

ULI Advisory Services Panel

Asheville, NC: Post-Helene Economic Recovery and Resilience

July 27 – August 1, 2025

Previously thought of as a 'climate haven,' Asheville, North Carolina, recently experienced one of the worst storm events in its history. Tropical Storm Helene's extensive reach caused catastrophic impacts across western North Carolina. Asheville and the surrounding mountainous areas experienced severe flooding and landslides, infrastructure damage and destruction, and widespread failure of essential utilities and services. The storm inflicted severe loss of life, with 42 residents within Buncombe County tragically losing their lives. Helene ranks as the second-deadliest storm in the US in the last 50 years, underscoring its devastating impact.

More than half a year later, the City of Asheville and other local government partners are now entering the long-term recovery phase. While the social, economic, and environmental impacts of Helene are yet to be fully understood, the community's aspiration to build a more environmentally and economically resilient city for the future is clear.

While a storm with the level of devastating effects seen in Tropical Storm Helene had not been felt in a generation, data tracked by NOAA since 1895 shows us that this section of the French Broad River in Asheville has flooded higher than 9.5 ft (the minor flooding threshold) 29 times. This averages to at least one moderate to major flooding event every four years. The section of the Swannanoa River through Asheville has, on average, a moderate to major flooding event every eight years. As Asheville and the surrounding watershed continue to grow and develop, these flooding events have become more dangerous, costly, and destructive.

Asheville's future environmental resilience- including the resiliency of our infrastructure- is a critical factor in its future economic resilience. This is true across the city and region, but perhaps nowhere more so than within the Swannanoa and French Broad Rivers' waterfronts. In the past twenty years, civic leaders successfully revitalized small pockets and nodes all along the riverfront. While this work included attention to resiliency - e.g. by creating additional open and public space along riparian areas, and by adopting updated floodplain regulations- the understanding of the challenges ahead has changed.

This moment provides the City with an opportunity to develop new strategies, ones that proactively consider the impacts of disasters on our overall economy, and ones that better balance the riverfront's economic role as a place where creative commerce thrives, and its natural role as a crucial floodplain during and after severe storm events. With the help of community partners, and the availability of federal resources like Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR), the City has an opportunity to begin addressing these challenges.

The City of Asheville is partnering with the Urban Land Institute (ULI) to host an Advisory Services panel from July 27 – August 1, 2025, focused on the questions listed below.

Panel Questions

Economy: Industry Resilience & Diversification

1. What tools, regulations, and programs can best help local businesses and commercial districts prepare for and recover from disasters like Helene?
2. What strategies could help Asheville's tourism/hospitality-based sectors bounce back more quickly from disasters like Helene?
3. How can we build in some protection against any one sector becoming as hard-hit as our tourism and hospitality sector became as a result of Helene?
4. In the coming five years, what existing economic assets can be built on to help diversify our economy and support the growth of target industries?
5. Given the economic contributions of the greater riverfront's (study area's) preponderance of historic, cultural, and artistic assets, how might the City stabilize and more safely grow the creative sector in these (and other) districts?

Workforce: Economic Mobility

6. What are our post-disaster opportunities to promote economic mobility and occupational adaptability within our workforce?
7. What are the priorities for economic revitalization of under-resourced areas with an eye towards economic mobility/workforce development, especially for low- to moderate-income individuals who experience the most significant impacts during a disaster?

Real Estate Development

8. How can Asheville grow a foundation within the development community where resilience to natural disasters and a focus on ecological resilience and emergency preparedness is the accepted norm?
9. What government policies, regulations, standards, financial tools, and or incentives can be used to drive more resilient private development in flood hazard areas?
10. What resilient design strategies should be considered when rebuilding or retrofitting buildings and public spaces to better withstand significant storm events?
 - a. Given the city's steep terrain and topography, what other design considerations should be prioritized to minimize the likelihood and impacts of landslides?
11. How can we balance the community's desire to have vibrant economic activity in the study areas with the desire to provide space for the study area to act optimally as a floodplain?

Public Investment, Infrastructure, and Parks

12. Considering available funding sources, what are the most important public investments to promote flood resilience for the mixed-use/commercial districts along the Swannanoa and French Broad Riverfronts, specifically in the study areas?
13. What investments in the City's Stormwater infrastructure should be prioritized?
14. How can the City's French Broad riverfront parks be rebuilt to not only meet community recreation needs, but demonstrate state-of-the-art techniques for flood mitigation,

integrate ecological resiliency, and support a more sustainable rebirth of the adjacent mixed-use/commercial districts that serve as economic drivers for the region?

- a. Consider planning, design, funding, and unique opportunities, for example, more innovative ways to reprogram any newly acquired Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) voluntary buy-outs so that their land use complies with federal regulations and contributes to place-based economic development goals.