

Introduction

A total of 80 local businesses provided responses to the survey questions. In order to organize the information, each business was categorized based on a description that the survey respondent provided. There are 15 categories of industries, displayed in the table below. The majority of respondents (36%) were categorized within two main sectors: consulting and real estate. Other well-represented categories of businesses include the retail, restaurant, and artist sectors. Ninety-two percent of the surveys were completed by for profit businesses; six respondents were from non-profit organizations.

Industry Category	Total
Agriculture	2
Artist/Crafter	5
Construction	4
Consulting/Professional Services	19
Education	2
Financial	3
Healthcare	4
Lodging	3
Manufacturing	3
Non-profit	6
Outdoor Recreation	2
Real Estate/Rental	10
Restaurant/Bar	7
Retail	8
Services	2
Grand Total	80

Local businesses provided a wealth of input in terms of answering the questions below. While some of the responses and suggestions focused on specific industries, others applied to multiple industry groups. These comments are summarized below, and include several industry-specific suggestions.

What makes the region an attractive place to do business?

Business owners responded to this question with comments such as the quality of life, friendly communities, natural and cultural resources, as well as the scenic beauty of the region. Another frequent response included the tourism economy. Tourists (and those who own second homes in the region) support a variety of industries, especially artists and crafters. Individuals retiring and relocating to this region support some local businesses as well. One respondent felt the region's residents are appreciative of small businesses. Other responses included the following: accessibility to other metropolitan areas, outdoor recreation options, and the preservation of historic buildings.

What can be done, especially locally, to make doing business in WNC easier? What concerns do you have about the future and potential impacts to your business?

Taxes and Regulations

Multiple groups expressed concern over high taxes and increased regulation, feeling that these make growth for local businesses a challenge. One artist considered the level of regulation to be "excessive," driving up the cost of compliance. The respondent was especially concerned about the loss of more independent businesses due to economic, regulatory, and political climate. Multiple sectors felt that the level of taxation and regulation makes growth very difficult for local businesses.

A suggestion provided across most business sectors was to reduce regulations and lower taxes. Several types of industries suggested that providing various tax breaks or other incentives for local businesses would be beneficial. Sectors that provided these suggestions included artists, financial institutions, restaurants, retail and real estate establishments, and outdoor recreation companies. A healthcare industry professional suggested that subsidies for job creation and property improvements that result in additional property tax revenues for local municipalities be considered.

One individual in the education sector suggested that incentives, such as lower utility costs or tax breaks, be provided to businesses interested in locating or staying in the region. The individual stated: "people who work here, spend money here. The money spent would offset

tax/utility breaks given.” Another business owner suggested that local governments be more understanding of the needs of each type of profession, and to not overburden them. One individual suggested that local governments should also set clear, consistent policies and examples in Asheville and beyond. Other specific suggestions included:

- Review regulations in Brevard;
- Allow the sale of liquor in lodging establishments;
- Keep construction regulations at a more local level (instead of the state or federal level) because each new building has a unique set of conditions; and
- Ease requirements on building and renovating commercial properties.

Economy

For-profit and non-profit sectors stated the economy was a major concern for their business. Nearly every sector specifically referenced the economy. The price of gas was especially noteworthy for those industries that rely heavily on tourists, such as lodging and retail stores.

Businesses were also concerned about various aspects of the job market, including a lack of employment options and overall job stability. Some specific comments included concerns over the availability of skilled labor in the financial sector as well as the aging work force. In the non-profit sector, individuals expressed concern that donations and funding have fallen considerably. Commenters also mentioned the need to focus on youth and younger people. One individual suggested that greater employment and entertainment opportunities for this age group would provide incentives to remain in the region.

Zoning

Most sectors also felt that zoning and building regulations restrict growth here. Seven individuals suggested making improvements to the zoning, development review, and permitting processes would make doing business easier. It is unclear which local governments the respondents are referring to. One rental space owner who provides upgrades to existing buildings called them a “labyrinth.” The individual stated that there were very high paperwork, permitting, and time costs associated with the procedures currently in place. Multiple business owners stated that some of the regulations appeared subjective and not easy to follow.

Specific suggestions to improve the zoning processes were provided across multiple industry categories and include:

- Reduce zoning obstacles that add substantial cost of new buildings;
- Relax zoning so that small businesses may operate home offices; and
- Review the entire process from zoning and planning to permitting.

