

Tourism in the Hickory Metro

2020 - 2021 Year in review

Silver Linings During a Pandemic year

In the middle of the pandemic there were many silver linings, one being community partners joining together to help the local leisure and hospitality community with current struggles and look forward by preparing for the future in the industry. The Chamber of Catawba County, Catawba Valley Community College (CVCC), local tourism partners including restaurant owners, winery/brewery/distillery owners, and the Visit Hickory Metro team started the county's first Hospitality Academy.

In less than a year the CVCC Hospitality Academy kicked off in July 2021 with more than a dozen students. The 9-module course spans 13 weeks and includes

courses on customer service, professionalism, teamwork and communication, health and safety, dining etiquette, financial management, hospitality law and career and professional development.

"Leisure and Hospitality" includes

arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodations, food services and drinking places. Some businesses considered tourism related are not under the leisure and hospitality category, and all of these categories have grown and/or recovered to where they were before COVID. Including wineries/breweries (some are considered manufacturing), furniture shopping, commercial shopping which is under general merchandise.

Taylor Dellinger with the Western Piedmont Council Of Governments (WPCOG) shared data with us in July 2021. This data represents the Hickory MSA (Catawba, Caldwell, Burke, and Alexander Counties). The latest data shows a near complete recovery in the leisure and hospitality category. There were 14,100 leisure and hospitality jobs in May 2021 which is slightly higher than the February 2020 number which was 14,000. Leisure and hospitality has gained 5,200 jobs since April 2020.

Where does Leisure and Hospitality fall in the ranks of % of employment compared to the other top industries for the Hickory MSA? The hospitality industry ranks 5th compared to other industries. Top 5 industries in May 2021 (Source:

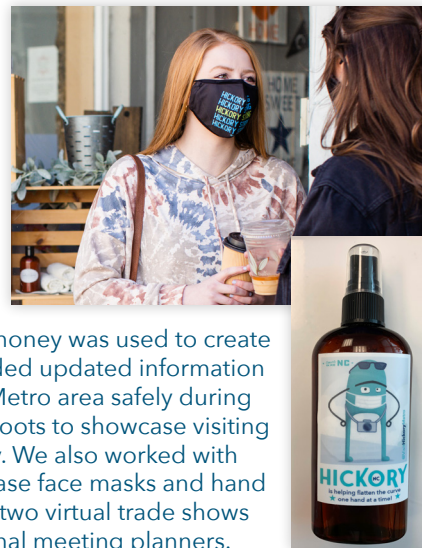
Current Employment Statistics) were Manufacturing, Government, Health Care/Social Assistance, Retail Trade and Leisure and Hospitality.

Tourism Grants and PPP

Federal dollars awarded to Visit NC were dispersed to partners across the state in need. The Hickory Metro Convention Center & Visitors Bureau was able to apply for CARES Act funds through Visit NC, in which we received \$20,750. The money was used to create two videos which provided updated information on visiting the Hickory Metro area safely during the pandemic, photo shoots to showcase visiting the Hickory Metro safely. We also worked with local suppliers to purchase face masks and hand sanitizers and attended two virtual trade shows with state and SE Regional meeting planners.

In addition, Our State Magazine gave us a grant to help pay for ads that Hickory puts in the magazine, with it's large readership our community gets many visitors due to seeing ads or reading feature stories about the Hickory Metro.

The Hickory Metro Convention Center & Visitors Bureau also received \$130,502 from the Small Business Association's (SBA) Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). The loan assisted the organization in paying its employees and was forgiven.



Helping Out During the Pandemic

During the pandemic, the convention center was a training center for a local company, a distribution center for Christmas gifts and a vaccination clinic. In FY 2019-2020, Merchant Distributors, Inc. (MDI) used the facility for four months training hundreds of new temporary employees to assist MDI with distributing food and other items across the county at the beginning of the pandemic.

The Salvation Army and United Way of Catawba County brought the Christmas Bureau to the center in December 2020 which gave the organizations and volunteers plenty of room to spread out. The Christmas Bureau served 1,458 children ages 0 - 12 and 373 teens 13 - 18 years old. Parents or guardians were able to safely pick up the gifts by receiving the packages at their car.

