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CITY OF ASHEVILLE

**POST-HELENE
ECONOMIC RECOVERY
AND RESILIENCE**

DRAFT BRIEFING BOOK

July 2025

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Introduction

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Problem Statement

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 contiguous US in the last 50 years, underscoring its devastating impact.¹

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, flooding is not a new problem for Asheville. Data tracked by NOAA since 1895 shows 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.² As Asheville and the surrounding watershed continue to grow and develop, these flooding events have become more dangerous, costly, and destructive.

Asheville’s future economic stability is contingent on building environmental resilience, notably infrastructure 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.

¹ City of Asheville. [Community Development Block Grant - Disaster Recovery \(CDBG-DR Action Plan\), 2025](#). Page 10.

² City of Asheville. [The Asheville Area French Broad and Swannanoa River Flood Assessment Report, 2025](#).

Questions for ULI Panel

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 areas 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.

SECTION 1

CONTEXT & BACKGROUND

As we move forward with recovery efforts, it is important to consider Asheville's distinct context in order to understand the long reaching and multi-faceted impacts of Helene. This section will cover Asheville's unique geography, demographic make-up and trends, underlying income and housing disparities, limiting state regulations, and a complex funding landscape. We will then discuss the infrastructure and economic devastation from the storm, and finally introduce the study areas, providing context both before and after Helene.



Community Context

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Asheville Overview

Situated in the midst of the Southern Appalachian Mountains of Western North Carolina and at the confluence of the French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers, Asheville has long been a draw for travelers and tourists. The mountainous terrain is a defining feature of the city, with elevations ranging from 1,900 to 2,900 feet above sea level. Encompassing an area of 45.95 square miles, the city is centrally located in Buncombe County and serves as the county seat. Asheville is the largest city in Western North Carolina, and the 12th largest in the state.³

Asheville is comprised of five distinctive geographic areas as described below. [See the Current Land Use map](#) for more details on these areas. **Central Asheville** is the region's primary employment hub as well as the commercial, dining, and entertainment center. It includes Downtown and its surrounding residential neighborhoods, including two of Asheville's Legacy (historically Black) neighborhoods- South Side and East End Valley Street- and significant tourist destinations outside of downtown: Biltmore Village and the River Arts District. Major institutional uses include Mission Hospital and Asheville -Buncombe Technical College. **North Asheville** is characterized by its many historic residential neighborhoods, tucked into the hillsides and accessible via the traditional commercial corridors: Merrimon Avenue, Broadway, and Charlotte Streets. Notable anchors in this area include the UNC Asheville campus, the Grove Park Inn, and the Country Club of Asheville. **East Asheville** contains the busy Tunnel Road commercial corridor and neighborhoods that are more suburban in nature. This area also includes a concentration of commercial development and recreational uses along Swannanoa River Road. **South Asheville** is a long, narrow section of the city situated between the Biltmore Estate and the Town of Biltmore Forest to the west and steep mountain slopes to the east. The Hendersonville Road commercial corridor forms the spine of South Asheville and is flanked by many densely populated suburban-type neighborhoods. Finally, **West Asheville**, located on the west side of the French Broad River, is centered on the Haywood Road corridor—one of the city's only pedestrian-oriented environments outside of downtown. Patton Avenue, a commercial corridor and the primary connection for I-26, also serves the varied communities of this area.

Regional Context

Asheville is a rapidly growing city at the core of a dynamic and emergent region nearly five times its size. Asheville has remained the regional hub, even as Western North Carolina has grown. Since 1980, Asheville's share of the Buncombe County population has been relatively consistent at approximately 35%. The city is host to around 60,000 regional residents who commute from surrounding communities each day, representing nearly 75% of the city's workforce. Furthermore, Asheville is the site of 54% of

³ [Close the GAP, City of Asheville, 2022](#). Page 19.

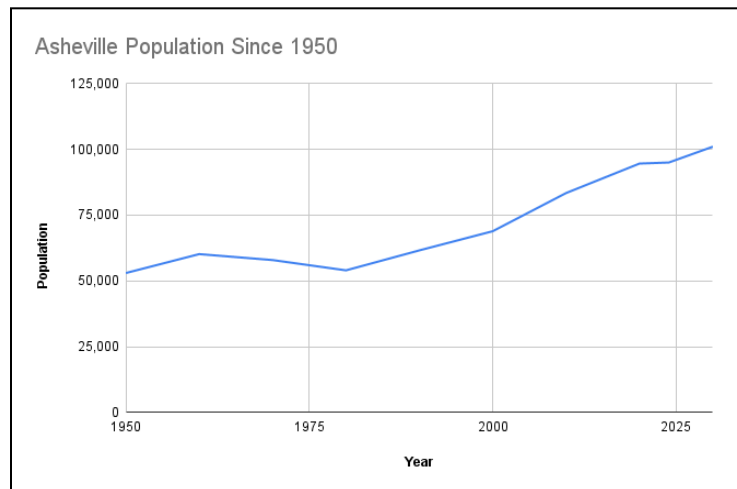
the region’s retail activity, despite being home to only 20% of the metropolitan population. This swelling of Asheville’s daytime population due to inbound commuting is the most extensive such example in the state.⁴ More broadly, Asheville is located within a day’s drive of many major metropolitan hubs and most of the Eastern seaboard. Interstates 26 and 40 provide significant access for ground transportation, the Asheville Airport provides air access, and the railroad supports shipping needs for customers in the area.

The economic and environmental connectivity between Asheville and Western North Carolina became particularly poignant in the wake of Tropical Storm Helene and highlights the need for continued regional collaboration. Flooding riverways caused the vast majority of damage to Asheville’s infrastructure and businesses. Asheville lies in the French Broad River Basin, with a total drainage area of 933 square miles. Within that sub-basin, the French Broad River travels from its headwaters in the Pisgah National Forest approximately 100 miles before reaching Asheville, while the Swannanoa River travels west from its headwaters about 20 miles before reaching the city.⁵ Climate resilience, particularly when it comes to riverway management, demands regional coordination.

Demographics

Population

Over the last 25 years, Asheville’s population has grown about 15% , increasing from just over 80,000 residents in 2010, to nearly 95,000 in 2025. This growth rate has outpaced the rest of the region and the State of North Carolina, which experienced 10.3% and 9.5% growth rates, respectively, during the same period. As illustrated in the chart to the right, Asheville is expected to continue growing, with an estimated population of over 100,000 by 2030.



Notable Demographic Trends

- **Aging Population:** Asheville’s population is projected to age significantly over the next 20 years, with most of the growth occurring in the older adult population. Seventy-five percent of the city’s projected growth will be adults aged 50 years old and over while close to 30% of the growth will be adults aged 70 years old and over.⁶ This is particularly significant because

⁴ [Living Asheville Comprehensive Plan, 2018](#). Page 278.

⁵ City of Asheville. [The Asheville Area French Broad and Swannanoa River Flood Assessment Report](#), 2025.

⁶ City of Asheville. [Affordable Housing Plan, 2024](#). Page 15.

Asheville is already on the older side, with a median age of 40.7⁷ about 2 years older than the national average.⁸

- **Disabilities:** According to the City’s GAP Plan, 12.2% of Asheville had a disability of some form at the time the data was gathered.⁹ As Asheville continues to age, the presence of disabilities in the population are likely to increase.
- **Asheville is Losing Black Residents:** Over the past decade, Asheville has seen significant changes in racial demographic composition. Asheville’s Black/African American population has fallen from 17% in 2000¹⁰, to 13% in 2010¹¹, and to 10% in 2025.¹² This decrease is even more evident in historically Black neighborhoods like Shiloh and East End / Valley Street.¹³ In comparison, North Carolina’s Black population has remained fairly consistent over the last two decades at around 20%.¹⁴

Racial Makeup

Racial Demographics of Asheville, NC Since 2000				
	2000 ¹⁰	2010 ¹⁵	2020 ⁶	2023 ¹³
White	77.8%	81.5%	82.6%	80.1%
Black or African American	17.2%	13.1%	11.1%	9.7%
American Indian and Alaska Native	1.0%	0.5%	0.4%	0.2%
Asian	1.1%	1.1%	1.5%	1.3%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	N/A	0.1%	0.3%	0.1%
Hispanic	3.9%	6.1%	6.7%	7.1%
Some other race	1.4%	2.2%	3.0%	2.2%

Income

The annual mean wages in Asheville (\$57,410) and median income (\$64,929) are notably lower than the North Carolina mean wages (\$62,440) and median income (\$71,629).¹⁶ This is despite the fact that over

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. [Asheville City: Population and People, 2023](#).

⁸ U.S. Census. [Press Release, CB23-106, 2023](#).

⁹ City of Asheville, NC. [Close the GAP Plan](#). Page 22.

¹⁰ U.S. Census Bureau. [Decennial Census Data, 2000](#).

¹¹ U.S. Census Bureau. [ACS 5-Year Estimates, 2010, 2020](#).

¹² Bowen National Research. [Asheville Region, Housing Needs Assessment, Bowen Report, 2025](#).

¹³ City of Asheville. [Missing Middle Housing Study & Displacement Risk Assessment, 2023](#). Page 102.

¹⁴ NC OSBM. [Changes in Black population of North Carolina, 2023](#)

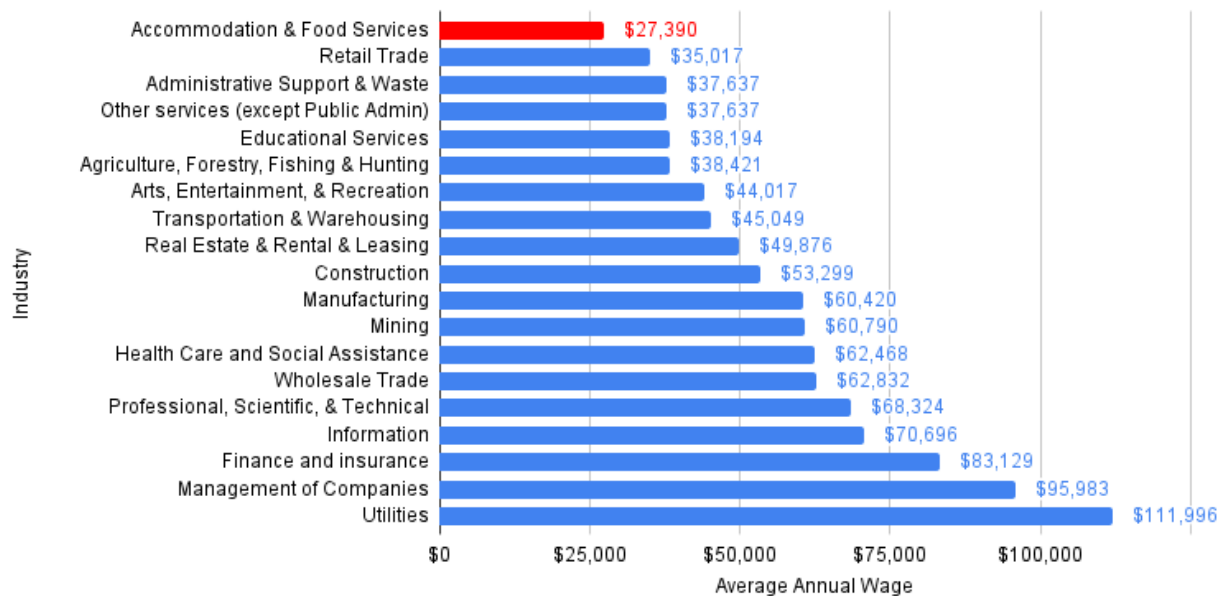
¹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, [ACS 5-Year Estimates, 2010, 2020](#).

¹⁶ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. [Occupational Employment Statistics Query System, May, 2024](#).

half of Asheville residents aged 25 and older hold a college degree.¹⁷ The average wages for individuals with at least a bachelor’s degree are also significantly lower than the state and national average.

Around 25% of Asheville residents work in a tourism-related industry, 13% in ‘Leisure and Hospitality’ and 12% in ‘Retail Trade’.¹⁸ While the average salary for Asheville workers in the hospitality industry is nearly 25% higher than the state average, salaries in this category are the lowest of any industry.¹⁹ The highlighted field, ‘Accommodation & Food Services’, represents the hospitality sector, which includes establishments such as hotels, restaurants, and bars.

Wages in Buncombe County (2022)



Income disparities are evident not only across industries but also along racial lines. Black households in Asheville, for instance, have a median income of less than half that of white households.

Median Household Income in the Past 12 Months by Race/Ethnicity of Householder (2021 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars)	
Asheville Household by Race	Median Income
White	\$71,705
Black	\$30,495
Native American	-
Asian	\$61,016
Pacific Islander	-
Other Race	\$41,205
Two or more Races	\$61,103

¹⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. [QuickFacts: Asheville City, North Carolina](#).

¹⁸ Riverbird Research. [Asheville Metro Economic Indicators, April 2025](#).

¹⁹ U.S. Census Bureau. [County Business Patterns, 2022](#).

Hispanic	\$40,855
All	\$67,221

Asheville: Population Below Poverty Level: Past 12 months by Age By Race/Ethnicity										
		White	Black	Native American	Asian	Pacific Islander	Other	Two or More Races	Hispanic	Total
<18	Number	1,630	802	0	0	0	0	322	629	2754
	Share	14.5%	43.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	18.9%	35.0%	18.2%
Overall	Number	8,938	2,658	4	159	73	585	929	1745	13,346
	Share	12.2%	31.0%	2.2%	13.7%	84.9%	31.1%	15.9%	26.7%	14.6%

Housing

Due to a variety of factors, including topography, market forces, historic discriminatory lending practices, and other structural challenges, the City of Asheville has long struggled with providing affordable and varied housing options that suit the diverse needs of its community. This decades-long struggle has been exacerbated by both the rise in the popularity of short-term rentals, and, recently, Tropical Storm Helene.

A cost to income mismatch

Asheville has some of the highest housing costs in the state and some of the lowest incomes. In 2023, the Asheville region had the highest price-to-income ratio in North Carolina at 6.1, meaning the median sale price for a single-family home was 6.1 times higher than the median household income.²⁰ From 2015 to 2024 the estimated median home value in the City of Asheville increased 112% from \$199,800 to \$424,786. This value is considerably higher than the 2024 statewide median home value of \$311,871. The median gross rent in Asheville of \$1,247 is also higher than the statewide median gross rent of \$1,093.²¹

Asheville: Household Income, Housing Costs and Affordability							
Total Households (2024)	Median Household Income (2024)	Median Home Value (2024)	Median Gross Rent (2022)	Share of Cost Burdened Households (2023)*		Share of Serve Cost Burdened Households (2023)**	
				Renter	Owner	Renter	Owner
44,766	\$64,929	\$414,786	\$1,247	49.5%	20.7%	17.9%	7.1%

²⁰ Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University. [Home Prices Far Outpace Incomes, 2023](#).

²¹ Bowen National Research. [Asheville Region, Housing Needs Assessment, Bowen Report, 2025](#).

As discussed, Asheville’s wages do not match up with its comparably high housing costs. Workers earning a median wage in Asheville’s top industries are unable to afford homes priced above \$200,000. Unfortunately, the share of homes priced under \$200,000 decreased from 50% of homes in 2010 to 22% of homes in 2021.²² This trend generally results in higher shares of cost burdened households in the city compared to the state,²³ with 50 percent of renter households, and 20 percent of homeowners, spending a third or more of their income on housing. The share of cost-burdened households in Asheville has increased by 6% since 2010.²⁴

A shortage of units

Asheville has a limited availability of housing options, particularly affordable units. Much of renters’ housing cost burden is due to the shortage of affordable rental units for low-income households. In Asheville, 18% of renter households are considered extremely low income, meaning they have incomes below 30% of the area median income (AMI). Only 2,930 (14%) rental units are considered to be affordable to those households, and over a five-year survey period from 2016 to 2020, there was a shortage of 760 units for these households. Not only are there not enough affordable units for extremely low-income households, but 41% of the existing units considered affordable to those households are being occupied by those earning more than 30% AMI, causing a greater strain on housing availability.²⁵

Overall Housing Gap Estimates (2024-2029)		
Area	Rental Housing Gap	For-Sale Housing Gap
Buncombe County	8,704	13,957

In addition to limited affordable supply, Asheville residents also face limited housing choice. While housing development has occurred in Asheville over the decades, 54% of the city’s housing was developed before 1980. Single family detached homes make up over half of Asheville's housing stock. Broken down by housing type, an estimated 61.26% of homes are single family dwellings, with an additional 35.10% consisting of multi-family units and 3.65% being mobile homes. In 2023, 9.4% of vacant units in the City were in use as short-term rentals. These units represent 2.1% of Asheville’s overall housing stock, or approximately 1,039 housing units.²⁶

Occupied and Vacant Units in Asheville (2024)				
Metric	Total	Owner Occupied	Renter Occupied	Vacant
Number	49,469	22,383	22,383	4,703
Percent	100.0%	50.0%	50.0%	9.5%

²² City of Asheville. [Affordable Housing Plan, City of Asheville, 2024](#). Page 12.

²³ Bowen National Research. [Housing Needs Assessment, Asheville Region, North Carolina, 2025](#). Page VI-7.

²⁴ City of Asheville. [Affordable Housing Plan, City of Asheville, 2024](#). Page 8.

²⁵ City of Asheville. [Affordable Housing Plan, City of Asheville, 2024](#). Page 9.

²⁶ Bowen National Research. [Housing Needs Assessment, Asheville Region, North Carolina, 2025](#). Page VI-38.

Housing in Asheville Post-Helene

The Asheville region experienced significant housing damage from Tropical Storm Helene. In Buncombe County, 12,921 housing units were damaged and of these, 85.6% of units were owner occupied. 1,102, or 9% of damaged units, sustained major damage or were destroyed. Rebuilding new housing in the aftermath of the storm faces significant land use challenges, including protected lands, steep slopes, and landslide risks, alongside local zoning that may require replacing damaged mobile homes with single-family homes. These issues are compounded by an estimated 8% to 20% increase in construction costs post-disaster, further hindering the rebuilding process.²⁷ Community feedback indicated the storm severely impacted the region's housing market by reducing housing availability and contractor access, while also driving up insurance premiums and construction costs. These effects further worsened existing issues with housing inventory and affordability.²⁸

Economic Characteristics

Tourism and Hospitality

Asheville's tourism sector is a cornerstone of its economy. The city's appeal stems from its proximity to the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Biltmore Estate, and a thriving downtown area with unique shops, galleries, and restaurants. This influx of visitors directly supports a wide array of businesses, from hotels and bed-and-breakfasts to tour operators and culinary establishments. The vibrant arts and music scene further enhances its allure as a tourist destination.

Healthcare

Healthcare is another dominant economic force, with Mission Health serving as the largest employer and a critical provider of medical services for the Western North Carolina region. This sector not only provides a large number of jobs but also attracts related industries and supports a stable professional workforce.

Craft Beverage Industry

The craft beverage industry, encompassing breweries, distilleries, and wineries, has experienced rapid growth in Asheville, earning it national recognition as a craft beer hub. This sector contributes significantly to tourism and creates local jobs, fostering a unique entrepreneurial spirit within the city. Many establishments offer tours and tasting rooms, further integrating with the tourism industry.

²⁷ Bowen National Research. [Housing Needs Assessment, Asheville Region, North Carolina, 2025](#). Page VII-32.

²⁸ Bowen National Research. [Housing Needs Assessment, Asheville Region, North Carolina, 2025](#). Page IX-8.

Manufacturing

Manufacturing represents another pillar in Asheville's diverse economy. While the manufacturing sector employs fewer workers than sectors related to tourism, several of Asheville's largest individual employers hail from this sector. Additionally, the City of Asheville continues to seek out new opportunities to partner with manufacturers looking to locate or expand in Asheville through programs such as the Industrial Development Grant (IDG) program.

Government

Buncombe County Overview

Buncombe County, North Carolina, operates under a Board of Commissioners form of government. The Governing Body is represented by six elected district-based commissioners who represent specific districts within the county. The Chair of the Board of Commissioners is elected at-large. Buncombe County employs a County Manager to handle the day-to-day administration of local government affairs, working under the direction of the Board of Commissioners.²⁹

Buncombe County contains six incorporated municipalities (cities and towns):

1. City of Asheville (the county seat and largest municipality)
2. Town of Biltmore Forest
3. Town of Black Mountain
4. Town of Montreat
5. Town of Weaverville
6. Town of Woodfin³⁰

In addition to these incorporated areas, Buncombe County also has numerous unincorporated communities, such as Avery Creek, Barnardsville, Bent Creek, Emma, Fairview, Royal Pines, and Swannanoa, among others. While these are populated areas, they do not have their own municipal governments like the six listed above; they fall under the direct governance of Buncombe County.

The Asheville Regional Airport (AVL) is governed by the Greater Asheville Regional Airport Authority, an independent, state-sanctioned board created in 2012 by the North Carolina General Assembly. This seven-member board, serving four-year terms, consists of regional representation with two appointments each from the Asheville City Council, Buncombe County Commission, and Henderson County Commission, plus one at-large member chosen by the other six. This structure signifies a shift from its earlier joint governmental oversight by Asheville and Buncombe County, establishing AVL as a distinctly regional and autonomous entity.³¹

²⁹ Buncombe County, North Carolina. [Buncombe Government](#).

³⁰ Buncombe County, North Carolina. [Municipalities](#).

³¹ Asheville Regional Airport. [Airport Authority, 2024](#).

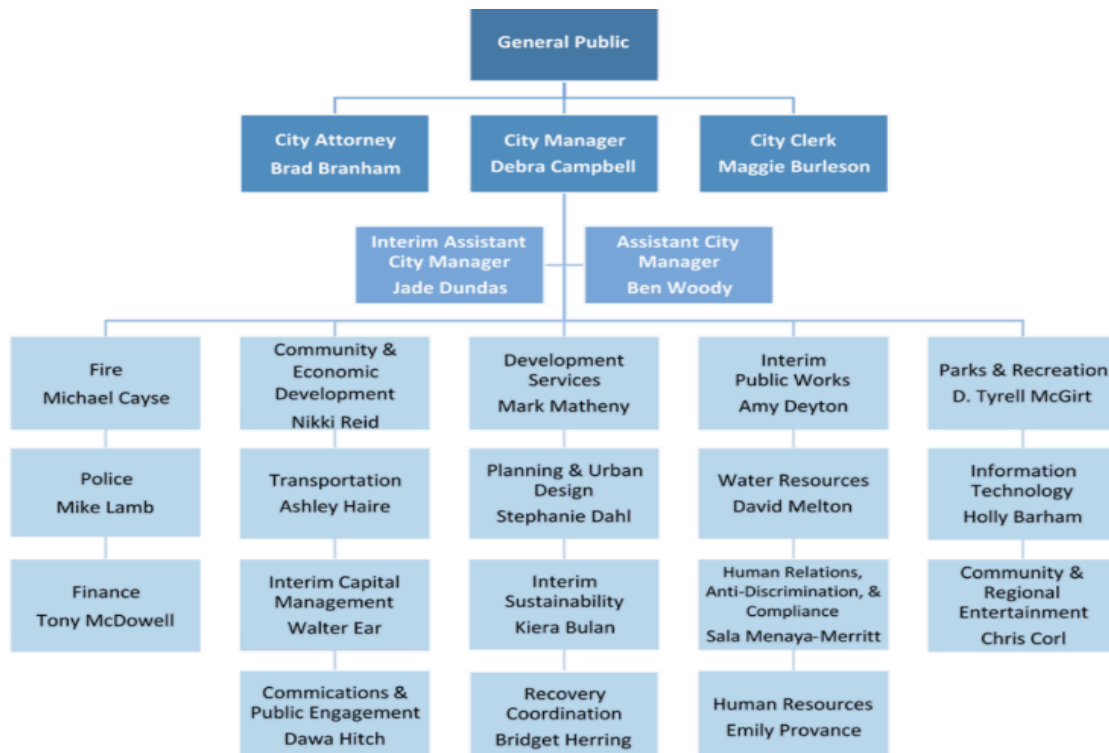
The sewer utility within the county is operated by the Metropolitan Sewerage District (MSD) and is overseen by a District Board consisting of 14 members, which is responsible for managing the business and affairs of the District. The board is composed of members representing the service areas of the District.³²

The Water Resources Department of the City of Asheville operates the water utility within the county, as described below.

Municipal Governance - The City of Asheville ³³

The City of Asheville operates under a council-manager form of government. The [City Council](#) is made up of a mayor and six council members who are elected at-large for four-year, staggered terms. The mayor, who is chosen on a separate ballot, presides over City Council meetings and serves as the ceremonial head of government. The Asheville City Council establishes the city’s policies, adopts the annual budget and appoints the city manager, city attorney, and city clerk.

The city manager oversees day-to-day city operations and executes Council-established laws and policies. The city manager ensures the entire community is being served and appoints department directors to manage daily operations.³⁴



³² Metropolitan Sewerage District. [MSD Structure, 2025](#).

³³ City of Asheville. [About the council manager form of government, 2024](#).

³⁴ City of Asheville. [City of Asheville Organizational Chart, May, 2025](#).

State and Local Authority

North Carolina is not a Home Rule state. Although it is technically not a Dillon's Rule state, municipal authority is governed more closely to this standard. This means that cities are restricted from exercising any power that is not expressly provided to them by the State Legislature, or which result from a broad construction of existing powers. The City of Asheville, and all other municipalities in North Carolina, only possess the powers and authorities explicitly granted to them by the North Carolina General Assembly through state statutes or the state constitution. If authority is not explicitly given, it remains with the state.³⁵

In essence, while the City of Asheville manages its day-to-day operations and provides essential services, its governmental structure, powers, and limits are fundamentally defined and can be altered by the North Carolina State Legislature. The city has no authority to implement fees or other revenue sources without explicit statutory authority to do so.³⁶

Asheville, like other North Carolina cities, has the authority to adopt zoning and development regulations via ordinances. These ordinances must be for the purpose of promoting health, safety, morals, or the general welfare of the community. Asheville makes zoning decisions through the administration of its adopted Unified Development Ordinance (UDO). The City can make amendments to the UDO through the adoption of ordinances, which can modify standards for the entire city or to specific zoning districts.

The City can rezone property by adopting ordinances to change a property's underlying zoning district. The City also can adopt conditional zoning ordinances for new development, through which the City can include specific conditions, if agreed upon by the applicant, as long as the conditions are site-specific, address the conformance of the development and the use of the site to city ordinances and other adopted comprehensive plans, address the impacts reasonably expected to be generated by the development of the site, and are not arbitrary and capricious.

Going beyond these rules with restrictive zoning would potentially result in the city being liable for regulatory takings under the law of eminent domain, or for exactions in situations where unreasonable conditions to a rezoning are requested.

The State of North Carolina limits the City of Asheville's ability to annex land into its municipal boundaries. Asheville has historically faced unique restrictions on its annexation powers due to specific state laws known as the "Sullivan Acts." These acts notably prohibit Asheville from making annexation a requirement for access to its water system.

³⁵ School of Government at the University of North Carolina, Frayda Bluestein. [Is North Carolina a Dillon's Rule State?, October 24, 2012.](#)

³⁶ City of Asheville. [Hotel Development, Asheville, NC - Briefing Book for Urban Land Institute Technical Assistance Panel \(TAP\), January, 2020.](#) Page 21.

In essence, while Asheville still has the legal authority to annex, the specific methods, especially involuntary ones, have been significantly constrained by state legislation, leading to a greater reliance on property owner petitions.

Financial Overview

Navigating Challenges and Recovery in Asheville

General Fund

The City of Asheville's FY 2025-26 General Fund budget, totaling \$182.8 million, supports essential day-to-day operations like police, fire, and parks. This fund relies primarily on property taxes (52%), sales taxes (21%), and utility taxes (7%), with other fees and intergovernmental revenues making up the rest.³⁷ As a non-Home Rule state, North Carolina limits the city's ability to create new revenue sources.

Following Tropical Storm Helene, the city incurred over \$24 million in widespread response and recovery costs, which are ongoing. Asheville anticipates full reimbursement from the FEMA Public Assistance Program. Beyond these expenses, Helene significantly impacted the city's revenue. A \$15.4 million revenue loss is projected for FY 2024-25, with nearly half affecting the Water Resources Fund due to service interruptions. The storm also hit the General Fund's two largest revenue streams: property and sales taxes.³⁸ Property tax collection for FY 2024-25 saw a slight dip, indicating a potential shortfall. More significantly, the FY 2025-26 tax base is projected to decrease by nearly 1.0%, a sharp contrast to typical growth. Sales tax collections, already slowing before Helene, plummeted further, leading to a forecasted 5.0% deficit for the current fiscal year and continued lower levels into the next.³⁹

To balance the FY 2025-26 General Fund budget, maintain current operations, adjust employee compensation, and preserve fund balance, City Council approved a 3.26 cent property tax rate increase.⁴⁰

Enterprise Funds ⁴¹

Enterprise Funds are proprietary funds used to account for activities that operate like private businesses, where expenses are primarily financed by revenues derived from user charges. For the City of Asheville, these funds include: Transit Services Fund, Parking Services Fund, Water Resources Fund, Harrah's Cherokee Center Asheville (HCCA) Fund, Stormwater Fund and Street Cut Utility Fund.

³⁷ City of Asheville. [Proposed Budget FY25-26, May 2025](#). Pages 18, 41.

³⁸ City of Asheville. [Proposed Budget FY25-26 - Tropical Storm Helene Current Year Impact & Budget, 2025](#). Page 7.

³⁹ City of Asheville. [Proposed Budget FY25-26 - Financial Outlook & Unavoidable Cost Increases, May 2025](#). Page 10.

⁴⁰ City of Asheville. [Proposed Budget FY25-26 - City Manager's Proposed Budget Message, May 2025](#). Page 6-7.

⁴¹ City of Asheville. [Proposed Budget FY25-26 - Enterprise Funds & The Business Improvement District Fund, May 2025](#). Pages 12-13.

Specifically, The Water Resources Fund faced significant revenue loss in the current fiscal year due to service interruptions from Helene, but no ongoing concerns are projected for FY 2025-26. An additional \$2.4 million in revenue is anticipated next fiscal year from City Council-approved rate increases, which will fund the Water system's Capital Improvement Program (CIP), maintain debt coverage ratios, and cover operational cost increases and compensation adjustments.

FY 2025-26 Budget

In total, the \$250.88 million budget, based on City Council priorities, community input, and staff work, reflects the long term strategies and priorities for funding in the next fiscal year (*July 1, 2024-June 30, 2025*). This year, Council members voted to approve a property tax rate increase to balance the budget. The approved property tax rate is 44.19 cents per \$100 of assessed valuation and will fund continuing current operations, employee compensation adjustments and maintaining sufficient fund balance to ensure a strong credit rating.⁴²

The FY 2025-26 budget ordinance that City Council adopted in June includes the second year budget for the Business Improvement District (BID). Staff is recommending no change in the BID property tax rate of \$0.0877 per \$100 assessed valuation. The FY 2025-26 Budget for the BID is \$1.25 million.⁴³

⁴² City of Asheville. [Proposed Budget FY25-26 - Budget Balancing Strategies, May 2025](#). Pages 12-13.

⁴³ City of Asheville. [Proposed Budget FY25-26 - Enterprise Funds & The Business Improvement District Fund, May 2025](#). Page 14.

