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Always something to do in *Surry County*

Surry County almost always has activities, fairs, festivals, and musical events going on, in addition to plenty of places to check out such as The Andy Griffith Museum, The Siamese Twins Museum, and the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History. To get an updated list of activities and events, visit <https://www.visitmayberry.com/events/> or <https://www.surryarts.org/>

ANNUAL EVENTS

TOMMY JARRELL FESTIVAL – FEBRUARY 28

Celebrating one of the pioneers in Old Time music. Sponsored by the Surry Arts Council, the gathering includes workshops, concerts, and the annual youth competition. Generally held on the Saturday closest to March 1. Visit <https://www.surryarts.org/shows/tommyjarrell.html> for more information. At the Historic Earle Theatre.

WINE & CRAFT BEER BUDBREAK FESTIVAL - MAY 2

A celebration of the spring time budbreaking for area wineries, this downtown gathering features live music, as well as booths set up by a number of area and regional wineries and breweries. Sponsored by the Mount Airy Rotary Club to raise money for its charitable work. Downtown Mount Airy, at Main Street and Independence Boulevard. Visit <https://budbreakfestival.com/> for more information.

PILOT MOUNTAIN MAYFEST – MAY 8-10

A three-day festival sponsored by the Pilot Mountain Civic Club. Features craft and plant vendors, retail booths, kid's games, live music, and plenty of food from a variety of vendors and trucks. Held on Mother's Day weekend. Downtown Pilot Mountain. Visit <https://www.pilotmountainnc.org/vist/page/mayfest> for more information.

MAYBERRY FARM FEST – MAY 16

This family-friendly event celebrates local agriculture with food, demonstrations, crafts, children's activities, music, heritage and cultural displays, tractors and more. 10:00 AM. Downtown Mount Airy. Visit <https://www.mountairydowntown.org/events> for more information.

MOUNT AIRY BLUE GRASS AND OLD TIME FIDDLER'S CONVENTION – JUNE 5-6

One of the nation's best-known old time music gatherings, musicians and fans come from across the nation — and sometimes from further — for some of the best down-home music anywhere. While the festival is officially two days, many musicians and fans arrive days early, set up their campers and spend the days talking with friends and playing impromptu mini-concerts. Held at Veteran's Memorial Park, 691 W. Lebanon St. in Mount Airy. For more information visit <https://www.surryarts.org/mafiddlersconvention/>



The Embers featuring Craig Woolard were featured during the Surry Arts Council's Summer Concert Series at Blackmon Amphitheatre in Mount Airy.

DOBSON GROUND STEAK FESTIVAL – JUNE 13

This day-long festival, officially known as the North Carolina Ground Steak Festival, is a celebration of the regional delicacy, combined with music and fun for everyone. 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. at Dobson Square Park.

INDEPENDENCE PARADE AND CELEBRATION – JULY 4

Features a July 4 parade, the reading of the Declaration of Independence in the courtyard of the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History on Main Street in downtown Mount Airy, and more — culminating with a concert and fireworks at Veteran's Memorial Park.

MAYBERRY DAYS – SEPTEMBER 21-27

Mount Airy truly becomes Mayberry during this week-long festival featuring actors who appeared on The Andy Griffith Show, their relatives, and Mayberry tribute artists. Shows, concerts, talks, movie and episode screenings, trivia contests and more. For more information, visit <https://www.surryarts.org/mayberrydays/index.html>

AUTUMN LEAVES FESTIVAL – OCTOBER 9-11

A three-day craft and food festival that is annually ranked among the Top 20 events in the Southeast. Downtown Mount Airy becomes a shopper's paradise for those looking for hand-made crafts, food, games and more.

ONGOING EVENTS

Mayberry Cool Cars and Rods Cruise In - The third Sunday of each month, May through September, sees Mount Airy's Main Street lined with old time cars, trucks, classic muscle cars and hot rods. Visit <https://www.facebook.com/MayberryCoolCarsandRodsCruiseIn> for updated information.

Surry Arts Council Summer Concert Series - May through October. Two, sometimes three concerts per week at the Blackmon Amphitheatre featuring some of the biggest musical acts in the Southeast. The Embers featuring Craig Woolard, Legacy Motown Revue, Phatt City, The Holiday Band, Cassette Rewind Band, and Envision are just a few of the dozens of acts visiting the Granite City for the series. For more information, visit <https://www.surryarts.org/shows/amphitheatre.html>

Hot Nights, Hot Cars Cruise-In - The first Saturday of the month, May through October, in Pilot Mountain. One of the oldest, and biggest, cruise-in series around. Pilot Mountain streets are lined with classic autos from years gone by, hot rods, even a few NASCAR race vehicles from time to time. Visit <https://www.pilotmountainnc.org/238/Hot-Nights-Hot-Cars-Cruise-In> for updated information.

SURRY COUNTY A Snapshot

A quick look Surry County — home of Mayberry and where the Blue Ridge Parkway started.

LOCATION

Surry County is part of the Piedmont Triad metropolitan area. The county is part of the Yadkin Valley AVA, an American Viticultural Area. Wines made from grapes grown in Surry County may carry the Yadkin Valley on their label insignia. Surry County rests on North Carolina's northern border with Virginia. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the county covers an area of 536 square miles, of which 532 square miles is land and 4.1 square miles is water.

POPULATION PROFILE

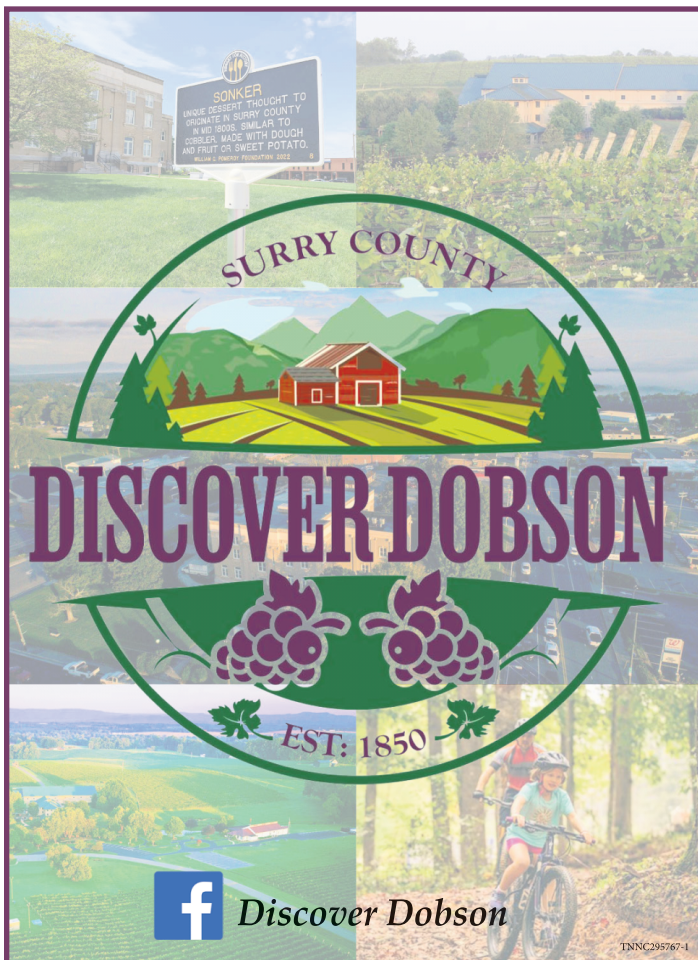
According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of Surry County is 71,462 (2023 estimate); 20.9% of the population is younger than 18, 21.6% is older than 65. There are 33,906 housing units in the county, 73.3% of which are owner-occupied. The median household income, averaged over 2019 to 2023, is \$56,095. 90.7% of homes have a computer, 83.6% have a broadband internet subscription. Among residents age 25 or older, 84.7% have a high school education or higher; 21.7% have a bachelor's degree or higher.

Demographic data from U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2019-2023 5-year estimates.



SALES TAX

The combined sales tax in Surry County is 7% — 2.25% of that is a local sales tax, while 4.75% is state sales tax.



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AREA GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS

SURRY COUNTY

Surry County is governed by a Board of Commissioners, with each seat on the five-member partisan board up for re-election every four years, with staggered terms. The commissioners elect a chairman on a rotating, annual basis. The board consists of:

Bill Goins, Chairman, Mount Airy District, Mount Airy, 336-401-7350, goinsb@co.surry.nc.us
Eddie Harris, Vice Chairman, South District, State Road, 336-401-1842, harrise@co.surry.nc.us
Mark Marion, Central District, 336-401-1787, marionm@co.surry.nc.us

Van Tucker, East District, Pilot Mountain, 336-401-1466, tuckerv@co.surry.nc.us

Melissa Hiatt, Mount Airy District; Mount Airy, 336-401-7870, hiattm@co.surry.nc.us

For additional information visit at [https://www.co.surry.nc.us/departments/\(a_through_j\)/commissioners.php](https://www.co.surry.nc.us/departments/(a_through_j)/commissioners.php)

MOUNT AIRY

Mount Airy is governed by a non-partisan five-member Board of Commissioners and a mayor, who is elected by popular vote.

The board consists of:

Mayor Jon Cawley, 336-786-3504, jcawley@mountairy.org
Phil Thacker, South Ward Commissioner, 336-786-8282, pthacker@mountairy.org
Calvin Vaughn, South Ward Commissioner, 336-786-3501, cvaughn@mountairy.org
David Hall, North Ward Commissioner, 336-786-3501, dhall@mountairy.org
Chad Hutchens, North Ward Commissioner, 336-786-3501, chutchens@mountairy.org
Deborah Cochran, At Large Commissioners,

336-786-3501, dcochran@mountairy.org

More information on the commissioners can be found at <https://www.mountairy.org/Directory.aspx?did=5>

TOWN OF DOBSON

Mayor Ricky Draughn, 336-374-8646, rdraughn@surry.net

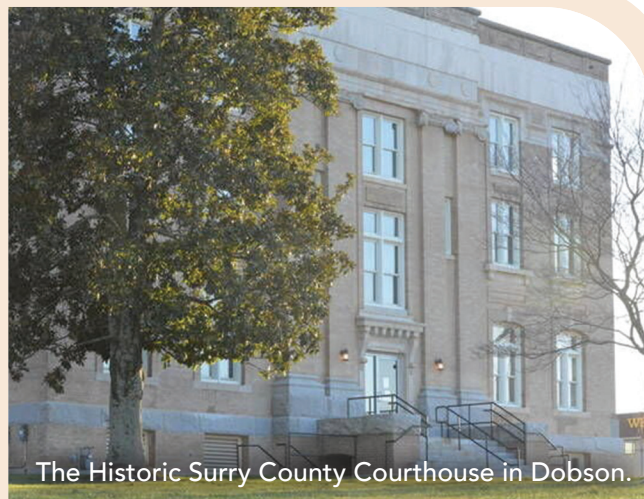
Robin Testerman Beeson, 336-466-3090, testermanrd@gmail.com
Todd Dockery, 336-356-2233, tsdockery@surry.net
Amy Whitaker, 336-648-2900, agdavis12@yahoo.com
Walter White, 336-356-4145, wcwhite@surry.net
For more information on Dobson visit <https://www.dobson-nc.com/27/Government>

TOWN OF ELKIN

Mayor Will Gwyn, 336-244-205, wgwyn@elkinnc.org
Graham Ray, 336-488-7494, blackbear.elkin@gmail.com
Alvin Hayes, 336-526-4408, ahayes@elkinnc.org
Robert H. Ball Jr. 336-835-2256, roberthball@gmail.com
Cicely McCulloch, 336-835-3133, cicelycmc@gmail.com
Jeff Eidson, 336-835-3607, jce@gbenergy.com

TOWN OF PILOT MOUNTAIN

Donna Kiger, Mayor Pro Tem, 336-368-2247,



The Historic Surry County Courthouse in Dobson.

