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New Hub Project offers a sound strategy for WNC job development

For a number of years we've been watching an evolution occur in Western North Carolina's economy. Traditional industries and crops are rapidly diminishing in importance. Textile and furniture manufacturing are moving to countries where labor costs less, and the tobacco allotment buyout is a factor in phasing out the production of burley tobacco.

Tourism continues to be a mainstay of the region's economy. And over the past 30 years, a large employment base has been established in construction, health care and public sector agencies, according to a plan for a new economic initiative.

But the three-legged stool of manufacturing, agriculture and tourism that helped the North Carolina mountains weather economic downturns in the past has begun to list rather badly.

If we don't think strategically about how to create diverse new job opportunities, our future will be far more vulnerable to economic recessions than it has been in the past. And without competitive, high-paying jobs, people will have to continue to sacrifice income in order to live here.

Asheville and Buncombe County have long been the center of economic activity for Western North Carolina. Buncombe County accounts for about two-thirds of the region's \$10 billion economy. Unemployment figures have traditionally remained relatively low, but so have salaries.

A group of county leaders has come up with a plan that they hope will begin to change that, a plan that will increase employment opportunities and wages. The effort is being called the Hub Project, because it builds on the concept of Asheville and Buncombe County as the economic hub for the region.

The plan is based on two basic ideas. The first is the idea of business clusters - that is, the theory that areas with interconnected groups of companies and other institutions focused on a particular industry or product, such as the film industry in southern California, are best positioned to be sources of innovation in those industries. The second is the idea of using assets like the National Climatic Data Center and the region's crafts base to be the focus of such clusters, thereby tying new companies and jobs to region-specific resources and making it less likely they will move away.

"We're trying to develop our strengths and grow our own," said Nathan Ramsey, chairman of the Buncombe County Board of Commissioners and also a member of the group that has spent months collecting information and putting together the Hub plan, which is scheduled to go to county commissioners for a vote Oct. 4. If commissioners adopt it, and they should, the plan will significantly alter economic development efforts in Buncombe County.

The plan's strategic goals include working with existing industry to preserve manufacturing and target manufacturing niches that build on the region's unique assets. It also continues to emphasize marketing to attract tourists and an "enterprise" cluster to support small business development.

But it focuses on developing three new clusters: technology; design, arts and crafts; and what the plan's chief author, Dan Ray, calls "rest and rejuvenation."

The technology cluster builds on the fact that the National Climatic Data Center is the "world's largest environmental data base," according to Ray. The center, high-speed Internet access and the area's quality of life have already lured two small companies. The design, arts and crafts cluster builds on the region's

long crafts heritage and the work already done by Handmade in America, an Asheville-based nonprofit that promotes production and purchase of handmade objects. The "rest and rejuvenation" cluster builds on the quality and variety of conventional, complementary and alternative medicine and therapies that already exist here. The idea is not just to lure businesses to relocate, but to encourage homegrown creativity and entrepreneurship.

If commissioners adopt the plan, a 35-member board would replace the Economic Development Coalition for Asheville-Buncombe County and would coordinate economic development efforts.

The Hub Project would help to grow our economy from indigenous roots that already go deep. By encouraging numerous small enterprises, it would make the region less vulnerable to a decision by a single large employer to close up shop and move away - though a large employer could well grow out of the technology cluster, for example.

To succeed, the project will require community buy-in and continued focused efforts by community leaders. But in the changing global economy, it seems smart to focus on assets that are unique to our area.

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