Budget Summary : All Funds⁴⁴

	2022-23 Actual	2023-24 Actual	2024-25 Original Budget	2024-25 Amended Budget	2025-26 Adopted Budget
REVENUES					
General Fund	162,641,659	164,461,741	179,714,209	180,691,172	182,819,441
Water Resources	40,895,448	46,048,091	47,140,150	47,140,150	49,445,000
Transit Services	11,998,173	14,938,340	14,547,242	14,859,249	15,226,984
Stormwater	7,511,027	8,338,439	8,839,605	8,839,605	9,319,906
Parking Services	7,083,453	6,612,994	8,167,300	8,167,300	7,143,500
Harrah's Center	6,236,694	5,825,268	6,147,937	6,147,937	6,089,447
Street Cut Utility	3,006,454	2,799,075	2,908,696	3,408,696	4,155,217
Total	239,372,907	249,023,948	267,465,139	269,254,109	274,199,495
Interfund Transactions	(15,185,450)	(15,313,100)	(16,588,942)	(16,583,942)	(17,835,042)
Net Revenues	224,187,458	233,710,848	250,876,197	252,670,167	256,364,453
EXPENDITURES					
General Fund	155,472,578	170,409,146	179,714,209	180,691,172	182,819,441
Water Resources	39,329,482	43,020,650	47,140,150	47,140,150	49,445,000
Transit Services	12,852,055	13,865,537	14,547,242	14,859,249	15,226,984
Stormwater	7,245,539	6,774,365	8,839,605	8,839,605	9,319,906
Parking Services	5,043,855	6,470,877	8,167,300	8,167,300	7,143,500
Harrah's Center	5,050,328	6,740,900	6,147,937	6,147,937	6,089,447
Streety Cut Utility	1,861,275	1,875,297	2,908,696	3,408,696	4,155,217
Total	226,855,111	249,156,772	267,465,139	269,254,109	274,199,495
Interfund Transactions	(15,185,450)	(15,313,100)	(16,588,942)	(16,583,942)	(17,835,042)
Net Expenditures	211,669,661	233,843,671	250,876,197	252,670,167	256,364,453

⁴⁴ City of Asheville. [Proposed Budget FY25-26 - Budget Summary: All Funds Table, May 2025](#). Page 40.

Budget Sources and Uses by Fund

	General Fund	Water Resources	Transit Services	Stormwater Utility	Parking Services	Harrah's Cherokee Center	Street Cut Utility
SOURCE OF FUNDS							
Property Tax	91,512,014	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sales & Other Tax	42,270,000	-	-	-	-	-	-
Intergovernmental	19,177,631	-	3,908,203	-	-	-	-
Licenses & Permits	5,216,400	-	370,000	427,100	-	-	-
Charges for Services	16,172,206	47,995,000	615,000	8,385,000	-	4,647,500	2,530,217
Investment Earnings	2,500,000	1,300,000	-	100,000	90,000	116,510	10,000
Miscellaneous	3,216,190	150,000	-	2,500	7,053,500	200,000	-
Other Sources	2,755,000	-	10,333,781	405,306	-	1,125,437	1,615,000
Total Revenues	182,819,441	49,445,000	15,226,984	9,319,906	7,143,500	6,089,447	4,155,217
USES OF FUNDS							
Salaries & Wages	80,927,466	11,437,864	374,703	3,816,498	1,643,627	2,365,441	1,133,460
Benefits	36,436,408	5,478,482	147,974	1,820,320	829,823	939,027	543,555
Operating Costs	38,530,615	14,170,169	14,663,234	3,211,970	2,654,067	2,544,172	238,202
Interfund Transfers	9,554,730	-	-	-	950,000	-	600,000
Capital & Debt	17,370,222	18,358,485	41,073	471,118	1,065,983	240,807	1,040,000
Total Expenditures	182,819,441	49,445,000	15,226,984	9,319,906	7,143,500	6,089,447	3,555,217

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Capital Improvements Plan (CIP)

The City of Asheville Capital Funds are used to account for capital replacements and improvements, and Special Revenue Funds are used to account for specific revenue sources that are restricted or committed to expenditures for specific purposes other than debt service or capital projects.

Capital and Special Revenue Funds include: General Capital Projects Fund, Community Development (CBDG) and HOME funds from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Water Major Capital Improvement Fund, Harrah's Cherokee Center Asheville (HCCA) Capital Fund, Parking Services Capital Fund, Transit Services Capital Fund and Business Improvement District Fund.⁴⁶

Capital Improvement Programs (CIP) are vital for the development and maintenance of essential infrastructure such as roads, sidewalks, water systems, public buildings, parks, and recreational facilities.

Prior to Helene, City staff were working to develop a ten-year CIP that included spending plans for the \$80 million in General Obligation (GO) Bonds that were on the November 2024 ballot. That GO Bond ballot, which included \$20 million each for Public Safety Facilities, Transportation, Parks & Recreation,

⁴⁵ City of Asheville. [Proposed Budget FY25-26 - Budget Sources and Uses by Fund Table, May 2025](#). Page 41.

⁴⁶ City of Asheville. [Proposed Budget FY25-26 - Capital & Special Revenue Funds, May 2025](#). Pages 18.

and Affordable Housing was overwhelmingly approved by voters.⁴⁷ Because of Helene however, City staff decided to focus on developing a five-year CIP that included the GO Bond projects along with regular CIP projects.⁴⁸

Federal Funding Highlights

Staff is still in the process of working on the details for Helene CIP Recovery Projects and working through the FEMA Public Assistance process in order to maximize federal funding and identify funding from other non-City sources. Staff has begun grouping CIP Recovery Projects into two categories: simple and complex projects. Simple projects are straightforward repairs or replacements that follow FEMA's one-for-one restoration requirement. These projects are designed to restore damaged infrastructure to its pre-storm function as quickly as possible, with minimal flexibility for adjustments. Examples of these types of projects include roof repairs to the Municipal Building and Thomas Wolfe Auditorium and an assessment of Historic Biltmore Village street lights damaged by the storm.

Complex projects require more planning, coordination, and strategic decision-making. Unlike simple projects, these efforts allow for internal and external engagement, providing opportunities to incorporate resilience, mitigation, and design enhancements. The following complex project groupings have been identified to date: 1) French Broad Riverfront, 2) Swannanoa River, 3) Municipal Golf Course, and 4) Water. The City is sequencing these complex recovery projects strategically to ensure an efficient and effective rebuilding process. To date, the City has already released Request for Qualifications (RFQ's) for the French Broad Riverfront Parks Recovery project, the Municipal Golf Course and a project to improve water treatment plants. In the near term, the community can also expect the start of an additional project that encompasses City-owned assets on the Swannanoa Riverfront adjacent to Azalea Road.

The City will continue to advance its regular and GO Bond Capital Improvement Plan in conjunction with storm recovery efforts throughout next fiscal year. The integration of these initiatives ensures a coordinated effort to strengthen Asheville's infrastructure and economic stability.⁴⁹

The City of Asheville receives two primary types of federal housing funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Annually, it receives approximately \$1 million in Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds for local projects. Additionally, as the participating jurisdiction for the Asheville Regional HOME Consortium, the City receives roughly \$1 million in HOME Investment Partnerships Program funds each year, which are designated for housing projects across a four-county region including Buncombe, Henderson, Haywood, and Transylvania counties.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ North Carolina State Board of Elections. [11/05/2024 Official General Election Results - Buncombe, 2024](#).

⁴⁸ City of Asheville. [Proposed Budget FY25-26 - Capital Improvement Program, May 2025](#). Page 14.

⁴⁹ City of Asheville. [Proposed Budget FY25-26 - Capital Improvement Program, May 2025](#). Page 14-15.

⁵⁰ City of Asheville. [Community and Economic Development - HUD Programs and Reports, May 2025](#).

In a separate, significant development, HUD allocated an additional \$225 million in Community Development Block Grant-Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) funds to the City of Asheville in January 2025. The City has since developed and submitted an [CDBG-DR Action Plan](#) to HUD, detailing how these substantial funds will address unmet recovery needs in the community following Tropical Storm Helene.⁵¹

Taxation

Sales Tax

Sales tax is the second largest source of municipal revenues in the City of Asheville's General Fund.⁵² The State of NC collects sales tax revenue and distributes it back to local governments based on a fairly complex formula. Sales taxes in Buncombe County are distributed using the "ad valorem", meaning sales tax revenue is divided between the county, local municipalities, the city school district, and rural fire districts based on each entity's share of total countywide property taxes. Asheville receives the same amount of sales tax on purchases made throughout Buncombe County, regardless if the transaction is made outside of the jurisdictional area of the city.⁵³ As the county has grown more rapidly than the city, Asheville's share of county-wide sales tax revenues has decreased over time. Since the 1990s, the City of Asheville has seen a decline in its share of the county-wide ad valorem tax levy, and thus a corresponding decline in its share of the sales tax revenue. In other words, the synchronized growth of Asheville and its region has very real budget implications.

Occupancy Tax⁵⁴

Counties and cities/towns in North Carolina can both be enabled by the General Assembly to collect occupancy taxes. Local legislation in Asheville states that these revenues must be transferred to the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority (BCTDA) for the purpose of promoting tourism in the county.⁵⁵

How that revenue is used generally falls into several categories, which vary amongst each North Carolina jurisdiction as allowed by law. These categories include: 1) destination promotion; 2) "tourism-related" expenditures; 3) funding or debt support for tourism-related capital projects such as convention centers and arenas or visitor attractions; 4) beach renourishment; and, 5) general fund revenue and other non-tourism uses. Pursuant to HB 347 the Buncombe County Commissioners have levied an occupancy tax of 6% on gross receipts derived from the rental of any room, lodging or accommodation furnished by a hotel, motel, inn or similar place within the county.

⁵¹ City of Asheville. [HUD Approves City of Asheville Plan for \\$225 Million in CDBG-DR Funds, May, 2025.](#)

⁵² City of Asheville. [Proposed Budget FY25-26 - Financial Outlook & Unavoidable Cost Increases, May 2025.](#) Page 10.

⁵³ City of Asheville. [Hotel Development, Asheville, NC - Briefing Book for Urban Land Institute Technical Assistance Panel \(TAP\), January, 2020.](#) Page 21.

⁵⁴ City of Asheville. [Hotel Development, Asheville, NC - Briefing Book for Urban Land Institute Technical Assistance Panel \(TAP\), January, 2020.](#) Page 21-22.

⁵⁵ City of Asheville. [City Clerk - Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority, July, 2025.](#)

The North Carolina legislation regarding how the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority uses its occupancy tax funds was most recently and significantly changed with a new law that became effective on July 1, 2022.⁵⁶

This 2022 legislation modified the allocation formula for the occupancy tax, shifting it from 75% for tourism promotion and 25% for community capital projects, to a new split of two-thirds (66.67%) for tourism promotion and one-third (33.33%) for investment in community capital projects.^{57, 58}

In the aftermath of Helene, Occupancy tax collections dropped significantly in October 2024 (down 74%) and November 2024 (down 60%).⁵⁹ However by January 2025, occupancy tax collections were trending upwards again (up 6% from the prior year). According to a recent Citizen-Times article, hotel lodging demand declined by 8% in May⁶⁰ compared to May 2024, which signals a slower recovery for occupancy tax collections.

⁵⁶ Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority (TDA). [Tourism Product Development Fund - Program Guidelines, April 7, 2025](#). Page 3.

⁵⁷ ExploreAsheville.com. [Legacy Investment from Tourism \(LIFT\) Fund, 2025](#).

⁵⁸ www.citizen-times.com. [Less money for Buncombe tourism advertising after occupancy tax bill passes NC Legislature, July, 2022](#).

⁵⁹ Asheville.com News, Buncombe County. [County Commissioners Adjust FY25 Expenditures, Begin Navigating Post-Helene Budget Process for FY26, January, 2025](#).

⁶⁰ www.citizen-times.com. [Asheville-area unemployment decreased in May, but hospitality industry maintains decline](#).



Overview of Disaster & Recovery Efforts

ULI Briefing Book

In late September 2024, rain from Tropical Storm Helene poured on an already drenched Western North Carolina. Before Helene reached southern Appalachia, a stalled weather system funneled excessive moisture into the region, triggering a Predecessor Rain Event (PRE). Over two days, continuous rainfall saturated the soil beyond capacity, leaving the mountainous terrain highly vulnerable to flooding and landslides. Between September 25 and 27, Asheville Regional Airport recorded 13.98 inches of rainfall, equivalent to nearly three months' worth of precipitation in less than 72 hours—before communications failed. When Helene rolled in, high winds knocked down trees with soaked roots, the mountainous terrain resulted in landslides, and rain funneled into rivers swelling them to unprecedented levels. The section of the French Broad River in Asheville rose 24.6 ft, breaking the previously set record in 1916.⁶¹ The section of the Swannanoa River through Asheville rose 27.3 ft⁶² eclipsing the previous records from 1791 and 1916, marking the most severe flood event since North Carolina became a state.⁶³



Flooding of French Broad River in Asheville NC / Courtesy of Reggie Tigwell Curve Theory

⁶¹ U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). [Tropical Storm Helene flooding on French Broad River in Asheville, North Carolina, October, 2024.](#)

⁶² U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). [Swannanoa River at Biltmore, NC - 03451000, 2025.](#)

⁶³ City of Asheville, North Carolina. [2025 Community Development Block Grant - Disaster Recovery \(CDBG-DR\) Disaster Recovery Action Plan, 2025.](#) Page 10-11.

The destruction from Helene left the majority of Asheville without power for nearly a week. Some had no power for nearly 2 weeks. For days following the storm Asheville had nearly no cell service.⁶⁴ The damaged infrastructure to the North Fork reservoir left around 80 percent of the city without running water for 18 days, for some residents the outage lasted over 3 weeks.⁶⁵ Clean drinking water would not fully return to the system for 52 days.⁶⁶

In Asheville, the infrastructure and economic impacts from Helene were immediate and catastrophic. The storm damaged an estimated 80% of buildings within the River Arts District, including some buildings that were destroyed. Many artist studios and businesses, including coffee shops, breweries, and bakeries, were either heavily damaged or destroyed, fundamentally altering the district's landscape. About 8,000 jobs were lost in Asheville from September to October, causing the unemployment rate in the Asheville metropolitan area to surge from 2.6% in September to 8.8% in October 2024. The storm inflicted significant damage on communications infrastructure in WNC. This disruption was exacerbated by damaged transportation infrastructure and the region's mountainous terrain, which hindered network restoration efforts and limited the effectiveness of temporary solutions. Tourism, a vital component of Asheville's economy, experienced a sharp downturn. Significant damage to the City's water system resulted in water service outages, which added to the many factors impacting tourism. These impacts have resulted in the region facing potential losses of up to \$1.8 billion due to lost tourism revenue in the fall season, though the approximate losses are still being calculated.⁶⁷ Use this link to view aerial footage of Asheville [before and after Helene](#).



Flood French Broad River in Asheville NC / Courtesy of Reggie Tigwell Curve Theory

⁶⁴ AP News. [Asheville has been isolated after Helene wrecked roads and knocked out power and cell service, 2024](#).

⁶⁵ [www.citizen-times.com. Non-potable water returns to nearly 95% of Asheville's system. What city learned from 2022-23 holiday outage, October, 2024.](#)

⁶⁶ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). [EPA New Release, City of Asheville lifts systemwide boil water notice issued after Hurricane Helene, November, 2024](#)

⁶⁷ City of Asheville, North Carolina. [2025 Community Development Block Grant - Disaster Recovery \(CDBG-DR\) Disaster Recovery Action Plan, 2025](#). Page 12.

Damage to Essential Infrastructure

Water

Arguably the most devastating impacts to infrastructure was to Asheville's water system. Tropical Storm Helene heavily damaged two of the city's three water treatment plants: the North Fork in Black Mountain and DeBruhl in the Bee Tree Reservoir. Additionally, large portions of the city's water distribution system (e.g. the underground lines) were destroyed, especially in areas east and south of downtown along the Swannanoa and French Broad Rivers. Even if the distribution system had remained intact, neither of the city's surface water treatment plants — North Fork and DeBruhl — were able to treat the highly sediment-laden (turbid) reservoir water. In other words, the plants could not have produced drinkable water to supply the system.



The system was able to be back online incrementally, though billing was paused until the full system returned to potable water delivery. The boil water notice wasn't lifted system-wide until November 18, 2024 indicating a safe return to normal service.⁶⁸

Future Plans to Build Resilience⁶⁹

At this time, the primary resilience project, for which the city has requested funding from FEMA, is filter upgrades at North Fork and DeBruhl. These upgrades would allow the facilities to treat especially turbid water similar to levels experienced after Helene. Another resilience project that the city might pursue is an additional bypass waterline from North Fork that, as much as possible, avoids the Swannanoa River. A long-term resilience project for consideration is a fourth water treatment plant, located in West Asheville.

⁶⁸ City of Asheville. [Asheville asks: When does utility billing resume post Helene?, 2024.](#)

⁶⁹ Information in this section obtained from the City's Water Department.

Communication and Broadband

In the initial days after the storm, response efforts were severely impacted by the community's inability to access WiFi and cell services. Tropical Storm Helene severely damaged internet and cell service across Asheville, Buncombe County, and broader Western North Carolina. At the storm's peak, a staggering 81.9% of cell towers in Buncombe County were non-operational, with the majority (65%) failing due to power loss, and another 34% due to severed fiber optic connections. This local impact mirrored a region-wide crisis, as nearly 70% of Western North Carolina's cell phone towers and equipment went out of service, leaving hundreds of thousands of residents without vital communication.⁷⁰ The primary issue was not damage to the towers themselves, but widespread fiber optic line ruptures, mainly from fallen trees, leading to a massive communication blackout.⁷¹ This prolonged outage was particularly devastating for people living in remote and isolated mountainous areas, many of whom already lacked reliable broadband internet, further cutting them off from essential services and information, with full restoration taking over a month or longer.⁷²

Future Plans to Build Resilience

Land of Sky (LOS) is Asheville's regional council, a multi-county, local government, planning and development organization. LOS is one of the primary organizations working on better connecting Western North Carolina. Recently, LOS Board of Delegates unanimously passed a resolution in support of the *Connecting All Communities* grant, reinforcing the region's commitment to closing the digital divide and accelerating recovery efforts following Tropical Storm Helene. The \$7.7 million federal grant—awarded in January 2025 to Land of Sky's WestNGN program—was stripped away in April 2025 after the abrupt termination of the Digital Equity Act.⁷³

Transportation ⁷⁴

Water and communications could not have been restored without the extensive work to repair roads in and around Asheville after Helene caused massive damage to the transportation system. Both I-26 and I-40, the two interstates that traverse Asheville, were washed out due to mudslides and landslides. I-40 had tremendous damage in the Pigeon River Gorge area and was closed for approximately five months following Tropical Storm Helene. The closure affected a 12-mile stretch of the interstate near the Tennessee border in North Carolina that reopened with one lane in each direction on March 1st. The typical detour via I-26 was also closed at the North Carolina-Tennessee border, specifically near the Nolichucky River in Erwin, Tennessee, where floodwaters washed out two bridge spans. Although I-26

⁷⁰ Federal Communications Commission (FCC). [Hurricane Helene Communications Status Report - Sep 28, 2024](#).

⁷¹ Asheville Watchdog. [Buncombe's blackout: Severed fiber lines made it impossible to call, text or use data on phones, September, 2024](#).

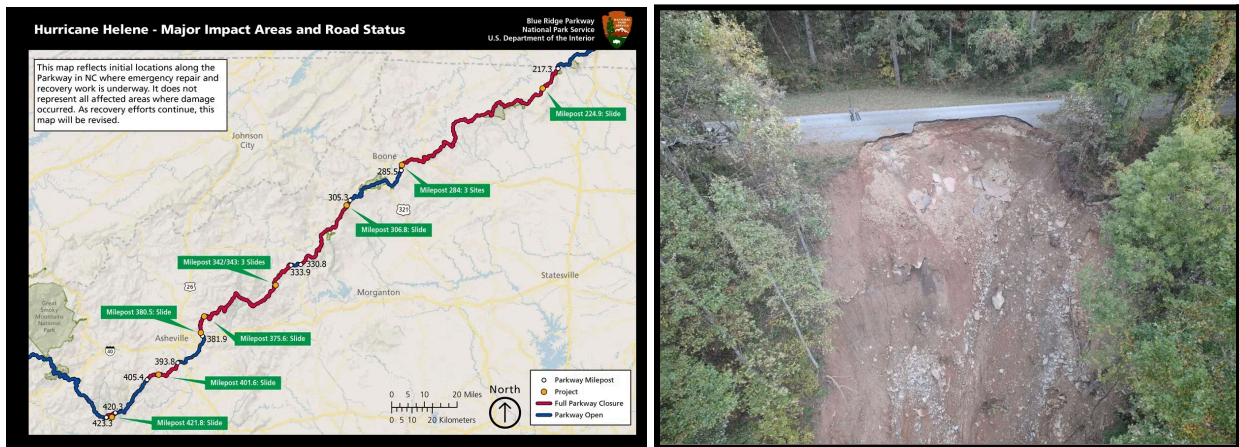
⁷² Blue Ridge Public Radio (BRPR). [Thousands in WNC still without internet and wireless service, October, 2024](#).

⁷³ Land of Sky. [Land of Sky Regional Council Delegates Unite to Back \\$7.7M Digital Equity Grant for Helene Recovery, June, 2025](#).

⁷⁴ Information in this section obtained primarily from the City's Public Works and Transportation Departments.

has reopened with one lane in each direction, the bridge spans that collapsed near the Tennessee state line suffered extensive damage and are still undergoing reconstruction.

The Blue Ridge Parkway, which travels through Asheville and draws around 15 million visitors each year⁷⁵, incurred significant road damage. Many sections of the Parkway around Asheville are still currently closed. Some of the closures are for scheduled maintenance, but storm-related damage contributed to the closures.



These pictures have hyperlinks to local news stories with more information regarding the Blue Ridge Parkway.^{76, 77}

The NCDOT owns and maintains most of the arterial roads through Asheville. Many of these roads and bridges were washed away or severely damaged to the point of needing significant repair. A total of 118 bridges in Buncombe County were reported closed. To date, 21 have been repaired.⁷⁸

Initially, fallen trees presented significant obstacles, impeding the swift response of first responders. Subsequently, extensive landslides rendered numerous roadways impassable. Public Works crews demonstrated exceptional dedication, operating for 12 to 16 hours daily, seven days a week, until January, to re-establish the functionality of the street network. Their sustained efforts



⁷⁵ National Parks Service. [Annual Park Recreation Visitation \(1904 - Last Calendar Year\), Blue Ridge Parkway, 2024.](#)

⁷⁶ ABC 13 News, Neydja Petithomme. [Tourists face navigation hurdles on Blue Ridge Parkway as Helene closures persist - Photo, May 31, 2025.](#)

⁷⁷ ABC 13 News, Rex Hodge. ['It could be a while': Blue Ridge Parkway remains closed due to Helene damage - Photo, October 17, 2024.](#)

⁷⁸ North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT). [Road Closures Buncombe County Helene - Spreadsheet.](#)

were carried out under exceptionally hazardous conditions.

Urgent challenges emerged after the storm. Multiple problems crippled our street system: washouts in floodplains, landslides and mudslides in neighborhoods — particularly on the north side of the city — and widespread downed trees that blocked streets and limited access for first responders. [Follow this link for further road information from Public Works.](#)

The Transit Division of Asheville played a critical role in rescuing people from the Swannanoa Valley during the storm. Buses were directed to transport people to the Harrah’s Cherokee Center - Asheville (HCCA) and then to disperse them to other shelters when HCCA became too full. Transit service resumed again on October 7, 2024, though many routes remained closed or detoured due to the closures. The City offered free fare rides through December 31, 2024. All routes are now restored and accessible.⁷⁹

Recovery Strategies

Immediate Response

During the storm, and in the days immediately after the storm, the City of Asheville worked on addressing the basic needs of our community with a focus on our most vulnerable populations. The City conducted 1000 evacuation, 140 rescues, and searched over 1,060 miles. The City of Asheville implemented water and meal distribution, worked on restoring Water Service, began debris collection, coordinated temporary housing, and provided Financial Assistance.⁸⁰

Short Term Recovery

After about two months post disaster the city began to transition into the recovery stage. Five focus areas were developed to guide the city's recovery efforts: **storm debris**; **housing**; **economic recovery**; **natural and cultural history**; and **infrastructure**.

Storm Debris

Tropical Storm Helene generated large amounts of storm debris within Asheville’s city limits. The City activated state contracts for a debris monitoring firm, eventually transitioning management to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) under Direct Federal Assistance (DFA) to begin clearing storm debris from public rights-of-way (ROW). As of July

⁷⁹ Information is this section obtained from City of Asheville Transportation Department.

⁸⁰ City of Asheville. [Tropical Storm Helene: Emergency Response and Recovery - Metro Mayors Conference, December, 2024.](#)

2025, over 865,000 cubic yards of debris have been collected. About a third of debris was collected from the city's waterways.^{81, 82}

Housing

In the months following Helene, the City has allocated \$1,000,000 in local funds and \$624,000 in Federal funds to assist low-income city residents with rental assistance. The City also allocated \$1,465,000 in Affordable Housing Bond funds to assist low-income city residents with home repair. The City has entered into a contract with the Asheville Regional Coalition for Home Repair (ARCHR), a relatively new coalition of housing-focused organizations including Habitat for Humanity, Poder Emma, Community Action Opportunities, Mountain Housing Opportunities, and the Asheville Buncombe Community Land Trust.⁸³ The City has directed 10% of the contract funds toward administrative costs to build the infrastructure for a 1-stop portal for applicants. Asheville Area Habitat for Humanity is the organization's backbone and is responsible for coordinating applications, conducting assessments, and reporting.

Economic Recovery⁸⁴

The City has identified several key approaches to economic recovery including:

- (1) Investing in business continuity planning programs, helping small businesses prepare for and recover from disruptions caused by flooding and extreme weather;
- (2) diversifying Asheville's local economy by supporting resilient industries, such as nature-based infrastructure development and sustainable tourism;
- (3) Strengthening financial recovery programs, ensuring that local businesses and workers have access to funding that enables quick post-disaster rebuilding;
- (4) prioritizing flood mitigation in commercial districts, particularly in high-risk economic and cultural hubs, such as the RAD, Biltmore Village, and Swannanoa River corridor, which suffered concentrated damages; and
- (5) conducting area-focused mitigation strategies for revitalizing flood-affected economic corridors through land-use planning, infrastructure modernization, and economic development policies that prioritize investments for commercial areas.

Natural and Cultural History

Asheville's natural landscapes and cultural assets are at the heart of the city's identity. Protecting and restoring these resources strengthens the community's resilience while preserving the unique character that makes Asheville special. The City has been working on restoring these resources through initiatives

⁸¹ City of Asheville - AshevilleRecovers.org. [Storm Debris, July, 2025.](#)

⁸² City of Asheville - AshevilleRecovers.org. [Storm Debris Dashboard, 2025.](#)

⁸³ Asheville Area Habitat for Humanity. [Disaster Home Repair: ARCHR.](#)

⁸⁴ Information in this section obtained from the City's Community and Economic Development Department and Economic Recovery Support Group.

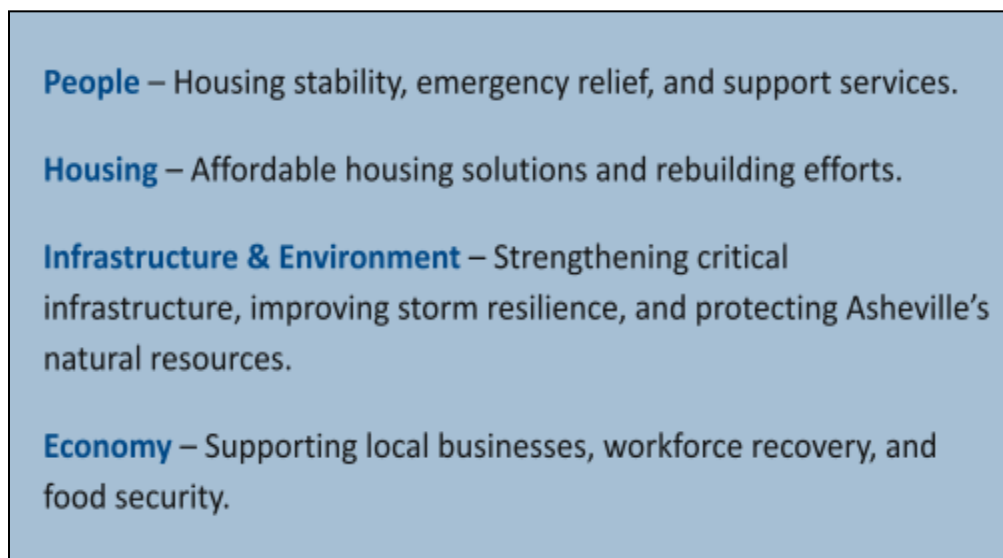
like [Arts Business Relief Grants](#), [Temporary Activation Program \(TAP\)](#), and reopening public spaces.^{85, 86} The City’s cultural recovery efforts are discussed further in the [Arts and Cultural section](#).

Infrastructure

It is estimated that storm damage to city-owned infrastructure totals at \$1 billion, and rebuilding will take years.⁸⁷ The focus of infrastructure recovery in the short term is to assess damage and lay the groundwork for the long-term effort. The City is committed to doing this in a way that promotes efficiency and ensures maximum use of outside funding sources. The City’s infrastructure recovery efforts are discussed further in the Next Level Parks Section.

Long Term Recovery

Recently, Asheville has transitioned into Long Term Recovery. Based on community input and City Council discussions, the City has identified four priority areas for long-term recovery:



People – Housing stability, emergency relief, and support services.

Housing – Affordable housing solutions and rebuilding efforts.

Infrastructure & Environment – Strengthening critical infrastructure, improving storm resilience, and protecting Asheville’s natural resources.

Economy – Supporting local businesses, workforce recovery, and food security.

The goal is to integrate these long-term recovery focus areas into recommendations from ULI on building Asheville’s economic and environmental resilience. [Visit Asheville Recovery Engagement Hub for more information on recovery priorities and current projects.](#)

⁸⁵ ArtsAVL. [ArtsAVL Awards \\$680,000 in Arts Business Relief Grants Across Western North Carolina, May, 2025.](#)

⁸⁶ City of Asheville. [City of Asheville launches Temporary Activation Program \(TAP\), facilitating temporary initiatives to support Helene Recovery in partnership with the community, May, 2025.](#)

⁸⁷ City of Asheville. [Restoring City-owned infrastructure through the FEMA Public Assistance Program, January, 2025.](#)

Primary Recovery Funding Sources

Community Development Block Grant - Disaster Relief (CDBG-DR)

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) approved the [City of Asheville's Action Plan](#) to use roughly \$225 million in CDBG-DR funds, allocated after a December 2024 Congressional appropriation. Asheville's City Council approved and submitted the plan in early April 2025, and HUD's approval marks a major milestone toward accessing these funds. The CDBG-DR program provides funding for infrastructure, housing/home repair, and economic revitalization projects. The Action Plan provides broad approaches to address the needs identified in each of the areas. Economic revitalization is intended to provide small business support, workforce development, and resources for the revitalization of flooded commercial corridors.

The plan allocates funding as follows:

- \$125 million for Infrastructure
- \$52 million for Economic Revitalization
- \$31 million for Housing
- \$11.2 million for Administration
- \$3.7 million for Planning
- \$2 million for Public Services

HUD will certify Asheville's financial and grant management processes before issuing a grant agreement. The City anticipates launching its first programs by the fall of 2025, with projects like the French Broad Riverfront Parks Recovery among those under consideration. The Action Plan was shaped through extensive community engagement, including surveys, public input sessions, and comment periods, which led to reallocating \$5 million toward Small Business Support, Affordable Multi-Family Construction, and Planning⁸⁸.

FEMA Public Assistant Program (FEMA PA)

FEMA has a process in place for reimbursing government and some nonprofit agencies for costs incurred to rebuild after natural disasters through the [FEMA Public Assistance program](#). This program is for public property; not individuals or businesses in the community. The City of Asheville is preparing to maximize use of this program, in addition to other funding sources, to restore the City's infrastructure and public spaces damaged by Helene. While this is a critical funding stream for rebuilding City infrastructure, it is important to note this funding is mostly oriented toward rebuilding structures similar to the ones that existed before the storm. There are also FEMA funding programs for mitigation and resilience.

⁸⁸ City of Asheville. [HUD approves City of Asheville Action Plan for \\$225 Million in CDBG-DR Funds, May 15, 2025.](#)

The City of Asheville initiated **Phase 1** of the FEMA PA process immediately after the storm, allocating as much staff time as possible given demanding emergency response efforts.

The transition to **Phase 2** is underway and includes FEMA damage inventory and inspections of City-owned property that experienced storm damage. Given the vast amount of damage to City-owned property and assets, Phase 2 is expected to last through late 2025. While properties and assets are inspected, the City can begin work on planning and design for rebuilding projects concurrently as feasible.

Phase 3 will involve City coordination with FEMA to determine funding eligibility for each individual rebuilding project, which will be approved in **Phase 4**. Although Phases 3 and 4 may take some time to complete, the City will begin immediately rebuilding where possible. In addition to storm recovery projects, the City will also be engaged in regular capital projects and projects that were identified in the [2024 bond referendum](#).