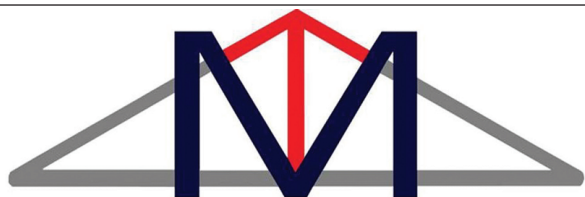
dkiger@pilotmountainnc.org
Scott Needham, 336-368-2247, sneedham@pilotmountainnc.org
Rachel Collins, 336-368-2247, rcollins@pilotmountainnc.org
Dwight Atkins, 336-368-2247, datkins@pilotmountainnc.org

NORTH CAROLINA REPRESENTATIVES

Sarah Stevens, NC State House, District 90, 919-715-1883, sarah.stevens@ncleg.gov
Eddie Settle, NC State Senator, 36th District, 919-733-5742, eddie.settle@ncleg.gov

US REPRESENTATIVES

Virginia Foxx, U.S. House of Representatives, Fifth District, 400 Shadowline Dr., Suite 205, Boone, NC 28607, 828-265-0240
Ted Budd, U.S. Senate, 5380 US Highway 158, Suite 202, Advance, NC 27006, 336-941-4470
Sen. Thom Tillis, 310 New Bern Ave., Suite 122, Raleigh, NC 27601, 919-856-4630



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CLIMATE & GEOGRAPHY

Surry County is located both within the Piedmont region of central North Carolina and in the Appalachian Mountains region of western North Carolina. Most of the eastern two-thirds of the county lies within the Piedmont, a region of gently rolling hills and valleys. However, the Piedmont of Surry County also contains a small portion of the Sauratown Mountains; Surry

County marks the western end of the Sauratown Mountain range. The western third of the county lies within the Blue Ridge Mountains, and they dominate the county's western horizon.

The highest point in Surry County is Fisher Peak in the Blue Ridge; it rises to 3,570 feet above sea level. However, the best-known peak in Surry County is not the highest. That honor

goes to Pilot Mountain, an isolated monadnock and a North Carolina landmark. Pilot Mountain rises 2,421 feet above sea level, and can be seen for miles.

Another notable peak in Surry County is Cumberland Knob, in the northwestern corner of the county. It was here, on Sept. 11, 1935 that construction on the Blue Ridge Parkway began.



The splash pad at Dobson Square Park provides family entertainment in downtown Dobson.

ECONOMIC AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

- Surry County Economic Development Partnership. This agency offers a number of free and confidential services and resources to help companies of all sizes. The organization provides direct assistance to companies interested in starting, expanding or relocating a business in Surry County and any of our municipalities. The main office is located at 1218 State Street in Mount Airy, and can be reached at 336-401-9900 or via email at surryedp@surry.net

- The Greater Mount Airy Chamber of Commerce works as an advocacy and support agency whose aim is to advance, promote, and encourage

successful business growth for the chamber's members. Reach the chamber at 200 N. Main St. in Mount Airy, by calling 336-786-6116 or online via a contact form at <https://www.mtairyncchamber.org/contact-us/>

- The Yadkin Valley Chamber of Commerce works to promote a positive business environment, facilitates community betterment and supports economic development in Yadkin, Wilkes and Surry counties. Reach the chamber at 257 Standard Street in Elkin, by phone at 336-526-1111, or by email at president@yadkinvalley.org

PROPERTY TAXES

Surry County levies a flat countywide property tax rate with an additional variable fire district tax. Beginning July 1, 2026, a uniform fire protection tax will take effect. Additional municipal taxes apply in Mount Airy, Elkin, Dobson, and Pilot Mountain. For current tax rates, visit the Surry County Tax Department at www.co.surry.nc.us/departments/tax

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A Mayberry Sheriff tour car passes the Andy Griffith Mural in downtown Mount Airy.

FILE PHOTO



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LOCAL, STATE AND FEDERAL AGENCIES

- NC Cooperative Extension, 915 E Atkins St, Suite 300, Dobson, 336-401-8025 Joanna Radford, County Extension Director; joanna_radford@ncsu.edu

- NC Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), 155 Patrol Station Rd, Mount Airy. 919-715-7000, 1687 N Bridge St, Elkin; 336-835-5247

- Vehicle and License Plate Agency, 137 Riverside Dr, Mount Airy; 336-786-5201, 220 W Main St, Elkin; 336-835-2757

- Social Security Administration, 1187 N Andy Griffith Pkwy, Mount Airy, 800-772-1213

- Surry County Board of Elections, 915 E Atkins St, Dobson; 336-401-8225, Sydney Bedsaul Romine, Director; elections@surrycountync.gov

- Surry County Building Inspections, 122 Hamby Rd, Dobson; 336-401-8300, Keith Kiger, Lead Building Codes Inspector; kigerk@co.surry.nc.us

- Surry County Health and Nutrition Center, 118

Hamby Rd, Dobson; 336-401-8400, Samantha B. Ange, MPH, RD, LDN, Health Director; anges@co.surry.nc.us

- Surry County Register of Deeds, 201 E Kapp St, Dobson; 336-401-8150, W. Todd Harris, Register of Deeds; harrist@co.surry.nc.us

- Surry County Social Services, 118 Hamby Rd, Dobson; 336-401-8700, Sharon Schueneman, Director, 336-401-8711, schuenemans@co.surry.nc.us

- Surry County Veterans Service, 1218 State St, Mount Airy; 336-783-8820, Mike Scott, U.S. Navy Retired, Director; scottmi@co.surry.nc.us

- Surry County Airport Authority, 146 Howard Woltz Jr Way, Mount Airy; 336-789-5153, mwkops@co.surry.nc.us

- Surry County Manager's Office, 114 W Atkins St, Dobson; 336-401-8201, Chris Knopf, County Manager; knopfc@co.surry.nc.us

- Sandra Snow, Assistant County Manager; snows@co.surry.nc.us

- Surry County Development Services, 122 Hamby Rd, Dobson; 336-401-8300, Adrienne Gardner, Development Services, Director, dollyhigha@co.surry.nc.us

- Surry County Emergency Services, 1218 State St, Mount Airy; 336-783-9000, Eric Southern, Director; southerner@co.surry.nc.us

- Surry Fire Marshal's Office, 1218 State St, Mount Airy; 336-783-9040, Jimmy Ashburn, Fire Marshal; ashburnji@co.surry.nc.us

- Surry County Tax Department, 915 E Atkins St, Dobson; 336-401-8100, Penny Harrison, Tax Administrator; harrisonp@co.surry.nc.us

- Surry County Soil and Water Conservation, 915 E Atkins St, Dobson; 336-386-8751, Laken Creed, District Director; Laken.Creed@usda.gov

Questions about Medicare? SHIP can help.

SHIP, the Seniors' Health Insurance Information Program, provides free counseling about Medicare in all 100 counties of North Carolina. SHIP can also help you apply for Medicare cost savings programs.



Call the Surry County Cooperative Extension at 336-401-8025 to talk to a trained SHIP counselor or schedule a one-on-one meeting.



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North Carolina Cooperative Extension is an equal opportunity provider.

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AREA SCHOOLS

Surry County has three separate public school systems: Mount Airy City Schools, Surry County Schools, and Elkin City Schools, along with Millennium Charter Academy in Mount Airy.

MOUNT AIRY CITY SCHOOLS

Superintendent Dr. Phillip Brown. pbrown@mtairy.k12.nc.us

The Board of Education is a partisan elected school board.

Chairman: Tim Matthews, Mount Airy At Large member, tmatthews@mtairy.k12.nc.us

Jayme Brant, Vice Chairman, Mount Airy District B, jbrant@mtairy.k12.nc.us

Kyle Leonard, Mount Airy District A, kleonard@mtairy.k12.nc.us

Randy Moore, Mount Airy District A, rmoore@mtairy.k12.nc.us

Ben Cooke, Mount Airy District B, bcooke@mtairy.k12.nc.us

Thomas Horton, Mount Airy District C, thorton@mtairy.k12.nc.us

Mark Welch, Mount Airy District D, mwelch@mtairy.k12.nc.us

More information can be found at <https://www.mtairy.k12.nc.us/>

SURRY COUNTY SCHOOLS

Superintendent: Dr. Travis Reeves, reevest@surry.k12.nc.us

Board of Education -- a partisan elected board.

Chairman, T.J. Bledsoe, Chairman, District 4, bledsoet@surry.k12.nc.us

Vice Chairman, Raleigh Scales, District 5, scalesr@surry.k12.nc.us

Dale Badgett, District 1, badgettd@surry.k12.nc.us

Tony Hutchens, District 2, hutchens@surry.k12.nc.us

Kent Whitaker, District 3, whitakerk@surry.k12.nc.us

More information can be found at <https://www.surry.k12.nc.us/>

ELKIN CITY SCHOOLS

Superintendent Dr. Steve Hall, halls@elkin.k12.nc.us

Board of Education, a partisan elected board.

Chair: Jennifer Kleinheksel

Vice Chair: Jillann Bellia

Earl Blackburn

Haley Sullivan

Susan Baker

For more information on Elkin City Schools visit <https://www.elkincityschools.org/>

MILLENNIUM CHARTER

ACADEMY is an independent public school in Mount Airy serving grades kindergarten through twelve.

Head Master: Paul Rezzo, paulrezzo@mcacademy.com

Board of Directors

President: Druery Devore

Treasurer: Christopher Willingham

Ann Jones

James Crossingham

Melinda Shew

Susan Campbell

For more information, visit <https://www.mcacademy.com/>



A conversation is held under the watchful gaze of the late Melva Houston in the pedestrian alley that now bears her name off Market Street in Mount Airy.

