

**8:00-9:00 AM**

**REGISTRATION, BREAKFAST & NETWORKING**

**9:00-10:00 AM**

**WELCOME & MORNING KEYNOTE SESSION**

**10:05-10:55 AM**

**MORNING BREAKOUT 1**

- [Ways Business Moves Throughout the Region](#)
- [All Roads Lead to Money](#)
- [Planes, Trains, & Greenways](#)

**11:05-11:55 AM**

**MORNING BREAKOUT 2**

- [Pathways to Employment](#)
- [All Roads Lead to Money](#)
- [The Road Traveled: Lessons Learned](#)

**BREAKOUT KEY**

**Red: Stop!** Driving is the extent of my knowledge.

**Yellow: Slow down,** I know the basics.

**Green: Go, go, go!** I work in or closely with the field.



**NOON-1:00 PM**

**LUNCH AND NETWORKING**

**1:05-1:55 PM**

**AFTERNOON BREAKOUT**

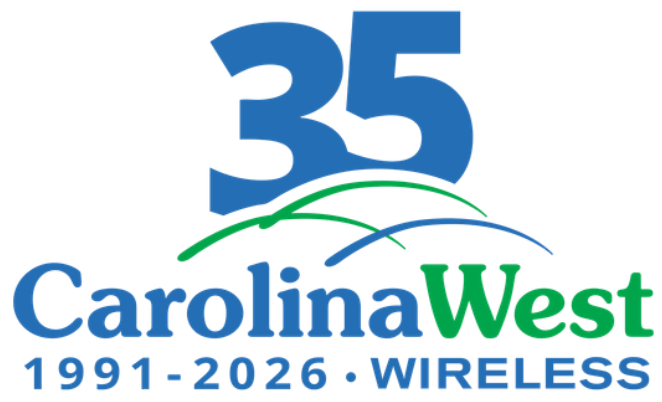
- [What Makes a Successful Project?](#)
- [We Can't Build Our Way Out of Congestion](#)
- [Communicating Around the Detour](#)

**2:00-2:30 PM**

**AFTERNOON KEYNOTE SESSION**

*Reception to Follow*

# THANK YOU, SPONSORS!





*Featured Guest*

## **KENNY FLOWERS**

Chief Deputy Secretary  
North Carolina Department of Commerce

[Learn more >>](#)

Kenny Flowers serves as the Chief Deputy Secretary at the North Carolina Department of Commerce, where he leads teams in operational areas and provides strategic leadership for the agency on issues related to economic development and external affairs.

From 2017 to 2025, Kenny served as Assistant Secretary for Rural Economic Development at N.C. Commerce. In that role he provided guidance for the Department in its efforts to support rural communities and help foster rural prosperity. Mr. Flowers led a team of community and economic development professionals that helps communities make the preparations and infrastructure investments needed to increase competitiveness, attract businesses, and spur economic growth. Under his leadership, the Rural Economic Development Division generated more than \$715 Million in grant awards that support over 2000 projects and 28,000 jobs throughout the state.



*Keynote Speaker*

## **JOE MILAZZO**

Executive Director  
Regional Transportation Alliance (RTA)

[Learn more >>](#)

Joe has served as Executive Director of RTA, the voice of the regional business community on transportation in North Carolina's Research Triangle metropolitan area, since the organization's founding in 2002. Joe's primary role is to provide strategic focus and direction for the regional business community to accelerate success on critical regional priorities. Under Joe's leadership, RTA has successfully advocated for the construction and advancement of \$3 billion in freeway, street, transit, and airport priorities, including the 540 turnpike, the widening of I-40, a regionwide BRT network, a new primary runway at RDU, dedicated revenue for enhanced transit, and America's first dynamic left turn intersection.