Phases 5 through 7: Once all cost estimates and scoping are reviewed and approved for each recovery project, FEMA will disburse federal funds to the State of North Carolina, which will manage program funds for all Public Assistance applicants of the Helene disaster statewide. The State will then reimburse the City of Asheville for eligible expenses incurred.⁸⁹

FEMA Hazard Mitigation Assistance (HMA)

Hazard Mitigation includes activities that reduce or eliminate long-term risk to people and property from natural hazards, such as flooding. FEMA HMA is a federally funded program but is administered by the states, in Asheville's case North Carolina Emergency Management (NCEM). Local governments can apply for funding as subapplicants for eligible projects, or on behalf of private property owners and businesses for certain projects. HMA provides funding for activities such as: acquisitions, elevations, or retrofits of individual properties; flood risk reduction projects such as upsizing culverts, enhancing stormwater management, or floodplain restorations; protection of utility or transportation infrastructure; capability and capacity building activities such as project scoping, codes and standards, and planning. Importantly, HMA funding cannot be used for repairs that do not provide a greater level of protection against future storm events.⁹⁰

While the HMA, FEMA PA, and CDBG-DR funding are the city's primary recovery grants, additional grants are also available that the city may pursue.

⁸⁹ City of Asheville. [Restoring City-owned infrastructure through the FEMA Public Assistance Program, January 23, 2025](#).

⁹⁰ Hagerty Consulting, Inc. [FEMA Hazard Mitigation: HMA and 406 Mitigation - Presentation, June, 2025](#).



Introduction to Study Areas

ULI Briefing Book

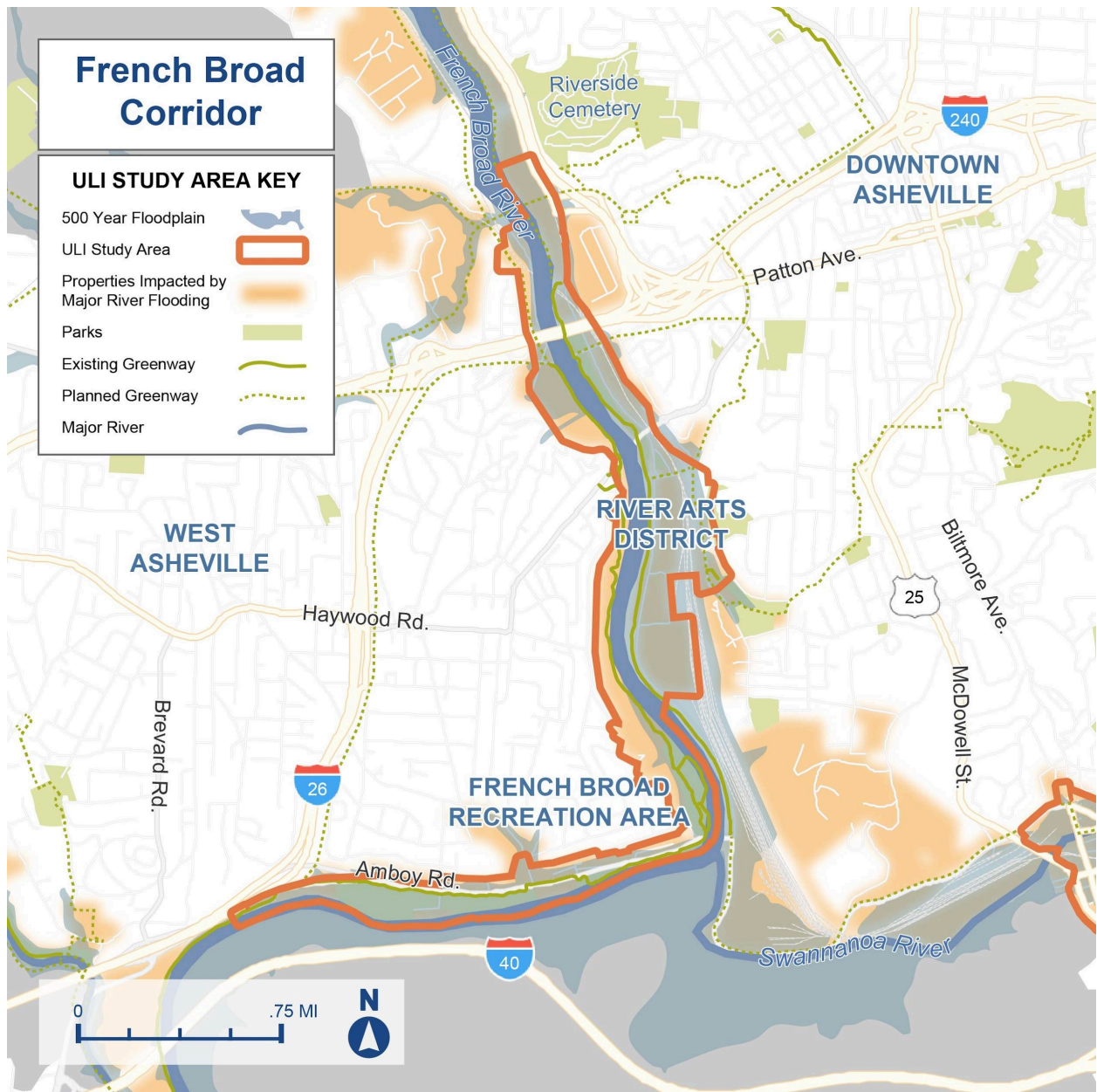
Why These Areas

All of Asheville was affected by the devastation of Helene. However, due to the limited time of the ULI Panel to create recommendations, the scope is focused on two study areas severely impacted by both physical and economic damage from the storm. The sections of the French Broad and Swannanoa corridors chosen could also particularly benefit from resilience recommendations.

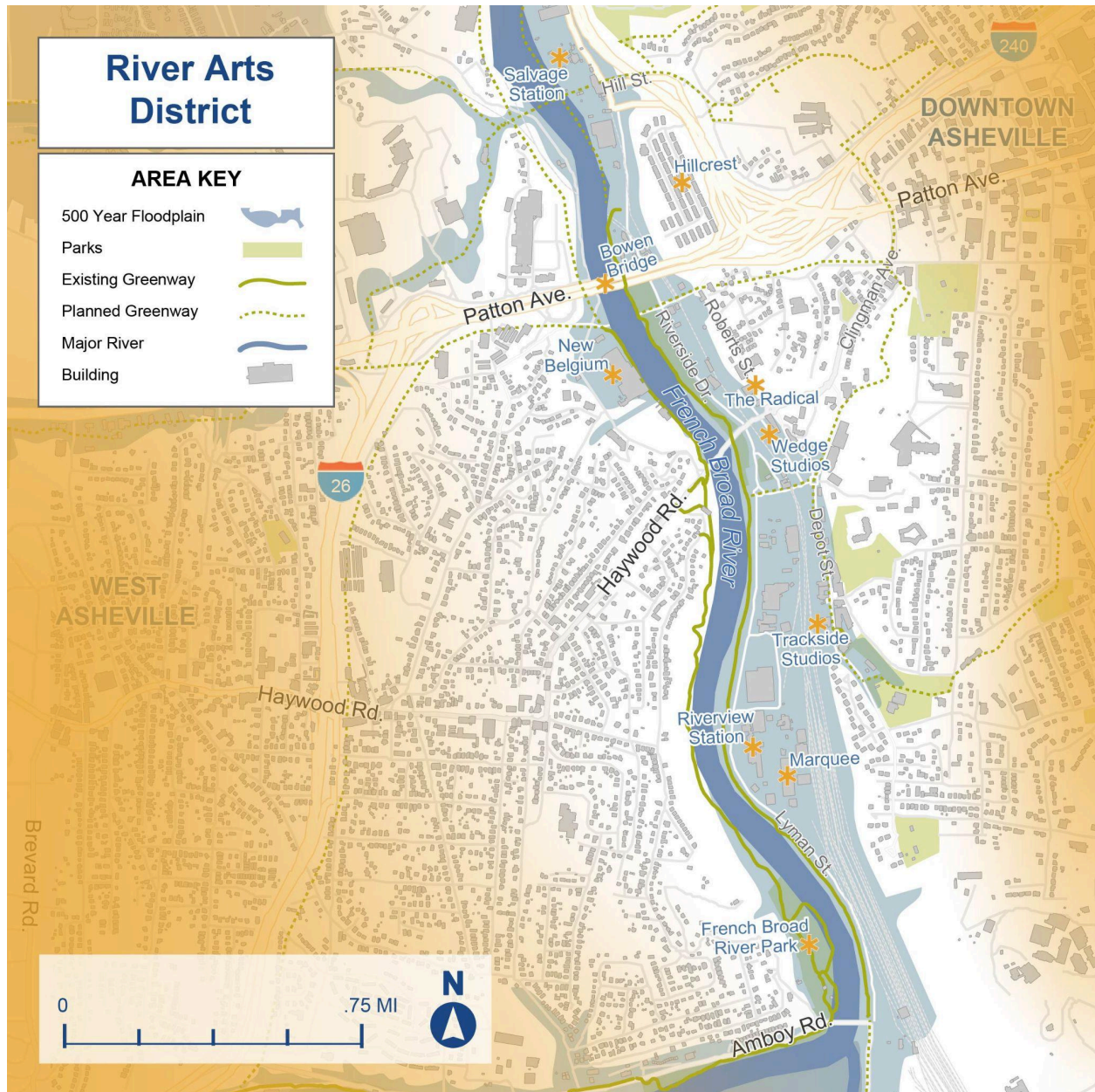


French Broad Corridor Study Area

To the north, the French Broad Corridor Study Area begins at Salvage Station (468 Riverside Drive), which marks the northern boundary of the City's completed revitalization projects. It then straddles the French Broad River going south, roughly defined by areas impacted by major flooding due to Helene, following the Wilma Dykeman greenway and riverfront parks system. The study area passes the heart of Asheville's River Arts District on the east, before continuing with the French Broad as it turns west. Finally the study area ends to the southwest at Riverfront RV park, which is the last developed parcel in the River zoning district.



River Arts District (RAD)



The River Arts District represents a remarkable transformation from its industrial past to a thriving cultural and economic cornerstone. The 320-340 million year old French Broad River defines the western boundary of the RAD. Known to the Cherokee as “Togiyasdi” (the place where they race) the area was inhabited for over 10,000 years by the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians before being forcibly removed by white settlers.

Settlers primarily had small family farms through the 1600-1700s. After the Civil War, the railroad, built largely by the forced prison labor of African Americans, expanded to Asheville and led to an era of rapid industrialization during the late 19th Century. The river and railroad attracted tanneries, textile mills,

stockyards, and warehouses and helped transform Asheville into the region’s economic center.⁹¹ During this time some of the city’s earliest parks were opened, including Carrier’s Field and Riverside Park, which included horse tracks, ballfields and amusement rides.

The severity of the Flood of 1916 brought development along Asheville’s riverfront to a halt. However, the community had already begun expanding farther from the river with the arrival of personal automobiles, leading to new business and residential centers. By the 1950s, Asheville’s rapid population growth turned the French Broad into an open cesspool in the form of floating sewage, garbage disposal, industrial and chemical runoff, and landfill seepage. Residents and businesses left the riverfront behind to auto graveyards, junkyards, abandoned buildings, and rundown factories that straight-piped waste directly into the river. Pollution was so bad that it was considered a “dead river” and several native fish and aquatic species became extinct.

Visionaries like Wilma Dykeman and other conservation-focused individuals and organizations banded together in the 1950s and 60s, calling for clean air and water. They connected a healthy environment with economic development and human well-being through recording and sharing stories about the rich history of the area. When the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) proposed building a series of hydroelectric dams in 1961, a grassroots effort rose up to challenge the government’s assumption that this was the best answer, ultimately halting the TVA’s plan. This set the stage for long-range planning efforts led by organizations such as the [Land of Sky Regional Council](#) and the community’s commitment to rehabilitating its rivers. Over the next decade, cleanup efforts and the annual French Broad River Week festival led to the formation of [RiverLink](#).⁹²



Credit / Cotton Mill Studios

⁹¹ River Arts District Artists. [History of Asheville’s River Arts District, 2025](#).

⁹² City of Asheville. [Park Views: Wilma Dykeman Greenway, March 16, 2023](#).

In the 1980s, artists, recognizing the potential and cheap rent in these vacant industrial structures, initiated a grassroots movement, converting them into studios and workspaces, thereby laying the foundation for the vibrant arts community present today.

This organic re-purposing resulted in the establishment of the River Arts District Artists (RADA) non-profit which now supports over 700 artists across diverse mediums and culminated in formal recognition with the area being named the River Arts District in 2005.⁹³

As a designated urban center in Asheville's future land use plans, the RAD is a critical component of the city's ongoing development and cultural identity. Its strategic location along the French Broad River, encompassing the Riverside Industrial Historic District with its century-old brick warehouses, exemplifies adaptive reuse, incorporating local artistry and materials in its design. The district's unique streetscape, greenway, and park components, featuring a palette of iron, corten steel, wood, and reclaimed urbanite, work to blend the old with the new. Key historical markers, such as a highwater marker from the Great Flood of 1916, preserved stone foundations, and repurposed industrial elements, underscore the district's commitment to its heritage while signaling its function as a dynamic hub for arts, recreation, and community engagement.⁹⁴

French Broad Recreation area

On the southern end of the French Broad Corridor Study Area is an extensive recreation system. Asheville's Riverfront Plan was unveiled in 1989 and the beginning of the city's greenway system became a reality when a paved loop opened in French Broad River Park in 1995.⁹⁵ In 2004, the Asheville City Council unanimously approved [The Wilma Dykeman RiverWay Master Plan](#), a detailed master plan for urban areas along the French Broad and Swannanoa rivers.⁹⁶

The success of French Broad River Park led Asheville Parks & Recreation (APR) to plan, invest in and develop numerous other greenways and parks in the area. ([See Parks section](#))

This parks and transportation system was significantly improved by the completion of the River Arts District Transportation Improvement Project (RADTIP) in 2021. The RADTIP was a \$35 million project to rebuild the transportation network along the east side of the French Broad River in the River Arts District, with the long term vision of supporting businesses, residents, artists and the greater community vision in [The Wilma Dykeman RiverWay Master Plan](#). The RADTIP constructed four miles of sidewalk, two miles of greenway, and added bike lanes, including the City's first protected bike lane. The RADTIP also created about 9 acres of new parkland, and installed a two-mile-long stormwater management system and three constructed wetlands to protect the French Broad River.⁹⁷ Today this extensive parks and

⁹³ River Arts District Artists. [History of Asheville's River Arts District, 2025](#).

⁹⁴ This information was obtained from the City's Planning and Urban Design Department.

⁹⁵ City of Asheville. [Park Views: French Broad River Park and French Broad River Greenway, August 29, 2024](#).

⁹⁶ City of Asheville. [Park Views: Wilma Dykeman Greenway, March 16, 2023](#).

⁹⁷ City of Asheville. [Revitalizing the Riverfront, April 23, 2025](#).

greenway system serves as a vital connector between the RAD and riverfront parks, and is a huge draw for both residents and visitors.

Overview of Storm Impacts on French Broad Corridor



View of flooded RAD / Courtesy of Reggie Tidwell Curve Theory

Much of the RAD intersects the floodway of the French Broad River and the Riverside Industrial Historic District sits entirely within the 500 year floodplain. As a result this district also saw significant damage and commercial losses because of Helene. The base flood elevation for the majority of the Riverside Industrial area is between 1,985 and 1,990 feet. There are 28 contributing structures and four noncontributing structures in the Historic District; many of these buildings sit well below the flood elevation.⁹⁸ ([See Arts and Culture section](#))

The French broad greenways and parks system was also entirely submerged and sustained significant damage. ([See Parks section](#))

⁹⁸ This information was obtained from the City's Planning and Urban Design Department.

Swannanoa Corridor Study Area



Swannanoa Corridor Study Area begins at the McDowell St. Bridge, a gateway into Asheville’s Historic Biltmore Village. It then follows the Swannanoa River upstream along a mostly commercial district characterized by older warehouses, parking lots, and strip malls. The study area ends where the river crosses underneath Tunnel Road, an intersection with several large box stores (e.g. Lowe’s). The study area is roughly defined by areas in this corridor impacted by major flooding due to Helene. To the north and south of the study area are predominantly single family residential neighborhoods with limited connections to this commercial river district. The study boundary to the north is generally set by the toe

of a steep slope and the boundary to the south is generally set by the railroad. The Swannanoa River is closely flanked by Swannanoa River Road to the north and Thompson Street to the south. Both of these roads received significant damage and are continually being compromised by the Swannanoa River. This corridor is “bookended” to the east and the west by 2 of only 5 areas identified as “Town Center” future land use category in the city's comprehensive plan.

Biltmore Village

Conceived by George W. Vanderbilt in the late 19th century, Biltmore Village was an English village-inspired, self-sustaining community meticulously designed by architect Richard Morris Hunt and landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. Its fan-shaped layout around All Souls Church provided modern conveniences and a strong community for estate employees.⁹⁹ However, Vanderbilt's unexpected death in 1914, a devastating 1916 flood, unenforced deed restrictions, and consequential suburban developments led to a decline that compromised its original architectural and historical character.¹⁰⁰

Despite these setbacks, Biltmore Village began a determined resurgence in the 1970s driven by local merchants' vision for a unified, historically rich community. Their vision culminated in its 1979 National Register historic district designation and subsequent local status, which provided crucial design standards for sensitive renovation.¹⁰¹ We will discuss these standards further in the [Rules and Regulations Chapter](#). This local historic district has 27 contributing structures and 34 non-contributing structures. Today, Biltmore Village has successfully transformed its historic structures into a vibrant mix of boutiques, galleries, and dining. While the village struggles with multimodal transit, greenspace access, and flooding vulnerabilities, its historic importance and strategic location make it a vital town center in Asheville's future land use.¹⁰²

Tunnel Road Corridor

The Tunnel Road corridor has historically served as a critical eastern gateway to Asheville. Its origins trace back to the 1920s with the construction of the tunnel through Beaucatcher Mountain. Its completion more easily connected downtown to Haw Creek and other Swannanoa River valley communities. The corridor quickly evolved from a rural path to a suburban commercial strip following World War II. During the 1960s and 1970s, the corridor witnessed significant commercial development. This period saw the construction of large indoor shopping malls, such as Asheville Mall and Innsbruck Mall, big-box retail stores, and other low density commercial uses. Since then, Tunnel Road has been established as a dominant regional retail destination.

⁹⁹ Historic Resources Commission, Asheville, North Carolina. [Biltmore Village Historic District Standards - Book 1, October 1, 1988](#).

¹⁰⁰ The Biltmore Company, Judy Ross. [Looking Back at the Flood of 1916, December 12, 2024](#).

¹⁰¹ Society of Architectural Historians (SAH), David Koontz. [SAH Archi Pedia - Biltmore Village, 2025](#).

¹⁰² This information was obtained from the City's Planning and Urban Design Department.

South Tunnel Road, the study area's eastern anchor, presents a prime opportunity for revitalization, currently burdened by recent flooding, numerous vacant retail spaces, a lack of public parks, and a car-centric layout. These factors highlight a substantial capacity for new, denser, and more diverse development as highlighted in the city's future land use goals. This revitalization has the potential to create a "live, work, play" environment, connecting the riverfront to the River Arts District and Biltmore Village, all while prioritizing flood mitigation for resilient growth.

Overview of Storm Impacts on Swannanoa Corridor

Biltmore Village

According to [NC Emergency Management's Flood Risk Information System](#), Biltmore Village has a base flood elevation of 1,999.5, while nearly all 61 buildings sit between 1,991 and 1,995 feet in elevation, which is 4-8.5 feet below the base elevation. During the flooding events, Biltmore Village saw 6 feet of water (both flowing and standing), which devastated the built environment.



Flooded Biltmore Village / Courtesy of Biltmore Property Group

Swannanoa River Road ¹⁰³

Swannanoa River Road (NC 81) is a vital transportation corridor that many people, including first responders, choose to commute from East Asheville into downtown and to the RAD. The road was washed away and required significant reconstruction following Tropical Storm Helene. It was closed for over 6 months and reopened in early April. This road was already identified as a flood-prone corridor before the storm. In 2024, the City held discussions with the NCDOT regarding the relocation of the road and conducted a hydrology study to determine if removing structures from the floodplain would aid in flood mitigation.

Currently, the City is considering a planning effort to collaborate with NCDOT on relocating the road. The City could then create flood storage that could mitigate flooding on this critical transportation corridor and possibly in Biltmore Village.



Credit / [WLOS](#)

¹⁰³ This information was obtained per the City's Public Works and Transportation Departments.

SECTION 2

ECONOMY

Natural disasters have a lasting impact on Asheville's economy, affecting small businesses, workforce stability, and regional supply chains. Comprehensive mitigation must address physical risks in tandem with economic resilience.



Industries

ULI Briefing Book

Sectors Overview

Tourism

The City of Asheville’s economy is grounded in its national reputation as a leisure and hospitality destination. In 2025 alone, publications such as the New York Times, Food and Wine Magazine, and Forbes Travel Guide listed Asheville as a highly rated travel destination. In 2023, 13.9 million visitors spent \$2.97 billion in the Asheville area, representing 20% of Buncombe County’s GDP. This spending contributed \$36 million to the City’s tax revenue.^{104, 105} Top visitor spending categories are included in the table below.

Category	Amount Spent	Percentage of Total Visitor Spending
Lodging	\$901M	30%
Food and Beverage (including local and independent restaurants and craft brewers)	\$787M	27%
Retail (including local shops, art galleries, and independent businesses ¹⁰⁶)	\$541M	18%

In April 2025, the Leisure and Hospitality industry, including independent restaurants and craft breweries, accounted for 13% of Asheville area employment, and Retail Trade, including independent shops and art galleries, accounted for 12%.¹⁰⁷ The Biltmore Estate is Buncombe County’s third-largest private employer, and employs approximately 2,000 individuals.¹⁰⁸ The City’s robust arts and culture sector can be seen in over 110 art studios in the City.¹⁰⁹ The River Arts District, one of Asheville’s hubs for artists and other creatives, boasts over 700 independent artists with spaces across its many art studio spaces.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ Asheville Chamber of Commerce - Economic Development Coalition, Asheville-Buncombe County. [Research and Reports - Rankings, 2025](#).

¹⁰⁵ Explore Asheville - Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority. [Annual Report Fiscal Year 2023-2024](#).

¹⁰⁶ City of Asheville, North Carolina. [2025 Community Development Block Grant - Disaster Recovery \(CDBG-DR\) Disaster Recovery Action Plan, April, 2025](#). Page 41.

¹⁰⁷ Explore Asheville - Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority. [Asheville Metro Economic Indicators Data, April, 2025](#).

¹⁰⁸ The Biltmore Company. [The Vanderbilt Family, 2025](#).

¹⁰⁹ ExploreAsheville.com. [Galleries & Studios, 2025](#).

¹¹⁰ [River Arts District Artists, 2025](#).

Asheville's proximity to many of the region's outdoor experiences attracts many visitors and provides quality of life amenities for residents. The region's most popular natural attractions include the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Blue Ridge Parkway, Pisgah National Forest, Mount Mitchell State Park, and the French Broad River.

Quality of Life/Open Space/Development

While these amenities provide immense opportunities for tourism and the outdoor economy, the region's geography presents challenges for future industry growth and investments. The rugged terrain limits development opportunities and can increase the cost of projects. Additionally, open space goals such as Buncombe County's Open Space bond program helped to conserve 18% of land (including federally managed land, land managed by conservation organizations, and others). The County's stated open space conservation goal is to have 20% of the County under some form of conservation by 2030. Open space goals support quality of life and hazard mitigation activities, but restrict the ability to develop those areas.

Non-Tourism Industry Overview ^{111, 112}

While tourism-support sectors (Leisure and Hospitality and Retail Trade) account for 25% of Asheville's employment, there are a number of large employers in other industries. The Health Services and Education Industries employ approximately 20% of workers in the Asheville MSA. This industry includes one of Asheville's largest private-sector employers, Mission Health Hospital, which employs over 6,000.

Manufacturing represents 10% of Asheville area employment. Major employers, such as Eaton Corporation, Pratt & Whitney, BorgWarner Turbo Systems, and Kendro Laboratory Products, have a substantial impact on the Asheville economy through employment and investments made in advanced manufacturing. Asheville's manufacturing sector also includes breweries that export Asheville's brews to a national market, including New Belgium Brewing Company, Highland Brewing, Wicked Weed Brewing, and many other well-known brands. Future growth of advanced manufacturing is somewhat challenging due to the limited number of suitable sites within City limits. Currently, the City only has one significant undeveloped industrial site, Enka Commerce Park. High real estate costs and little available flat land will provide challenging obstacles for any future attempt to bring high-footprint development to Asheville.

Professional and Business Services make up 11% of Asheville's workforce (4). These jobs include legal, accounting, engineering, and other skilled services. With the rise of remote work options at major firms, Asheville has benefited from many of these workers choosing to live and work in the area. As the ability for high-performance individuals to contribute to national and international firms from the place of their

¹¹¹ Asheville Chamber of Commerce - Economic Development Coalition (EDC). [Asheville Metro Economic Indicators Data, April, 2025](#).

¹¹² Information in this section obtained from the City's Community and Economic Development Department.

choosing rises, Asheville stands to continue to receive an inflow of residents who participate in this ecosystem.

Storm Economic Disruptions

Tropical Storm Helene inflicted extensive property damage, severely disrupting Asheville’s economy. The River Arts District suffered catastrophic losses, with approximately 80% of its infrastructure destroyed. This devastation displaced numerous artists and significantly reduced tourism revenue, a primary economic driver for the City.

The local brewing industry, integral to Asheville’s identity, faced unprecedented challenges due to facility and equipment damage. Many small breweries suffered substantial financial losses and operational disruptions, compounded by the municipal water system’s catastrophic failure, which left some businesses without potable water for 56 days. Restaurants and hotels also struggled to operate, leading to a sharp decline in tourism.

Tourism experienced a projected 70% decline in visitors during the last quarter of 2024, translating to an estimated \$584M in lost revenue. The extensive damage to major attractions and infrastructure further deterred potential tourists, extending the economic downturn beyond immediate repairs. This drop in visitor spending impacted hotels, attractions, local retailers, restaurants, and service providers.

To support small businesses following Helene, the City of Asheville, the Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce, and Mountain BizWorks created the Asheville-Buncombe Rebuilding Together Grant Fund. As of January 2025, 624 applications were submitted, with a total funding request of approximately \$13.4M, including an aggregate reported cost of economic injury and physical damages totaling approximately \$170M within Asheville city limits.¹¹³

The City of Asheville is known as the hub of Western North Carolina (WNC). Reviving the city’s economy is key to the success of the entire regional economy in WNC. Restoring livelihoods, preventing residents’ economic displacement, and preserving the community’s unique character is crucial to Asheville’s recovery.

¹¹³ City of Asheville, North Carolina. [2025 Community Development Block Grant - Disaster Recovery \(CDBG-DR\) Disaster Recovery Action Plan, April, 2025](#). Pages 12-13, and 45-46.



Economic Mobility

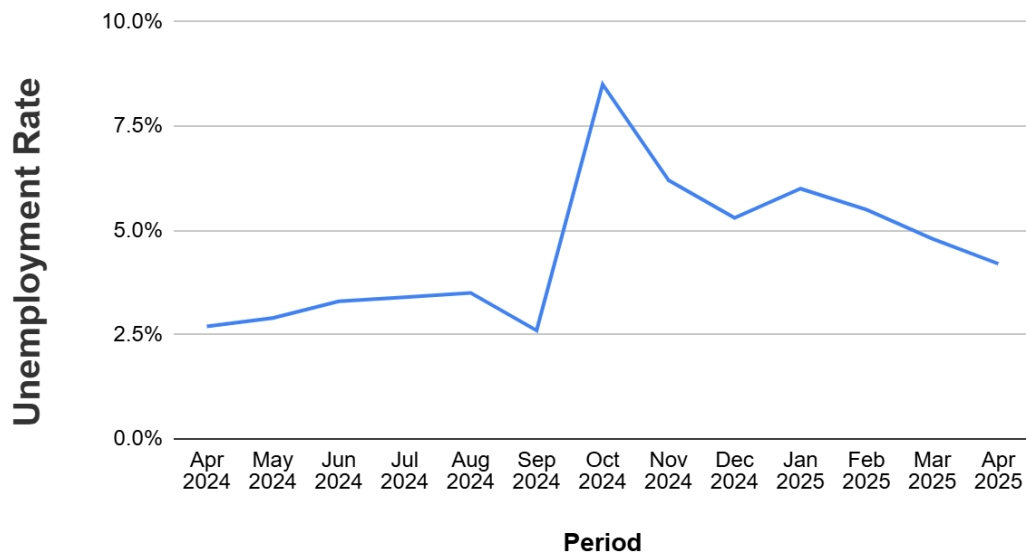
ULI Briefing Book

Understanding Key Economic Statistics

Unemployment

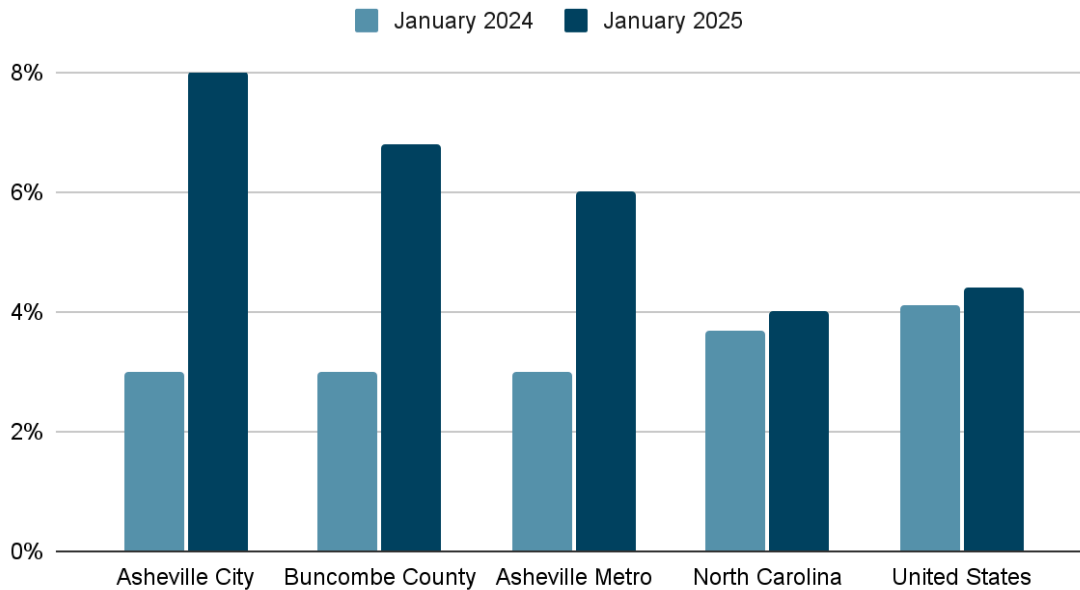
Asheville's recent labor market trends have been characterized by low levels of unemployment, excluding disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to Tropical Storm Helene, Asheville's unemployment rate stood at 2.6% and Buncombe County's unemployment was the lowest in the state. Immediately following the storm, Asheville saw a steep increase in unemployment, rising to 8.5% in October 2024 and settling at 4.2% in April 2025. Asheville's tourism-related sectors experienced the most significant losses in employment. Between September 2024, the month of the storm, and October the same year, the Leisure and Hospitality sector lost 10.3% of employees. In Quarter 1 of this year, the Asheville Leisure and Hospitality sector supported fewer jobs in Asheville than any quarter since 2021.¹¹⁴

Unemployment Rate (Apr. '23 - Apr '24)



¹¹⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. [Asheville, NC, July 3, 2025](#).