PARKS AND RECREATION

- Mount Airy Parks & Recreation Department - 113 Renfro St. Mount Airy - 336-786-8313
- Surry County Parks and Recreation - 122 Hamby Rd. Dobson, 336-401-8235
- Elkin Recreation & Parks - 399 North Carolina 268 W. Elkin - 336-258-8917
- Pilot Mountain Armfield Civic & Recreation - 873 W. 52 Bypass, Pilot Mountain - 336-368-2012

EMERGENCY SERVICES & FIRE PROTECTION

There are several agencies across Surry County and its municipalities which handle fire protection and emergency rescue services. For emergencies, call 911 and the appropriate agency will be dispatched.

- Surry County Emergency Services, Director Eric Southern, 1218 State St. Mount Airy, 336-783-9000;

- | | |
|--|--|
| • Ararat Volunteer Fire Department | Fire Department |
| • Bannertown Volunteer Fire Department | • Pilot Knob Volunteer Fire Department |
| • C.C. Camp Volunteer Fire Department | • Pilot Mountain Volunteer Fire Department |
| • Central Surry Fire Department | • Pine Ridge Fire Department |
| • Dobson Fire Department | • Shoals Volunteer Fire Department |
| • Elkin Fire Department | • Skull Camp Fire Department |
| • Four Way Fire Department | • South Surry Fire Department |
| • Franklin Community Volunteer Fire Department | • State Road Volunteer Fire Department |
| • Jot-Um-Down Volunteer Fire Department | • Westfield Volunteer Fire Department |
| • Mount Airy Fire Department | • White Plains Volunteer Fire Department |
| • Mountain Park Volunteer | |

WATER AND SEWER SERVICE

Water and sewer service is available in the county's four municipalities, as well as in parts of the county, via several different providers, depending upon what portion of the county.

They are:

- Mount Airy - City of Mount Airy, 300 S. Main St., Mount Airy, 336-786-3517
- Pilot Mountain - City of Pilot Mountain, 124 W. Main St., Pilot Mountain, 336-368-2247
- Dobson - Town of Dobson, 307 N. Main St. Dobson, 336-356-8962
- Elkin - Town of Elkin - 226 N. Bridge St. Elkin - 336-258-8900
- Flat Rock-Bannertown Water and Sewer area - City of Mount Airy, 300 S. Main St., Mount Airy, 336-786-3517
- Interstates Water and Sewer District. The district was created in 2004 and is governed by the District's Board of Directors. The district is located in the vicinity of the Interstate 74/NC 89 and Interstate 77/NC 89 interchanges and was created for economic development purposes to facilitate future commercial and industrial growth. Call 336-401-8201 for more information.
- Yadkin Valley Sewer Authority: 500 NC Hwy 268 W., 336-835-9819

Surry County Farmers Market

Dobson, Mount Airy, Pilot Mtn. and Elkin

ALWAYS FRESH, ALWAYS LOCAL



DOBSON	MOUNT AIRY	ELKIN	Pilot Mtn
903 E. Atkins St Dobson, NC 27017	Virginia St Mt. Airy, NC 27030	226 N. Bridge St. Elkin, NC 28621	300 S Key St. Pilot Mountain, NC 27041
Fri 3-6pm	Fri 9-Noon	Sat 9-Noon	Sat 3-6pm

*Markets open mid April-November, exact dates at surrycountyfarmersmarket.com

*Elkin Winter Market season will be at the Heritage and Trail Center on Standard Street November thru early April with holiday breaks weather permitting 9-12 every Saturday
Elkin Tuesday Evening Market Starting in Late May through October 6:00pm-8pm

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RYAN KELLY | THE NEWS

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LAW ENFORCEMENT

There are several law enforcement agencies in Surry County, serving various jurisdictions depending upon where one lives. For emergencies, call 911 and the appropriate agency will be dispatched.

- Surry County Sheriff's Department, Sheriff Steve C. Hiatt is at 218 N. Main St. Dobson. Phone 336-401-8900. The sheriff's office has countywide law enforcement jurisdiction, as well as handling security for the county courts and the county detention center.

- Mount Airy Police Department under the management of Chief Dale Watson, at 150 Rockford St. Mount Airy; 336-786-3535. The police department is responsible for law enforcement within the boundaries of the city of Mount Airy, the largest municipality in Surry County.

- Dobson Police Department managed by Chief Michael Murphy at 307 N. Main St. Dobson; 336-356-8161. The Dobson force

offers law enforcement and security in the county seat.

- Elkin Police Department, under the leadership of Chief Joseph VanHoy, 226 N. Bridge St. Elkin; 336-258-8910, offers law enforcement service in the town of Elkin, at the southern tip of Surry County.

- Pilot Mountain Police Department, under the leadership of Chief Adrian Tillotson, 124 W Main St, Pilot Mountain, 336-368-4725, offers law enforcement services in Pilot Mountain.

- North Carolina Highway Patrol offers statewide enforcement of highway rules and regulations, as well as criminal law enforcement. Locally, the district office is at 155 Patrol Station Rd. Mount Airy, 336-786-8552.

Two Surry County Sheriff's Office cruisers.



UTILITIES

Electric services are provided throughout Surry County, and the municipalities within the county's borders, primarily by two different utility companies.

- Surry Yadkin Electric is located at 510 S. Main St. in Dobson; phone 336-356-8241.

- Duke Energy is one of the nation's largest electric utilities. The firm can be reached at 1-800-777-9898 and to start service online visit www.duke-energy.com



Hikers pause for a moment inside Stone Mountain State Park during the 2025 NC Trail Days Festival.

COURTESY PHOTO



Hotel, conference center to transform *Mount Airy*



A groundbreaking for Granstone Conference Center in November is attended by state and local officials.

TOM JOYCE | THE NEWS

TOM JOYCE | tjoyce@mtairynews.com

They're all over the South – decaying industrial buildings with overgrown parking lots, standing as mute tribute to the ghosts of textile glories past.

But Mount Airy, for one, has been able to wrest itself from that depressing fate.

Mount Airy's economy has changed dramatically over the last three decades as the town shifted from an industrial base built on hosiery and textiles into a twenty-first century model centered on tourism. Against that backdrop, the town bought the former Spencer's property in 2014, seven years after the last infant garment rolled off the production line.

It is resurrecting the former Spencer's textile mill property downtown for new uses including a Marriott Tribute hotel and the Granstone Conference Center.

"It's going to bring a lot of life to an area that ever since Spencer's closed, has been kind of dead," Mayor



TOM JOYCE | THE NEWS

Project Engineer Madison Allred stands in a room of the soon-to-be-completed Balladeer Hotel.

Jon Cawley said.

"Not dead, but kind of dead," he specified. "There's going to be a lot of life moving around the city there."

Jessica Roberts, executive director of the Mount Airy Tourism Development Authority, described the situation using similar terms.

“That part of town has been sitting as a ghost town for a long time,” Roberts said of a development area centered in the vicinity of Willow and Franklin streets.

“I think it’s really going to change the landscape of our town,” she predicted regarding the Balladeer Hotel and Granstone Conference Center.

The 70-room lodging establishment will greet its first guests next spring, with construction on the conference center to be finished in late 2026.

Rough road at times

It hasn’t been easy for the Spencer’s redevelopment to reach this point.

The city government has overcome many pitfalls since acquiring the former textile site in 2014, 10 acres containing more than 20 buildings – some dating to the late 1800s.

A private firm, Sunhouse Hospitality, bought the Sparger Building and is transforming the towering,



CITY OF MOUNT AIRY

A rendering of the new Granstone Conference Center in Mount Airy, depicting its west side.

five-story structure into the Balladeer Hotel.

“A Marriott downtown is a great thing,” City Manager Darren Lewis said of the boutique hotel to operate under that brand.

Meanwhile, the municipality secured \$15 million



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in appropriations from the state Legislature to build Granstone Conference Center, for which a groundbreaking was held in November at its location on Franklin Street.

The idea is that persons using the center will stay at the Balladeer, along with the typical Mayberry tourists.

“It’s going to bring in a different group of individuals that do not come to Mount Airy now,” Lewis believes.

They will include members of different organizations or business groups who’ll be venturing here for conventions and other large-scale meetings.

The town has assigned Jenny Smith of the Mount Airy Visitors Center to recruit meeting planners and organizations to book the facility.

“We do really well with leisure travel, leisure tourism, but one thing that we are lacking is these meetings and conferences,” Smith said. “We have had to turn down a lot of those.”

Smith believes Mount Airy has a competitive advantage over typical conference destinations.

“We have an advantage because we are in a walkable community,” she said. “A lot of these conference centers that I’ve been to, you know, they’re surrounded by hotels, but there’s not a whole lot that you can walk to from there.”

Plans have called for the Granstone to include one large ballroom, multiple (two to three) breakout rooms and other programmable spaces for exhibits and meetings. The city commissioners awarded a contract for architectural and engineering services to Workplace Architecture and Design.

City officials acknowledge one challenge: while the Granstone can hold up to 300 attendees, the adjacent Balladeer Hotel will have only 70 rooms. Commissioner Calvin Vaughn pointed out the capacity gap during a council meeting, noting that larger conferences could exceed the hotel’s room inventory.

A new buzzword, “Bleisure,” a blend of business and leisure, is being tossed around in envisioning what the Granstone will generate in terms of visitors arriving for conventions who also want to have fun while in town.

“So I think that this is going to be a major marketing tool for Mount Airy,” the city manager said of the hotel/conference center pairing.



CITY OF MOUNT AIRY

Workers give new life to formerly abandoned hallways in the Sparger Building of the old Spencer’s textile mill complex.

“Both of these, along with the entire Spencer’s Mill Redevelopment, will be one of the largest projects the city has ever been involved with,” Lewis declared.

About the name

The term Granstone obviously is a play on Mount Airy granite.

It emerged in 2024, being selected by a committee planning the convention center which needed to come up with a “working title” for the facility, according to Mayor Cawley.

There was a need to establish a “trademark” for the center including a name “they could get a license for that no one else is using,” Cawley has said.

Committee members weighed several options and settled on Granstone, which he agrees ties in nicely with the local granite industry tradition.

“It felt like it fit,” the mayor said.

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December 5

Holiday Tour of Homes

December 5-6

MAMRH New Year's Eve Sheriff Badge Raising - December 31



Library goes from *'Good to Great'* with renovations

Public-use computers fill one spacious area of the renovated library.

TOM JOYCE | THE NEWS

TOM JOYCE | tjoyce@mtairynews.com

So, with the Internet Era bringing “mini-libraries” to the nearest desk or kitchen table with a computer, public libraries are dying as THE information source, right?

Wrong!

Although libraries have adapted to meet challenges, including upping their digital games by offering ebooks and similar resources, the facilities endure as depositories of knowledge and community hubs.

That is certainly the case locally, where Mount Airy officials have shown their faith in this concept through a recently completed renovation project for the Mount Airy Public Library on Rockford Street.

It had received no such upgrades since being built in the early 1980s.

“I think you can say that a community that thrives has a good public library,” Mayor Jon Cawley said.

“And our library went from very good to great,” he said of the renovations funded by a \$1.5 million appropriation from the N.C. General Assembly.

The project began around the start of 2025 and wound up with the reopening of the facility in October after the library operated from a temporary location.