## WAYS BUSINESS MOVES THROUGHOUT THE REGION



*Getting goods, workers, and customers where they need to go is foundational to every sector of our economy. Explore the economic interdependence of trucking, freight, and regional mobility.*



### LEEANN NIXON

President

Wilkes Economic Development

[Learn more >>](#)

LeeAnn Nixon boasts a 15-year career in economic development, including roles at Surry County Economic Development and Cabarrus Economic Development. Her journey spans vice president of existing business services and existing industry project manager, culminating in her current role for the past 8-years as the president of Wilkes Economic Development. Holding a Bachelor of Science Degree in Business Administration and Project Management from Liberty University, she brings former Realtor experience and a North Carolina Real Estate Broker's license to her development work. With a history of nurturing businesses, LeeAnn's focus now centers on providing support to local government, fostering existing businesses, and driving new investments through strategic partnerships across North Carolina.



### GREGORY HART

Senior Manufacturing Staff Manager

[GE Aerospace](#)

Gregory Hart is a Senior Manufacturing Staff Manager at GE Aerospace, where he leads all aspects of Safety, Quality, Delivery, and Cost for the LEAP HPT Stage 1 disk production line. With a focus on both day-to-day operational excellence and long-term strategic vision, Gregory oversees manufacturing operations at the West Jefferson site, ensuring customer demand is consistently met while driving the site's future forward.

# ALL ROADS LEAD TO MONEY



*Transportation funding and gas tax are shifting and the State needs new strategies to sustain infrastructure investment for decades ahead. Examine how transportation is financed and future funding models that could replace today's policies.*



## DAN GERLACH

Economic Development Strategist

[Learn more >>](#)

I am an experienced leader in the government, nonprofit, philanthropic, and education sectors, including 25 years in North Carolina serving as senior fiscal advisor to the NC governor, president of a \$1 billion foundation, founding director of a public policy research organization, and interim leader of a research university.

I hold a Bachelor of Arts in Economics and English from the University of Notre Dame and a Masters of Public Administration from Syracuse University.

Through Dan Gerlach LLC, I now strive to provide strategic counsel on finance, public policy, and other issues.



## MARK NEWSOME

Chief Financial Officer

NCDOT

[Learn more >>](#)

As chief financial officer, Mark Newsome oversees the N.C. Department of Transportation's financial operations including accounting, budget, treasury, debt financing, forecasting and spend management.

He leads the Department's Financial Management Division working strategically to mitigate financial risk, accelerate project delivery, evaluate alternative financing and reengineer key business processes.

Newsome has worked in the public sector since the early 1990s. Most recently, he served as the chief financial officer of the N.C. Department of Information Technology. He has also worked as a controller and chief financial officer in North Carolina higher education and local government. Newsome has supported state and local governments across the southeast as a risk advisory consultant in public accounting.

# ALL ROADS LEAD TO MONEY



*Transportation funding and gas tax are shifting and the State needs new strategies to sustain infrastructure investment for decades ahead. Examine how transportation is financed and future funding models that could replace today's policies.*



## PATRICK WOODIE

President & CEO  
NC Rural Center

[Learn more >>](#)

Patrick is the president and chief executive officer of the NC Rural Center. He is a product of our state's public schools, including Piney Creek Elementary School in Piney Creek and Alleghany High School in Sparta. He graduated from Wake Forest University in 1987 and from Wake Forest University School of Law in 1990.

After law school, Patrick worked briefly for Congressman Steve Neal before becoming the first executive director of the Alleghany County Chamber of Commerce in his hometown of Sparta. From 1992-1999, Patrick served as director of the chamber and as the lead economic developer for the county, successfully recruiting two new industries to the county that were the top new investments in the entire state in 1994 and 1998.

In March of 2006, Patrick lost his father, a retired school teacher. He then made the difficult decision to leave his home county in October of 2006 to become vice president of programs for the North Carolina Rural Center. As a graduate of the Center's Rural Economic Development Institute and a member of the Center's board of directors from 1997 to 2000, Patrick already had a long history with—and connection to—the NC Rural Center.

In 2013, he was named president of the NC Rural Center and led the organization through a major transition, repositioning the Center into a new era of work and community engagement but still focused on the singular mission to serve the people and places of rural North Carolina.