Unemployment Rate (1/2024 to 1/2025 comparison)¹¹⁵



Income

The median household income in Asheville is \$86,100, slightly lower than North Carolina’s State median family income, \$88,600.¹¹⁶ The living wage in Buncombe County is \$23.15/hour.¹¹⁷

FY 2024 Income Limit Area	Median Family Income	FY 2024 Income Limit Category	Persons in Family							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Asheville, NC HUD Metro FMR Area	\$86,100	Very Low (50%)	32,700	37,400	42,050	46,750	50,450	54,200	57,950	61,700
		Extremely Low	19,650	22,450	25,820	31,200	36,580	41,960	47,340	52,720
		Low (80%)	52,350	59,800	67,300	74,800	80,750	86,750	92,750	98,750
		Median Income*	65,400	74,800	84,100	93,500	100,900	108,400	115,900	123,400

Major Employers

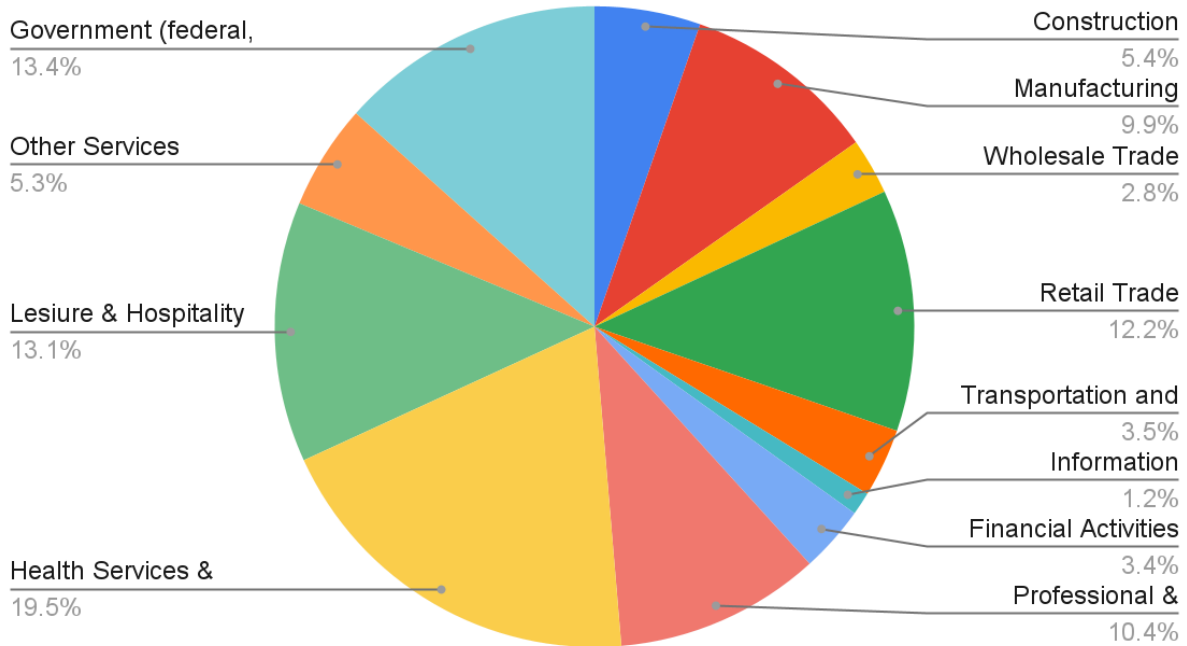
Like many communities, some of the largest employers in the city are government agencies. In Buncombe County, some of the largest public employers include the Buncombe County Board of Education, the Veterans Administration, the County of Buncombe, and the City of Asheville.

¹¹⁵ Asheville Chamber. [Asheville Economy & Unemployment Rate](#)

¹¹⁶ HUD User. [FY 24 Income Limits Documentation System](#).

¹¹⁷ Just Economics WNC. [About Living Wage, 2025](#).

Major Industry Employment Distribution (April, 2025)



Focusing on the County's largest private employers, we can see a mixture of nationally and locally owned firms. These businesses reflect several of the area's prominent employment sectors.¹¹⁸

Five Largest Private Employers in Asheville				
Rank	Company Name	Industry	Employee Range	Corporate Headquarters
1	Mission Health Hospital	Health Care & Social Assistance	1000+	509 Biltmore Ave, Asheville, NC 28801
2	Ingles Markets, Inc.	Retail Trade	1000+	3049 US-70, Black Mountain, NC 28711
3	Biltmore Workforce Management Inc.	Arts, Entertainment, & Recreation	1000+	2 Hendersonville Rd C, Asheville, NC 28803
4	Wal-Mart Associates Inc.	Retail Trade	1000+	702 SW 8th St, Bentonville, AR
5	Eaton Corporation	Manufacturing	1000+	1000 Eaton Blvd, Beachwood, OH 44122

Major Industries	Employed Workers
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¹¹⁸ Asheville Chamber of Commerce - Economic Development Coalition, Asheville-Buncombe County. [Major Employers, May, 2024](#).

Health Services & Education	37,100
Government (federal, state, and Local)	25,500
Leisure & Hospitality	25,000
Retail Trade	23,200
Professional & Business Services	19,800
Manufacturing	18,800
Construction	10,200
Other Services	10,100
Transportation and Warehousing	6,600
Financial Activities	6,400
Wholesale Trade	5,400
Information	2,200

Workforce Development

Many educational institutions and workforce development organizations, including Western Carolina University, the University of North Carolina at Asheville, Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, and the Mountain Area Workforce Development Board, support the Asheville area labor shed. The City of Asheville contributes to this ecosystem directly, through programming, and indirectly by supporting the Economic Development Coalition's 5x5 Plan implementation.

Sponsored Programs

The City of Asheville, in collaboration with key partners like the Economic Development Coalition, is dedicated to fostering economic growth that benefits all residents. Together, they host a variety of programs specifically designed to enhance economic mobility and create pathways to prosperity within the community.

City of Asheville Sponsored Programs

Asheville Business Inclusion Office ¹¹⁹

The City of Asheville's Business Inclusion Policy states "It is the policy of the City of Asheville to provide all, including minorities, equal opportunity to participate in all aspects of City contracting and purchasing programs, including, but not limited to, participation in procurement, professional services and construction contracts; prohibiting discrimination against any person or business in pursuit of these

¹¹⁹ City of Asheville. [Asheville Business Inclusion \(ABI\), May, 2025.](#)

opportunities on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, disability, familial status, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, national origin or any other unlawful discrimination; and conducting its contracting and purchasing programs so as to prevent any discrimination.” It is the charge of the Asheville Business Inclusion Office to create, enact, and enforce processes and practices that promote internal compliance with this policy. Additionally, the Business Inclusion Office conducts external engagement with small businesses in the City of Asheville to increase local participation in government contracting.

To maintain the policy, the City of Asheville reviews local vendors available to bid on City contracts on a local, regional, and national basis. The City conducts a disparity study to assess participation in City contracting opportunities by comparing the number of minority and women-owned (MWBE) firms available to the actual participation. Based on the disparity study results, the City sets goals for the ideal percentage of MWBE by product and service type. These goals correspond with a particular racial or ethnic group's current market representation for their service or product type. Under the ABI policy, disparity studies must occur every 5 years. The City completed the most recent disparity study in 2023.

City of Asheville Youth Leadership Academy (CAYLA) ¹²⁰

Since 2007, the City of Asheville Youth Leadership Academy (CAYLA) has been committed to three overarching purposes:

1. Introduce students to meaningful career, skill-building, and leadership development experiences.
2. Support students in pursuing higher education through college preparation and research.
3. Encourage students seeking to return to Asheville as young professionals upon college graduation.

CAYLA achieves its mission by placing students in paid internships. These internships give students firsthand insight into specific careers through practical, real-world experience. Additionally, students build connections with professionals in their fields of interest, which can be invaluable for future job opportunities and mentorship. Successful participation in the CAYLA program will also confer a \$2,000 scholarship on the students.

The experience and skills gained through CAYLA internships enhance students’ college applications and prepare them for higher education and professional environments. By working within the community, students develop a sense of civic responsibility and a deeper connection to Asheville, encouraging them to return as professionals. These internships are vital to CAYLA’s strategy to support students’ educational and career aspirations while fostering a commitment to public service and community involvement.

¹²⁰ City of Asheville. [Community and Economic Development - City of Asheville Youth Leadership Academy \(CAYLA\), May 21, 2025.](#)

Per the City's Community and Economic Development Department, in 2025, 26 students graduated from the CAYLA program, and all expect to attend college in the coming fall. The graduating CAYLA cohort earned \$1,090,518 in scholarships and financial aid from all their aid sources.

Economic Development Coalition Programming

WNC Futures Factory ¹²¹

The WNC Futures Factory is a planned innovation hub in Western North Carolina. The initiative aims to support local industries in the global economy. A-B Tech heads the initiative and involves five regional community colleges, five North Carolina universities (including UNC-Asheville, WCU, UNC-Charlotte, NC A&T, and NC State University), and other partners.

This facility will offer education, research, and design programs focused on Industry 5.0 concepts like AI, advanced robotics, engineering, digital manufacturing, data management, and additive manufacturing. The program is designed to propel STEM talent, from certificate to PhD levels, and advance regional Research and Development (R&D), attracting graduates and experienced professionals to Western North Carolina.

Funding includes \$10 million committed by Buncombe County and the General Assembly, with potential for additional EDA Recovery Grant funding. The initiative seeks continued collaboration with national partners and successful Industry 5.0 programs, such as FAME USA and Women MAKE America, to establish branch programs. The goal is to create a comprehensive pipeline for technology, engineering, and design education through multi-institutional collaboration, actively engaging industry employers in curriculum design and campus planning. The success of the Futures Factory relies on strong partnerships across public, private, education, and nonprofit sectors.

Optimist Ventures Accelerator ¹²²

The Optimist Ventures Accelerator is a 15-week program launched in 2024 to support local businesses after Tropical Storm Helene. It provides startup funding and education for founders in Western North Carolina and builds on the success of previous venture accelerator work. The program employs a unique venture philanthropy model, combining grants and investments. This approach prioritizes community roots and sustainable growth over typical "unicorn-style" returns. Initial support came from Dogwood Health Trust, Truist Bank Foundation, and other investors.

The program combines a 15-week accelerator program with venture funding and mentorship. Each program week is themed around a specific topic and features workshops and speakers. Each participating company will receive \$50,000 of investment (\$25,000 in grant funding, \$25,000 as an investment as a SPA Note). Participating companies must

¹²¹ Asheville Chamber of Commerce - Economic Development Coalition, Asheville-Buncombe County. [2024-2025 \(FY\) EDC Annual Report, 2025](#).

¹²² [Optimist Ventures, 2024](#).

- Must be headquartered in Western North Carolina;
- Have revenue between \$150,000 and \$2M;
- Pledge to participate in the accelerator (3 days/week) in Asheville – travel stipends are available to companies outside of Buncombe County; and
- Must use technology to enable sustainable growth.

Accelerate Buncombe¹²³

Building on the success of the State of the Workforce WNC study and the Accelerate Buncombe pilot, the region aims to expand an accelerated apprenticeship model. By focusing on short-term credentials that lead to higher-wage careers, Accelerate Buncombe offers residents quicker entry points into target industry jobs while simultaneously building talent pipelines for STEM occupations. The goal is to significantly increase participation and programming for Accelerate Buncombe over the next five years.

Accelerate Buncombe was a successful pilot program, a collaborative effort between Buncombe County, the Housing Authority of the City of Asheville, Operation Gateway, and the YMI Cultural Center. Its core mission was swiftly connecting residents with paid, short-term credential training for high-demand industries. The program provided significant support, including \$15/hour for education, stipends, emergency assistance, and completion bonuses, effectively removing barriers to participation and fostering economic mobility.

When Tropical Storm Helene hit the region, Accelerate Buncombe didn't halt; it adapted. Community Health Workers from partner organizations played a crucial role, guiding participants through the disruption to ensure they remained enrolled and completed their training. This dedication transformed a challenging situation into a testament of resolve. Despite the storm, many participants earned certifications in critically needed fields like Phlebotomy, CNA, Radiology, Medical Coding and Billing, and CDL training. Others became Community Health Workers and Peer Support Specialists, returning to their communities with valuable skills and a renewed sense of purpose.

Inclusive Hiring Partners

Inclusive Hiring Partners offers comprehensive support for job seekers, focusing on job placement, retention, and work-based learning. The program aims to place individuals experiencing employment barriers into full-time roles, creating healthier, more inclusive workplaces. After placement, Inclusive Hiring Partners provides ongoing support and check-ins to ensure a successful onboarding process and gather feedback. Additionally, the program strives to connect all job seekers with work-based learning opportunities, helping them gain skills and experience for long-term success. Currently, Inclusive Hiring Partners is supported by 31 participating employers.

Employers participating in the Inclusive Hiring Partner program must meet a set of minimum criteria, including:

¹²³ Economic Development Coalition, Asheville-Buncombe County. [Accelerate Buncombe, 2025](#).

- Be an existing employer in a high-demand industry like manufacturing, health care, or construction.
- Anticipate a minimum of 5 job openings per year.
- Hire for some entry-level positions, or roles that only require a high school diploma or equivalent.
- Offer on-the-job training and opportunities for advancement.
- Pay starting wages that meet or exceed living wage standards.
- Be willing to:
 - Guarantee interviews to Inclusive Hiring talent pool participants.
 - Maintain communication with the job seeker's support service provider.
 - Have staff attend diversity, equity, and inclusion training.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Economic Development Coalition, Asheville-Buncombe County. [Inclusive Hiring Partners, 2025](#).



Arts and Culture

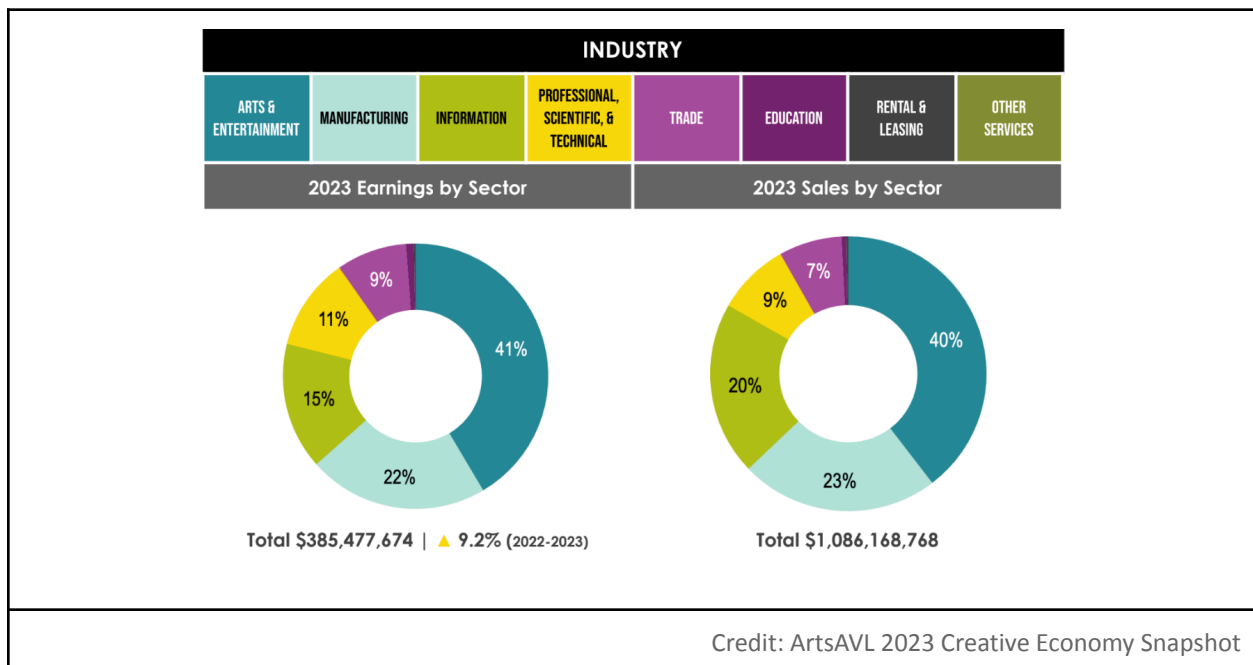
ULI Briefing Book

Creative Economy Snapshot

Buncombe County is a Leading Arts Destination

Buncombe County, NC was home to 483 establishments in the arts and culture sector during 2022, and was ranked #1 out of all 100 NC counties for arts and culture establishments per 10,000 residents. By this same measure, Buncombe County ranked 47th out of all 3,144 U.S. counties.¹²⁵

In 2023, Buncombe County’s creative industries produced \$1.1 billion in sales or 40 percent of total sales and supported 9,000 local jobs. The top three creative jobs in Asheville in 2023 were photographers, writers/authors, and musicians/singers.¹²⁶



Asheville is More Expensive than 98% of Other NC Cities

With rents having risen by 41.7% since 2020, making it the most expensive place to rent in the state. The cost of living for creatives in Asheville presents a growing challenge, fueled by rising housing, transportation, and utility costs. Buncombe County’s living wage in 2022 was calculated at \$24.61 per

¹²⁵ WNC Business, Emma Castleberry. [Recovering WNC’s Creative Economy, January 22, 2025.](#)

¹²⁶ ArtsAVL. [Buncombe County, NC - 2023 Creative Economy Snapshot.](#)

hour, significantly higher than the median earnings of \$21.06 for creative occupations in the area. This wage disparity means that most local creatives face difficulty covering basic expenses, forcing many to seek supplemental income, reduce their artistic output, or leave the area altogether. Self-employed and freelance artists are particularly affected, as they often lack access to benefits like affordable healthcare or retirement savings, which further exacerbates their financial instability.¹²⁷

The Availability and Affordability of Creative Workspaces

Many artists and makers struggle to find affordable studio, rehearsal, or retail spaces, as rising property values and rental rates outpace their earnings. According to the 2024 Creative Spaces survey, 51% of respondents in Buncombe County said they did not have access to affordable creative space with 15% saying they are no longer located in Buncombe County due to rent expenses being too high.¹²⁸

River Arts District ¹²⁹

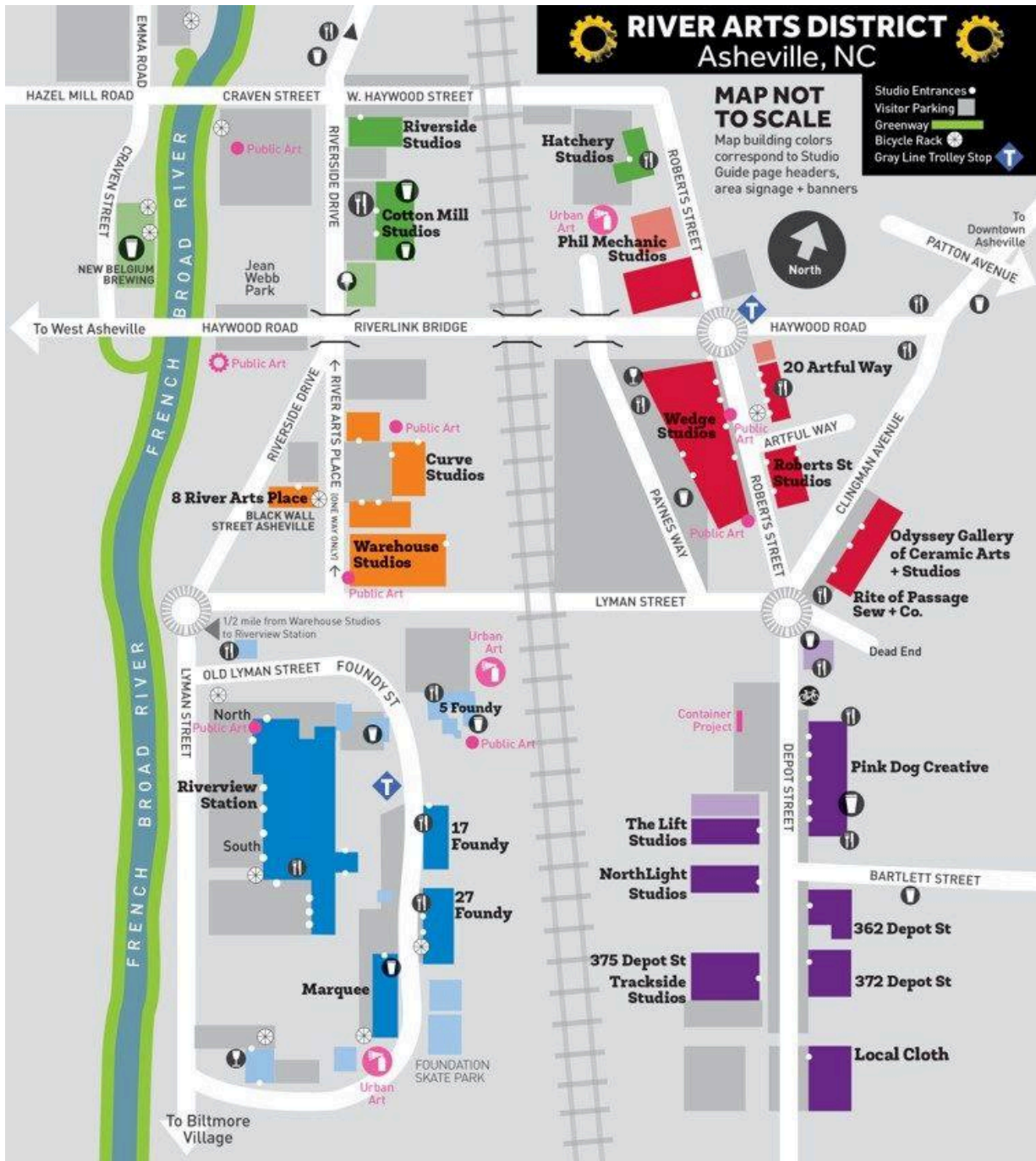
The River Arts District (RAD) has been a destination for art lovers and collectors for over 30 years. The district is contained in the French Broad Corridor Study Area, and Pre-Helene, hosted a high concentration of the creative sector in Asheville with the work of over 700 artists displayed in galleries or working studios, many of the spaces within renovated industrial buildings. RAD strives to create an immersive experience where visitors can watch artists at work, engage in hands-on workshops and purchase original artwork. The district hosts regular events such as art strolls and farmers markets.

The boundary of the River Arts District and the businesses associated with the district are constantly evolving. Generally, the district is bordered by the French Broad River on its west side. The I-26 ramp at Hill Street and Riverside Drive create a gateway from the north and the Amboy Road Bridge at Lyman Street serves as the gateway to the south. The eastern edges of the district includes the mixed use areas of Roberts Street, Clingman Extension, and Depot Street.

¹²⁷ ArtsAVL. [Creative Spaces Report, May, 2024](#). Pages 5-6.

¹²⁸ ArtsAVL. [Creative Spaces Report, May, 2024](#). Pages 6.

¹²⁹ Information in this section provided by the City's Planning and Urban Design Department.





Map Credit: River Arts District Artists, riverartsdistrict.com

RADTIP ¹³⁰

A major piece of The Wilma Dykeman RiverWay Plan was realized in 2021 with the completion of the [River Arts District Transportation Improvement Project \(RADTIP\)](#). This project reconfigured unsafe road

¹³⁰ Information in this section provided by the City's Planning and Urban Design Department.

intersections, established constructed wetlands, installed wide sidewalks, provided almost 200 new public parking spaces, added nine acres of new parkland, and installed several new pieces of public art. [The RADTIP Public Art Masterplan](#) provides the framework for future investment in public art in the district. As part of the percent for public art policy, 1% of eligible funding for RADTIP was reserved for public art within the project area. Some of the funds have already gone toward the creation and installation of public art including: The Big Fish, Soul Singing, All Feet Stand Under the Stars, and John Payne’s Chair. Funding still remains to realize additional components of the RADTIP Public Art Masterplan. In 2023, an [audio tour](#) hosted by Otocast was created. It highlights some of the most iconic private and public art in the district.

	
<p>The Big Fish (aka Trash Trout) by artist David Earl Tomlinson, located at Craven Street boat launch. Helene flooding damaged the piece and it had to be removed. FEMA PA funds will cover reinstallation. // Credit: City of Asheville</p>	<p>All Feet Stand Under the Stars by DeWayne Barton is located next to the Wilma Dykeman Greenway and Riverside Drive, across from 8 River Arts Place. It was undamaged by Helene’s floodwaters. // Credit: David Pearson Landscape Architect</p>

River Arts District Branding¹³¹

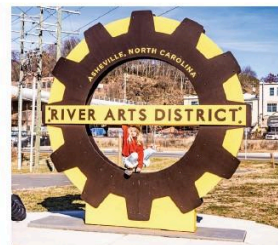
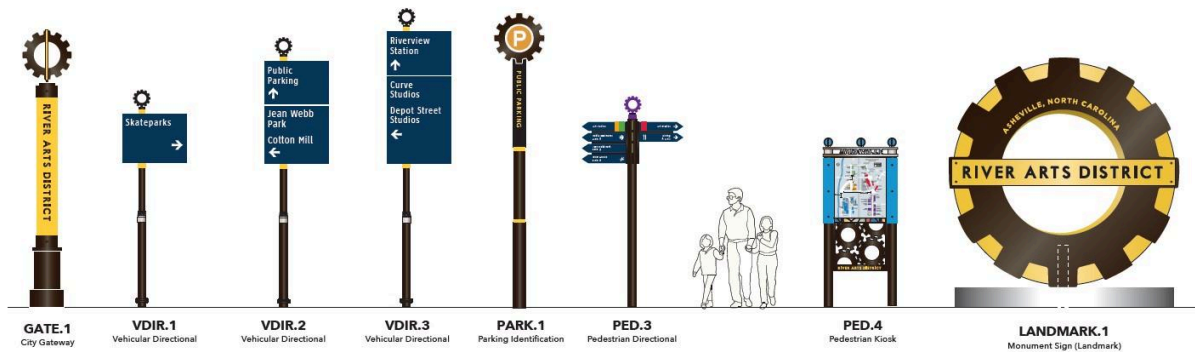
At the Wedge Building, formerly owned by John Payne, the industrial roots of the River Arts District were captured in his unique steel fence design, which served as inspiration for the RAD logo.

¹³¹ Information in this section provided by the City’s Planning and Urban Design Department.



Credit / www.riverartsdistrict.com

As part of Explore Asheville’s Wayfinding Program, in 2020 the River Arts District developed unique River Arts System signage that incorporates the gear or cogs, a unique color palette and typography. This has helped unify the district and encourage visitors and foot traffic throughout the area.



Arts Focused Stakeholders and Organizations

River Arts District

River Arts District Artists (RADA)

The River Arts District was formally designated in 2005, though activity in the area began much earlier. Prior to this, events and visitors were already drawing attention to the area. The [River Arts District Artists \(RADA\)](#) organization was established in 1994 to support the growing community of artists and advocate for their interests as the district quickly developed and evolved. In 2023, the [RADA Foundation](#) was created as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit to “foster and advance the arts in Asheville’s River Arts District by supporting the efforts of the RADA organization; to be a leader in providing progressive services to [our] members from: shared spaces, scholarship opportunities, and technical assistance programs for professional and emerging artists in the River Arts District; and, to lead by three core programs: Scholarships, Space, and Support RADAs organizational operations.”¹³² The RADA Foundation is led by an executive director, a director of operations and a board of directors.

River Arts District Business Association (RADBA)

[RADBA](#)’s mission is to recognize the distinctive urban neighborhood that is the River Arts District and serve as a unified, representative voice of business owners with city and county officials, legislators, and professional partners to promote and support the businesses, artists, and residents that support independent creative commerce.¹³³ The group was particularly active and engaged during the planning and implementation of RADTIP, where they met regularly and attended events like the RAD Leadership Roundtable in partnership with the City of Asheville.

Businesses and Stakeholders¹³⁴

The River Arts District developed organically into a community of working artists, studios, and galleries. Grassroots efforts helped establish the district as a creative enclave. As RAD gained popularity, the City of Asheville and private developers began investing in infrastructure, safety, and public spaces. The area became a key destination for both locals and tourists.

With hundreds of studios, event spaces, restaurants, breweries, hotels and new developments underway, the district contains innumerable stakeholders and invested members of the public. Foundational businesses in and around the district include: Salvage Station, Grey Eagle, The Radical, Cotton Mill Studios, Curve Studios, Wedge Studios, NorthLight Studios, Trackside Studios and Riverview

¹³² River Arts District Artists. [RADA Foundation, 2025](#).

¹³³ River Arts District Business Association (RADBA). [Members](#).

¹³⁴ Information in this section provided by the City’s Planning and Urban Design Department.

Station. In order to paint the picture of how the River Arts District grew over time, Foundy Street serves as an emblematic example.

FOUNDY STREET

[Foundy Street](#) buildings originally housed the Rees & Sons Tannery and employed thousands of people. After the flood of 1916, a fire, and years of neglect the property was purchased by a group of local Asheville investors in 2016 that envisioned a space for locals to gather and for counter-culture artists to commune and create. Anchor tenants included Wedge Brewing, 12 Bones BBQ, Summit Coffee, Foundation Studios, a [DIY skatepark](#), and [The Marquee](#). It eventually became a repeat location for the annual [Burners and BBQ](#) event. This non-profit event celebrated the culture and tradition of graffiti, street art and muralism and was a destination for artists and art lovers to participate in and experience public art. Foundy Street's buildings became canvases that drew world-class artists from around the country.¹³⁵

The River Arts District's webpages provide a comprehensive overview of the [buildings](#), [artists](#) and [galleries](#) that make up the River Arts District.

Biltmore Village

Biltmore Village Merchants Association (BVMA)

Biltmore Village was originally envisioned as a planned mixed-use community of artisans, estate workers, and essential services featuring shops, a church, post office, and school laid out in an English country-village style. The spirit of that original plan is upheld by the [Biltmore Village Merchants Association \(BVMA\)](#), which brings together over 80 independent shops, restaurants, galleries and artisans to cultivate a vibrant, walkable neighborhood centered on creativity and commerce. The group supports and organizes several [events](#) that bolster Asheville's arts scene including the Village Art and Craft Fair, Dickens in the Village and other market-style events that focus on local vendors.¹³⁶

City-wide

Asheville's "artistic heritage runs deep, rooted in the pioneering spirit of institutions like [Black Mountain College](#)—an experimental institution that became a crucible for avant-garde thought and artistic expression in the early 20th century, and boasted such luminaries amongst its faculty and alumni as Josef Albers, Buckminster Fuller, and Merce Cunningham. Today, Asheville's art scene teems with fine artists, mountain crafters, folk artists, numerous [art galleries](#) and [performing arts venues](#), and an array of [art events](#) and [artsy neighborhoods](#)."¹³⁷

Downtown's walkability and historic character amplify its appeal as a cultural hub, where creative expression is embedded in the architecture, businesses, galleries and public spaces. From legacy

¹³⁵ Foundy Street. [Welcome to Foundy Street - A Collective of Seriously Talented Misfits, 2022](#).

¹³⁶ Historic Biltmore Village. [Historic Biltmore Village – Resilient, Rebuilding, and Reopening](#).

¹³⁷ ExploreAsheville.com. [The Arts - Creative Asheville Culture, 2025](#).

institutions to independent artists, a wide range of stakeholders collaborate to make arts and culture accessible and celebrated. Major arts-related stakeholders in Downtown Asheville include: [Asheville Art Museum](#), [Worham Center for the Performing Arts](#), [Asheville Symphony Orchestra](#), [Asheville Community Theater](#), [Center for Craft](#), [ArtsAVL](#), [The Block](#) which includes [Noir Collective](#) and [LEAF Global Arts](#), [Harrah's Cherokee Center](#) and [Thomas Wolfe Auditorium](#), [UNC Asheville](#) and [STEAM Studio](#), [AB Tech](#) and [Southern Highland Craft Guild](#).

Organizations like the [Asheville Downtown Association](#) work to boost the downtown economy through advocacy for businesses, diverse events, engaging activations and co-management of the [Asheville Downtown Improvement District](#).

Public Events and Arts Programs

The City of Asheville supports arts and culture through a coordinated, cross-departmental approach that spans funding, public space activation, urban design, equity, and economic development. The following departments include programs or services that support Asheville's creative community.