Catawba County Public Health moved into the convention center in December 2020 and opened the COVID-19 vaccine clinic the last week of the year. The convention center was the vaccine hub in the county until June 2021. Within six months the health department administered 52,720 COVID-19 vaccines. For some locals coming to the convention center to get their vaccine was their first visit to the convention center.



Occupancy Tax Revenue

There are **24** lodging entities, including VRBO and Airbnb, in Hickory and Conover that pay occupancy tax to the Hickory - Conover Tourism Development Authority (HCTDA). Overnight visitors in Hickory and Conover pay a 6% occupancy tax that goes toward paying for and operating the HMCC, and to market the Hickory Metro as a business and leisure destination.



Patricia and Ralph Hatch are owners of Sweet Tea B&B in Conover and have guests visit from all over the country.

Hickory and Conover offer all types of lodging amenities which cater to all people whether someone is visiting for business, leisure or sports.

Occupancy tax revenue decreased

tremendously due to the pandemic but began to rebound by April 2021. In recent years occupancy tax revenue has been between \$1.8 and \$2.1 million. In fiscal year 2020-2021 occupancy was \$1.4 million.

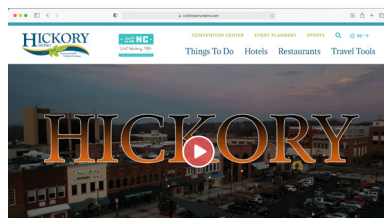
Visit Hickory Metro Destination Guide



The 2021-2022 Visit Hickory Metro Destination Guide, which was produced in-house, was completed in April and within four months almost 9,000 copies have been distributed across the state and beyond. It's also available online.

www.VisitHickoryMetro.com

There has been a large increase in website traffic for www.VisitHickoryMetro.com. Created in 2019, the vibrant site promotes things to do, local restaurants, places to stay, and blogs/stories. In the midst of the pandemic, a COVID-19 page was created with updates on all the local restaurants and activities.



@VisitHickoryMetro

Facebook

- Total Page Views: 6,213
- Gained Page Likes: 231
- Gained Followers: 251
- Post Reach: 125,429
- Story Reach: 6,767
- Paid Reach: 2,626,175

Instagram

- Total Followers: 2,067
- Gained Followers: 536
- Post Reach: 96,346
- Post Impression: 108,214
- Story Reach: 36,519

Giphy

Total Views: 1,123,145



Updates & Expansion Plans

- Two sets of restrooms are now equipped with touchless faucets, soap, hand dryers and toilets. In addition, there is a fresh new look in the restrooms on the Hickory and Conover hallways.
- The convention center is known for cleanliness, however, with the pandemic additional cleaning practices were and continue to be put in place. With staff adapting and adjusting to guidance given from the state and CDC the center was able to hold safe events and remain open. Also, all staff participated in the Visit NC "Count on Me NC" and the Chamber's "Open and Safe" trainings.
- The HCTDA, which is the governing board of the Hickory Metro Convention Center and Visitors Bureau revisited the addition and renovation plans that were almost complete in the middle of the pandemic. With meetings, conventions, and sporting events making changes due to the pandemic, the board chose to rethink future expansion plans at the convention center. Instead of adding more meetings rooms and updating offices and other spaces, the board has chosen to add a 35,000 square foot addition with a 30-foot ceiling which is perfect for expo space, and sporting events including basketball, volleyball and cheerleading. The existing Catawba space of the convention center will be renovated to be a ballroom and include three high tech meetings rooms. The HCTDA hopes to approve construction drawings by the end of 2021 then make plans to begin the addition and renovation in 2022 or 2023.



Hickory Metro Convention Center Events

This past year was not a typical year due to the pandemic but there was still activity at the convention center.

Totals:

Corporate/Government:	67
Public:	24
Sports:	10
SMERF (Social, Military, Education, Religious, Fraternal):	9
Association:	10
Total # of Events:	120



www.VisitHickoryMetro.com
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Fiscal Year 2020-21
Annual Report
September 2021