# PLANES, TRAINS, & GREENWAYS



*From regional airports to greenway systems, alternative transportation networks are opening new pathways across Western North Carolina. Learn how these assets connect communities and attract investment.*



## DAN GURLEY

Principal  
DGR Solutions, LLC

[Learn more >>](#)

Dan Gurley is the principal of DGR Solutions, LLC, a Raleigh-based boutique firm focused on transportation policy in rail and aviation. He brings more than 30 years of experience in government relations, public affairs, and legislative operations, including nearly seven years as a transportation policy advisor and deputy chief of staff to NC Speaker of the House Tim Moore.



## ERIC PAYNE

Airport Manger  
Ashe County Airport

Eric Payne has served as Ashe County Airport Supervisor for 17 years and holds an Airline Transport Commercial Rated Pilot certification with 33 years in the cockpit.



## CHRISTINA REDMAN

Director of Public Lands Programs  
[Camp Grier/G5 Trail Collective](#)

Christina Redman is the Director of Public Lands Programs at Camp Grier in Old Fort, North Carolina. The Public Lands Programs department includes the G5 Trail Collective, an official partner of the U.S. Forest Service that builds and maintains trails throughout the Pisgah National Forest Grandfather District. G5 is also leading the Old Fort Trail Project, a 42-mile trail expansion supported through public funding, with 21 miles completed to date. The department also includes Tanawha Adventures and Pisgah Productions, which produce endurance races and outdoor recreation events across Western North Carolina.

# PATHWAYS TO EMPLOYMENT



*Transportation is a workforce issue: without reliable access, workers can't reach jobs and employers can't fill them. This session looks at transportation barriers, CDL licensure, and how construction intersects with regional workforce development.*



## BRIAN SMITH

Director of Environmental Health Safety and Sustainability  
[Baxter Pharmaceuticals](#)

Brian has a BS in Industrial Engineering from Buffalo State University, and Masters in Operation Management from Arizona State University. He is a certified Six Sigma Black Belt from Kettering University. He has held global manufacturing leadership positions with Baxter, General Motors, and Textron. He is a change agent in driving employee and leadership-based culture.



## SCOTT HARTLEY

Director  
[CCC&TI - Truck Driver Training](#)

A 38-year veteran of the commercial trucking industry, Scott Hartley has transitioned from over-the-road operations and fleet ownership to a pivotal role in education. As Program Director for CDL programs at Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute, Scott manages a network of seven collegiate partnerships across North Carolina. His mission is simple: to translate decades of practical experience into high-standard training programs that prioritize safety, compliance, and robust workforce development.



## LUCAS UNDERWOOD

Owner  
[L&N Performance Auto Repair](#)

Lucas Underwood owns and operates L&N Performance Auto Repair in Blowing Rock, where he's built his career diagnosing and repairing today's increasingly complex vehicles. He co-hosts Changing the Industry, a podcast network reaching shop owners and technicians across the country on the issues shaping the trade — from the skilled labor shortage to the rapid pace of technology in modern automotive service. Through the podcast and his content for technicians, he's become a recognizable voice for independent shops navigating an industry in transition. He also oversees Mystery Hill, the High Country attraction his family has owned since the 1950s.

# THE ROAD TRAVELED: LESSONS LEARNED



*Real projects come with real complications. Hear from firsthand experiences with corridor development, community trust, and what happens when the process is followed (and when it isn't).*



## IVAN DISHMAN

Division Construction Engineer  
NCDOT Division 11

Ivan Dishman is a graduate of North Carolina State University with a degree in Civil Engineering and is a registered Professional Engineer. He has more than 20 years of experience with the North Carolina Department of Transportation, all of which has been dedicated to serving Division 11 in western North Carolina. Throughout his career, he has held a variety of engineering and leadership roles within the Division and currently serves as the Division 11 Construction Engineer, overseeing transportation construction projects and supporting infrastructure development across the region.