Department of Community & Regional Entertainment Facilities

The [Department of Community & Regional Entertainment Facilities](#) manages a unique collection of sporting & entertainment facilities and operations. **Over 1.5 Million people participate in programs or attend events at the facilities**, including the Harrah's Cherokee Center, Thomas Wolfe Auditorium, WNC Nature Center, McCormick Field, Aston Park Tennis Center, John B Lewis Soccer Complex and outdoor events within parks and public spaces, permitted by the City's Office of Special Events.¹³⁸ ArtsAVL facilitates the city's [Event Support Grant](#) which provides a competitive process for non-profits to receive financial support for events that are free and open to the public. Grants typically range between \$3,000-10,000 but may be more or less depending on the event. **\$77,546 was awarded to support community events in 2025.**¹³⁹

Parks & Recreation

In addition to maintaining vibrant parks and community spaces, [Asheville's Parks and Recreation](#) department fosters creativity across all ages through a wide range of arts programs and events, including painting nights, talent shows, storytelling, nature crafts, afterschool arts, and specialty camps for youth. The department hosts an array of creative classes and clubs for writing, visual arts, dance, crafts and therapeutic arts. Parks staff also supports popup galleries, themed art shows, and inclusive festivals such as Cinco de Mayo, Festival of Frights, SilverArts Showcase, and Holly Jolly Holidays.

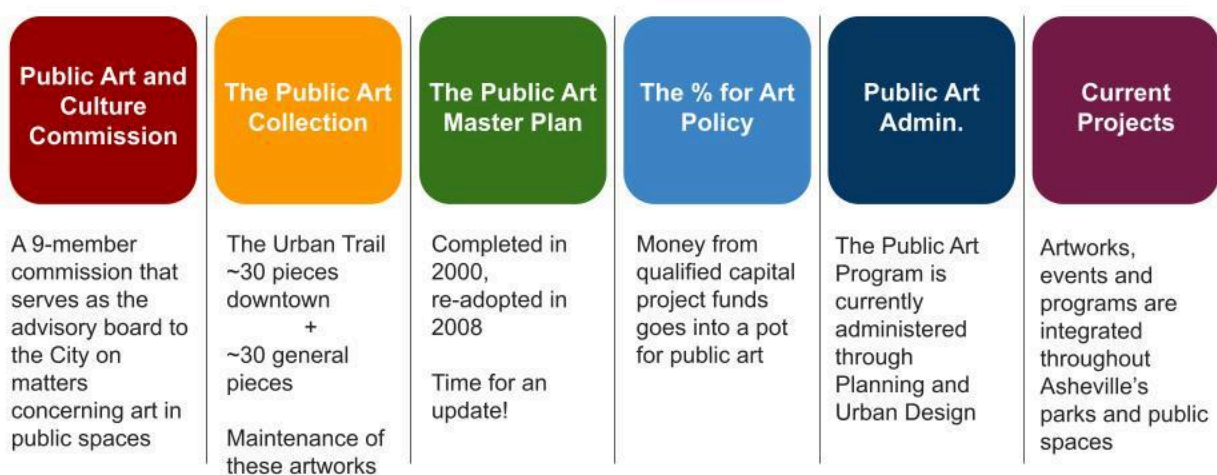
¹³⁸ City of Asheville. [Community & Regional Entertainment Facilities - Office of Special Events, July, 2025](#).

¹³⁹ City of Asheville. [ArtsAVL Announces Awardees of City of Asheville's Event Support Grant, March 5, 2025](#).

The Public Art Program¹⁴⁰

The [Public Art Program](#) is layered with many components including a percent for art policy with 1% of funding for eligible capital projects going towards public art initiatives. [Planning and Urban Design](#) administers the official program and policy and manages a 9-member [Public Art and Culture Commission](#). For FY2025-2026, the Percent for Art allocation is \$196,782, which is pooled into a dedicated public art fund each year. In addition, \$40,000 is added annually to an operating budget for maintenance and repairs for existing public art inventory.

Many of the building blocks of the program are in need of an update or refresh – and the need to be adaptive and responsive has only grown post-Helene.



Credit / City of Asheville

Storm Impacts

Many up and coming artists in Asheville work multiple jobs to make ends meet, with secondary income coming from jobs in the service industry. With studio spaces and galleries destroyed or unusable and restaurants/bars closed for weeks, many artists struggled to make ends meet following Helene.

According to ArtsAVL's recent assessment surveys, the craft, visual, and performing arts sectors, particularly music, are the most heavily impacted areas of the arts in Western North Carolina (WNC). These findings highlight the disproportionate effect of recent events on key parts of the region's creative economy.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Information in this section provided by the City's Planning and Urban Design Department.

¹⁴¹ ArtsAVL. [Creative Sector Survey Reveals Top Support Needs for Artists in Western North Carolina, 2025](#).

A support services survey conducted by ArtsAVL gathered responses from 358 arts-related businesses across WNC in the months after Helene. Of these, 74% were women-led and 12% were minority-led. The top needs identified by respondents included access to space, support services, marketing, and increased sales opportunities.

The counties most affected include Buncombe (Asheville), Haywood (Canton), McDowell (Old Fort and Marion), Madison (Marshall and Hot Springs), Mitchell (Spruce Pine), and Yancey (Celo). These areas saw widespread disruptions to arts programming, facilities, and income sources. Many local arts agencies are also experiencing budget cuts due to severe municipal deficits and federal cuts. These reductions are compounding the challenges faced by the arts community, limiting their ability to recover and serve the public.¹⁴²

The impact is especially severe in Asheville, specifically in the River Arts District and Biltmore Village. Across the City of Asheville, 572 cultural assets have been significantly affected by Tropical Storm Helene, either through temporary or permanent closures or by operating at reduced hours. Overall, 45% of Buncombe County's cultural assets are considered significantly impacted, with many others experiencing substantial revenue losses and decreased visitor traffic.^{143, 144}

Arts Relief, Recovery & Planning Efforts

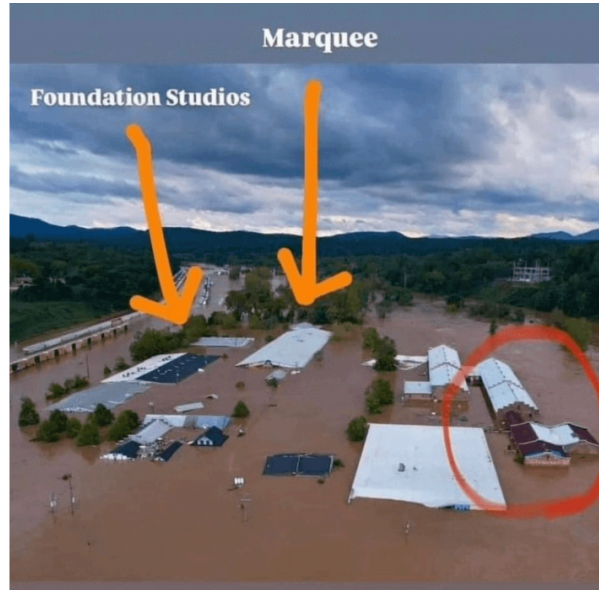
River Arts District Recovery Efforts

In the days and weeks following Helene's catastrophic flooding of the River Arts District, the community mobilized quickly for cleanup and early recovery. Local artists, business owners, and volunteers, many of whom were directly impacted, organized debris removal, assessed damage, and began stabilizing affected buildings and riverbanks. [The Radical Hotel](#) repurposed its space to house first responders and serve as a supply distribution center. RADA distributed \$300 stipends to artists that were members and \$150 stipends to non-members who had works on display in the district.

¹⁴² ArtsAVL. [Support Services for Creatives Survey Breakdown, February, 2025](#).

¹⁴³ Arts AVL. [WNC Arts Recovery Overview, May, 2025](#). Page 2.

¹⁴⁴ ArtsAVL. [Buncombe County Cultural Assets Snapshot Map \(Feb 2025\), June 2, 2025](#).



Foundy Street before and immediately after Tropical Storm Helene. Hundreds of artists' work and studios were submerged - The Marquee was a 50,000 sqft building that housed the art of more than 300 artists.

// Photo Credit: <https://foundystreet.com/>

Fundraising and community events played a key role: The Grey Eagle hosted benefit concerts, and RADFest 1.0 and RAD Renaissance, two-day celebrations organized by RADA, helped reinvigorate community spirit and showcase the resilience of local creatives. These early efforts reflected a strong, grassroots commitment to rebuilding the RAD and preserving its cultural and economic role in Asheville.¹⁴⁵

In the months after the storm, RADA and RADBA combined forces to establish a cohesive and balanced vision for the River Arts District focused on keeping existing businesses and artists open and preparing for a more resilient future. This unified group is known as Unified RAD or [URAD](#). The group put together a formal [funding and recovery request](#) to the Mayor and Council members highlighting the extensive damage to the district and proposing a path forward. The asks include the following:

- **Funding & Expertise Support from the City of Asheville:**
 - Bi-monthly access to expert consultants in disaster recovery, flood mitigation, urban planning, stormwater infrastructure, and civil engineering for two years.
 - Increased city investment in RAD district services: security, landscaping, maintenance, visitor shuttle service, and programming.
- **Infrastructure and Public Amenity Projects:**
 - Green infrastructure for stormwater and flood mitigation (e.g., rain gardens, tree planting).
 - Multi-use path connectivity and wayfinding signage.

¹⁴⁵ Information obtained from the City's Planning and Urban Design Department.

- New public amenities such as busking zones, public bathrooms, benches, lighting, and river access.
- **Community and Cultural Investments:**
 - Outdoor amphitheater, skate park, food truck courts, and a beer garden/playground.
 - Mixed-use, flood-resilient buildings with affordable artist housing and creative spaces.
 - A new cultural arts center with a museum, gallery, and craft school.
- **“Big Ideas” for the Future:**
 - A pedestrian bridge over the French Broad River.
 - A commuter rail depot station and new public parking decks.¹⁴⁶

An application submitted by URAD and RiverLink resulted in a \$100,000 grant from Etsy to support a design charrette and high-level recovery planning in the district. The group has hired a design consultant to lead the process and organized a steering committee made up of key stakeholders in the area. The deliverable will be a high-level visioning document that will incorporate lessons learned from other communities after natural disasters and identify specific projects for both private and public lands.¹⁴⁷

Ongoing River Arts District Recovery Needs

Key priorities include securing financial support for affected artists, rebuilding studio infrastructure, installing new wayfinding signage, and revitalizing and beautifying the district to welcome back visitors. Through coordinated fundraising campaigns and community events, the River Arts District remains committed to recovery and is determined to emerge stronger than ever.

Biltmore Village Recovery Efforts

Following storm damage from Tropical Storm Helene, the Biltmore Village Merchants Association (BVMA) helped galvanize the Village’s recovery, coordinating debris cleanup events with partners like Explore Asheville and the Biltmore Estate.¹⁴⁸ According to BVMA, most businesses in the Village plan to come back, however some severely damaged buildings remain in limbo. One of the biggest challenges for business owners has been navigating the rules and regulations around building back in the floodplain on top of approval and variance processes required for buildings within a local historic district.

Ongoing Biltmore Village Recovery Needs¹⁴⁹

Biltmore Village’s greatest recovery needs after Helene include: flood mitigation infrastructure, stormwater management improvements, lighting repairs, and long-term support for small businesses that suffered financial losses. Many historic buildings will require structural repairs and waterproofing. Rebuilding, removing debris and managing construction while also inviting visitors and locals to return to reopened businesses will require a coordinated effort. Lighting, wayfinding, signage and other

¹⁴⁶ Unified River Arts District (URAD). [Funding & Recovery Request - Hurricane Helene Recovery Needs & Sustainable Vision for the RAD, 2025](#).

¹⁴⁷ Information obtained from the City’s Planning and Urban Design Department.

¹⁴⁸ Eventbrite. [Explore Asheville Travel & Hospitality Earth Day Cleanup, April 22, 2025](#).

¹⁴⁹ Information in this section obtained from the City’s Planning and Urban Design Department.

beautification/activation tactics will be needed to welcome visitors and foot traffic back safely. Public spaces within the Village were in need of improvements and upkeep prior to the storm. Those issues have only been exacerbated post-Helene. Regular maintenance and activation of the streets, sidewalks and historic village greens is an ongoing discussion between Biltmore Village businesses and the City of Asheville.

City-Wide Recovery Efforts

Reallocation of Public Art Funds

In the wake of Tropical Storm Helene, the City of Asheville allocated \$200,000 in public art funds to ArtsAVL. This funding supports arts businesses in Asheville affected by Tropical Storm Helene. Specifically, \$150,000 was used for Arts Business Relief Grants, and \$50,000 supported a campaign designed to bring attention to local arts areas.¹⁵⁰ Of the 136 grants awarded 70% of the arts businesses are located in Buncombe County (95) and 60% from the City of Asheville (81).¹⁵¹

Temporary Activation Program (TAP)

In order to better facilitate city efforts and the multitude of volunteer organizations wanting to assist with recovery, the City of Asheville started a [Temporary Activation Program](#) (TAP) to accommodate and guide the temporary utilization of City-owned property and right-of-way in Helene-impacted areas of Asheville. Short-term/temporary projects related to economic or natural resource recovery can be submitted by community groups, non-profit organizations or private businesses. Examples of projects intended to be routed through the TAP include: community clean up activities, signage, wayfinding, public art and beautification initiatives, invasive species management, and erosion control.¹⁵²

County and Regional Recovery Efforts

ArtsAVL¹⁵³

ArtsAVL is leading WNC's arts recovery efforts, working closely with federal, state and local partners. Recovery initiatives and strategies include assessments, grants, support services, studies and plans that are outlined in the [May 2025 WNC Arts Recovery Overview](#). A few of the strategies are outlined below.

GRANTS¹⁵⁴

Several relief grant programs have been implemented to support the arts community in Western North Carolina (WNC) following recent disruptions. ArtsAVL awarded 1,500 artist stipends of \$500 each, totaling \$750,000 in direct support to individual artists. Additionally, the North Carolina Arts Council

¹⁵⁰ City of Asheville. [City of Asheville reallocates Public Art Funds to support local arts businesses impacted by Tropical Storm Helene, March 11, 2025.](#)

¹⁵¹ ArtsAVL. [ArtsAVL Arts Business Relief Grant Breakdown, May, 2025.](#) Page 1.

¹⁵² City of Asheville. [Asheville Recovers - Temporary Activation Program \(TAP\), 2025.](#)

¹⁵³ ArtsAVL. [WNC Arts Recovery Overview, May, 2025.](#)

¹⁵⁴ ArtsAVL. [WNC Arts Recovery Overview, May, 2025.](#) Page 3.

provided 69 nonprofit grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$20,000, amounting to \$915,000 in funding across the region.

ArtsAVL also distributed 136 grants of \$5,000 each to arts businesses—both nonprofit and for-profit—resulting in \$680,000 in total funding. Beyond these programs, additional relief grants have been made available through organizations such as CERF+, the Center for Craft, the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, SouthArts, and various local arts agencies.

ARTS RECOVERY PLAN¹⁵⁵

A countywide [Arts Recovery Plan](#), led by ArtsAVL and developed in partnership with Lord Cultural Resources, is set to launch in July 2025. This comprehensive plan will focus on integrating the arts into public spaces such as parks, community centers, libraries, and other public facilities. It will also aim to improve public art programs and policies, with an emphasis on supporting temporary arts projects and outdoor cultural events.¹⁵⁶

CONNECTIONS CAMPAIGN - REDEFINE THE WEEKEND

[Redefine the Weekend](#) aims to boost foot traffic and create cohesive programming and messaging for the area’s arts districts through a memorable campaign that includes: an updated art guide and website, promotional kits and targeted advertising/PR, wayfinding, and themed events that tie-in with regional anchors like Biltmore and the NC Arboretum. The City of Asheville allocated \$50,000 in Public Art Funds to support wayfinding/signage and printed materials for Asheville’s arts districts.

Additional County and Regional Recovery Efforts

EXPLORE ASHEVILLE

- [Love Asheville from Afar](#) - Promoting Arts and other business through online retail post Helene.

BUNCOMBE COUNTY

- [Envision Buncombe County](#) - Buncombe County Government is working to develop a community-driven plan for strategic recovery and resilience.

MOUNTAIN BIZWORKS

- [Mountain BizWorks’ Craft Your Commerce program](#) is currently offering free one-on-one support, workshops, and other support series for WNC creatives.

GALLERIES AND SHOWS TO SUPPORT IMPACTED ARTISTS

- [Information on gallery space for displaced artists.](#)

¹⁵⁵ ArtsAVL. [WNC Arts Recovery Overview, May, 2025](#). Page 4.

¹⁵⁶ ArtsAVL. [ArtsAVL Launches Buncombe County Cultural Plan and Arts Recovery Strategy Following Hurricane Helene, 2025](#).

Arts-Related Recovery at the State and Federal Level ¹⁵⁷

At the State level, a relief bill was passed in late June – the Disaster Recovery Act of 2025 (H1012). The bill did not include dedicated funding for arts recovery and excluded most nonprofit arts organizations and creative businesses, many of which were significantly impacted by the storm. State and local arts organizations, like [Arts North Carolina](#) and the NC Arts Council, continue to call on legislators to include dedicated funding for arts recovery in future relief bills.

At the federal level, critical arts funding has already been cut. All [National Endowment for the Arts \(NEA\)](#) grants to Western North Carolina have been terminated, including a major grant previously awarded to ArtsAVL. Additionally, the NEA's staff has been reduced by 50%, significantly limiting the agency's capacity to support rural and disaster-affected communities. Mary Anne Carter, the previous chair under the first Trump administration, was officially nominated as NEA Chair, which may signal future stability for the agency.¹⁵⁸

Where are Artists Working Now?

Upper RAD / Lower RAD Divide¹⁵⁹

Since Helene, the RAD is commonly divided into Upper and Lower sections.

- **Upper RAD:** The northern section of the RAD is largely back open and welcoming visitors after the hurricane. It encompasses areas like Roberts Street, Artful Way, Depot Street, and Clingman Avenue, featuring a concentration of studios, galleries, shops, cafes, and music venues.
- **Lower RAD:** The area along the French Broad River faced more severe damage from Hurricane Helene and is still in the process of rebuilding. While recovery efforts are ongoing, some studio complexes, like Riverview Station, Marquee, Cotton Mill, and Warehouse Studios, were temporarily closed, with several aiming to reopen by fall.

As individual businesses located in the Lower RAD begin to open, distinguishing between Upper (open) and Lower (closed) RAD may become problematic and hinder visitors to businesses located closer to the French Broad River. Clear communication and a targeted marketing and wayfinding campaign may be necessary to reunify the district and bring foot traffic back to some of the most impacted areas.

Temporary Relocations, New Spaces & Plans to Reopen¹⁶⁰

With Upper RAD mostly open, it has served as a vital space for displaced artists to continue their work. This area has become a hub of resilience and creativity, helping sustain the region's arts community following widespread storm damage.

¹⁵⁷ Information in this section primarily obtained from the City's Planning and Urban Design Department.

¹⁵⁸ ARTnews, Alex Greenberger. [Trump Moves to Reappoint Mary Anne Carter as NEA Head, May 8, 2025.](#)

¹⁵⁹ Information in this section primarily obtained from the City's Planning and Urban Design Department.

¹⁶⁰ Information in this section primarily obtained from the City's Planning and Urban Design Department.

As of May 2025, there are still 300 artists from RADA that have been displaced and are looking for studio space preferably in the River Artists District. Efforts are actively underway to assist artists from the Lower RAD and to reopen damaged or closed studio spaces.

The following working studio spaces have opened post-Helene to support impacted artists:

- [RAD Rendezvous](#)
- [Resurrection Studios Collective](#) – Located in the historic Moog Music manufacturing building in downtown Asheville, Resurrection Studios Collective aims to provide workshop and exhibition spaces for artists across the region. The grand opening is set for March 7, with monthly "First Friday" strolls. Each month promises a different visitor experience with rotating gallery displays and pop-up shops.

RADA's webpages provide a [list of businesses that are currently open](#) in the River Arts District along with an [interactive map](#).

Larger studios and businesses that were part of The Foundy, like Foundation Woodworks and The Marquee, are planning to reopen in the summer or fall of 2025.¹⁶¹

Permanent Closures or Relocations¹⁶²

According to early estimates from ArtsAVL, approximately 60 arts businesses in the River Arts District have permanently relocated (half of those have left Buncombe County with the rest relocating within the River Arts District), 60 have permanently closed, and another 100+ are only open online. Many of the smaller studios along Riverside Drive and Foundy Street remain without reopening dates.

¹⁶¹ Blue Ridge Public Radio, Laura Hackett. [Businesses spring back to life in flood-ravaged parts of Asheville's River Arts District, April 29, 2025.](#)

¹⁶² Information in this section primarily obtained from the City's Planning and Urban Design Department.

SECTION 3

DEVELOPMENT

Asheville has seen significant development along its rivers in the last few decades. This poses great opportunities as well as barriers for economic and environmental resilience. It is important to understand Asheville's private development landscape in order to build a more sustainable floodplain.



Land Use and Development

ULI Briefing Book

Summary & Overview

This section details the city's vulnerability to flooding along the French Broad and Swannanoa River floodplains, which has been worsened by historical development patterns. Urbanization and industrialization have narrowed these river valleys, leading to projections that major floods could result in water levels 3 to 4 feet higher than in the past. Prior to the significant flooding from Tropical Storm Helene in September 2024, Asheville was experiencing a housing boom characterized by a surge in home prices—a 53% increase between January 2020 and January 2025—and a significant housing gap, estimated at nearly 20,000 units for Buncombe County. The area's land use is predominantly commercial, government, and utility-related, with zoning regulations that permit many uses not well-suited for floodplains.

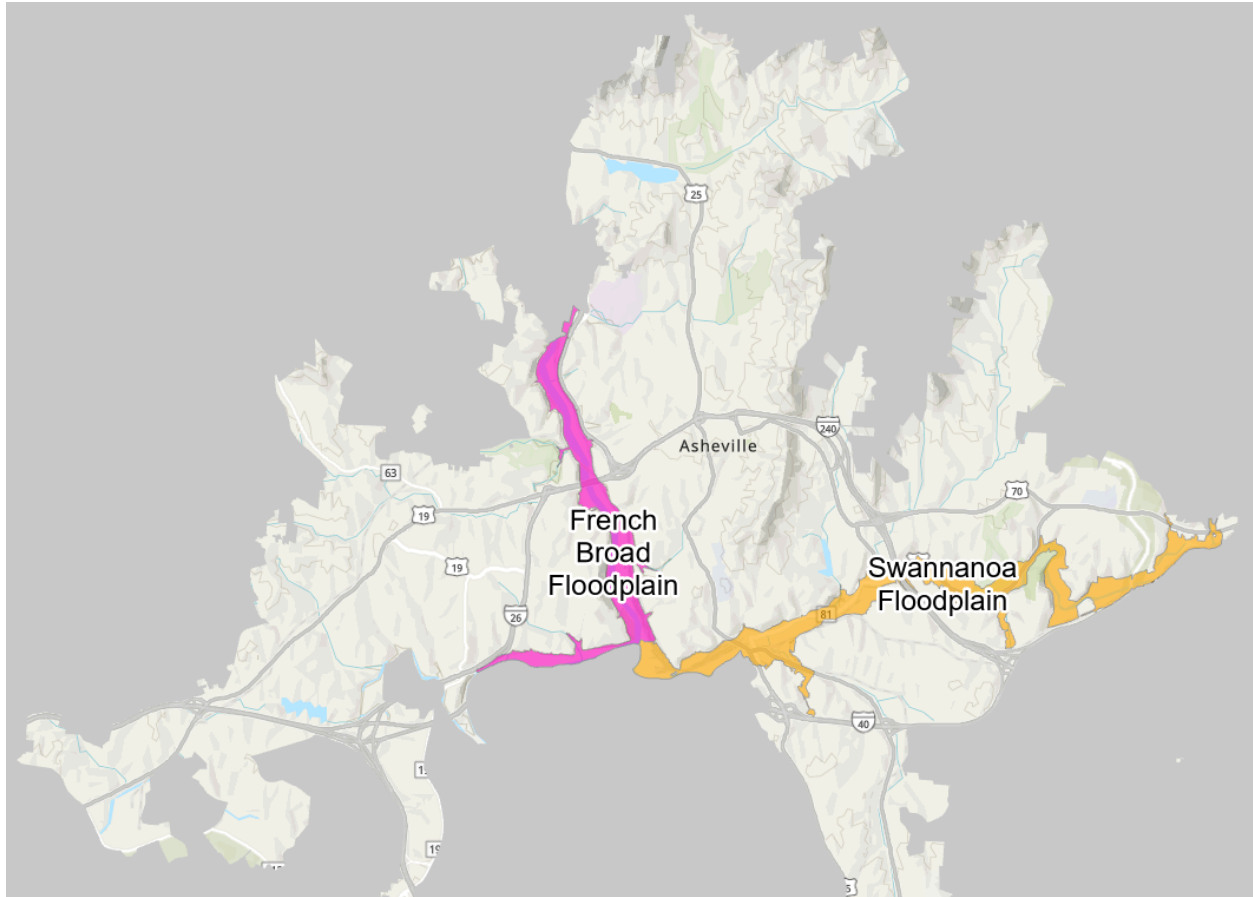
The impact of Tropical Storm Helene was devastating, bringing the region's real estate market to a halt and causing extensive damage to the built environment. Commercial properties were disproportionately affected, accounting for 81.5% of the total applied valuation for Helene-related building permits. Two historic districts, Biltmore Village and the Riverside Industrial Historic District, suffered significant damage due to their location within the floodplains, with many buildings situated several feet below the base flood elevation. The storm also led to a 17% decrease in short-term rental listings in Buncombe County within seven months.

In response to Tropical Storm Helene's devastation, several initiatives have been established to aid recovery. The City of Asheville formed a Flood Assistance Support Team (FAST) to help property owners navigate the complex permitting and rebuilding process, including requirements of the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) approved a \$225 million Community Development Block Grant - Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) action plan for Asheville, with funds allocated for infrastructure, economic revitalization, and housing. These recovery efforts are guided by existing local and federal flood regulations, which include higher standards for elevation requirements and rules for substantial improvements, with special provisions available for historic structures.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Information for this section primarily compiled by the Planning and Urban Design Department.

Physical Description

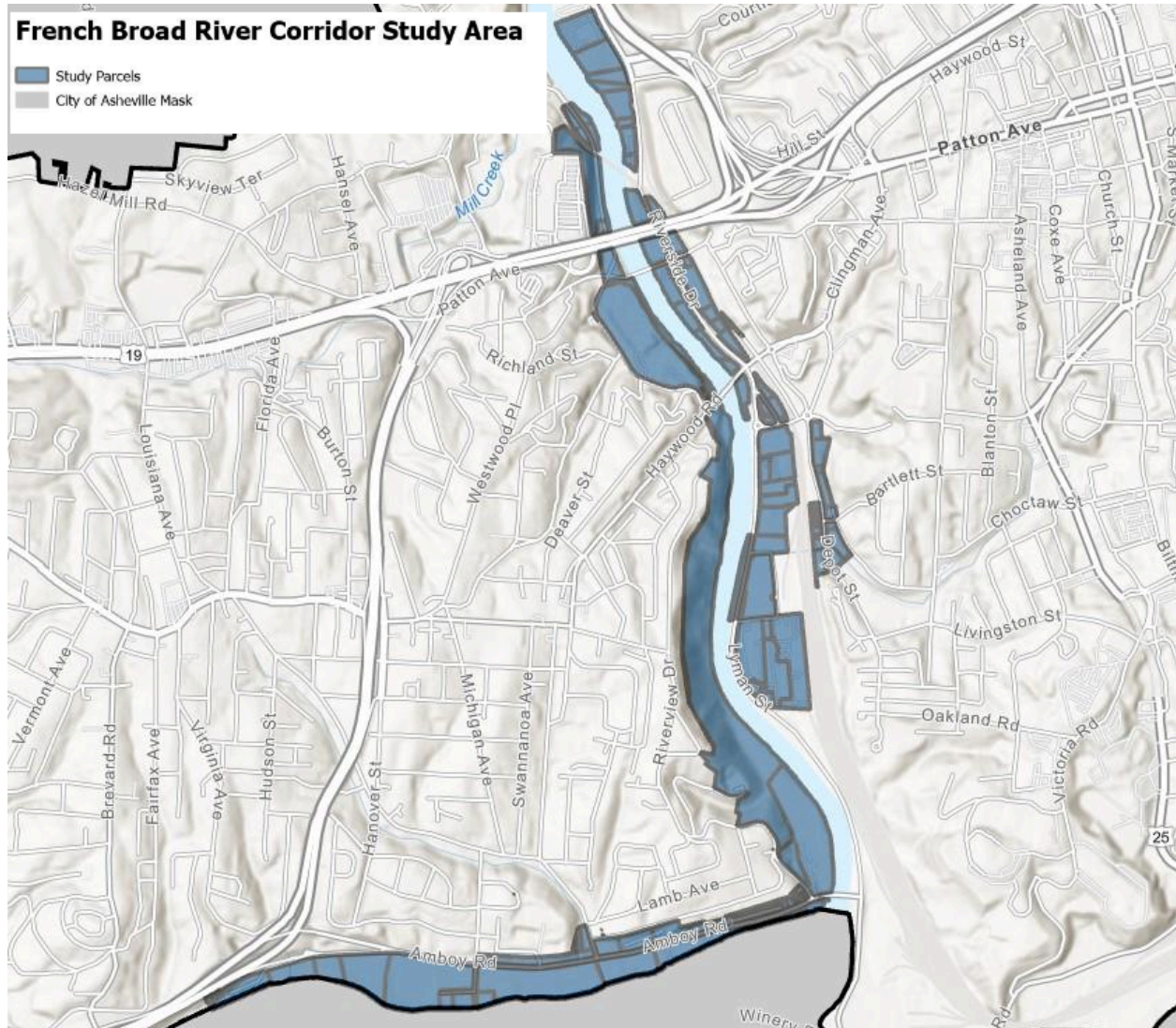
Asheville's flood areas include two distinct areas, portions of the French Broad River Valley and portions of the Swannanoa River Valley within city limits, as shown below.



French Broad River Valley

The French Broad River in the Asheville area flows through a valley shaped by natural and human influences. Historically, the river's floodplain was expansive, providing ample space for overbank flooding. However, urbanization and industrial activity have significantly altered this landscape. Industrial and commercial development has progressively narrowed the floodplain. Fills, bridge abutments, and other obstructions have encroached upon the natural flow path of the river. Fill material placed in the floodplain has led to considerable increases in water levels during floods. For example, recurrences of the 1916 or 2024 floods will cause stages of flooding 3 to 4 feet higher than before filling due to the constricted flow area and bridge obstructions.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ Tennessee Valley Authority - Division of Water Control Planning. [Floods on French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers - Vicinity of Asheville North Carolina, December, 1960](#). Page 27.