City Manager Darren Lewis has described the project as “pretty much a makeover of the whole interior of the library.”

The renovations included floor, roof and ceiling work; furniture upgrades; replacing windows; the removal of walls; waterproofing work; electrical improvements; new shelves; the installation of



TOM JOYCE | THE NEWS

A worker labors on the roof of the Mount Airy Public Library during the major renovation effort occurring there.

new storefront units; exterior landscaping enhancements; and more.

Although this did not involve the construction of a building, the place looks brand-new with a sparkling interior that is proving to be a hit with visitors.

There is a new public-use computer space near the library lobby, along with individual nooks tucked away in corners resembling internet cafes where students have been spotted connecting with that technology recently.

Blue Bear addition brings creature comfort

One element that makes the new and improved Mount Airy Public Library “great” in the mayor’s estimation is its addition of Blue Bear Cafe No. 2.

It’s an offshoot of a student cafe at Mount Airy High School incorporated at the library in conjunction with the renovations, which also doubles as a training center for youths.

Blue Bear Cafe No. 2 offers various flavors of coffee along with hot tea, smoothies, slushies, milk, cookies, candy and other items with a spacious seating area alongside.



TOM JOYCE | THE NEWS

The front desk of the newly reopened Mount Airy Public Library is a beehive of activity.



TOM JOYCE | THE NEWS

Personnel of Blue Bear Cafe No. 2 serve eager customers from a spot inside the library.

A hidden ingredient is what it has brought to the library in terms of providing a gathering place where someone can sit with friends and sip a latte, for example.

This has increased visitation for the library, which is greatly needed in this day and age.

“From my office, I can see where traffic has really piled in,” City Manager Lewis said of what the Blue Bear Cafe has brought to the table.

“Just another neat addition to what the library does.”

Community members fuel downtown

Pilot Mountain

REVIVAL



FILE PHOTO

Downtown Pilot Mountain's Main Street features restored historic buildings with Pilot Mountain State Park visible in the background. Private investment in the downtown area has exceeded \$2 million annually as property owners restore buildings like the 1900 Queen Anne-style bank building at 100 E. Main St.

RYAN KELLY | ryan.kelly@mtairynews.com

In small towns across America, there are concerted pushes to get more people living, eating and shopping in downtown areas. For those who want Pilot Mountain to follow a similar pattern, the question emerges: Can one fall in love with a building, warts and all?

In Pilot Mountain, property owners are answering that question with their checkbooks. The 1900 Queen Anne-style bank building at 100 E. Main St., with its distinctive domed corner turret and round-arched windows, is undergoing meticulous restoration. The former Mount Pilot Drug building now houses a pharmacy and insurance office after extensive renovation.

Today, Main Street hosts weekend festivals drawing thousands. Property values are climbing and private investment exceeds \$2 million annually.



RYAN KELLY | THE NEWS

Vendor tents line Main Street as thousands of visitors browse during Mayfest. The 40-year-old festival recorded 22,400 visits during its three-day run and generated revenue that funded community events including the Better Together Back to School Bash.

It is the kind of downtown revitalization story that earns state recognition and grants — which is why some town leaders were dismayed when North Carolina's Main Street program rejected Pilot Mountain's application for help in 2017.

The town decided to do it themselves.

Eight years ago, Pilot Mountain's downtown struggled with single-digit business counts and high vacancy rates. After the state rejection, town leaders assembled staff and volunteers to create their own Main Street program on a modest budget.

"People who have spent time in downtown Pilot Mountain over the last eight to 10 years can see the difference in the variety of shops and restaurants now open and the level of economic activity," former

Mayor Evan Cockerham said.

The homegrown effort worked. Businesses multiplied from single digits to dozens. The town now hosts multiple weekend events throughout the year, including the long-running Mayfest and Hot Nights Hot Cars cruise-ins.

“The historical success of Mayfest 2025 gave us the momentum, and the means, to turn around and pour directly back into our community, especially our youth,” said Meagan Hutchens, event director and Pilot Mountain Civic Club secretary.

Revenue from that success allowed the civic club to fund the Better Together Back to School Bash in 2025, a community-wide event featuring more than 20 businesses distributing school supplies to families.

By 2022, the state program that had rejected Pilot Mountain came calling. North Carolina Main Street accepted the town into its ranks, joining just three other communities that year.



RYAN KELLY | THE NEWS

Sue Stone, whose late husband Joe operated Mount Pilot Drug starting in 1956, cuts the ribbon at the renovated 117 and 119 W. Main St. buildings alongside Christopher Cook and community members.

“Beyond grant opportunities and logistical support, it’s a little bit of validation of the work we’ve put in,” Cockerham said.

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K. QUINN

The second floor of Kim Quinn's 1900 bank building at 100 E. Main St. features round-arched windows and original hardwood floors during restoration. Quinn plans to use the upstairs space for commercial rentals while operating Main Street Coffee on the ground floor.

The validation opened doors to larger grants and more serious private investment. But the foundation had already been laid through strategic local initiatives.

The town's approach combined multiple tools rather than betting everything on one solution.

In 2018, Pilot Mountain created a Downtown Reinvestment Incentive Grant program offering cash grants to property owners making renovations. The grants are calculated based on increased property tax value over five years, with Surry County matching a percentage.

By 2023, three buildings had qualified, collectively increasing their tax value by more than \$113,000. The work at 131 W. Main St. transformed the former Nichols Plumbing building from a \$32,280 valuation to \$111,730 after nearly complete renovation.

The town also pursued historic district designation — a years-long process that unlocked federal and state tax credits for building renovations. Property owners could now access financial incentives that made ambitious restoration projects economically viable.

"This board deserves credit for the wisdom of investing in the work that it took to get a historic district so that property owners can take advantage of that," Cockerham said.

The formula combined grant opportunities, historic preservation incentives, dedicated staff coordination

and volunteer efforts. Most importantly, it maintained focus on a long-term vision even when short-term results were modest.

Between fiscal years 2022-23, the town reported almost \$250,000 in public investment and \$1.58 million in private investment. The momentum has accelerated since.

Christopher Cook wanted to honor two men from his hometown — Joe Stone and Jack Palmer — when he purchased the buildings at 117 and 119 W. Main St.

"The goal was to honor the town's rich heritage while introducing modern functionality," Cook said.


The completed mixed-use project now houses Alliance Insurance Services, Stokes Pharmacy, Mount Pilot Hideaways short-term rentals, two long-term

apartments and a community meeting room. Five new residential units bring people downtown to support restaurants and shops. Short-term rentals attract visitors who spend money at local businesses. Ground-floor retail activates the streetscape and increases foot traffic.

"It attracts visitors, supports local businesses and creates a unique sense of place that sets Pilot Mountain apart versus big box stores and chains," Cockerham said.

"Christopher Cook was kind enough to give me a tour," said Alyssa Munson, Main Street coordinator. "I got to see the pharmacy, the insurance building, the Airbnbs, the apartments — they all look fantastic."

Kim Quinn's bank building restoration follows a

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similar philosophy. As 2025 closed, she signed a contract for full roof replacement and was researching tax credits and grants while interviewing architects and contractors. Pre-CAD drawings have been completed, along with black mold and other testing required for historic restoration work.

“It will be restored historically, which slows the process down, but it will be worth it,” Quinn said, choosing authentic preservation over shortcuts.

The 1900 building, added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1997, is described in its application as “the most architecturally significant commercial structure in Pilot Mountain.” Quinn plans to move her Main Street Coffee business into the restored building with commercial rental space upstairs, targeting completion for 2026.

From July 2024 through summer 2025, Pilot Mountain generated \$2.36 million in new private investment despite receiving no new public funding



Mayor Pro Tem Donna Kiger talks with Ross Kiser of Stokes Pharmacy during a tour of the renovated building which also now features a drive through window for the pharmacy. RYAN KELLY | THE NEWS

during that period.

The district added seven new businesses and available spaces are being absorbed immediately. When Munson announced completed facade grants,

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TOM JOYCE | THE NEWS

Visitors eat at tables along Main Street during Pilot Mountain's 2025 Mayfest.

businesses were already waiting to occupy them.

"We have two businesses already interested in utilizing them when the next round's open," she told commissioners in August.

Cockerham described the dramatic shift from just a few years ago when high vacancy rates plagued the area.

"We've seen the fruits of that labor quite a bit," he said, describing how renovated spaces now find tenants before work is even complete.

The town's Mayfest — the 40-year-old festival that is the unofficial kickoff to the area's spring and summer season — recorded 22,400 visits during its three-day run in 2025, according to analytics data. While events and tourism drive weekend traffic, town leaders have positioned Pilot Mountain as more than a pass-through destination to the state park.

"We know the Yadkin Valley and Pilot Mountain State Park attract thousands of visitors yearly," Cockerham said. "We want to make sure those visitors know about Pilot Mountain, stop here, visit our businesses and explore what we offer."

For a town rejected by the state's revitalization program just eight years ago, the progress is remarkable. Pilot Mountain did not wait for permission or outside validation to begin its transformation — it created its own program, proved

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the concept and eventually earned the recognition it had been denied.

The lesson resonates beyond the town's borders. Small towns do not need state programs or major employers to drive economic development. Sometimes they just need determination, strategic thinking and willingness to invest in their own potential.

"This project was truly community-led," said Donna Kiger, mayor pro tem. "Between guidance from our commissioners, town staff and community members all providing input along the way, we are confident that this identity reflects our town's true identity and spirit."

Munson said the momentum is building. "We have a lot that has been recently done and that is coming up, and some great private investors, businesses and property owners that are leading the charge," she said. "It makes me and the community feel optimistic for the future here."

That spirit — the refusal to accept "no" as a final answer in 2017 — has carried Pilot Mountain from rejection to renewal, from vacant storefronts to a



CHRISTOPHER COOK

Construction equipment sits outside a building undergoing facade renovation on Main Street in Pilot Mountain. The town's Downtown Reinvestment Incentive Grant program has helped property owners fund renovations, with three buildings collectively increasing their tax value by more than \$113,000 by 2023.

downtown where businesses compete for space.

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A stronger future for

Hugh Chatham Health

TOM JOYCE | THE NEWS

Hugh Chatham Health announced a partnership with Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist in March 2025.