Marketing

Business owners from almost every category suggested that a greater focus be placed on marketing in the region. Specific recommendations included:

- Increase investment in marketing efforts focused on “buying local”;
- Assist the local economy through public service announcements, advertising co-ops, and special events;
- Provide more marketing support for those in the River Arts District;
- Allow directional signage to lodging businesses;
- Encourage more consistent hours for all merchant shops downtown during winter months;
- Increase marketing to attract tourists;
- Improve emphasis on local food markets and healthy living;
- Continue marketing and protecting cultural and natural resource assets because these resources attract tourists; and
- Advertise the healthcare sector nationally in trade journals.

Lending and Other Support Services

Multiple business sectors, including consultants, non-profits, restaurants, retail shops, and financial institutions, expressed concerns about the availability of capital and loans. Businesses were concerned they would not be able to expand without support from banks. One consultant suggested that it would be helpful for local banks to provide lending support to local business owners for expanding their operations and starting new companies.

Some respondents proposed that providing additional support to local entities interested in starting or expanding businesses would be especially beneficial. Another suggestion was to add readily available tax and background information online for those interested in opening local businesses.

Education/Training and Support

A number of suggestions related to education and training for businesses and individuals were made. Various groups, including financial, manufacturing, construction and restaurants, found this to be important.

Suggestions that were provided include the following:

- Focus on youth so there will be a continuing economy to transition towards as the current workforce retires;
- Improve workforce readiness through training partnerships and local policies with schools and community colleges;
- Implement other local policies and agreements to support local workforce readiness and the local economy;
- Provide training for local vendors to help them price their products competitively; and
- Improve emphasis on food and agricultural education in school.

Suggestions that were made specific to some of the industry sectors are to:

- Improve infrastructure to connect farmers of specialty crops to a specific market in order to sell their crops;
- Provide agriculture classes, such as those in basic vineyard business; and
- Disseminate information about processes dealing with government at all levels, especially rule changes that would affect the construction industry.

Infrastructure Development

Several respondents in more rural areas felt that the development of infrastructure would lead to business improvements. Recommendations included the following:

- Increase internet and cell service;
- Provide water infrastructure, sewer, and gas upgrades in Marshall; and
- Improve road safety.

Another organization stated that it is also important to invest more in infrastructure development in the more urban areas, such as Asheville, so that the region continues to be a pleasant place to live. One individual suggested that there be greater development of bicycle lanes and greenways to increase the appeal of the area.

Affordable Housing (residential and manufacturing/retail spaces)

Multiple survey respondents, including those in the non-profit, consulting, and real estate industries were worried about the lack of affordable real estate and rental properties in the region. This was expressed by consultants and financial institutions in relation to workforce housing. One consultant specifically stated that this issue is driving locals to other areas, especially younger people. The individual stated that it may lead to the region becoming a mecca for tourists and very wealthy individuals.

Resource Conservation and Environmental Issues

A major concern voiced across several sectors, including the artist, real estate, and consulting groups was resource protection. One individual noted that the industries the region relies on, such as tourism, seasonal residences, and the attraction of outside companies are ultimately dependent upon natural resource conservation. The respondent specifically referred to Sierra Nevada's location in this region. An artist added that these natural resources also attract tourists who purchase local art.

Both companies in the outdoor recreation sector expressed concern over resource conservation. One stated that unplanned development diminishes features that make western North Carolina an attractive place to do business. The other was concerned about a lack of support for the development of greenway, trails, and bicycle infrastructure.

Planning

A couple of sectors expressed concern over a lack of concerted planning efforts. For example, one bed and breakfast owner was concerned that approval of new hotels without planning for the future may lead to sprawl, meaning a less desirable place to live or visit. A consultant was concerned that the planning and implementation of green business initiatives was happening so slowly to protect the viability of companies.

A real estate agent suggested that a balance of business growth and green space would be appropriate in planning for the future. Another company added that implementing strategies to support smart growth is important for the well-being of the region.

Chamber Support

Two consulting organizations provided these suggestions to improve local Chambers of Commerce:

- Receive more financial support from municipalities; and
- Obtain more training.

Local Business Development

Two business owners encouraged the continued support of the arts, music, and outdoor recreation components of the local economy. One respondent specifically suggested that the area continue to attract unique shops, restaurants, and bars in downtown Black Mountain.

Other respondents stated that local governments should be more willing to work with new local businesses as opposed to mainly focusing on providing incentives for large outside companies to relocate. One individual noted that there are great resources within the region and that they should be utilized instead of seeking industries from outside the area.

Conclusion

Overall, many valuable suggestions were proposed by these local businesses across the region. It was interesting how many organizations spoke about similar issues and provided suggestions along the same lines. This input was considered as the recommended future scenario was created and supported the initial development of specific strategies and recommendations.