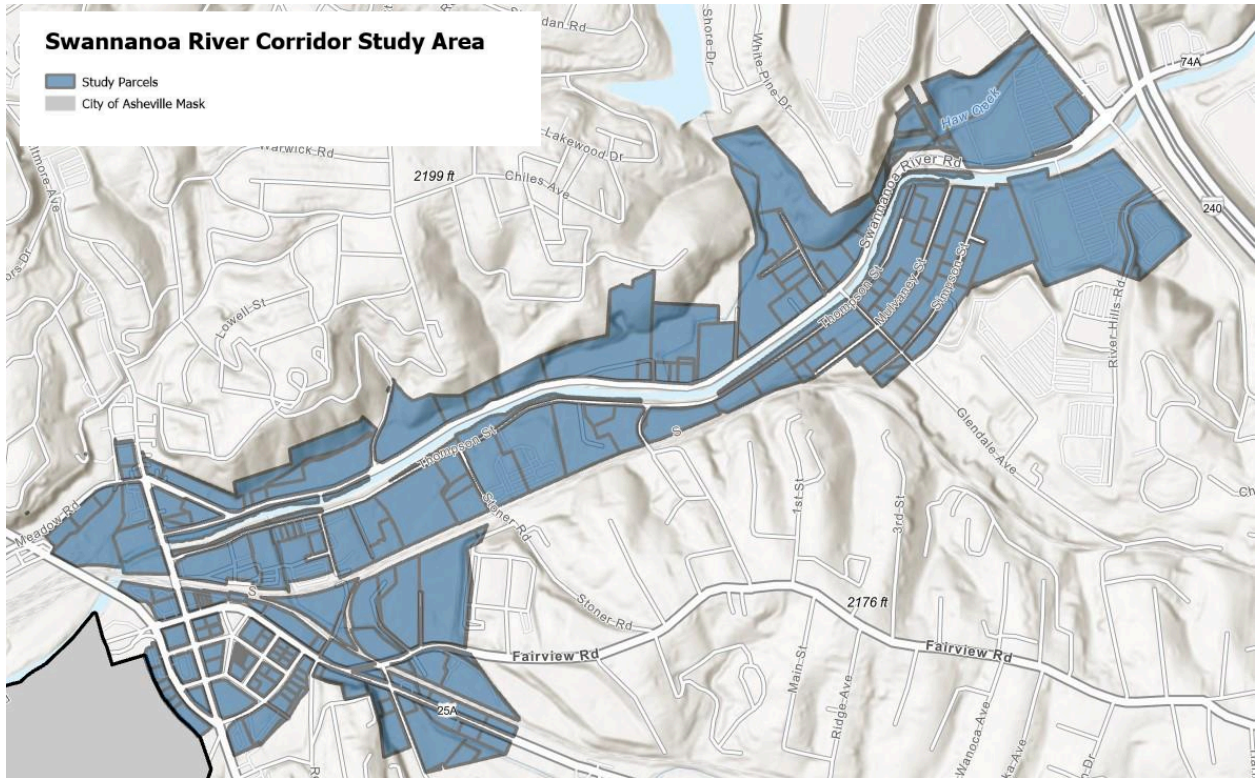


Swannanoa River Valley

The Swannanoa River originates in the rugged mountains east of Asheville, draining a 133-square-mile watershed. The river is more characteristic of a mountain stream than the French Broad and is more prone to rapid runoff due to steep slopes and high elevations (up to 6,000 feet in the north and northeast). The river descends from an elevation of 2,350 feet at Black Mountain to about 2,000 feet at the entrance of Biltmore Village at Hendersonville Road. Slopes average 10.5 feet per mile near Asheville, making the area more prone to rapid flooding. Several small tributaries (e.g., Sweeten Creek, Haw Creek, Gashes Creek) join the Swannanoa but have limited hydrological impact on major floods¹⁶⁵. The Swannanoa's floodplain is broad and alternates from one bank to the other, especially prominent in

¹⁶⁵ Tennessee Valley Authority - Division of Water Control Planning. [Floods on French Broad and Swannanoa Rivers - Vicinity of Asheville North Carolina, December, 1960](#). Page 65.

the lower five miles. Key wide-bottom areas exist near Azalea, Sayles Bleacheries, and on the Biltmore Estate. Present in the floodplain are important industrial and commercial developments. In the absence of flood protection, these low-lying areas are highly susceptible to damage during major flood events.



Land Use and Zoning

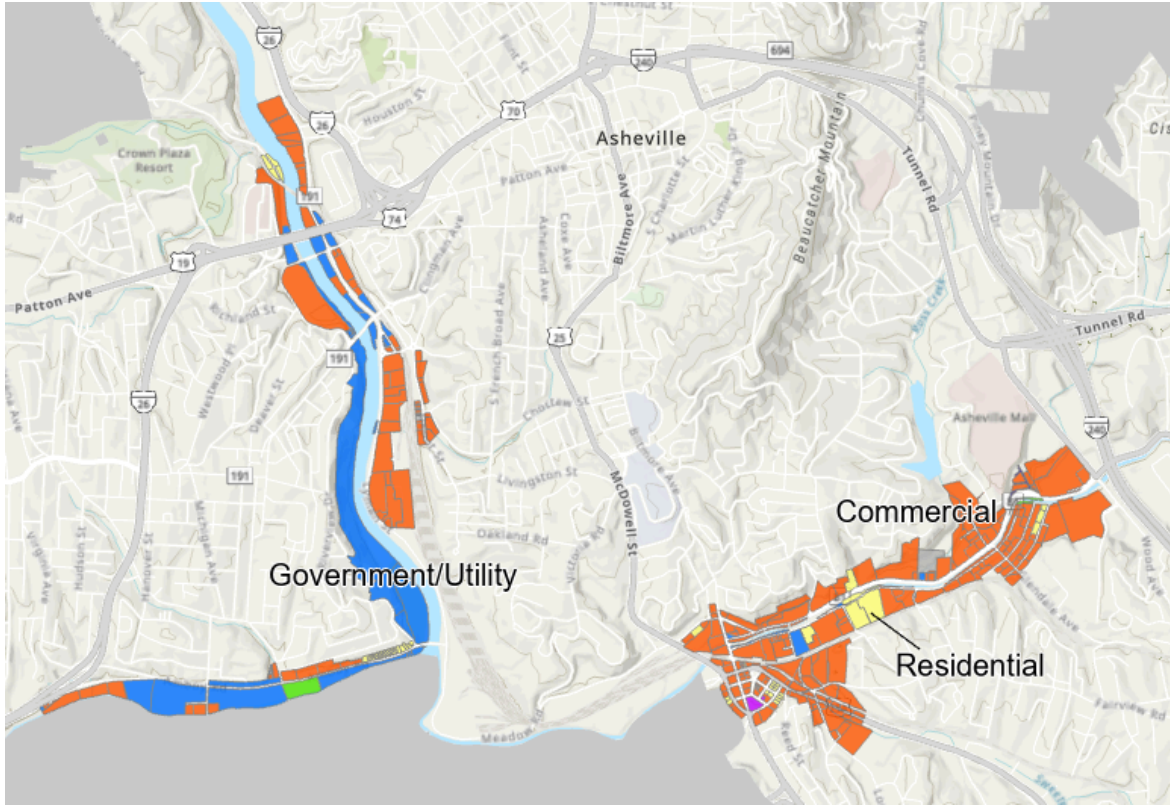
Land Use

When separated into study areas, the Swannanoa Corridor includes 288 parcels while the French Broad Corridor includes 199 for a total of 487 parcels. The median size property is 0.37 acres (16,117 square feet).

Area Totals	City of Asheville	Study Parcels
Total number of parcels	40,181	487
Total parcelized acreage	35,217 acres (1,534,041,630 SF)	670 acres (29,205,238 SF)
Median parcel size	0.24 acre (10,454 SF)	0.37 acre (16,117.2 SF)

Total assessed value	\$22,311,512,791	\$498,075,100
Cost per square foot:	\$14.54	\$17.05

The 52 unique land uses within the study areas can be grouped into general categories, the overwhelming majority are within the categories of commercial, government, and utilities, shown below:



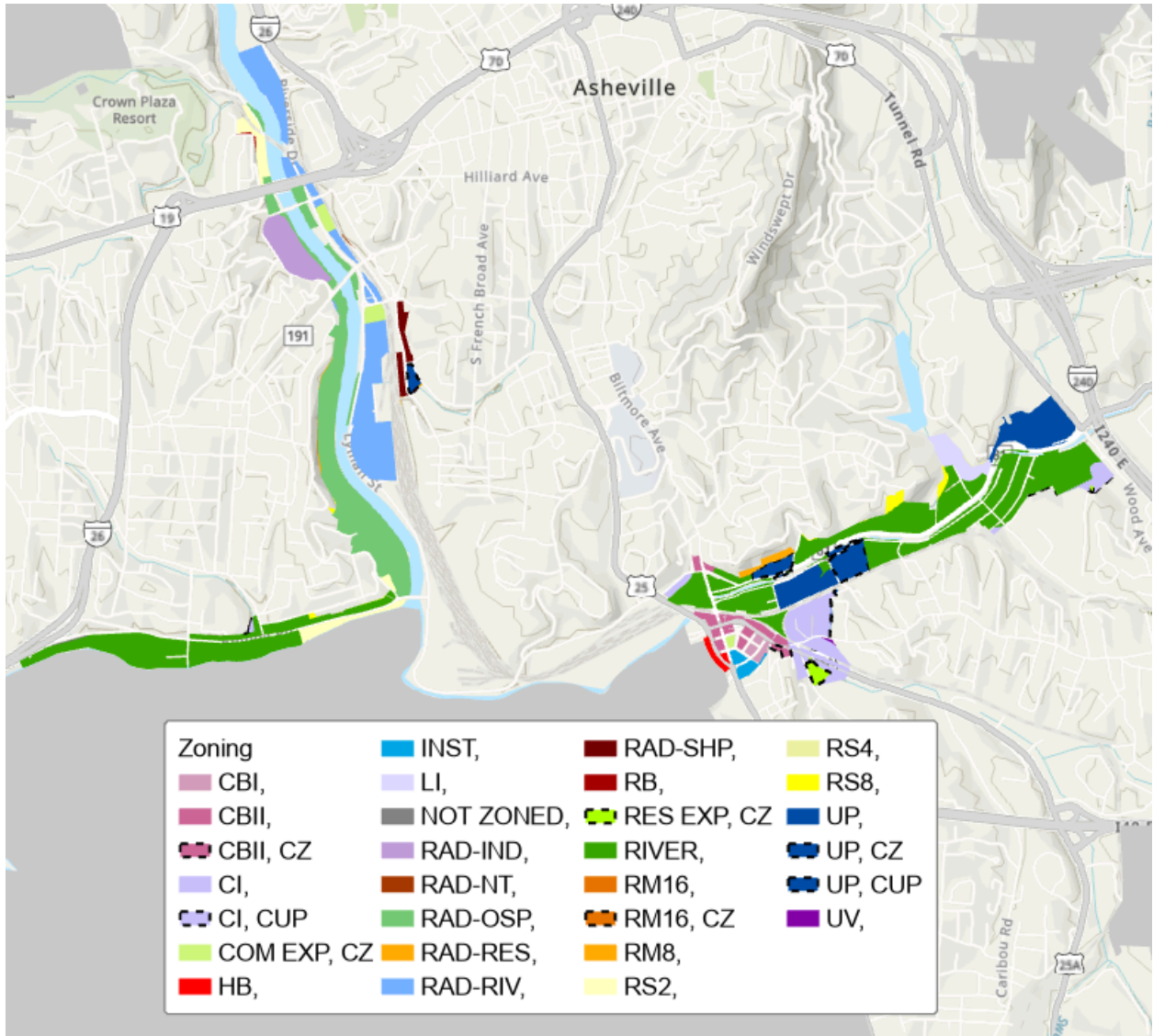
Zoning

The River zoning district¹⁶⁶ zoning accounts for approximately 30 percent of the land in the study areas. While the district purports to “celebrate, conserve, promote, and manage” the riverplain areas, it allows for many commercial and industrial uses which may not be well suited for floodplains, including gasoline sales, auto repair, and industrial uses such as concrete plants.¹⁶⁷ This is reflected in the table that breaks down the study areas by zoning district acreage:

¹⁶⁶ American Legal Publishing. [Asheville, NC Code - Section 7-8-19. River District.](#)

¹⁶⁷ For more background on the disconnect between the current development regulations, see [The Asheville Area French Broad and Swannanoa River Flood Assessment Report, 2025.](#)

Study Areas Parcels: Zoning Districts	Acreage
River	199 acres
River Arts District - River	107 acres
Commercial Industrial	70 acres
Community Business II	43 acres
Residential Multifamily - 8	39 acres
Residential Single-Family - 2	29 acres
Community Business I	29 acres
Urban Place	23 acres
Residential Single-Family - 8	22 acres
Residential Multifamily - 16	17 acres
Institutional	15 acres
Residential Single-Family - 4	15 acres
River Arts District - Neighborhood Transition	13 acres
River Arts District - Open Space	12 acres
Highway Business	11 acres
Commercial–Expansion	8 acres
Regional Business	6 acres
River Arts District - Shopfront	3 acres
River Arts District - Residential	3 acres
Not Zoned - Right of Way	1.3 acres
Residential Expansion	1.2 acres
River Arts District - Industrial	0.64 acre
Light Industrial	0.6 acre



The three zoning districts that comprise the most land area are *River*, *River Arts District - River*, and *Commercial Industrial*, which total 376 acres or 77 percent of the study areas. The following are some of the more intense permitted uses in these top three zoning districts, including some more questionable floodplain uses: *Equipment rental business; Heavy equipment & specialized vehicle sales, rental & service; Industrial equipment sales; Laundry/dry cleaning establishments (drive through facility permitted separately¹⁶⁸); Manufactured home sales and servicing; Recreational vehicle sales, service & repair; Motor vehicle and boat sales new & used; Motor vehicle and utility trailer rental; Motor vehicle service facility (outdoor storage and gasoline sales permitted separately); Small Engine service and repair; Studios, galleries & workshops for artists, artisans, and craftspeople - low impact; Studios, galleries &*

¹⁶⁸ American Legal Publishing. [Asheville, NC Code - Sec 7-8-1\(d\). Table of Permitted Uses.](#)

workshops for artists, artisans and craftspeople - high impact; Industrial uses; Industrial uses, light; Lumber yards; Motor freight terminals; Wholesale sales; Warehousing and storage.

Most of the zoning districts in the study areas allow for residential uses. Nevertheless, most properties are used for commercial, manufacturing, and industrial purposes. Recently, however, there’s been somewhat of a shift toward residential infill development projects. Between 2020 and 2025, five major, predominantly mixed-use developments were entitled within a 0.41 mile radius of the Roberts Street traffic circle within the French Broad River Corridor Study Area. The project information for each development is below:

Project Name	Address	Residential Unit Counts	Commercial SF	Affordability Component? Y/N
290 Depot	290 Depot Street	48	6,000	Y
The Wyre	146 Roberts Street	235	14,000	Y
Artful Way	31 Artful Way	34	1,472	N
Stoneyard	175 Lyman Street	263	4,500	Y
Riverside Drive Residences	144/179 Riverside Drive	240	0	Y
Total		820	25,972	

It’s important to understand the significance of the housing issue for the Asheville region. A 2024 report commissioned to assess housing for North Carolina identifies a housing gap for Buncombe county at nearly 20,000 for the period 2024-2029, including both for rental (7,477 housing unit gap) and for-sale housing (12,130 housing unit gap).¹⁶⁹ As such a crucial need, the city has been taking steps to develop more tools to help deal with the various challenges and also actively adjusting regulations to promote more housing.

On March 11, 2025, the Asheville City Council adopted three zoning text amendments to the city’s Unified Development Ordinance (UDO) to further incentivize affordable, walkable, mixed-use developments in areas identified as “transit corridors” according to [Living Asheville Comprehensive Plan](#), the city’s long-range plan. The goal of these amendments is to encourage the construction of more residential development and reduce barriers to infill development.

The first zoning text amendment removed parking minimums in a majority of commercial districts – including those within the study areas. The second zoning text amendment offers incentives to include deeper levels of affordability. While most of the projects in the table above offered 5% of units at 80%

¹⁶⁹ Bowen National Research. [Housing Needs Assessment - Asheville Region, North Carolina, 2025](#).

AMI for 20 years, the [Affordable Housing Plan](#) and the Land of Sky Housing Needs Assessment both call for deeper affordability closer to the 40-60% Area Median Income (AMI) range. The third zoning text amendment simplified dimensional and building envelope regulations to offer greater flexibility to any residential or mixed-use development that incorporates housing units.

Real Estate and Development

Prior to September 2024, Asheville and the broader Western North Carolina (WNC) region were in the midst of a prolonged housing boom. The area's reputation for natural beauty, cultural vibrancy, and a high quality of life had fueled robust in-migration, making it a hotspot for tourists, new residents, and retirees. This intense demand, coupled with a growing prevalence of vacation homes and short-term rentals, created significant housing market pressure.

This imbalance drove home prices to unprecedented levels. Between January 2020 and January 2025, home prices in Buncombe County surged by 53%, a rate of growth that outpaced the national average of 46%. Consequently, housing availability and affordability had become major concerns for many local residents long before the storm arrived, creating a fragile market highly susceptible to a major shock.¹⁷⁰

According to CoStar data, Central Asheville's industrial real estate market is incredibly supply-limited right now, with very little available space. (Note that CoStar's definition of the Central Asheville submarket roughly aligns with the ULI study areas.) This limited availability is largely due to the impacts of Hurricane Helene, which caused more industrial space to be taken offline than added. As of late 2025, only 1.2% of industrial properties are empty. This is even lower than what we've seen on average over the past five and ten years (1.5% and 1.6% respectively). Currently, there's only about 44,000 square feet of industrial space available, which is a tiny fraction (1.1%) of the total. A major reason for this shortage is that no new industrial buildings are being built in Central Asheville, and that's been true for the last ten years. In total, Central Asheville has about 3.9 million square feet of industrial property, including warehouses, flexible-use spaces, and specialized buildings.¹⁷¹

The Central Asheville office market is experiencing a slight slowdown. Currently, the vacancy rate is 3.9%, which is higher than the historical average for the area. This increase is mainly because more new office space was built in the past year than was rented out. There is currently about 140,000 square feet of available office space in Central Asheville. Notably, no new office buildings are under construction, which is a significant change from the typical activity level over the past decade.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, Bethany Greene and Anthony Tringali. [Hurricane Helene's Impact on Housing in Western North Carolina, March 27, 2025.](#)

¹⁷¹ City of Asheville, Megan Owens. [CoStar, Industrial Submarket Report - Central Asheville, July, 2025.](#)

¹⁷² City of Asheville, Megan Owens. [CoStar, Office Submarket Report - Central Asheville, July, 2025.](#)

Right now, about 5.4% of retail spaces are empty in Central Asheville, which is significantly higher than the average of about 2.7% to 2.9% over the last five to ten years. This increase is mainly because more stores have closed or moved out than new ones have opened, leading to a loss of 170,000 square feet of occupied space in the last year. There have been no new retail buildings built either, which is unusual for the area. Central Asheville's retail market has more empty stores than usual, especially in strip malls and enclosed malls, and while rents are still rising, they're not increasing as quickly as they have in the past.¹⁷³

Helene Impact on Development

The floodwaters of Tropical Storm Helene brought the region's real estate market to an abrupt halt. In the immediate aftermath, the market effectively froze as property owners, lenders, and insurers grappled with the scale of the devastation. Over 500 listed properties across WNC were temporarily withdrawn from the market as homeowners struggled to assess damage and navigate the initial chaos¹⁷⁴. Key market indicators plummeted; in the Asheville Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), which includes Buncombe, Haywood, Henderson, and Madison counties, pending contract activity fell by 39.7% in October 2024¹⁷⁵.

Short Term Vacation Rentals (STR) are also a critical part of Asheville's real estate environment to accommodate the tourism economy, though it's important to understand that whole-house STRs are not permitted in Asheville¹⁷⁶. The STR segment of Asheville's real estate was equally impacted by Helene. In September 2024, Buncombe County had 3,406 STR listings and within seven months that number had dropped to 2,809—a 597 unit (17%) decrease. The City of Asheville reported a slightly higher decrease of 21%. The median nightly rental rate had also dropped by \$10.00 during that same time period, signifying a reduction in market demand for short-term housing.

The damage to the built environment of Asheville during Helene was devastating in terms of both the number of buildings damaged, and the extent to which all recorded structures were damaged. The majority of damage inflicted upon residential structures was related to tree-fall, and most permits fell in residential zones outside of the identified study areas. In fact, of the 357 residential/multi-family structures in the regulatory floodplain only 5 were completely destroyed or demolished. The damage to commercial buildings was disproportionately higher and far more concentrated to the study areas. As shown below in the Helene Related Building Permits Table, 81.5% of all applied valuation even though only 48% of the overall Helene related building permits were commercial in nature.

¹⁷³ City of Asheville, Megan Owens. [CoStar, Retail Submarket Report - Central Asheville, July, 2025](#).

¹⁷⁴ BiggerPockets, LLC, Jeff Vasishta. [Three Months After a Generational Storm, Here's How Asheville's Market is Recovering, January 13, 2025](#).

¹⁷⁵ Canopy Realtor Association. [After devastating Helene, Asheville region housing market shows signs of recovery, with increased buyer and seller activity in December, January 21, 2025](#).

¹⁷⁶ City of Asheville. [Homestays and Short Term Rental Violations, April, 2024](#).

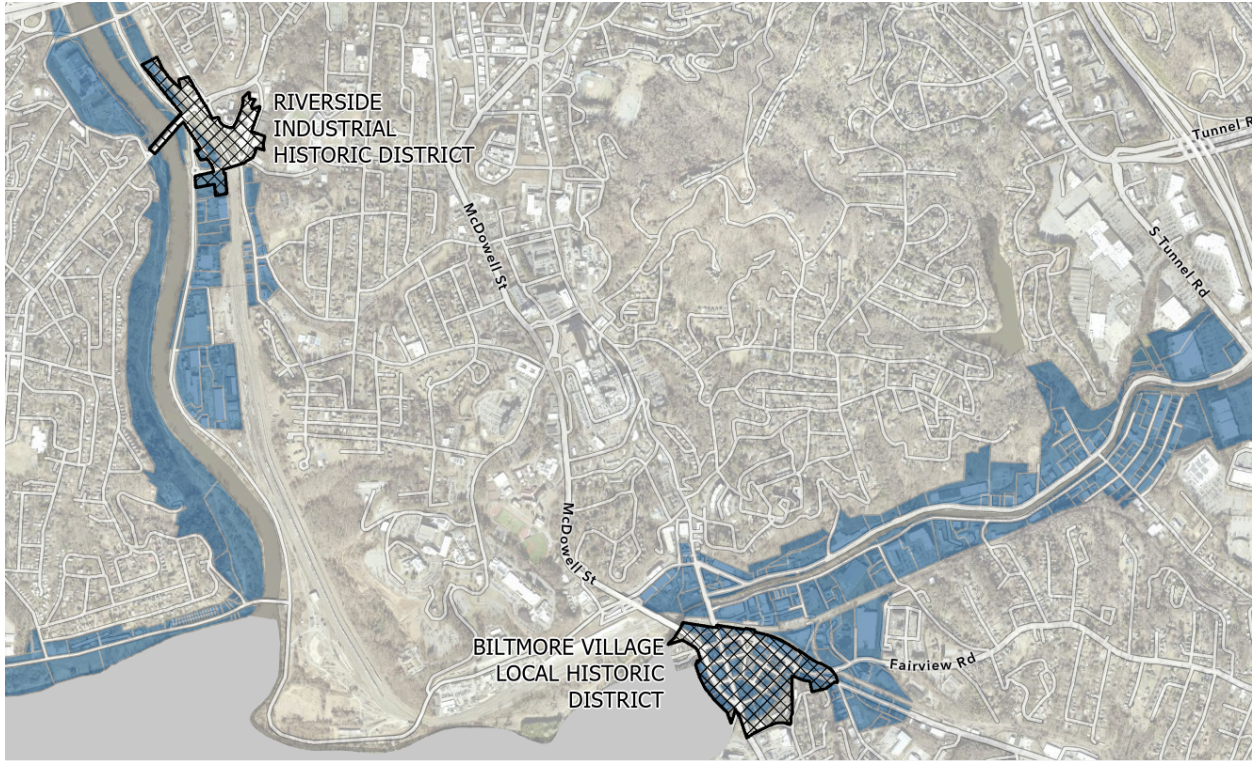
Helene Related Building Permits 10/2/2024-6/24/2025			
	Applied for	Issued	Applied Valuation
Total Commercial Permits	586	449	\$71,975,217.01
Total Residential Permits	533	474	\$16,282,167.49
Grand Total	1119	923	\$88,257,384.50

One of the contributing factors to the disproportionate commercial impacts of Helene is that two of Asheville’s Historic Districts (Biltmore Village Local Historic District and Riverside Industrial Historic District) were adversely impacted because of their geographic proximity to the French Broad and Swannanoa Floodplains.

Biltmore Village Local Historic District is uniquely situated just upstream of the confluence of the Swannanoa River and French Broad River. As previously mentioned, much of the district sits below base flood elevation and experienced about 6 feet of flooding during Helene. Since September 2024, Asheville’s Board of Adjustment has granted seven flood variances (discussed in the federal standards section below) to allow substantially damaged historic structures to rebuild without meeting base flood elevations yet to meet floodproofing to the extent practicable. As of this report, the Board of Adjustment is anticipating more applications for flood variances; the area estimates for substantially damaged buildings is much higher.

The Riverside Industrial Historic District is a national historic district that falls within the greater River. Again, much of this district is significantly below base flood elevation. No flood variances have been issued for this district, and as of the summer 2025 the number of structures in this district scheduled to be demolished has not been finalized.

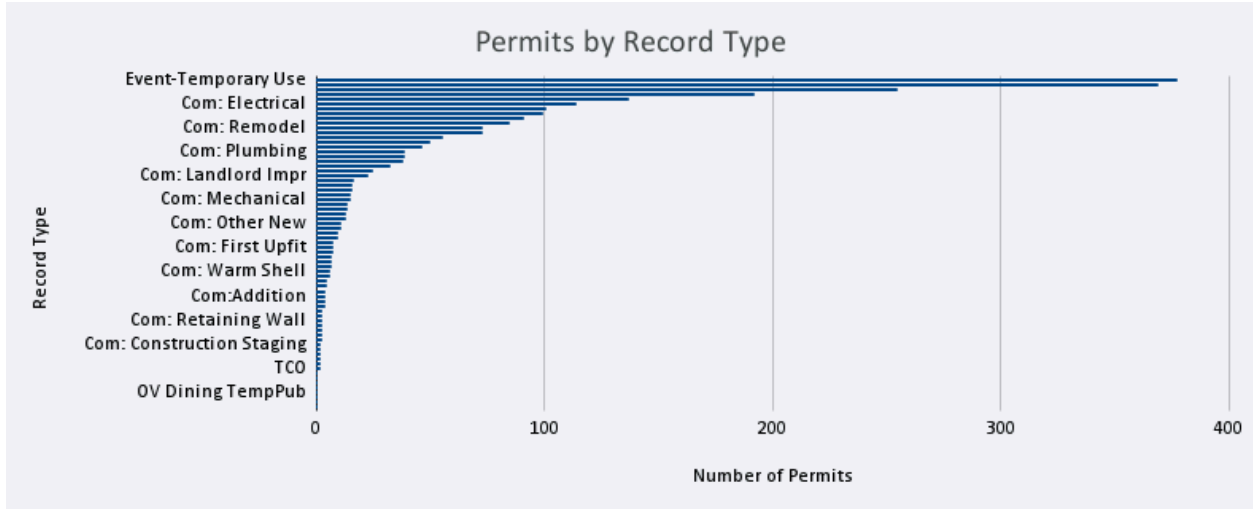
Both Historic Districts and their spatial relationship to each other and the broader study areas is shown in the map below.



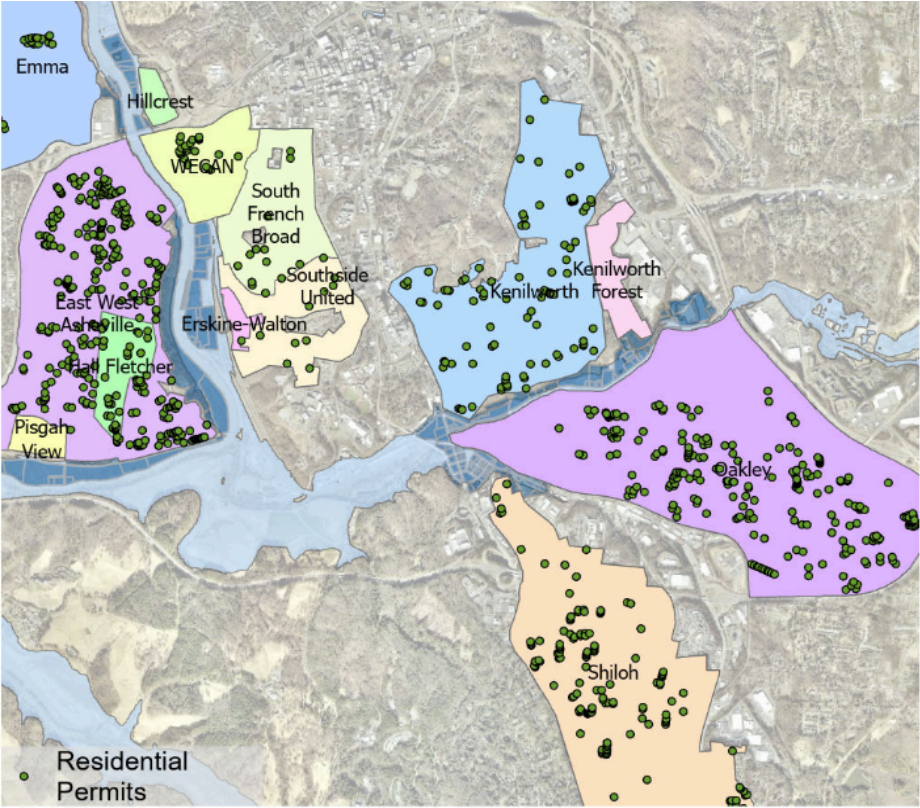
Development Trends and the Development Pipeline

The five projects outlined in the Zoning section signify a promising future for the built environment within the study areas. The zoning text amendments, enacted on March 11, 2025, are designed to incentivize similar developments over the next decade. However, an analysis of permit data from summer 2014 to the present reveals a different trend. The overwhelming majority of permitted construction in the study areas has focused on the renovation and redevelopment of existing structures. While "Temporary Events" represents the highest permit record type, indicating the area's cultural significance, the subsequent largest categories are: Commercial: Alterations, Commercial: Building Repair-Replace, Commercial: Electrical, Commercial: Multi-Trade Heating, Commercial: Occupancy, Commercial: Remodel, and Commercial: Site Work.

Collectively, these commercial permitting categories far exceed all others. The high volume of commercial renovation and repair permits suggests significant challenges to new construction within the study areas. These challenges may include, but are not limited to, the availability of vacant land, floodplain restrictions, and/or a restrictive regulatory environment.



A significant development trend intersecting with the study areas is the escalating demand for housing. Analysis of development records from summer 2024 to summer 2025 reveals that 35% of all residential permit types (including duplexes, accessory dwelling units [attached and detached], single-family dwellings, and waivers) originated within neighborhoods bordering the study areas. The geographical distribution of these developments in neighborhoods with officially recognized neighborhood association, is illustrated in the map below:



Shiloh and Southside are recognized legacy neighborhoods, and Shilo, Southside and Oakley are areas identified in the [Missing Middle Housing Study](#) as areas vulnerable to change. The Land of Sky Regional Council noted in their [Housing Needs Assessment](#) that Buncombe County has a 8,704 unit housing gap currently, and will have a 13,957 unit housing gap by 2029 (accounting for 68% of the region's housing gap) if development pressures are not addressed.¹⁷⁷

This trend of intensified housing demand is clearly observable in the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the study area parcels and is anticipated to be a defining factor in Asheville's development landscape in the foreseeable future.

City Initiatives & Recovery Investments

FAST

On January 21, 2025, Asheville developed a Flood Assistance Support Team (FAST) as a specialized, interdepartmental group created to provide personalized and empathetic support to property and business owners affected by Helene and who now must navigate the requirements for recovery, restoration, and rebuilding. The team's primary role is to listen and assist individuals through the complexities of the decision process following Helene. Specifically, the team advises on and supports navigation of the permitting process and addressing issues such as demolition, debris removal, temporary use permits, and changes of use. A significant focus of the FAST team is to help property owners navigate the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, which can provide funds for elevating, mitigating, or buying out flood-prone properties. They also play a crucial role in outreach, particularly to property owners whose properties are believed to be substantially damaged, ensuring that all necessary information is collected for a fair and timely determination.

A key function of the FAST team is guiding property owners through the Substantial Damage Estimate (SDE) process, which is a requirement under the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) for buildings within a floodplain. "Substantial Damage" is determined when the cost to repair a damaged building to its pre-damage condition is 50% or more of the building's pre-damage market value. Asheville's participation in the voluntary NFIP allows residents to access federally backed flood insurance and other federal disaster assistance. The FAST team works with property owners to ensure the accuracy of these damage estimates by accepting updated appraisals and contractor work costs to inform the final determination. As of early 2025, the team has been actively engaging with affected residents, businesses and property owners by holding over 200 individual team sessions to provide assistance. Outreach included mailing letters to all impacted property owners to offer individualized support.

¹⁷⁷ Bowen National Research. [Housing Needs Assessment - Asheville Region, North Carolina, 2025](#).

Asheville 5x5

Asheville's Economic Development Coalition, housed at the Chamber of Commerce, developed a strategic plan for recovery, titled [AVL 5X5 2030](#). The plan centers its resiliency efforts on economic recovery from Tropical Storm Helene, highlighted by five "Signature Recovery Projects" aimed at rebuilding. Key investment initiatives include:

- Surveying businesses to guide relief funding and decision-making
- Showcasing the region's resilience to national audiences to demonstrate it is "open for business," and
- Expanding the Optimist Ventures Accelerator to provide funding and support to vulnerable startups affected by the disaster

Across its strategies, the plan calls for modernizing critical infrastructure like water systems, helping businesses access recovery funds, and rebuilding commercial areas such as the River Arts District¹⁷⁸.