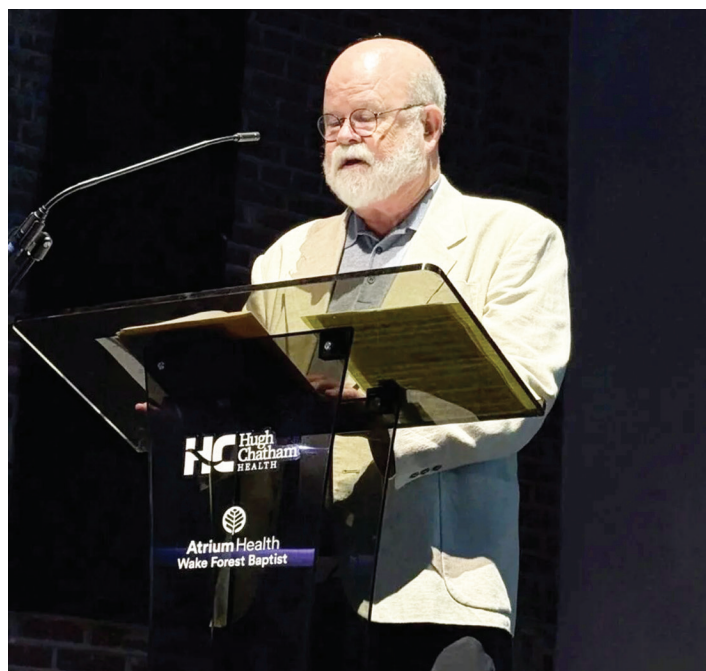
Atrium partnership brings investment, expanded services to Elkin

KITSEY BURNS HARRISON | kburns@yadkinripple.com

In March 2025, Hugh Chatham Health announced it would partner with Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist. That new partnership was officially unveiled in July at a reception held at the Reeves Theater.

The Hugh Chatham board began its search for a healthcare partner in late 2024, and HCH Board of Trustees Chair Cynthia Gonzalez said that after an extensive search, Atrium was the top choice.

In a brief update on the merger in December, a representative for Atrium Health said, "Our partnership continues to progress as planned, bringing meaningful improvements to health care access and the highest quality for the Yadkin Valley community. By combining resources and expertise, we're ensuring families in this region



Dr. Chris Groner speaks at a reception to announce a partnership with Hugh Chatham Health and Atrium Health, which will also include a new foundation known as the Yadkin Valley Wellness Foundation.

have access to advanced care, innovative technology, and expanded services close to home – delivering on our shared commitment to strengthen rural health for the long term.”

At the July gathering announcing the merger, Hugh Chatham Health CEO Paul Hammes said, “This partnership is, I think, a natural next step in an evolutionary relationship. It began about 30 years ago when at the time, Wake Forest brought cancer care to this community ... and a totality of care around a nationally accredited program that brought care closer to home, so the patients and their loved ones did not have to be on the road days or weeks in a row to get lifesaving treatments.”

Board Chair Cynthia Gonzalez added, “Our longstanding relationship, combined with Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist’s deep understanding and commitment to rural communities, makes this partnership the natural step for both of our organizations.”

Gonzalez and Hammes, along with several other healthcare leaders, spoke to a full house at the Reeves Theater. Hugh Chatham Health and Atrium Health department leaders as well as Elkin community leaders, Yadkin Valley Chamber Board members, Rotary Club members, and several elected officials were present for a luncheon and reception to celebrate the new partnership.

Hammes called the new partnership “innovative.”

“There’s a theme around this, we’re calling it ‘the power of together,’” he said. “It’s much more than a partnership. Hugh Chatham Health has joined an incredibly high-performing organization, Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist, which is also part of Advocate Health. Hugh Chatham Health is now part of the third largest nonprofit healthcare system in the country. Imagine the possibilities this will offer for our patients, for our team members, for our providers, and for everybody. It’s incredible. That’s what the power together means.”

Dr. David Zaas, president of Atrium Health



HCH Chief Medical Officer Dr. Jonathan Snyder, CEO Paul Hammes, Yadkin Valley Wellness Board member Teresa Smith Chatham, Hugh Chatham Board of Trustees Chair Cynthia Gonzalez, Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist President Dr. David Zaas and Yadkin Valley Wellness Foundation Board member Dr. Chris Groner at a reception held at the Reeves Theater to officially announce a partnership of Hugh Chatham Health with Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist.

Wake Forest Baptist, echoed the sentiments on the importance of local care.

“Paul [Hammes] and I have had a chance this morning to speak to the medical staff, to speak to the team members around our goal to ensure the best care stays here.”

Zaas also spoke to the financial commitments Atrium will bring to the table for Hugh Chatham Health.

“Over the next 10 years, we will be investing \$100 million in this town. One-hundred million to ensure that the best care, the technology, the people, the resources, can deliver care here,” he said.

Future improvements planned for the local health system include:

- Implementation of a new electronic health record, Epic, to facilitate seamless care coordination between providers at Hugh Chatham Health and Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist.
- Advance the recruitment and retention” of primary care and specialty care providers to the Yadkin Valley region.
- Support and expand current clinical programs such as Women’s Services, Heart and Vascular and Cancer Care to ensure essential services stay local.
- Provide professional and career growth



A reception at the Reeves Theater in Elkin to celebrate the new partnership of Hugh Chatham Health and Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist.

opportunities for Hugh Chatham Health team members and providers.

The July event also served to introduce a new foundation called the Yadkin Valley Wellness Foundation, established with \$30 million from Atrium, with a “mission to advance health and wellness priorities in the community.”

Dr. Chris Groner and Teresa Smith Chatham will serve on this newly established board.

“All of us on the board are eager to begin the hard work of creating the foundation that all the citizens of our area need and want. Over the coming months, the Yadkin Valley Wellness Foundation will establish a website and an office, and publicize how the community can stay informed about activities. Over the next year, the Yadkin Valley Wellness Foundation will engage in community development, vision and structure. We want this foundation to reflect and serve the needs of our citizens,” Groner said.

Chatham, a longtime member of the Hugh Chatham Health Auxiliary Board, expressed her enthusiasm for the partnership.

“There’s been many discussions about the future of our hospital over the past few years,” she said. “I stand here today to tell you with 100% confidence that our executive team and our board of trustees have made the very best decision to join the Atrium Health family.”

“By joining Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist, we’re securing a stronger future for our organization and for all the patients that we serve. Together, we’ll provide greater access to specialists and sub-specialists for our patients, seamless care



Hugh Chatham Health CEO Paul Hammes speaks at a special reception announcing a new partnership with Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist.

coordination between providers and advanced medical services with local access to cutting-edge technology and research, but most importantly, continued local access to high-quality care that our patients and our community know,” said HCH Chief Medical Officer Dr. Jonathan Snyder.

A spokesperson for Hugh Chatham said that at this time there is no planned change to the hospital organization’s name or local leadership. More information and a frequently asked questions page regarding the new partnership can be found online at hughchatham.org/the-power-of-together/.

Ground Steak

Festival

fuels Dobson's economic transformation and drives stomachs



NORTH SURRY HIGH

Volunteers serve ground steak sandwiches at the Flat Rock Ruritan Club booth during the June 2025 North Carolina Ground Steak Festival in Dobson. The Ruritan Club's booth drew lines stretching halfway across the festival grounds.



RYAN KELLY | ryan.kelly@mtairynews.com

For decades, Dobson has been known primarily as Surry County's seat of government — a place where residents came for courthouse business, not weekend getaways. But on a June Saturday in 2025, roughly 10,000 people flooded downtown Dobson for a reason that had nothing to do with county commissioners or property records. They came for a sandwich.

The North Carolina Ground Steak Festival has become the centerpiece of Dobson's transformation from a quiet administrative center into a tourism destination. In just three years, the festival celebrating a humble Depression-era delicacy has earned recognition as one of the Southeast Tourism Society's Signature Events, drawing visitors from across North Carolina and beyond while generating measurable economic impact for local businesses.

The festival's success didn't happen by accident. It

emerged from a deliberate strategy to leverage Surry County's unique culinary heritage — specifically, a loose-meat sandwich that exists nowhere else in North Carolina — to drive tourism and economic development.

"In the Depression era, ground steak was just a means to get by and stretch meat product out," said Travis Frye, coordinator for both the Dobson and Surry County tourism development authorities. "Now it's become a novelty and something of nostalgia for folks to try."

But the festival represents far more than nostalgia. It is proof that small towns can compete in the tourism economy by embracing what makes them distinctive — and early returns suggest the strategy is working.

A sandwich born of necessity

The ground steak sandwich emerged in Surry

County during the Great Depression, when local cooks with limited resources found they could stretch ground beef by boiling or browning the meat, adding flour and water, and seasoning the mixture with salt and pepper. The result was a tender, loose-meat patty served on a bun with mayonnaise, slaw and tomato — a far cry from the spicier sloppy joe, and wholly unique to this corner of North Carolina.

“Go outside Surry, and you won’t find restaurants or many folks that have even heard of it,” Frye said. “It’s one of our hidden treasures.”

For generations, ground steak remained exactly that — a hidden treasure known primarily to locals who grew up eating it at home or grabbing sandwiches during lunch breaks at the textile mills. When the factory whistles blew in Mount Airy,



DISCOVER DOBSON
Vendor tents line the streets of downtown Dobson during the June 2025 North Carolina Ground Steak Festival. The event drew roughly 10,000 attendees to the historic courthouse square, up from about 7,000 at the inaugural festival in 2023.

workers would flood Main Street, and ground steak sandwiches were among the affordable options at places like the Canteen, where records show Archie Barker was making them as early as 1936.

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That hyperlocal identity — the fact that ground steak exists nowhere else in North Carolina — is precisely what makes it valuable in today’s tourism economy. It is what allows Dobson to call its event the North Carolina Ground Steak Festival without dispute from any other locality.

Strategic thinking from the start

The festival’s origins trace back to 2022, during the dedication of a “Hungry for History” marker honoring the Surry County sonker on the historic courthouse lawn. One of Frye’s first assignments as tourism coordinator was providing sound equipment for that event. Standing on the courthouse grounds that day, he began envisioning something larger.

“The idea of having both a sweet and savory trail began to take shape that would reflect the culinary history of our community,” Frye said.

Through collaboration between the Surry County Tourism Development Authority, Dobson Tourism Development Authority and the Tourism Partnership of Surry County, the Surry Ground Steak Trail emerged, initially featuring 11 locally owned restaurants across all four county municipalities.

The tourism authorities created both a physical map and digital website, arranged photo shoots of the participating restaurants, issued press releases and handled targeted advertising — all at no expense to the trail participants. The goal was to give people a reason to explore the entire county, one sandwich at a time.

But Frye saw an opportunity to take the concept further. Given his unique dual role coordinating tourism for both the county and the town, he envisioned the trail and a signature festival working in tandem.

“Community participation was the fundamental foundation,” Frye said, drawing on his years coordinating the Autumn Leaves Festival in Mount Airy before taking the Dobson role. “Therefore, in addition to enticing both locals and visitors with historically significant tasty food, the idea to bring in local artisans and crafters as well as regional bluegrass and old-time string music was essential.”

Planning formalizes vision

The Ground Steak Festival’s early success helped crystallize Dobson’s broader economic development



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vision. In 2024, with the festival proving its value, the Town of Dobson embarked on a comprehensive strategic planning process with the N.C. Department of Commerce's Main Street & Rural Planning Center to chart the town's economic future.

More than 60 residents participated in a community visioning workshop in August 2024, identifying downtown assets and discussing what economic role Dobson should play in the region. The result was an economic positioning statement that shaped the town's five-year Downtown Economic Development Strategic Plan, adopted in January 2025.