## SHANE FOX

Town Manager  
Caldwell County

Shane Fox is an experienced local government leader currently serving as County Manager for Caldwell County, NC. With a career rooted in Western North Carolina, he has held senior roles across municipal and county government, including two tenures as Town Manager of Blowing Rock, a stint as County Manager of Alexander County, and CFO/Deputy County Manager for Cleveland County.

Shane holds a Bachelor of Business Administration in Accounting from Appalachian State University and is an active member of the Appalachian State University Local Government Alumni Association. He is also a member of the North Carolina Housing Coalition, reflecting his commitment to community development across the region.

# WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL PROJECT?



*From community buy-in to funding structures and realistic cost planning, map how transportation projects move from concept to completion across the region's planning organizations.*



## DAVID GRAHAM

[High Country Council of Governments - Rural Planning Organization](#)

David Graham is the High Country Council of Governments Rural Planning Organization Transportation Planner; a position he has held for the past 13 years. Prior to his current role, David was the Town of Boone Development Coordinator for over 12 years.

He is Appalachian State University alumni with a Bachelor of Science degree in Community and Regional Planning. He also attended the Watauga Campus of Caldwell Community College. David lives in Watauga County and is grateful to call the High Country region home.



## MAGNOLIA LONG

[Foothills Council of Governments - Rural Planning Organization](#)

Magnolia Long is the Senior Planner and Rural Planning Organization (RPO) Director for the Foothills Regional Commission, where she leads regional transportation planning efforts across Rutherford, Polk, and McDowell Counties in western North Carolina. She works closely with local governments, NCDOT, and community partners to advance projects focused on safety, connectivity, economic development, and quality of life in rural communities.

Magnolia holds a Master of Public Affairs degree from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and previously served as Community Development Director for the Town of Rutherfordton through the Lead for North Carolina Fellowship program. Her experience includes transportation prioritization, trail and multimodal planning, roadway safety initiatives, grant writing, and regional collaboration focused on turning local ideas into successful projects.

# WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL PROJECT?



*From community buy-in to funding structures and realistic cost planning, map how transportation projects move from concept to completion across the region's planning organizations.*



## AVERI RITCHIE

[Western Piedmont Council of Governments - Metro Planning Organization](#)

I'm Averi Ritchie, serving as the MPO Director and Transportation Planning Director for the Greater Hickory Metropolitan Planning Organization (GHMPO) and the Western Piedmont Council of Governments (WPCOG), where I also serve as an ADA Administrator. In this role, I lead regional transportation planning efforts, coordinating with NCDOT and 28 local governments to prioritize funding, advance projects, and guide long-range plans.

My work focuses on managing federal and state transportation programs, supporting multimodal investments, and implementing key initiatives such as the Metropolitan Transportation Plan and Comprehensive Transportation Plan. I also oversee the Locally Administered Projects Program, which provides annual funding for local transportation projects, and assist with ADA Transition Planning efforts to improve accessibility across the region.

# WE CAN'T BUILD OUR WAY OUT OF CONGESTION



*Infrastructure alone won't solve traffic challenges. Take a look at demand management strategies, public transit options, and business incentives that can move more people with fewer vehicles.*



## SCOTT GARLAND

General Manager/President

[Stonewalls Restaurant & Catering](#)

Scott Garland is an experienced restaurateur and hospitality professional with a deep background in luxury hospitality, club, and resort management. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, NY and the University of New Haven, he brings both culinary expertise and business acumen to everything he does. Scott currently serves as General Manager and President of Stonewalls Restaurant, and is the owner of Cornerstone Cabins & Lodge, The Barn at Cornerstone event facility, and What the Cluck Food Truck.



## STEPHANIE TWITTY

CEO

[Eagle Market Streets Development Corporation, CDC \(EMSDC\)](#)

Stephanie Swepson-Twitty is the CEO of Eagle Market Streets Development Corporation, CDC (EMSDC). As an African American woman with a background in finance, she is acutely aware of the hurdles disadvantaged populations face while trying to scale their businesses. With Eagle Market Streets Development Corporation, she works to find innovative, market-driven solutions to pressing economic issues, including the distribution of wealth in the U.S.