¹⁷⁸ Asheville Chamber of Commerce - Economic Development Coalition (EDC). [AVL 5X5 2030. A Strategic Plan for Economic Recovery](#).



Rules and Regulations

ULI Briefing Book

Flood Regulations

In addition to the zoning district regulations already mentioned, the City of Asheville maintains regulations for flood areas within the code's Article XII, Environmental Protection Standards¹⁷⁹. The flood damage prevention ordinance establishes higher standards for any development within designated special flood hazard areas. The primary goal is to minimize public and private losses from flooding by managing development and land use within regulated floodplains.

Key provisions of the ordinance include:

- **Elevation Requirements:** All new construction and substantially improved residential structures must have their lowest floor elevated to the Base Flood Elevation (BFE) plus a two-foot freeboard, creating a Regulatory Flood Protection Elevation (RFPE). Non-residential structures must either meet this elevation requirement or be flood-proofed to the same level.
- **Floodways:** To preserve flood-carrying capacity, encroachments such as fill, new construction, or substantial improvements are prohibited within designated floodways unless an engineering analysis confirms no resulting increase in flood levels. New habitable structures are also not permitted in these high-hazard areas.
- **Substantial Improvements:** The ordinance broadly defines "substantial improvement" to include any cumulative repair or renovation project over a one-year period that costs 50% or more of the building's market value. Such projects trigger the requirement to bring the entire structure into compliance with the standards for new construction.
- **Nonconforming Structures:** Buildings that existed before the ordinance and do not comply may continue to operate. However, any substantial improvement or repair of substantial damage necessitates bringing the entire structure up to current code.
- **Enforcement:** The city's Floodplain Administrator has the authority to conduct inspections and enforce the ordinance through measures that include stop-work orders and civil penalties up to

¹⁷⁹ American Legal Publishing. [Asheville, NC Code - Section 7-12-1. Flood Damage Prevention.](#)

\$25,000.

- **Flood Variances:** A variance from these requirements is difficult to obtain. An applicant must demonstrate exceptional hardship and show that the variance will not increase flood heights or threaten public safety. NFIP guidance also allows for variances for eligible historic structures to seek relief from the City's flood regulations, the purpose of which is to flood protect historic structures to the extent possible without adversely impacting historic character.

Federal Standards

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) designates Special Flood Hazard Areas (SFHAs) as those having special flood, mudflow or flood-related erosion hazards. These areas are shown on the Buncombe County Digital Flood Insurance Rate Maps (DFIRMs)¹⁸⁰ and include the 1% Annual Chance Flood Hazard, the 0.2% Annual Chance Flood Hazard, and the floodway. For communities that participate in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), floodplain management regulations must be enforced within the SFHAs. Flood insurance is mandatory for buildings in the SFHAs only if they have a federally backed loan.

Communities that choose to participate in FEMA's Community Rating System program (CRS) can obtain reductions in flood insurance premiums. CRS is a voluntary program where the goals are to improve standards and programming around floodplain management to build resiliency and reduce risk¹⁸¹. Asheville has been a CRS community since 2014. In Asheville, there are 2,574 acres of area that fall within the SFHAs, or nine percent (9%) of the area within city limits, including the study areas under review. Asheville is rated class 8 which provides for a 10% reduction in flood insurance premiums for residents in SFHAs.

FEMA manages a program to buy out properties that face flood risks in order to help communities rebuild in a way that reduces long-term risk. The Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) allows local governments to apply for grants to support property acquisition, elevation, or stabilization on behalf of property owners or businesses who have applied to the program¹⁸². As of the publication of this memo, there have been 31 acquisition applications, 14 elevation applications, and two stabilization applications, which include both commercial and residential properties. Applicants have until October 2025 to apply for (or withdraw their property from) this program.

As noted above, NFIP guidance allows for exceptions for eligible historic structures to seek relief from some of the City's flood regulations, the purpose of which is to flood protect historic structures to the extent possible without adversely impacting historic character. This allowance applies to:

¹⁸⁰ Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). [Flood Maps](#).

¹⁸¹ Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). [Glossary - Special Flood Hazard Area \(SFHA\), July 7, 2020](#).

¹⁸² Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). [Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, April 24, 2025](#).

- Structures listed individually in the National Register of Historic Places or preliminarily determined as meeting the requirements for individual listing on the National Register;
- Certified or preliminarily determined as contributing to the historical significance of a registered historic district;
- Individually listed on a state inventory of historic places; or
- Individually listed on a local inventory of historic places.

Multiple impacted historic structures meet these eligibility criteria in both the Biltmore Village Historic District, Riverside Industrial Historic District, as well as the Hans Rees Tannery property (“The Foundy”) located on Lyman Street.

In addition to the variance regulatory process for historic structures, repairs to structures located within the Biltmore Village Historic District overlay boundary must go through review for a Certificate of Appropriateness (CA) for any work related to the exterior of the structure(s) and/or site. The vast majority of repairs for Helene-related damage have been reviewed administratively via minor work application versus major work review, which requires a public hearing by the Historic Resources Commission (HRC). The total number of Helene-related minor work CAs issued post-Helene to-date total is 36, and the number of major work CAs issued is three.

Flood-related development considerations

Regional Coordination

Regional collaboration is critical for effective flood-focused management, including for development regulations, since flooding sources primarily lie outside city limits. This regional watershed approach aligns with Asheville’s comprehensive plan goal to protect hillsides, waterways, and farmland, preserving ecosystems and habitats. Given Western North Carolina’s \$3.8 billion tourism economy tied to the French Broad River, such cooperation can both reduce future flood risks and improve water quality after events like Tropical Storm Helene¹⁸³.

Stormwater Regulations

Federal Stormwater Requirements

The federally-mandated National Pollutant Discharge Elimination system (NPDES) Phase II Stormwater Program is an effort to preserve, protect, and improve the nation’s water resources from polluted runoff. The City of Asheville and all similarly-sized U.S. cities are required to uphold and implement the

¹⁸³ City of Asheville. [The Asheville Area French Broad and Swannanoa River Flood Assessment Report, 2025](#).

provisions of a federal stormwater permit with the intent of protecting water quality. The six required components of the federal NPDES Phase II Stormwater permit are:

- Public Education
- Public Involvement
- Illicit Discharge Detection and Elimination
- Construction Site Runoff Controls
- Post-Construction Site Runoff Controls
- Good Housekeeping/Pollution Prevention of Municipal Facilities.

The City of Asheville received its initial [NPDES Permit](#) (#NCS000435) for the discharge of stormwater from the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Division of Water Quality in July 2005. The permit was renewed on [January 1, 2021](#) and is effective until December 31, 2026. The City of Asheville received approval on December 3, 2020 for its [Stormwater Management Plan](#). No state or federal resources are provided to municipalities to implement these measures. For more information about the NPDES Phase II Stormwater Program, visit the [NC Division of Water Quality](#) and the [US Environmental Protection Agency](#). For more detailed information on the Stormwater Division's operations, please see their [Annual Stormwater Management Reports](#).

Stormwater Ordinance

The Stormwater Division strives to protect local water quality by way of the current Stormwater Ordinance. The ordinance, adopted in August 2007, brought the city into compliance with NC Department of Environmental Quality regulations. Some provisions could impact the future development plans of landowners along streams. These stream protection and erosion rules, and any revisions to them, can affect both future development and the city's ability to maintain water quality in rivers, streams, and lakes. The City of Asheville has held several public input sessions to gain feedback and describe the process being used to reconsider certain provisions. With the public input, the final product was developed by staff and the Watershed Policy Committee (consisting of City staff, members of the development community, owners of private property in the city, and environmental representatives) and adopted June 8, 2010. Click on the following links to view the current ordinance:

- [Ordinance Amending Chapter 7 of the Code Ordinances of the City of Asheville Pertaining to Environmental Protection Standards for Soil Erosion and Sedimentation Control and Stormwater Management](#)
- [Regulations Pertaining to Definitions for Environmental Protection Standards of the Code of Ordinances of the City of Asheville](#)
- [Ordinance Amending Chapter 7, Article XVIII, of the Unified Development Regulations of the Code of Ordinances of the City of Asheville Pertaining to Enforcement](#)
- [Development Review Procedures for Floodplain Development](#)

Additional standards and regulations:

- [Clean Water Act](#) - EPA has developed national water quality criteria recommendations for pollutants in surface waters
- [NC State Stormwater Program](#) - Protects North Carolina's surface water from water quality impacts due to stormwater runoff by using a combination of communication, innovation, leadership, and regulation as we work toward this important mission.
- [Standard Specifications and Design Manual](#) (SSDM) - Sections 7, 8, 9, and 10

SECTION 4

INFRASTRUCTURE

Asheville cannot become a more resilient city without taking a hard look at our infrastructure. As previously mentioned, the City of Asheville suffered extreme infrastructure damage during Tropical Storm Helene. This section will focus on two aspects of Asheville's infrastructure: our stormwater system and our parks system. These systems play key roles in flood mitigation while also allowing for study area specific recommendations.



Stormwater

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Asheville's Stormwater System ¹⁸⁴

The City of Asheville’s Public Works Department manages a complex and extensive stormwater system, which includes a mix of inlets, catch basins, pipes, ditches, channels, creeks/streams, and green infrastructure (GI). This aging system faces increasing strain due to factors like Tropical Storm Helene, more severe storm events, increased tourism, and urban growth.

Asheville's stormwater infrastructure has an estimated average age of 65 years, with some parts being over a century old while others are recent installations. The system utilizes a variety of pipe materials, including ductile iron, steel, other metals, high-density polyethylene (HDPE), polyvinyl chloride (PVC), and clay. Newer installations and replacements favor plastics due to their 100-year useful life, which helps to defer future renewal costs associated with older materials. Despite the varied age and materials, there is no consistent formal monitoring of the stormwater system's condition; a limited assessment conducted in 2016 provided the initial asset condition profile. The Stormwater Division has a dedicated crew to camera and inspect our stormwater system. Their work helps to prioritize the replacement of failing pipes and reduce the amount of nuisance flooding.

Asheville’s Stormwater System by the Numbers (FY22)	
Stormwater piped system	Estimated 40.25 miles
Ditches	Estimated 412 roadside miles
Stormwater Accounts	28,863 customer accounts
Pipes (FY18)	1,674 feet replaced, 1739 feet new installations by 2 crews
Debris Removal (FY18)	1,273 tons removed by 3 street sweeping and 2 drain cleaning crews
Sweeping (FY18)	4,853 curb miles cleaned by 3 sweeper operators and 2 sweepers night shift
Ditching (FY18)	28,013 feet maintained by 1 crew

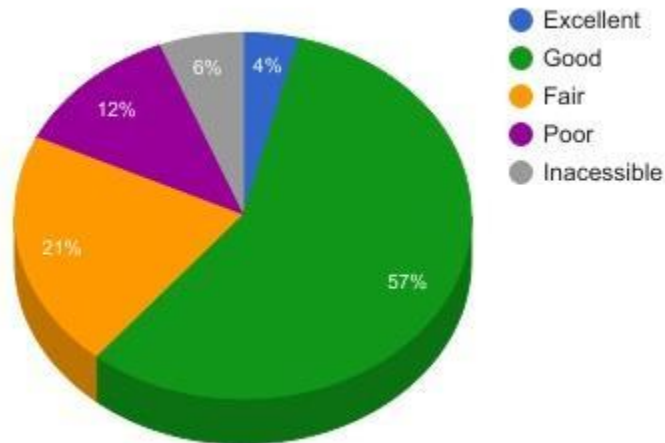
¹⁸⁴ Information in this section primarily obtained from the City’s Stormwater Division.

Asheville's Stormwater System by the Numbers (FY22)

Capital Projects

11 active projects; \$21.6 million total life cost (about \$8 million spent)

Fig 1: Asset Condition Profile, Stormwater System



Funding and Challenges

The City funds its entire stormwater program through a stormwater utility enterprise fund, which is a common method to pay for stormwater management and compliance costs by charging property owners a fee related to the amount of impervious surface on their property. Revenues from this fee fund improvements, regulatory efforts, permitting, inspections, billing, and maintenance and operations. Stormwater utilities funded through a tiered rate based on the amount of impervious surface on each property are an equitable method to pay for these services since all are affected by the management of stormwater.

Prior to Tropical Storm Helene, the Stormwater Division operated with limited capacity (e.g. understaffed, heavy workloads, limited funding, etc.), and these considerations have been exacerbated by recovery efforts. These factors present challenges in taking a proactive approach to stormwater improvements. Moreover, the current legislative environment does not support higher standards than the State's minimums for stormwater management. Asheville's standards are slightly higher but these were devised previously and have been in existence since at least 2010.

Initial investments in stormwater funding have gone towards capital projects or in-house construction/maintenance. While this has provided for an immediate increase of stormwater improvements, it can sometimes inadvertently lead to the wrong sequencing of projects. Citywide wholesale watershed modeling and planning is needed to understand and manage watershed systems. This approach would consider the interplay of natural and human systems within the watershed to inform decision-making for stormwater management. In order to do this, the City would need to place a

pause on larger scale stormwater improvement projects due to both staff and funding limitations. Once watershed plans are in place, city-wide priorities and UDO updates can be established based on the watershed plans and infrastructure assessments.

To address challenges prior to the storm, the city recently conducted a Stormwater Utility Program Assessment and Fee Study that analyzed the program and provided recommendations such as:

- Identify and manage the community expectations;
- Identify appropriate size and scope for stormwater program;
- Identify future needs and program gaps;
- Guide the program through the lens of sustainability;
- Recommend funding for future needs of maintenance; and,
- Develop strategies to implement recommendations.^{185, 186}

Existing Studies and Reports

Through the years there have been numerous stormwater and flood studies relevant to the Asheville area. To find a summary of some of these relevant studies [review page 20 of this report](#).

Stormwater Quality

Wilma Dykeman often paraphrased Mark Twain in saying that the “French Broad River was too thick to drink and too thin to plow,” but thanks to the Clean Water Act of 1972 and the hard work of many, including the City of Asheville, the French Broad River now supports a diverse group of aquatic species, a thriving recreation scene, a robust economy, and a world class fishery.

While the improvements in the French Broad River have been significant since the 70’s, in recent years the water quality in the river has declined precipitously in many locations. The Pearson Bridge sampling location on the French Broad River in the Asheville River District has gone from passing the safe threshold for bacteria 81% of the time in 2016 to failing 81% of the time in 2020. Out of 99 E. coli samples taken in 2019 in Town (“Nasty”) Branch, only 8% passed EPA's safe limit. This decline in water quality is resulting in the French Broad River, Bacoate Branch (draining Clingman Ave area) and Town Branch being scheduled for listing on the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality’s Clean Water Act Section 303(d) list of impaired waters. While the causes are varied and upstream users, including other municipalities, agriculture and construction play a significant role in the quality of the river, data clearly shows stormwater runoff from Asheville contributes to the declining water quality in the river and its tributaries.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ City of Asheville. [Stormwater Utility Program Assessment and Fee Study, 2023](#).

¹⁸⁶ City of Asheville. [Stormwater Utility Program Assessment and Fee Study Presentation, August 2024](#).

¹⁸⁷ City of Asheville. [Asheville Stormwater Task Force 2020-2021 - Final Report and Recommendations to the City of Asheville, July 2021](#). Page 4.

In August 2019, RiverLink began a project to investigate and find solutions to water quality issues in three Asheville streams.¹⁸⁸ The City of Asheville’s two-square mile watershed is a priority area due to its complex environmental, economic, and social equity issues. The streams covered in the study—Nasty Branch, Bacoate Branch and Haith Branch—are all impacted by numerous issues, including: stormwater runoff from developed areas, piped streams, and aging infrastructure.

According to the Environmental Quality Institute, Nasty Branch is one of the most polluted streams in Buncombe County. Water quality tests have found high nutrient levels that create a toxic environment for fish and other aquatic wildlife. The French Broad Riverkeeper has also found high levels of e-coli in Town Branch, which flows into a section of the French Broad River where e-coli levels regularly exceed state water quality standards.¹⁸⁹

All three streams in the Central Asheville watershed flow into a section of the French Broad River that is a popular recreation destination for local residents and out of town visitors. With E-coli levels in this area of the River frequently exceeding the EPA’s recommended limit for safe swimming, it is imperative that we take action now to make our waterways healthy for all.⁴

Green Infrastructure

Green infrastructure (GI) uses filtration, infiltration, and evapotranspiration to treat and soak up rainwater where it falls. It can deliver multiple environmental, social, and economic benefits beyond stormwater management alone. Terms such as nature-based solutions, green stormwater infrastructure, and low-impact development are also used to describe green infrastructure installations, and there is overlap between these concepts.

When green infrastructure systems are thoughtfully designed to fit the site-specific, local, or regional needs of the community and environment, they can provide cleaner air and water, protect against flooding and excessive heat exposure, provide diverse habitat, and create beautiful green spaces for all to enjoy.¹⁹⁰

The City of Asheville as an organization has over 30 examples of green infrastructure. Three of those GI examples of constructed wetlands can be found adjacent to the Craven St bridge. These wetlands were constructed and monitored with assistance from NC State University. Information about these wetlands can be found in [The Asheville RADTIPS Wetland Water Quality Study report](#).

In terms of stormwater management, the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality (NCDEQ) Minimum Design Criteria for Stormwater Control Measures (SCMs) does not refer to “green infrastructure,” though some measures may qualify. Most of the SCMs in the NCDEQ Minimum Design

¹⁸⁸ RiverLink. [RiverLink Renames Project the Central Asheville Watershed Restoration Plan, June 2020](#).

¹⁸⁹ RiverLink. [Central Asheville Watershed](#).

¹⁹⁰ EPA. [About Green Infrastructure](#).

Manual have research based in either the piedmont or eastern parts of North Carolina and not in the western portion. SCMs are not a one-size fits all and are typically not designed for large storm events. Asheville being in a mountainous region has challenges given its topography and steep slopes—there is limited adequate space available in most developments to provide for the conventional SCMs and the steep slopes provide for extreme velocities to these facilities. Furthermore, not all SCMs are appropriate for floodways and floodplains. Special design and maintenance considerations may need to be taken into account when locating SCMs in flood prone areas.

An example of a SCM that may act as green infrastructure are stream buffer requirements, which call for no land disturbance within 30 feet of the top of either side of a stream bank. These intermittent and perennial stream buffer requirements, as they are referred to in City of Asheville ordinances, are called vegetative setbacks.

Maintenance, resources, and the topographical and logistical challenges noted above have been an impediment for larger scale adoption of Green Infrastructure devices.



Figure 1. Craven Street site location before (left circa 2015) and after (right circa 2023) wetland

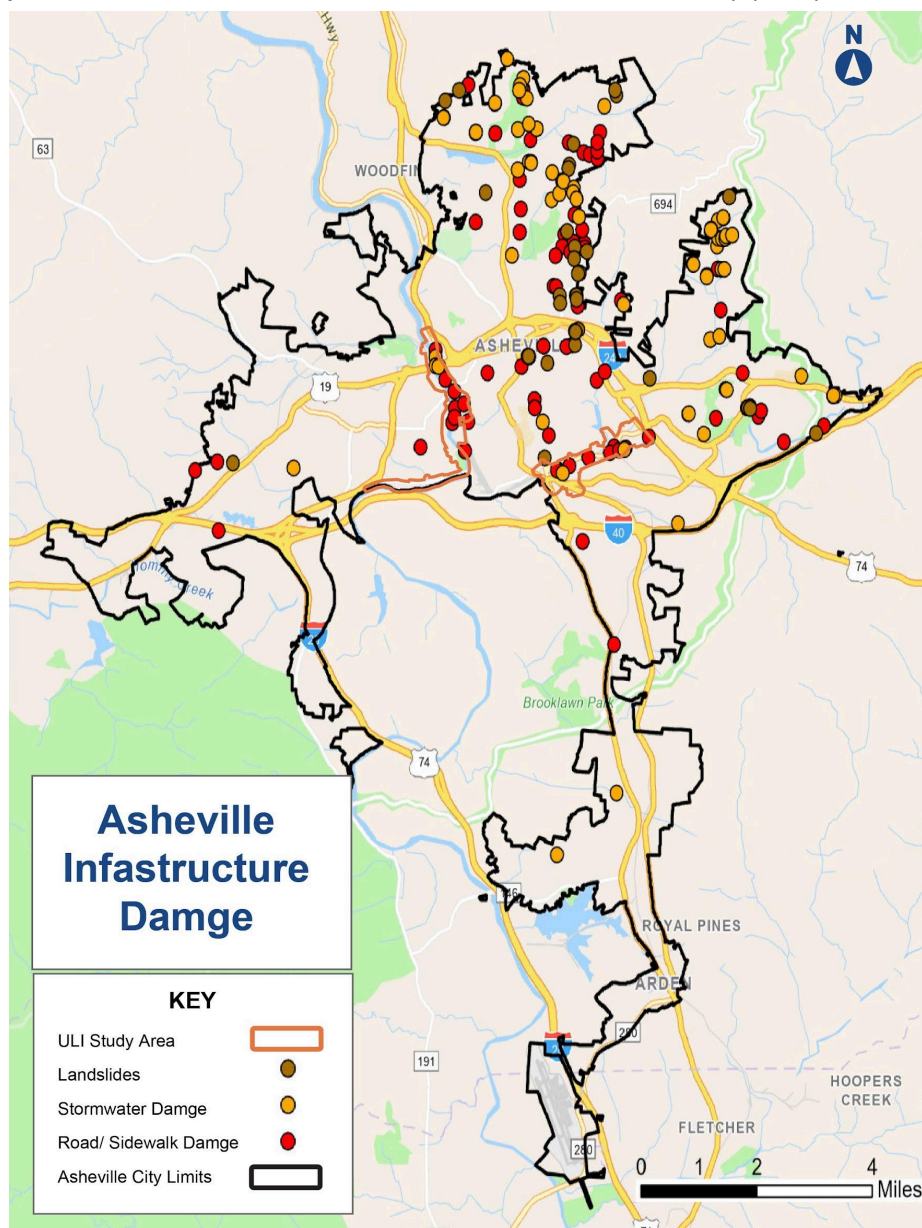
Helene Impacts to the Stormwater System

According to the City's Stormwater Division, Helene significantly impacted Asheville's stormwater infrastructure, causing a variety of problems. There was significant erosion along stream banks, particularly near the French Broad River and Swannanoa River. Additionally, the city experienced approximately 35 landslides, which caused substantial damage and hindered vehicular access in certain areas. Storm pipes, city stream outfalls, and stormwater control measures became blocked by debris and

siltation, and stream outfalls themselves suffered severe erosion. These issues were further exacerbated by the fall leaf season, which impeded street sweeping efforts due to existing street debris.

Estimated Damages

Rough preliminary estimates indicate approximately \$3,000,000 in damages that relates to several proposed recovery projects within the Public Works Department. These projects are generally stormwater replacement for pipes and culverts, inlet replacements, rightsizing or upsizing pipes and inlets, addressing streambank erosion and fortification, and several stormwater control measures. Additional systemwide damages and repair costs have not all been accounted for at this time; moreover, there are further costs for stormwater repairs and recovery initiatives that will be inherent to Parks and Greenway projects that have associated stormwater control measures and pipe replacements.



Projects and Initiatives

Current projects and initiatives include FEMA COA3D's (Detailed, Damage, Description and Dimensions) reports for 241 individual sites, finishing ongoing projects such as Carter Ann and Patton stormwater project, rebuilding damaged infrastructure, completing FEMA Substantial Damage Determinations (SDD) and issuing SDD Reports, infrastructure recovery, and supporting economic recovery. Since Helene, the Stormwater Division has also revised the floodplain ordinance to reflect updated language from State's model ordinance and to correct ambiguities in the ordinance language (*e.g. 2' above Base Flood Elevation (BFE) for substantially damaged structures*), and created the Flood Assistance Support Team (FAST) to fast track floodplain permitting for those properties that received damage and want to rebuild. The FAST Team represents a cross departmental group aimed solely for this purpose.¹⁹¹

At the State level, the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) along with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the United States Geological Survey (USGS) are working on a four State region update to the precipitation and intensity values to use in hydrologic and hydraulic (H&H) design. This update will take into account the newest data of the region's more intense rain events providing for better and more accurate numbers to use when designing infrastructure. Until this study is complete, Asheville should consider adjusting the Standards Specifications and Details Manual (SSDM) for stormwater guidelines.

At the federal level, FEMA is working to update the North Carolina Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRM). This work is scheduled to be completed this coming winter, 2025.

In addition to these current ongoing and proposed projects and initiatives, in 2018 the City of Asheville collaborated with UNC Asheville's National Environmental Modeling and Analysis Center (NEMAC) to conduct a climate resilience assessment. The primary purpose of the climate resilience planning process was to consider climate-related threats and hazards with a goal of becoming more resilient, or better prepared, by increasing our adaptive capacity. The primary hazards identified for Asheville are flooding, wildfire, and landslide. This climate assessment process had a ripple effect which led to the following work:

- Findings from the [Climate Resilience Assessment](#) were incorporated into the City's comprehensive plan, "[Living Asheville](#);"
- The City produced a [Climate Resource Guide](#) to share information on how — as a community and individually — we can become better prepared and more resilient to the effects of climate change. This guide was updated through the [Elevate AVL](#) project in 2025 to develop the [Climate Action Toolkit](#);
- A [Climate Emergency through Resolution 20-25](#) was declared in January of 2020; and

¹⁹¹ This information comes per the City's Stormwater Division.

- The City established the [Climate Justice Initiative](#) to collaborate with Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) leaders and community members to create a locally relevant definition of Climate Equity and to develop resources like the [Climate Justice Data Map](#) to embed climate justice considerations in City planning and implementation.¹⁹²

ULI Study Area Resilience Data ¹⁹³

Using the [AccelAdapt tool](#), Climate Resilience Assessment and other data, in partnership with Land of Sky, the Sustainability Department is able to provide this detailed study area resilience data including vulnerability and risk assessments of various parcel types. AccelAdapt data allows for flood analysis to be run using not only FEMA floodplain, but also NC Emergency Management (NCEM) advisory flood data which offers a much broader range of flood conditions (25-1,000 yr vs 100-500 yr) to indicate where much smaller and larger stores will cause flooding.

Regional Resiliency Assessment Data (AccelAdapt)

Land of Sky Regional Council and FernLeaf
 July 7, 2025, JMB
<https://landofsky.acceladapt.com/#/overview/>

French Broad Corridor Study Area (199 parcels total, 153 not vacant) - ULI Analysis

Parcel Landuse	Number of Parcels	Percent of Study Area	Parcels with High or Medium Vulnerability & Risk			
			Flood - NCEM Flood Advisory	Flood- FEMA Floodplain	Landslide	Wildfire
Residential	93	61%	10%	16%	34%	0%
Natural & Agricultural	2	1%	100%	50%	50%	50%
Government Owned & Critical Facilities	20	13%	80%	60%	15%	25%
Commercial	38	25%	79%	76%	32%	13%
Total Number of Parcels (not vacant)	153	100%	37%	37%	31%	7%

Swannanoa Corridor Study Area (288 parcels total, 166 not vacant) - ULI Analysis

Parcel Landuse	Number of Parcels	Percent of Study Area	Parcels with High or Medium Vulnerability & Risk			
			Flood - NCEM Flood Advisory	Flood- FEMA Floodplain	Landslide	Wildfire
Residential	47	28%	57%	43%	30%	0%
Natural & Agricultural	1	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Government Owned & Critical Facilities	10	6%	100%	80%	10%	10%
Commercial	108	65%	100%	82%	25%	0%
Total Number of Parcels (not vacant)	166	100%	87%	70%	25%	1%

Understanding the Resiliency Data

The above results present the number of parcels in each study area, not an analysis of area. Vacant parcels are excluded from the analysis. The vulnerability & risk result is a composite score of exposure

¹⁹² This information comes per the City's Sustainability Department.

¹⁹³ This information comes per the City's Sustainability Department.

(i.e. presence of risk) and level of vulnerability due to structure characteristics (e.g. finished elevation, year built, etc.).

Key Findings

Overall, the Swannanoa Corridor Study Area has a much greater proportion of parcels with medium or high flood vulnerability & risk at 87% (NCEM Flood Advisory Data) than the French Broad Corridor Study Area at 37% (NCEM Flood Advisory Data).

Interestingly, for the Swannanoa Corridor, the NCEM Flood Advisory Data produced 17% more parcels with medium or high flood vulnerability & risk compared to the FEMA Floodplain Data analysis. For the French Broad Corridor, NCEM Flood Advisory Data and the FEMA Floodplain data produced the same overall results, with some variation per parcel land use.

In the French Broad Corridor Study Area 79% of commercial parcels have medium or high flood vulnerability & risk, while only 10% of the residential parcels have medium or high flood vulnerability & risk (NCEM Flood Advisory Data). The study area has a similar number of parcels with medium or high flood vulnerability & risk (NCEM Flood Advisory Data) as landslide risk, 37% and 31%, respectively.

In the Swannanoa Corridor Study Area, government owned critical facilities parcels and commercial parcels all have 100% medium or high flood vulnerability & risk (NCEM Flood Advisory Data). Of the residential parcels, comprising 28% of the study area, 57% have medium or high flood vulnerability & risk (NCEM Flood Advisory Data).

Streambank Stabilization Project

Fast moving floodwaters from Tropical Storm Helene severely eroded the banks in large sections of both the Swannanoa and French Broad Rivers and stripped them of vegetation leaving them unprotected from future storm events and in some cases unstable. Repairing these areas will increase flood resilience, reduce erosion that threatens City assets and infrastructure as well as private property, and decrease sedimentation pollution helping our rivers to recover more quickly.

Streambank stabilization project work will include strategy development for cross-sector and inter-departmental collaboration to identify funding and technical resources needed to complete required work across these waterways. The project intends to be complimentary and collaborative with other riverfront revitalization projects to support the identification of streambank stabilization needs and innovative, cohesive strategies for damaged streambank areas. Dedicated focus on streambank stabilization within and across projects will support coordinated strategies and best practices, opportunities to share resources where appropriate, and will help identify priority areas that are not currently being addressed through planned recovery projects.

The French Broad and Azalea Road complex projects include very little streambank work. Most impacted sites are outside of dedicated recovery project focus areas. Further complicating a comprehensive,

cohesive streambank restoration are the many private property parcels and the critical upstream areas outside of city limits. While private property improvements are outside of the scope of this project, the collaborative mapping, resource identification, and best practices development at the larger waterway scale will support a more strategic approach to streambank stabilization across private and public properties. Furthermore, collaboration with Buncombe County, local and state agencies, and non profit organizations will encourage consistent, high quality work and can support development of prioritization strategies for thoughtful resource identification and deployment.

The project team will:

- Assess streambank areas on City-owned property to identify and document damage;
- Develop mapping and documentation strategies that support project prioritization;
- Participate in cross sector city/county/non-profit “Community Partner Stream Restoration” working group;
- Contribute city property project and assessed sites to shared map;
- Pursue Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) support for qualified areas;
- Identify and share restoration best practices that match unique needs of specific impacted areas; and
- Develop communication strategies to ensure that community members understand current and planned streambank restoration and erosion control efforts along with opportunities to volunteer or support community-led efforts.



Parks

ULI Briefing Book

Park System Overview

Asheville’s park system has been shaped by our riverways, and in turn has the opportunity to play a vital role in building resilience in our city.

Asheville is famous for its access to the Blue Ridge Mountains and the national forests that surround the city. However, on a local level residents have less access to park space than many of Asheville’s peer cities. For example, nationally 55% of city residents live within a 10 minute walk of a park; in Asheville this number drops to around a third. Asheville has 58 parks, totalling 572 acres in the city. This park space makes up 2% of the city land area, the national average is over 10 percent.¹⁹⁴

	Asheville	High Point	Roanoke	Bloomington	Greenville	National Figures (NRPA, TPL)
Total No. of Parks	58	47	68	45	40	
Total Park Acreage Under Management	575	1703	1374	2300	634	
Park Acreage per 1,000 Residents	6	15	15	28	7	11 - 17
% City Land Area Dedicated to Parks	2%	5%	5%	15%	3%	10%
NRPA Gold Medal / Innovation Awards	1	0	0	2	2	
CAPRA Accreditation	no	yes	yes	yes	no	192 Currently Accredited US Agencies
% City Residents w/ 10-Minute Walk Park Access	34%	45%	65%	75%	52%	55%

SOURCE: 2023 NRPA Agency Performance Review, Population 50,000 - 99,000. Ranges reflect median to upper quartile; Trust for Public Land (TPL) Median for all urban cities and towns.