The resulting vision statement positioned Dobson as "a welcoming neighbor of the Blue Ridge Mountains" offering "farm-to-table experiences blended with family-centered entertainment, arts, and culture" where "locally-sourced small shops are the heartbeat of the community."

The Ground Steak Festival embodies that vision in action. Town officials identified four priority strategies for downtown economic development, and the festival directly implements two of them: creating farm-to-table food and wine experiences, and offering family-centered entertainment, arts and culture.

"The North Carolina Ground Steak Festival aligns itself with family-centered entertainment, arts and culture, wrapped into the fabric of culinary history while promoting businesses within the community," Frye said, citing the town's economic positioning statement.

Town leaders developed 49 specific recommendations for downtown development, including recruiting new restaurants to vacant properties, creating cultural events, supporting locally-owned businesses, and increasing tourism. The festival serves as a catalyst for implementing many of these objectives simultaneously.

From concept to crowds

For years, Surry County's other municipalities had signature annual events that drew regional crowds and generated economic activity. Mount Airy had Mayberry Days and the Autumn Leaves Festival. Pilot Mountain had Mayfest. Elkin had the Yadkin Valley Pumpkin Festival and NC Trail Days. Dobson, despite being the county seat, lacked a major draw of its own.

The inaugural 2023 festival started with two official ground steak vendors — Dobson's Central Cafe and



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the beloved Flat Rock Ruritan Club, whose sandwiches had been a staple of the Autumn Leaves Festival for years. Roughly 50 craft vendors set up alongside food trucks, while bluegrass bands played at the Dobson Square Park amphitheater.

More than 7,000 people showed up that first year. By 2024, attendance had grown to about 9,000. This year, according to data from Placer AI, the festival averaged around 10,000 attendees.

“Folks who came here last year were like, ‘Wow, there’s a lot of things we can do with our kids, with our families,’” Frye recalled.

The growth didn’t just mean more bodies downtown. It meant measurable economic impact. The Hampton Inn at Shelton Vineyards reported limited room availability over the festival weekend, with many guests specifically coming for the festival but staying

after to visit Shelton Vineyards and other points of interest. Sue’s Kitchen, the newest member of the Surry Ground Steak Trail, reported that many visitors stopped to eat on their way out of town — and only learned about the trail because of the festival.



Families enjoy carnival rides at dusk during the North Carolina Ground Steak Festival.

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DISCOVER DOBSON

An aerial view shows the amphitheater at Dobson Square Park during Dobson Rock the Block, a get together music event that draws crowds to downtown.

The Flat Rock Ruritan Club's booth drew lines stretching halfway across the festival grounds. Local merchants began offering festival-day discounts. Visitors explored the Ground Steak Trail, stopping at restaurants in Mount Airy, Pilot Mountain and Elkin. The festival became a gateway to broader county tourism.

Robert Stone captured the enthusiasm many first-time visitors felt after attending the 2025 festival.

"If you've never had a Surry County ground steak sandwich, you are missing out on one of life's little treats," he wrote online. "Ground sirloin is seasoned with just salt and pepper, then slapped onto a bun with a thick slice of tomato and coleslaw. Go to Dobson or Mount Airy and get you one."

The festival has evolved beyond a tourism event. It has become a vehicle for preserving and sharing local history — the kind of history that lives not in textbooks but in cast-iron skillets and corner diners, passed down through generations of cooks stretching ingredients to feed their families. Food carries memory forward, connecting present-day festival-goers to the resourcefulness of Depression-era families who created something enduring from necessity.

Converting courthouse traffic to festival crowds

According to data analysis included in the development plan, downtown already attracts significant foot traffic — 111,700 unique visitors annually who make an average of 6.23 visits for a total of 695,000 annual visits. But there's a catch: most of those visitors come Monday through Friday during courthouse business hours, with peak traffic between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.

The festival represents a strategy to change that pattern. By creating weekend events and cultural attractions, Dobson aims to transform from a place people visit out of obligation into a destination people choose.

Town officials identified this challenge explicitly, calling for efforts to "create more opportunities for everyone to enjoy cultural experiences throughout the downtown district" and to "reduce building vacancies and increase retail businesses downtown." The festival serves as the most visible tool for achieving both objectives.

Validation and growth

In August 2025, the Southeast Tourism Society



Volunteers prepare ground steak sandwiches as a finished product awaits pickup at the festival. The loose-meat sandwich emerged during the Great Depression when Surry County cooks stretched ground beef by adding flour, water, salt and pepper.

named the Ground Steak Festival one of its Signature Events of the Southeast — a designation earned in its first year of eligibility that validates Dobson’s food tourism strategy.

“As you can imagine I was thrilled to see the North Carolina Ground Steak Festival recognized in its first year of eligibility,” Frye said.

The festival’s success has begun to reshape downtown. New businesses have opened, existing merchants have become sponsors, and artisans have made inquiries about available space.



DISCOVER DOBSON

Musicians perform at Music at the Market, a free concert series at the Surry County Farmers Market in Dobson. The event represents part of the town’s broader strategy to create events and attractions like the North Carolina Ground Steak Festival.

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Carnival rides light up against dark clouds at Dobson Square Park. The downtown park plays host to a variety of concerts, festivals and events throughout the year, including the North Carolina Ground Steak Festival.

“We have seen the synergy that festivals and events have on the downtown community,” Frye said.

Part of a larger vision

For Frye and festival organizers, the event represents proof of concept. If 10,000 people will come to Dobson for a sandwich, what else is possible?

“As for the Town of Dobson, I believe we have only scratched the surface of untapped potential,” Frye said. “I see a town with tremendous opportunity showcasing its locally sourced small shops, arts and entertainment, and recreational living.”

The 2026 festival is scheduled for June 13 from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. on the historic courthouse square.

Organizers are considering additions including a possible ground steak tasting contest, but the core mission remains unchanged: honoring history while building economic opportunity.

Storytelling for future generations

What makes Frye most proud is not just the numbers or the recognition. It is that the festival emerged from genuine collaboration — between the Surry County Tourism Development Authority, Dobson Tourism Development Authority, Tourism Partnership of Surry County, Ground Steak Trail participants, the county, and the town.

“All organizations embraced the ground steak sandwich and its historical significance to Surry



DISCOVER DOBSON

Crowds fill the streets during the June 2025 North Carolina Ground Steak Festival in downtown Dobson. The 2026 festival is scheduled for June 13.

County,” he said.

“The North Carolina Ground Steak Festival, like the Surry Ground Steak Trail, depends on the community to continue the storytelling aspect for the coming generations,” Frye said. “Whatever small part I played in it, I am just glad to keep that history alive and look back in appreciation of things that make me think of home.”

Even passing thunderstorms couldn’t dampen the 2025 festival. Organizers described it as an

“incredible day of delicious food, unique crafts, fun children’s activities, lively mountain string-band music and core memories despite some passing thunderstorms.”

For Dobson, the ground steak sandwich has evolved from a Depression-era survival strategy into something far more valuable: a vision for economic transformation that honors the past while building the future — one sandwich, one festival, one strategic plan at a time.

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Twin Oaks Business Park advances Dobson's *Economic Strategy*

SURRY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION

The site of the future Twin Oaks Business Park. The Surry County Economic Development Foundation purchased the 30-acre property from Shelton Companies in early 2025 for development of an industrial park near Interstate 77.

RYAN KELLY | ryan.kelly@mtairnews.com

While the Ground Steak Festival brings visitors to Dobson on weekends, a quieter transformation is underway just off Interstate 77 — one designed to bring jobs and industry to the county seat on a permanent basis.

Twin Oaks Business Park, a 30-acre site near Exit 93 at the intersection of Zephyr Road and Twin Oaks Road, represents Dobson's first industrial park and a creative approach to economic development that earned statewide recognition.

The site, purchased from the Shelton Companies in

early 2025, sits near Shelton Vineyards and remains farmland for now, cultivated season by season while development plans progress. But the vision extends far beyond crops.

"When you put something there, it is going to draw everything out there," Blake Moyer, president of the Surry County Economic Development Partnership, said earlier this year, describing a build-it-and-they-will-come approach to industrial recruitment.

The project emerged from an 18-month collaborative effort between the Surry County Economic Development Foundation, Surry-Yadkin

Electric Membership Corporation, the Town of Dobson and the Shelton family. The partnership resulted in what Moyer describes as North Carolina's first equity partnership agreement in economic development — a groundbreaking financing structure that brought the property into public control with minimal upfront costs while maintaining high-quality development standards.

"It is a pretty creative project," Moyer said. "I think people in Surry County should be proud we're on the cutting edge of economic development."

Statewide recognition

The innovation didn't go unnoticed. In June, the North Carolina Economic Development Association honored Moyer with its Innovator of the Year Award, specifically citing the Twin Oaks project. But Moyer was quick to share credit.

"To me, it's not really an award I won," he said. "It was an award the team won."

Travis Bode, manager of economic development for Surry-Yadkin EMC, emphasized the site's strategic importance. "New industrial sites are in high demand and filling that gap in Surry County is a vision and focus for leaders like Blake Moyer and (Dobson town manager) Jeff Sedlacek," he said.

The corporation, along with North Carolina Electric Cooperatives, provided \$25,000 for due diligence studies including Phase 1 Environmental Analysis and wetlands assessments — work now complete.

With all due diligence in hand, the Surry County Economic Development Foundation is preparing an application to the Golden LEAF Foundation for funding to build out an industrial pad — a graded, utility-ready site that companies can occupy quickly. The application is due in January with review scheduled for April.

"The goal is to get a pad built out in 2026," Moyer said.

Part of a comprehensive strategy

The Twin Oaks development aligns with Dobson's broader economic development vision outlined in the town's five-year Downtown Economic Development Strategic Plan adopted in January 2025. While the strategic plan focuses primarily on downtown revitalization through tourism, arts, culture and small business recruitment, town officials recognize the importance of "surrounding industrial and infrastructure development" as part of comprehensive growth.

The plan, developed through collaboration between the Town of Dobson and the N.C. Department of Commerce's Main Street & Rural Planning Center, involved more than 60 residents who participated in a community visioning workshop to shape Dobson's economic future. The resulting vision statement positions Dobson as "a welcoming neighbor of the Blue Ridge Mountains" that offers "farm-to-table experiences blended with family-centered entertainment, arts, and culture" while maintaining "locally-sourced small shops" as "the heartbeat of the

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community.”

Industrial development like Twin Oaks provides the economic foundation that allows those community-focused strategies to flourish.

The site will accommodate a mix of commercial and light industrial uses, officials said, with the stated goal of creating new jobs and generating fresh investment for Dobson — crucial for a town whose composition is 70% to 80% public institutions, according to the strategic plan’s economic assessment.

“Twin Oaks will be the first business park in the Town of Dobson and will be integral to the growth here in Dobson and Surry County as we continue to identify sites for businesses to locate and expand,” town officials said in a statement. “This acquisition showcases partnerships and collaboration across sectors allowing for continued growth, and we look forward to seeing this project come to fruition in Dobson.”