# WE CAN'T BUILD OUR WAY OUT OF CONGESTION



*Infrastructure alone won't solve traffic challenges. Take a look at demand management strategies, public transit options, and business incentives that can move more people with fewer vehicles.*



## CRAIG HUGHES

Executive Director, [AppalCART](#)

Craig Hughes has been the Executive Director of AppalCART since June, 2015 where he has strived to maintain AppalCART's reputation for efficiency, volume, and cost effectiveness. He successfully navigated AppalCART through a redesign of its routes and schedules to address capacity issues and is currently guiding the organization's transition to electric vehicles. Most recently, he introduced AppalCART's first double decker bus to their fleet to help address peak demand capacity issues and driver shortages.

Mr. Hughes has 26 years of experience in transportation. He was a Transportation Planner for the High Point Metropolitan Planning Organization (2000-2006) and for the High Country Rural Planning Organization (2006-2012). As a Transportation Planner, he became familiar with all modes of transportation allowing him to familiarize himself with public transportation systems and developing plans for them. His involvement with the transit systems in the High Country region and assistance with transit planning tasks equipped him to serve as a Mobility Development Specialist with NCDOT where he worked with transit systems in the northwest corner of North Carolina. All of these experiences combined to prepare him for his role as Executive Director of AppalCART.

Mr. Hughes holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Geography with a concentration in Urban Planning from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

# COMMUNICATING AROUND THE DETOUR



*Local businesses and residents are often the last to know when a project affects their area. Examine how to improve communication around changes and how communities can better engage in the process.*



**MEAGAN PHILLIPS**  
NCDOT Board of Directors

Meagan C. Phillips joined the N.C. Board of Transportation in September 2022 and represents Division 11.

Hailing from a family with a tradition in public service, Phillips worked previously in admissions and recruitment at her alma mater, Appalachian State University. Then she joined her family's business, which specializes in real estate and development in Boone.

Phillips is the granddaughter of M. Randolph Phillips, who was appointed to the Board of Transportation in 1977. She currently serves on the Appalachian Regional Healthcare System board and was a board member of the Blue Ridge Conservancy, where she held multiple leadership roles. Phillips has also served as a board member at various non-profit organizations.

Phillips grew up in Raleigh and has lived in Watauga County since she earned a bachelor's degree in communications with a minor in international business from ASU in 2009.



**DR. CAROLYN WIDNER**  
CEO

[Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation](#)

Dr. Carolyn Widner, serves as the CEO of the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation, the philanthropic partner to the Blue Ridge Parkway. Carolyn was born and raised in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Southwestern Virginia and began her career as a park ranger in Virginia. She is a retired decorated professor, and award-winning researcher, author and editor including receiving a Champion of Change Award from the White House. She has dedicated the later part of her career to forming partnerships and building connections and capacity in all that she does for the Blue Ridge Parkway and its gateway communities.

# COMMUNICATING AROUND THE DETOUR



*Local businesses and residents are often the last to know when a project affects their area. Examine how to improve communication around changes and how communities can better engage in the process.*



## JESSE POPE

President/CEO

[Grandfather Mountain](#)

Jesse Pope is the President and CEO of the Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation, the nonprofit organization that owns and operates the Grandfather Mountain nature park. Jesse has nearly two decades of experience working for the nature park in many capacities, most notably as Backcountry Ranger, Animal Keeper and Chief Naturalist.

Jesse started his career at Grandfather Mountain in 2002. Before becoming executive director in 2015, he served as assistant vice president and director of education and natural resources. During his time at Grandfather Mountain, Pope also worked as a seasonal trail ranger and on the animal habitats staff before launching the park's naturalist program, which he led for six years.

With unmatched knowledge of Grandfather Mountain's ecosystem and unbridled passion for the organization's mission, Jesse oversees foundation staff, programs and the execution of its strategic plan.

