



The Southwestern Commission

The Southwestern North Carolina Planning and Economic Development Commission was created in November 1965 by joint resolution of the county commissioners of Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon and Swain Counties, and the region's 14 (now 16) town councils. The Southwestern Commission is one of 17 non-profit Regional Councils across North Carolina and among 500-plus such organizations around the country.

The Councils' principal purpose: To provide administrative and technical support for member-governments receiving grants from government agencies and foundations for everything from infrastructure improvement to senior citizen services. They facilitate planning, mediate disputes, and help governments find expert assistance.

While many things have changed in the ways local governments obtain grants and deal with state and federal agencies, the Southwestern Commission still focuses substantial energy on intergovernmental cooperation. In the rural mountain region, that energy is invested in "relationship capital," primarily in one-on-one dealings between Southwestern Commission professionals and long-time business and political leaders in each community. It helps considerably that the two lead professionals at the Southwestern Commission – executive director Bill Gibson and development and assistant director Vicki Greene – are natives of the region with more than three decades of experience working with elected officials and their staffs. The relationships they've built over the years uniquely qualify Gibson and Greene and the Southwestern Commission for pioneering the Mountain Landscapes Initiative in their seven-county area – Region A.

Here's how the pilot was born: During the summer of 2007, at about the same time The Community Foundation was drafting its MLI proposal, Greene and Gibson organized a Growth Management Workshop in Macon County to address some of the same issues the MLI was designed to target. The results of that workshop were immediately applauded and set the stage for the "Tool Box" pilot.

"There might have been a time not so long ago when land-use planning was too controversial in our region to be on the top of election officials' agendas," says Gibson. "But there's been a change. In fact, I think the politics has just about flipped on this issue. Now, current and former officials are calling and asking for help planning for growth. There could not be a better time for this initiative. And there could not be anything more important."

Says Greene, project manager of the "Tool Box" pilot: "This is an exciting opportunity. I feel as if we've been preparing for this for years. Finally, the time is right."