Ready sites for a competitive market

The emphasis on ready-to-occupy sites reflects current industrial recruitment realities. Companies increasingly demand locations they can develop immediately rather than raw land requiring extensive preparation. A prepared pad positions Dobson to compete for prospects that might otherwise bypass rural communities.

The project aligns with broader county economic development strategies. The partnership has identified development opportunities across more than 6,000 acres at 40 sites countywide through its Sites 2050 analysis, recognizing that having shovel-ready locations is essential to competing for the roughly 160 annual economic development projects statewide.

Leslie Schlender, chair of the Surry County Economic Development Foundation, described the acquisition as “one of many more to come in Surry County’s efforts to provide an inventory of quality industrial product for our existing and potential new employers.”

Balancing tourism and industry

For Dobson, Twin Oaks represents an economic complement to the tourism strategy embodied by the Ground Steak Festival and the downtown strategic plan. While the festival brings 10,000 visitors for a day and downtown revitalization efforts aim to recruit restaurants, artists and retail shops to

vacant properties, the industrial park aims to bring permanent employers and year-round economic activity.

According to Placer.AI data included in the strategic plan, downtown Dobson already attracts 111,700 unique visitors annually who make an average of 6.23 visits for a total of 695,000 annual visits. But most of those visits occur Monday through Friday during courthouse business hours. The challenge — and the opportunity — is converting that daytime traffic into evening and weekend economic activity while simultaneously building an industrial base that provides stable employment.

Both strategies share a common thread: Dobson positioning itself not just as the county seat, but as a destination — whether for a weekend sandwich or a manufacturing operation seeking a strategic location near Interstate 77.

The next chapter unfolds in 2026, when Dobson could see its first industrial park take physical shape, transforming farmland into opportunity while downtown continues its own transformation from administrative center to vibrant community gathering place.

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From pre-K to college, Surry

Educational Opportunities ABOUND



Chelsy Payne, principal of BH Tharrington Primary School, is all smiles along with some of her students after being named Mount Airy City Schools 2024-2025 Principal of the Year.

Surry County has three separate public school systems — Mount Airy City Schools, Surry County Schools, and Elkin City Schools, along with Millennium Charter Academy in Mount Airy.

The school systems are consistently ranked among the top in the state in a number of categories, including standardized testing, graduation rates, and other measures showing how successful the schools

are in teaching and in helping students transition into post-secondary education or into the workforce.

In addition to traditional learning strategies, local schools have a number of summer enrichment camps and activities, keeping students engaged and learning. A number of programs in both Mount Airy and Surry County have been used as models or studies for other school systems across the state to emulate.

In Mount Airy, Dr. Phillip Brown serves as superintendent of the 1,700-student system, serving under a seven-member elected school board. The school district also has a thriving series of summer camps, workshops, and other activities to keep students engaged with learning when schools are closed during those summer months.

More information on the school system and its leadership and <https://www.mtairy.k12.nc.us/>

In addition to its academic excellence, Mount Airy High School has seen exemplary success on the athletic field, with a number of state and regional champions. Among those are the football team, which has won the past two 1A state titles; the girls tennis team, which has won three consecutive state titles and six state crowns over the past 13 seasons; and many other titles in different sports.

Surry County Schools is the largest of the school systems in the county, with nearly 7,300 students,



Surry County Schools Superintendent Dr. Travis Reeves speaks during an event for the worker-training program Surry-Yadkin Works FLEET, a collaborative program between Mount Airy City, Elkin City, Yadkin County Schools, as well as Surry County Schools.



Surry Knights celebrate following a home run against Brookdale College.

under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. Travis Reeves and a five-member school board. Surry County Schools have also excelled in athletics, with a number of regional and state finalists and champions spread across multiple sports in recent years.

The county school system is home to the Surry Early College High School, a collaborative effort between Surry County Schools and Surry Community College. In this program, students enroll as incoming freshmen, taking both high school and college courses throughout their time in the school. At the end of four years, they are eligible for a high school diploma, and can earn an associate of arts degree with a fifth year of enrollment.

For more information on the Surry County School system visit <https://www.surry.k12.nc.us/>

Elkin City School, with slightly more than 1,200 students, is helmed by Superintendent Dr. Steve Hall, under a five-member school board.

As is the case with the other school systems in the county, Elkin has experienced both academic and athletic success with its students. On the athletic field, the school system has seen its students claim

state and regional titles in swimming, track, tennis, and other sports. For more information on Elkin City Schools visit <https://www.elkincityschools.org/>

Millennium Charter Academy is an independent public school in Mount Airy serving grades kindergarten through twelve. The school says it “is structured to move forward thoughtfully, purposefully, and quickly, fueled by its mission and vision as embodied by its leadership, staff, and parent body,” focusing on a traditional classic education. The school is operated under the leadership of Headmaster Paul Rezzo. For more information, visit <https://www.mcademy.com/>

Surry Community College

With a main campus in Dobson and satellite locations across two counties. Surry Community College serves a dual purpose for area residents.

The two-year school offers an affordable means for students to get two years of college work behind them before transferring on to a four-year university; and Surry Community College continually evolves and adds to a wide array of job training, trades, and professional certificates for those looking to move

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One of many programs at Surry Community College is the Practical Nursing Program, which routinely holds pinning and graduation ceremonies for its graduates.

into the workforce

Surry Community annually serves 3,200 students seeking certificates, diplomas or degrees in a wide range of curriculum programming. The school also serves 18,000 students in more than 1,500 classes through the Workforce, Technology and Community Education Divisions.

SCC's main campus is located in Dobson. The college also operates at different locations in Surry and Yadkin counties, including at the Center for Public Safety in Mount Airy, the Yadkin Center in

Yadkinville, the Pilot Center in Pilot Mountain and the Elkin Center in Elkin. These additional locations allow the college to reach a far wider number of people, with everything from college courses to workforce training and even basic computer programs. Two of the college's well-known programs are its Nursing program, based in Dobson, and its truck driving program, based at the Yadkin Center in Yadkinville.

Local high school students are also able to take college courses through Surry and even receive an associate's degree with their high school diploma.

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Hugh Chatham Health is recognized every year by a number of health care agencies as among the top small hospitals in the region.

Born of public need after a small private hospital closed, in the throes of the Great Depression, Hugh Chatham Memorial hospital was born. At the time, Dr. L. B. Abernathy, pastor of the Elkin First Methodist Church, assisted by the western North Carolina Methodist Conference South and the J. B. Duke Endowment, worked with other community leaders to bring a hospital to the community during a time of dire need.

At the time Hugh Gwyn Chatham, president of Chatham Manufacturing Company, was a major benefactor for the project, donating the land that would house the facility. He died on Oct. 10, 1930, before the hospital was opened, and those leading the project chose to name the facility Hugh Chatham Memorial Hospital when the new hospital opened on

Sunday, April 19, 1931, with its first patients walking through the doors the following day.

While that early facility met a critical community need, those founders and leaders probably had no idea how much those community medical needs might grow, and how the hospital they founded would evolve and grow to meet those needs over the coming nine decades (and counting). Even now, the hospital is changing and growing — it recently changed its name and branding to Hugh Chatham Health to better align with its growing presence in the surrounding community and its expanding ability to offer more varied care options. In 2025, Hugh Chatham Health joined Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist, becoming part of Advocate Health, the third-largest nonprofit healthcare system in the country.



Hugh Chatham Health is constantly changing and evolving to better serve the community. Here staff members pose for a photo in the newly revamped Emergency Department waiting area.

Hugh Chatham Health is a not-for-profit community health care network of physician clinics and an 81-bed acute care hospital that delivers healthcare to residents of Elkin, and Surry, Yadkin, and Wilkes counties. Hugh Chatham continues to evolve and grow to meet the changing needs of residents of the Yadkin Valley and Foothills region of North Carolina, and southwestern Virginia. Employing more than 950 people, Hugh Chatham Health includes a medical group of more than 74 providers across 29 locations and six counties. Headquartered in Elkin, Hugh Chatham has been nationally recognized for patient satisfaction, patient safety, and clinical quality.

Among those recognitions are being named as

one of America's Best Hospitals for Stroke Care by the Women's Choice Award; the American Heart Association's Gold Plus Get With The Guidelines – Stroke Quality Achievement Award; North Carolina's Best Hospitals for Patient Satisfaction award by Business North Carolina; and America's Best Hospitals for Patient Safety by the Women's Choice Award among its multiple recognitions.

"Our goal is to always provide our patients with the very best healthcare available. As evidence of our commitment to you, Hugh Chatham is accredited by the Joint Commission, which surveys, accredits and certifies healthcare organizations that meet their extremely high standards for care," said Hugh Chatham Health CEO Paul Hammes.



Northern Regional Hospital.

NORTHERN REGIONAL HOSPITAL

Meeting Community Needs

Sixty-six years ago, a 98-bed hospital offering basic medical care, maternity wards, and other medical treatment opened in Mount Airy, filling a void left when the former Martin Memorial Hospital was destroyed by a fire.

Today, that facility has grown into the modern Northern Regional Hospital, a 146-bed medical facility, along with an ever-growing network of practices, clinics, and expanded capabilities to serve Mount Airy, Surry County, and portions of Southwest Virginia. The hospital has in recent years focused on expanding not only the number of clinics and ancillary facilities it has in the region to serve area residents, but has grown to offer many services locally that many small towns usually cannot do. In 2025, Northern Regional Hospital announced a

partnership with Novant Health, a leading healthcare system in the Carolinas with 19 medical centers and nearly 800 clinics across North and South Carolina.

Northern is routinely recognized as one of the strongest community hospitals in the nation by a number of organizations which track hospital success. Among those are being given the Pulmonary Care Excellence Award multiple times by Healthgrades.com; multiple 5-star rating by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS); and multiple “A” ratings from the Leapfrog Group, an agency that monitors and grades hospital safety, results, and effectiveness; the American Heart and Stroke Association’s “Target Stroke Gold Plus Elite Honor Roll Award” and “Type 2 Diabetes Honor Roll Award;” as well as being chosen as a “Great

Community Hospital” by Becker’s Hospital Review. Northern’s Skilled Care Nursing Center has also achieved a Top 10% national rating in U.S. News & World Report’s “Best Nursing Homes” in North Carolina Award.

Recently, the hospital was named one of Becker’s 100 Top Rural and Community Hospitals in the country, the only North Carolina facility named to the list..

Among the services offered by Northern and its network of practices are:

Cardiology diagnostic services: These include treadmill and stress tests and other programs to test and monitor cardiac health;

Cardiac Rehabilitation Services: “Cardiac rehabilitation programs typically last about three months and are often covered by your insurance,” the hospital said.

Emergency Department: The emergency department at the hospital is open and staffed by doctors and nurses seven days a week, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

“A triage nurse is on duty at all times to assess a patient’s condition as they arrive and determine the level of urgency needed for treatment,” hospital officials said. “All of our physicians are Board Certified in Emergency Medicine and specially trained for all types of emergencies including cardiac, pediatric, and trauma situations.”