A native of Mouth of Wilson, Va., Pope holds a bachelor's degree in biology with a naturalist concentration from Lees-McRae College and he attended Montreat College for graduate studies in environmental education. He lives in Newland with his wife, Michelle, and three children.

He is very passionate about the Stewardship Foundation's mission to inspire conservation of the natural world by helping guests explore, understand and value the wonders of Grandfather Mountain. An avid birder and advocate for environmental causes, Pope said he understands the role Grandfather Mountain must play in serving as a model for North Carolina and the world as a leader in tourism, conservation and environmental education.



*Featured Guest, Panelist*

## **PATRICK NORMAN, P.E.**

Chief Engineer

[North Carolina Department of Transportation \(NCDOT\)](#)

In May 2025, Patrick Norman became chief engineer of the N.C. Department of Transportation. As chief engineer, he manages and directs the engineering program activities of NCDOT's 14 highway divisions, Transportation Mobility and Safety Division, the Central Units and the Technical Services Division.

He is a registered professional engineer and has held several positions at NCDOT during his 24-year career, including chief engineer for the Department's Turnpike Authority. In this role, Norman oversaw all design, permitting, pre-construction, construction, maintenance, operations and asset management.



*Panelist*

## **MATT CALABRIA**

Director

[Governor's Recovery Office for Western North Carolina \(GROW NC\)](#)

Matt Calabria directs the Governor's Recovery Office for Western North Carolina (GROW NC), leading the state's recovery from the damage caused by Hurricane Helene. GROW NC works to oversee, coordinate, and accelerate housing, infrastructure, economic, and community recovery efforts across the region. Calabria previously served for more than a decade on the Wake County Board of Commissioners, where he authored the WakeWorks workforce development program, helped pass landmark public transportation and early childhood education programs, and championed innovative public safety initiatives and supports for first responders. A graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University Law School, he was also a practicing attorney for 15 years. He lives in Fuquay-Varina, NC.



*Panelist*

## LOREN HILL

Chief Engineer

[North Carolina Department of Transportation \(NCDOT\)](#)

Loren Hill has worked for 28 years in economic development in central North Carolina. For the last five years, he has worked for the Piedmont Triad Partnership as Carolina Core Regional Economic Development Director. He works with 19 counties and parts of adjacent counties. Prior to his current role, Loren served for 20 years as President of the High Point Economic Development Corporation. He was also vice president of public policy and communications for the Greensboro Chamber and its economic development department.

Before those jobs, he served in roles that prepared him well for his economic development career: Governmental affairs director for five Piedmont Triad real estate trade associations; Marriott hotel general manager in Arizona, California, New York, Virginia, and North Carolina; and Town of Jamestown councilman for two terms.



*Panelist*

## MELISSA SMITH

Senior Vice President Business Recruitment & Development

[Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina \(EDPNC\)](#)

Melissa Smith is Senior Vice President of Business Recruitment and Development at the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina (EDPNC), the public-private organization that leads economic development efforts for the State of North Carolina. In this role, she directs the state's strategy to attract, grow, and retain business investment, overseeing teams responsible for marketing North Carolina globally, supporting new company locations, and driving the expansion of existing industry.

Under her leadership, North Carolina has secured more than 800 corporate commitments, representing approximately 130,000 new jobs and nearly \$80 billion in planned investment – reinforcing the state's position as one of the nation's top destinations for business.

Melissa brings more than 25 years of experience in economic development across local, regional, and state levels. Prior to joining EDPNC in 2014, she held several positions within the Business & Industry Division of the North Carolina Department of Commerce, where she managed programs supporting business recruitment and existing industry growth. She began her career with the Randolph County Economic Development Corporation, working closely with community and business leaders to advance local economic opportunity.

Melissa is a graduate of the Economic Development Institute and an active member of the North Carolina Economic Development Association. She is passionate about building strong partnerships, supporting business growth, and creating opportunities that strengthen communities across North Carolina.