¹⁹⁴ City of Asheville. [Recreate Asheville: City of Asheville’s Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Plan, 2024.](#)

While Asheville is lagging behind in some national metrics, the city has significantly invested in its park system over the past several decades. [In the 1990s](#), public attention shifted towards a renewed interest in greenspace investment. Major projects, which primarily occurred along the riverfront, such as Azalea, Carrier, French Broad River, and Richmond Hill Parks, substantially increased park acreage within city limits. Today riverfront parks make up over half of Asheville total parkland space, with about 210 acres along the French Board and about 109 acres along the Swannanoa.^{195, 196}

Asheville’s residents have been historically supportive of public space investment. With significant interest in expanding greenways, public art, and cultural programs, the community updated the parks and recreation [plan](#) in 2009. Another [bond referendum](#) vote took place in 2016 to address deferred maintenance, add major enhancements, and acquire land for investments throughout the city and 77 percent of voters approved the bond — bringing much needed upgrades to parks throughout the city. In November 2024, Asheville voters approved four General Obligation Bond Referendums totaling \$80 million. The Bond Referendums will help fund key prioritized improvements in affordable housing, [transportation infrastructure](#), public safety facilities, and [parks and recreation facilities](#), with \$20 million allocated to each category. All referendum categories passed with over 70% of the vote. Parks and Recreation passed with the highest margin at 78%.¹⁹⁷

French Broad Corridor

In the French Broad Corridor there are nearly 60 acres of park space making up nearly 20% of the study area. These parks provide crucial green space and recreational opportunities for residents and visitors alike. Carrier Park, the largest in the study area and second most visited park in the city, is a regional park. Regional parks are the largest parks in the park system, serving the largest service area. These parks are large enough to accommodate a variety of experiences and functions, such as bringing people together at community- wide events, and promoting tourism and economic development.

¹⁹⁵ City of Asheville. [Recreate Asheville: City of Asheville’s Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Plan, 2024](#).

¹⁹⁶ City of Asheville - [Map Asheville parcel acreage data](#).

¹⁹⁷ North Carolina State Board of Elections. [11/05/2024 Official General Election Results - Buncombe, 2024](#).



The French Broad Corridor study area contains four parks. Three of the four, Jean Webb Park, French Broad River Park, and Amboy Riverfront Park, are linear parks, meaning they are corridors of parkland that connect people and places together throughout the city. These parks are not intensely developed but due to their primary goal of connection, they often support greenways, paths and related site furnishings. Before the storm, Jean Webb Park and Amboy Road park were in “like new condition.” However, the French Broad River Park was considered to have “minimal loss of value,” and Carrier Park was considered to be at a tipping point of irreversible decline without investment.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸ City of Asheville. [Recreate Asheville: City of Asheville’s Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Plan, 2024.](#)

Helene Impact

The 200+ acres of parks and recreation amenities, facilities, and greenway network along the French Broad Riverfront were completely submerged during the flooding after the storm. This caused over \$25 million dollars worth of damages to Asheville's Park system. Supplemental applications for Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) and Community Development Block Grant Disaster Relief (CDBG-DR) funds could potentially add over \$25 million, bringing the total cost estimate up to \$50 million.¹⁹⁹



Flooded Carrier Park / Courtesy of Reggie Tidwell

Greenways

Greenways in Asheville sustained a fair amount of damage, but less than expected based on the nature of the flooding. The most severe damage was to the French Broad River greenways at locations near the confluence of the French Broad River with the Swannanoa River. Additional areas near turns in the river experienced more damage due to turbulence and undercutting. Overall the greenways remained in good condition, with most damage impacting fencing, signage and trees.²⁰⁰

This photo is linked to the Damage Assessment files of the greenways

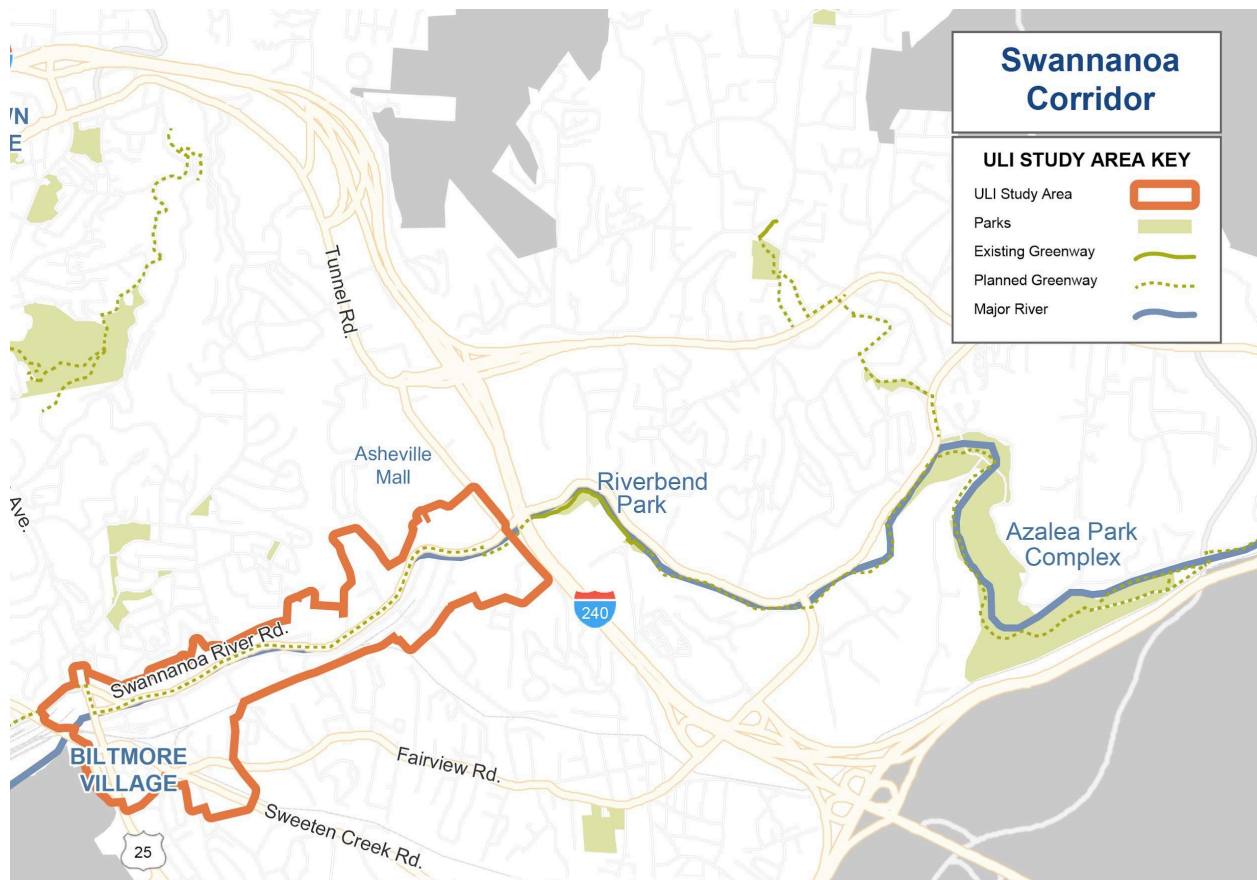


¹⁹⁹ Public Input - City of Asheville. [French Broad Riverfront Park Recovery, 2025](#).

²⁰⁰ Information from City of Asheville Transportation Department

Swannanoa Corridor

Currently the Swannanoa Corridor does not contain any park space. However, this study area does abut Riverbend Park to the east, which is the third most visited park in Asheville. Similar to the majority of the parks in the French Broad Corridor, Riverbend Park is a linear park, which contains a greenway. The city has planned an extension of this greenway along the south bank of the Swannanoa River, eventually connecting to the existing greenway near French Broad River Park in the French Broad Corridor.



Helene Impact

Along the Swannanoa River corridor, Tropical Storm Helene significantly impacted several public parks, facilities and transportation systems. Impacted properties include (but are not limited to) Gashes Creek vehicular bridge and dam, Recreation Park and swimming pool, Azalea Park, Azalea Rd. and their ancillary building structures, infrastructure and amenities. Damages are estimated to be in the range of \$26M or greater.²⁰¹

²⁰¹ PublicInput - City of Asheville. [Azalea Parks and Infrastructure Recovery](#).

Future Investments

Equity Investment Zones

[Recreate Asheville](#), the city’s comprehensive parks and recreation plan, recommends projects and investments to be prioritized in areas identified as Equity Investment Zones. These zones are identified as areas within the city that have historically experienced underinvestment and consequently have a greater need for the benefits that parks provide. The methodology for mapping these equity zones considers various Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) categories, including economic stability, education access and quality, healthcare access and quality, neighborhood and built environment, and social and community context. This comprehensive approach ensures that resources are directed to communities where they can have the most significant impact on improving well-being and access to quality recreational spaces.

Within the French Broad Corridor, the entire east bank of the French Broad River, including much of the River Arts District and Southside neighborhoods as well the south eastern side of West Asheville are all considered high equity investment zones. Along the north bank of the French Broad River along Amboy Road in West Asheville, the plan highlights a parkland search zone. Additionally, in the Swannanoa Corridor, the neighborhoods along the south bank of the River are also identified as high equity investment zones and also identified as a parkland search zone. These specific designations underscore Asheville's strategic commitment to addressing historical inequities and proactively expanding park access in underserved communities along its vital river corridors.²⁰²






²⁰² City of Asheville. [Recreate Asheville: City of Asheville’s Comprehensive Parks and Recreation Plan, 2024.](#)

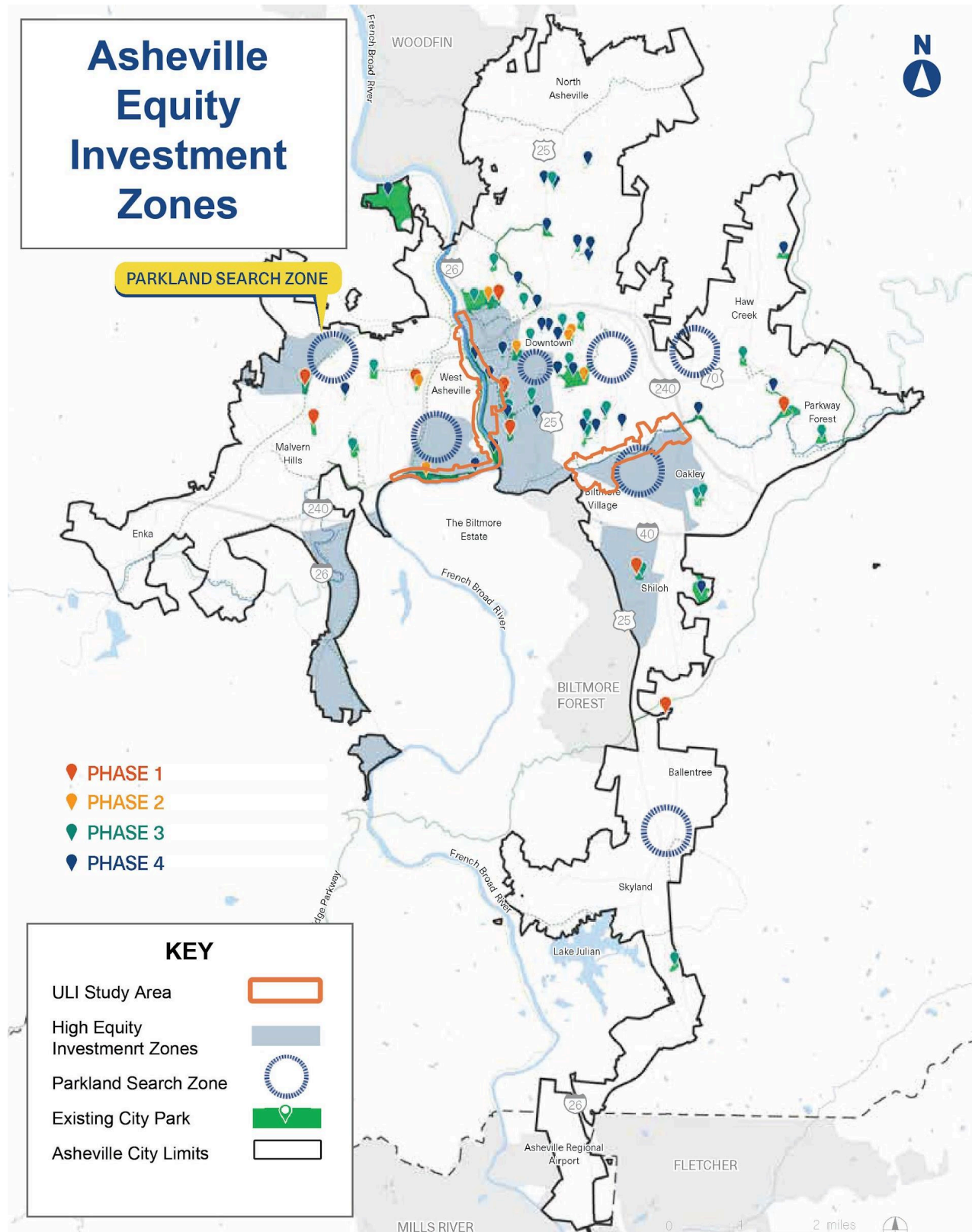
Asheville Equity Investment Zones

PARKLAND SEARCH ZONE

- PHASE 1
- PHASE 2
- PHASE 3
- PHASE 4

KEY

- ULI Study Area 
- High Equity Investment Zones 
- Parkland Search Zone 
- Existing City Park 
- Asheville City Limits 

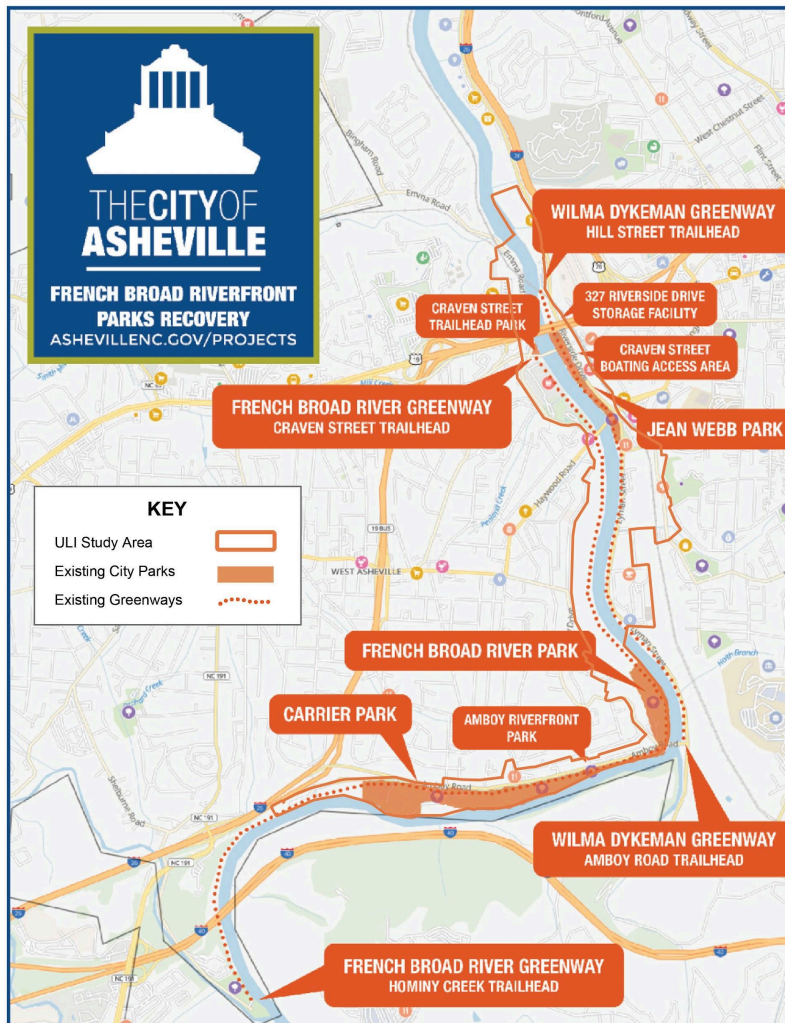


Post Helene Resiliency Projects

French Broad Corridor

Recognizing the impacts from the recent disaster, the City of Asheville is currently seeking qualifications for a team to rebuild and enhance this system. The Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for this project was intentionally designed with flexibility, allowing the city to thoroughly explore and consider various recovery strategies. The desired team will be tasked with designing a project that not only maximizes eligibility for mitigation funding but also prioritizes resilience, ensuring that improvements are not merely restored but robustly fortified against future environmental challenges. This approach underscores Asheville's commitment to protecting and enhancing its riverfront assets for generations to come, acknowledging both their historical ties and ongoing recreational value.²⁰³

The RFQ for this project was designed strategically to allow for flexibility as the City continues to consider recovery strategies for the area.



²⁰³ City of Asheville. [French Broad Riverfront Park Recovery, 2025.](#)

Swannanoa Corridor

While Helene impacted the timeline of the greenway extension through the Swannanoa Corridor Study Area, the city of Asheville is still committed to building the [Swannanoa River Greenway](#). Construction on the first extension segment of the Swannanoa River Greenway began shortly before Tropical Storm Helene caused catastrophic flooding and altered the landscape of the Swannanoa River bed and stream banks.

In the months after the storm, the project area was re-surveyed to determine impacts on existing conditions, and on March 25, 2025, City staff met with FEMA for a site inspection of the greenway, an important step in the process to determine funding eligibility through the [FEMA Public Assistance Program](#). In addition to working with FEMA, the project team will explore additional opportunities for restoration of the project area. In the meantime, contractors are actively removing debris from the waterway and rights-of-way.²⁰⁴



²⁰⁴ City of Asheville. [Swannanoa River Greenway, 2025](#).

Less than two miles upstream from Swannanoa Corridor Study Area, is the Azalea Park complex, which sustained significant damages from Helene. This large complex is deeply rooted in Asheville’s history and hosts many recreational facilities including soccer fields, playgrounds, and a dog park. Funded by the FEMA Public Assistance Program and a variety of other funding sources, the city has also issued a RFQ to help the City envision and restore the riverfront recreation complex. The city remains committed to building parks within its riverfront areas, specifically emphasizing resilient design elements to adapt to periodic flooding. These efforts will notably include the development of greenways, which are designed to not only connect the riverfront areas but also serve as a crucial natural flood-resilient barrier.²⁰⁵

Funding

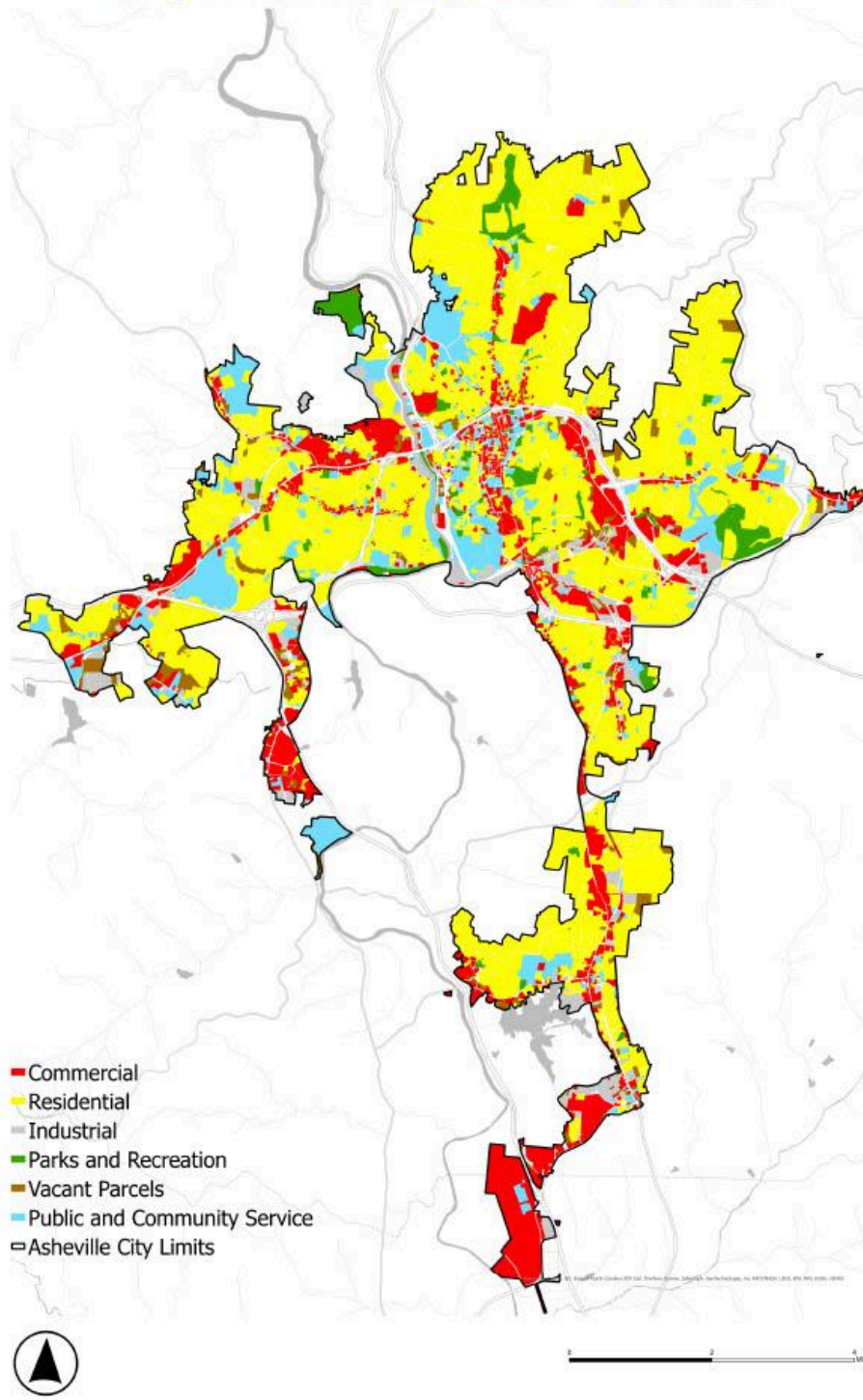
The City of Asheville is sequencing recovery projects strategically to ensure an efficient and effective rebuilding process. Cost recovery through federal disaster relief funding programs is essential in making this project possible. The City of Asheville seeks to accomplish this primarily through the [FEMA Public Assistance Program](#), with significant supplemental funding from the [Community Development Block Grant - Disaster Relief](#) (CDBG-DR) program. Additional funding sources may include the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, grants from other agencies or partners, and local capital fund dollars.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ City of Asheville. [Azalea Parks and Infrastructure Recovery, 2025](#).

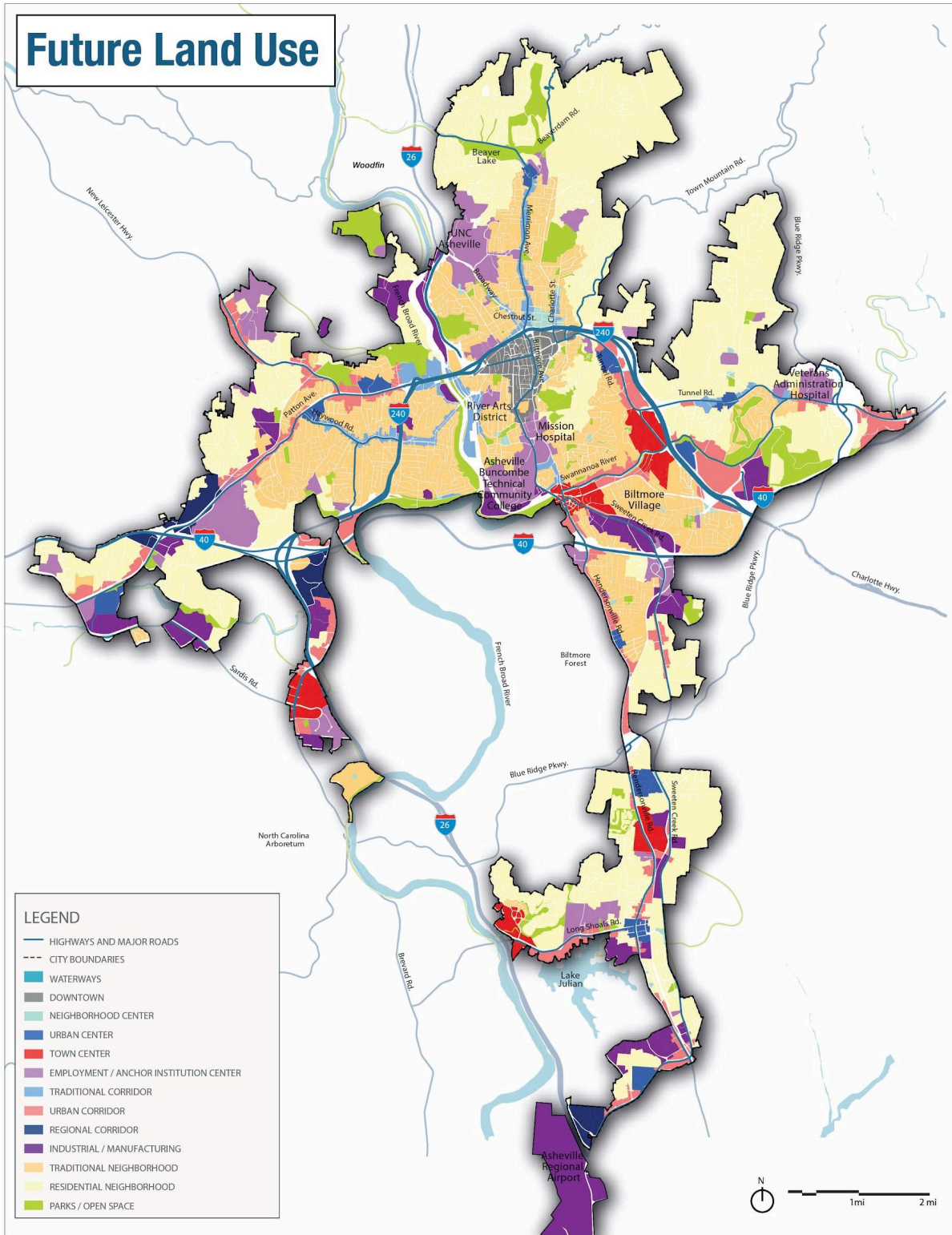
²⁰⁶ City of Asheville. [French Broad Riverfront Park Recovery, 2025](#).

Appendix

Current Land Uses



Future Land Use



LEGEND

- HIGHWAYS AND MAJOR ROADS
- - - CITY BOUNDARIES
- WATERWAYS
- DOWNTOWN
- NEIGHBORHOOD CENTER
- URBAN CENTER
- TOWN CENTER
- EMPLOYMENT / ANCHOR INSTITUTION CENTER
- TRADITIONAL CORRIDOR
- URBAN CORRIDOR
- REGIONAL CORRIDOR
- INDUSTRIAL / MANUFACTURING
- TRADITIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD
- RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD
- PARKS / OPEN SPACE

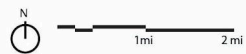
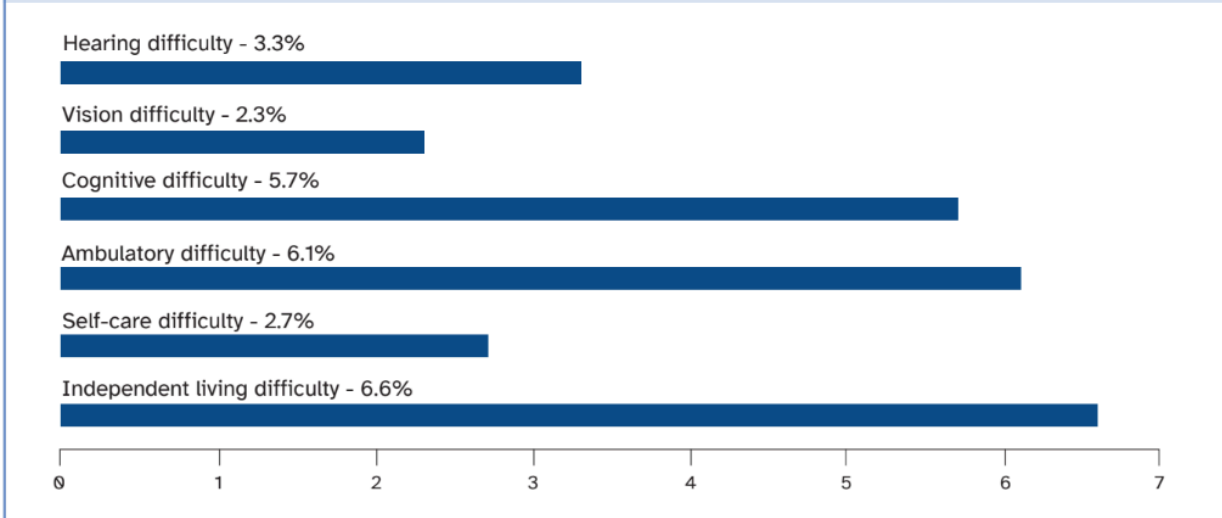
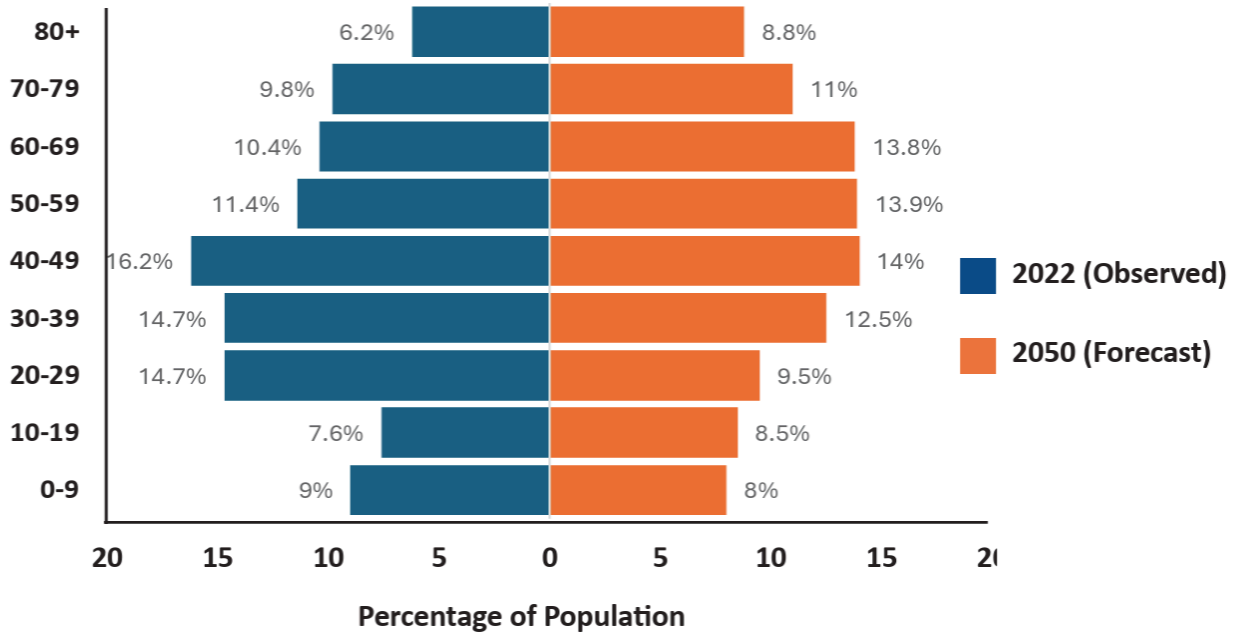


Figure 3. Types of Disabilities in the City of Asheville (Source: U.S. Census).



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Asheville Population by Age Cohort, 2022 vs. 2050



²⁰⁷ City of Asheville. [Affordable Housing Plan, September 2024](#). Figure: Asheville Population by Age Cohort, 2022 vs. 2050. Page 15.