The hospital also offers air transport with triage specialization to enable patients to transfer by air when necessary.

Pediatrics: “We provide primary care services for children aged 0 to 18. Our goal is to be more than just your doctor we want to be your partner in providing a personalized healthcare experience and establish a relationship for life,” the hospital’s website says of its pediatric care services.

Northern Pediatrics is recognized by the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) as a Patient-Centered Medical Home. According to the NCQA, patients of Patient-Centered practices are more likely to stay healthy, receive better communication from their physician, better manage chronic conditions, and “have a better experience.”

Primary Stroke Center: Northern Regional Hospital is certified as an Advanced Primary Stroke Center by The Joint Commission. This, hospital officials say, “demonstrates the hospital’s expertise and



Not only does Northern Regional Hospital work to meet the healthcare needs of its community, but hospital officials work with area schools and the community college to show how accessible a medical career can be. Here, members of the hospital’s Junior Volunteer Program pose for a photo.

commitment to the community in quickly treating stroke patients and providing the highest level of quality treatment and services according to national standards.”

Pulmonary Rehabilitation: While there is no cure for chronic lung disease, the staff at Northern Regional, in partnership with Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center, offers a team approach to dealing with chronic lung issues. This includes exercise and dietary guidance, education to help manage the condition, and support to reduce stress and stop harmful habits such as smoking. The team includes physicians, clinical exercise specialists, nutritionists, registered nurses, and registered respiratory therapists.

Surgery: The Surgery Center at Northern Regional Hospital is a state-of-the-art facility that includes four integrated digital operating rooms, pre-admission testing, patient prep and holding areas, day surgery, endoscopy, and Northern Regional Hospital has an updated, state-of-the-art MRI scanner.

Other services that make up the wide variety of services at Northern include women’s services (birthing center, obstetrics, gynecological procedures); family medicine, gastroenterology; imaging and radiology; intensive care, occupational health services, orthopaedics, otolaryngology, skilled nursing care, urgent care, urology, wound care, as well as a full-service wellness and fitness center.

“Our vision is to be the healthcare system of choice for the region,” hospital officials say. “Our organization will continually strive to meet these goals guided by our core values of trust, quality, customer service, compassion, commitment and fiscal responsibility.”

Taking flight

How Mount Airy-Surry County Airport is shaping the region's future

RYAN KELLY | ryan.kelly@mtairynews.com

The new terminal at Mount Airy-Surry County Airport is now complete, marking not just the opening of a building, but the culmination of years of strategic growth that has positioned this rural airfield as one of North Carolina's most economically powerful general aviation facilities.

The numbers tell a compelling story. The airport generates \$741 million in annual economic output and supports 2,275 jobs while collecting \$35.8 million in state and local taxes, according to the N.C. Department of Transportation's 2025 State of Aviation report. Among the state's 62 general aviation facilities, only Smith Reynolds Airport in Winston-Salem at \$885 million and Kinston Regional Jetport at Stallings Field at \$781 million rank higher.

For a rural county, those figures represent something extraordinary. The airport accounts for nearly 12% of all economic output generated by general aviation airports across North Carolina. It's an economic engine that operates largely out of sight for most residents, yet touches nearly every aspect of the county's business landscape.

"North Carolina is synonymous with aviation and aerospace innovation. We were the first in flight, and now, we are the future of flight," Gov. Josh Stein said recently, speaking about the state's growing aerospace sector.

"I think some people might say 'what's the big deal about the airport?'" Mount Airy Mayor Jon Cawley noted. "But operations there are important to local residents who don't own or fly a plane."

The new 9,500-square-foot terminal replaces the facility's previous 1,800-square-foot building, which state aviation officials had deemed too small based on the airport's activity and economic impact. The \$4.5 million project, funded by the state government,



RYAN KELLY | THE NEWS

A jet prepares for takeoff at Mount Airy-Surry County Airport. Recent improvements include extending the runway from 4,300 to 5,500 feet to accommodate larger aircraft and completing a full parallel taxiway to improve safety and efficiency.

represents far more than additional square footage.

Construction on the building began in late 2024. Airport Manager George Crater said the larger facility provides amenities similar to what is offered at big-city airports.

The terminal houses airport staff alongside offices for the Surry County Economic Development Partnership (EDP), a partnership Crater said has proven successful at airports across the state.

"We thought what a great match it would be to have airport staff and what we do combined with the economic development team kind of intertwine together," Crater said earlier this year. "That's why we increased it to 9,500 square feet on this terminal building so that we could have all the team kind of together and we felt like we can feed off of each other."

A strategic partnership

The decision to relocate the Surry County Economic

Development Partnership to the airport terminal carries both practical and symbolic weight. For years, EDP has operated from county-owned offices off State Street in Mount Airy. The move to the airport places the organization at what may be the most strategic location in the county for business development.

Blake Moyer, president and CEO of EDP, said the organization is excited about the relocation.

“EDP is super excited to be locating out here at the new airport terminal,” Moyer said. “The airport is a unique asset, and this building is going to be a really high quality place for us to use as a marketing tool when we’re trying to talk about the quality of Surry County and the assets herein.”

The proximity to corporate aviation traffic creates natural opportunities for face-to-face contact with business decision-makers who might otherwise fly in and out without ever meeting local economic development officials.

“This is a very active airport with a lot of corporate business traffic that we’re happy to get to be adjacent to and be a part of,” Moyer said. “Being here might also give us a couple extra chances to run into some interesting folks that fly in here and tell them a little bit more about Surry County.”

When executives from major corporations arrive via private jet to visit existing facilities or scout potential sites, they’ll land at an airport where economic development professionals are literally next door, ready to showcase the county’s assets and address questions about infrastructure, workforce, incentives and quality of life.

“Obviously if they’re flying in, it’s always better to meet them where they’re coming,” Moyer added.

The symbolism extends beyond convenience. In economic development, perceptions matter enormously. A modern, well-appointed terminal housing a professional economic development team sends a clear message that Surry County is serious about business, investing in infrastructure, and positioning itself to compete for quality jobs and capital investment.

“I think it’s important to invest when you’ve got the opportunity to invest in long-term assets that are going to be for the public good,” Moyer said. “This project is certainly going to be a long-term asset for our community to benefit off of.”

More than a pit stop

The new facility includes a pilot’s lounge and quiet

room for aviators waiting on clients, multiple offices, a large conference room, and a spacious lobby area for travelers. The facility also includes approximately 1,500 square feet for a café, which Crater has said could provide a revenue stream for the airport while making it a more attractive destination for pilots.

“All the other airports in North Carolina have (dining) with good restaurants and have been very successful and it increases the aviators coming in — that is what we want to do,” Crater said.

The dining component addresses a practical need while also encouraging pilots and passengers to linger rather than simply refuel and depart. A pilot stopping for fuel might grab lunch at the café, then decide to take advantage of courtesy cars to explore downtown Mount Airy or visit Pilot Mountain. Business travelers with time between meetings might work from the conference room rather than sitting in their aircraft.

These seemingly small amenities add up to something larger: transforming the airport from a functional stopover into a genuine destination that showcases the county’s hospitality and quality of life.

Years of strategic growth

The new terminal represents the latest phase in a multi-year expansion plan that has steadily enhanced the airport’s capabilities and competitive position.

In recent years, the facility has extended its runway from 4,300 to 5,500 feet to accommodate larger aircraft, completed a full parallel taxiway to improve safety and efficiency, and expanded hangar capacity. Each improvement has been funded through a combination of state grants, federal infrastructure funding, and local investment.

The state budget finalized in November 2021 included \$2.9 million for construction of the new terminal building and \$1.5 million for completion of the parallel taxiway. Additional funding has flowed to the airport through various sources, including \$1.5 million in state capital improvement grants in 2024 and annual allocations from the federal infrastructure bill totaling \$159,000 per year.

“We’re very fortunate with our state legislators helping us get funding,” Crater said. “We’re very fortunate by the massive support we get from the county commissioners and the City of Mount Airy.”

The airport has experienced significant growth recently, with fuel sales increasing 35% over the past year. That growth reflects increased corporate jet

traffic as well as steady increases in general aviation activity.

Training the next generation

The facility also recently added Talon Aviation's flight training operations, with the Davie County-based flight school relocating two of its three aircraft and most of its operations to Mount Airy. The company announced plans to occupy the former terminal building once airport operations transition to the new facility.

Talon Aviation brings five years of experience with four certified flight instructors. The addition of flight training services could further boost traffic at the airport while also creating a pipeline of pilots who become familiar with the facility early in their careers.

"We felt very confident that they would be a really good fit with us at the airport," Crater told the Airport Authority. "They're moving a lot of students and we're excited. We think this will be a lot of traffic at the airport."

Moyer noted that the flight school "adds a new asset to our community, bringing in new people and traffic to the airport where they will see from the sky the beauty of the surrounding area."

"The flight school will expand opportunities and add to the great things that are happening at the Mount Airy-Surry County Airport," Airport Authority Chair Bill Goins said.

Looking ahead

Crater said he expects the airport's economic output to increase even more with the new terminal now operational, which he believes will also increase awareness about the facility in general.

The airport's consistent performance in state rankings underscores its importance to the regional economy, demonstrating sustained economic impact rather than a one-time spike.

The 2025 State of Aviation report found that North Carolina's aviation industry contributes \$88 billion each year to the state's economy and supports more than 427,000 jobs statewide. General aviation facilities like Mount Airy-Surry County Airport account for \$6.8 billion of that total economic output.

Local communities earn significant returns from general aviation facilities, where nearly 4,000 aircraft generate \$6.8 million in local property tax revenues. A single \$15 million aircraft based at an airport



Airport Manager George Crater stands at the construction site of the new Mount Airy-Surry County Airport terminal. The 9,500-square-foot facility now houses airport staff alongside offices for the Surry County Economic Development Partnership.

generates the same property taxes as 60 typical homes, without the high level of public infrastructure residential areas require, according to the state Department of Transportation.

The airport currently serves as home base for corporate jets belonging to local manufacturers and other businesses with far-flung operations requiring rapid, flexible transportation. These aircraft enable executives to maintain facilities in rural North Carolina while still reaching major markets and supplier networks efficiently.

For many residents, the airport remains out of sight and out of mind. Yet it represents a critical piece of infrastructure that helps existing employers remain competitive while making the county more attractive to potential new investment. In an era when rural communities struggle to maintain economic vitality, Mount Airy-Surry County Airport stands as a powerful example of how strategic infrastructure investment can generate sustained returns that benefit an entire region.

The new terminal opening marks a milestone in Surry County's ongoing transformation into a community that competes effectively in a global economy while maintaining the character and quality of life that make it distinctive.

With the county's economic development team now working from offices at the airport terminal, they're positioned to leverage one of the region's most valuable assets in telling Surry County's story to the business leaders who can shape its future. That's the real takeoff this new terminal represents.



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