Western North Carolina is full of breathtaking views and rugged terrain, including the highest mountain in the East, Mount Mitchell. But when it comes to the region’s economy, its $3 billion tourism industry stands tallest. It employs about 30,000 people, says Wit Tuttell, executive director of Visit North Carolina, the tourism arm of Cary-based Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina Inc. “Asheville is exploding with new hotels, attractions and the [craft] brew scene. Boone has added hotels. Tweetsie Railroad is expanding. Harrah’s just built a second casino in Murphy, and Tryon is home to an equestrian center.”

A team of hospitality and tourism students at Cullowhee-based Western Carolina University analyzed 2015 tourist spending in 26 western North Carolina counties. They calculated $3.34 billion in total spending, 3.5% more than the previous year. That created 31,540 jobs.

But it hasn’t been all good times for tourism. “During the [recent] recession, people still came,” Tuttell says. “They didn’t stay as long, but they came. Tourism is strong and it continues to grow.” You can raise a glass to the region’s craft brewing industry, which offers taprooms, festivals, tastings and tours, for helping that happen.

Chico, Calif.-based Sierra Nevada announced in January 2012 that it was building a $110 million brewery with about 95 full-time and 80 part-time jobs in the small Henderson County community of Mills River. Three months later, Fort Collins, Colo.-based New Belgium Brewing Co. announced a $175 million brewery in the River Arts District of Ashe-
Sylva-based Southwestern North Carolina Planning and Economic Development Commission includes Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon and Swain counties. “We recognized we’d have an easier time pulling together as a region instead of independently,” says Executive Director Sarah Thompson. “Tourism is a huge sector for us, and it’s great, but we want diversification.” One focus of the partnership is improving access to regional broadband internet. It’s an expensive proposition in the seven-county region, which counts 200,000 residents. “This is our most important economic-development need. We are fortunate to have fiber [optics cable] in the ground, and we would love to grow our technology sector.”

Ben Hamrick is a longtime Asheville resident and businessman. Born and raised in Shelby, he graduated from Appalachian State University in Boone and is CEO of Asheville-based accounting firm Johnson Price Sprinkle PA, which also has offices in Marion and Boone. “We focus on small to midmarket companies that are representative of the local economy. Our clients are entrepreneurial and are in the hospitality, health services and manufacturing sectors.”

Hamrick joined JPS in 1983 and has served as Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce chairman. He has witnessed the city change. “It’s remarkable what has happened here.
We have a great downtown, awesome restaurants and a great beer scene. We’re benefiting from Asheville’s ‘cool’ factor. Asheville’s population was 90,918 as of July 1, 2015, according to N.C. Office of State Budget and Management. The four counties in the Asheville region — Buncombe, Haywood, Henderson and Madison — are home to almost 442,000 people. “We’re going to be a half million population in a few years,” says Clark Duncan, director of business development for the economic-development division of Asheville Chamber of Commerce. “Asheville is the true urban center of the mountains and continues to be a growth center for professional opportunities.”

Manufacturers, such as Evendale, Ohio-based GE Aviation, which recently invested almost $200 million in its Asheville and West Jefferson plants, craft brewers and others have provided Asheville with $5 billion in economic development over the last five years, says Ben Teague, chief operating officer and executive director of the economic-development division of Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce. “What differentiates us is the culture and brand of who we are. We’re fiercely independent and diverse with an arts culture and a spirit of outdoor adventure.”

Asheville’s economic-development efforts leverage those regional characteristics to attract businesses. Workforce readiness, quality of life and an affordable cost of living are becoming important business drivers, Duncan says. “We are attracting a highly educated demographic and among the fastest growth sectors is millennials. They are drawn to Asheville because of new and emerging opportunities. Asheville is now home to technology startups, as well as other technology companies that are moving here and scaling their businesses to Asheville, where the costs are not as high as in Silicon Valley.”

Venture Asheville, which started in 2014, is an initiative of the Economic Development Coalition for Asheville-Buncombe County and the Asheville chamber. It nurtures the entrepreneurial ecosystem, connecting startups to mentors, talent and funding. Duncan says its network of 40 angel investors has helped 13 startups find more than $600,000.

Asheville and Buncombe County aren’t the only ones seeing economic gains. Tuttle says Tryon International Equestrian Center in Polk County, which opened in 2014 with 10 riding arenas and 850 permanent stalls, features 30 weeks of shows each year. It will host the 2018 FEI World Equestrian Games. It’s expected to attract 500,000 spectators and produce an economic impact of more $400 million over its 14-day run, making it one of the largest sporting events in the state’s history. “The FEI World Games is going to be like the U.S. Open

Taiwan-based Everest Textile Co. chose Rutherford County for its first U.S. factory, a 400,000-square-foot building in Forest City that will employ more than 600 people.

Higher education, such as Appalachian State University and its 18,000 students in Boone, continues to be an important sector in western North Carolina.
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golf championship for horses,” he says. “It’s a $125 million investment and will fill hotels all the way to South Carolina, Asheville, Charlotte and beyond.”

About 6,000 Rutherford County residents cross the county line for jobs each workday. “They go in all directions,” says Tom Johnson, interim director of Rutherford County Economic Development. “We would like to keep them here ….”

Efforts to increase local employment opportunities start with Gateway West Commerce Park. The 90-acre county-owned industrial park has been developed for advanced manufacturing, automotive and technology companies. They also include Miami-based CMI Enterprises Inc., a supplier of soft-trim textiles and fabrication for the automotive, furniture and health care industries. It announced a 150,000-square-foot vinyl manufacturing plant and 30 jobs in Forest City in January. And in late 2016, Taiwan-based Everest Textile Co. spent $18.5 million to purchase and prepare its first U.S. factory, a 400,000-square-foot building in Forest City. It will employ more than 600 people, and hiring is expected to start this year.

Caldwell County’s manufacturing legacy is filled with textiles and furniture, two industries hit especially hard during the Great Recession. The unemployment rate was about 17% in 2010, says Deborah Murray, executive director of the county’s Economic Development Commission. “We lost more than 10,000 jobs. We were in the bottom two or three counties for employment every month.” The rate fell to about 4% in April, she says, the lowest since December 2000. That ties it for 26th best among the state’s 100 counties.

Murray credits the community for reducing the unemployment rate. Caldwell Is Hiring, for example, is a job fair where job seekers meet face to face with employers. “We wanted to do everything we could to give people hope,” she says. “We have evolved over the last seven years, and now we have more employers than available workforce.”

Caldwell is home to strong plastics and packaging industries. Murray says its biotechnology and pharmaceutical sectors are growing, and manufacturing still makes an impact. Diamond Bar, Calif.-based Ryan-Al Inc., which makes fiberglass doors, announced it was moving production to Lenoir from China last April. It will invest $1.7 million and create 53 jobs.

Andrew Tate is president of Hendersonville-based Henderson County Partnership for Economic Development. He describes Henderson’s economy as balanced. “We’re fortunate to have health care, tourism and manufacturing. We have weathered economic storms, and today we have low unemployment and a growing economy.” Retirees made up most of Henderson County’s population a decade ago, but now more than half of new residents are 35 years old or younger. He says they’re coming for the quality of life and job opportunities.

Henderson County is investing in workforce readiness initiatives to lure business and industry. Starting in the eighth grade, county schools provide vocational education to prepare students for jobs. Blue Ridge Community College, which has campuses in
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The region’s universities are a study in economic development

The University of North Carolina System recently asked Economic Modeling Specialists International to define the economic impact of public higher education in western North Carolina. So it studied the payroll, operational, construction and research expenditures of universities and community colleges. It also examined the spending habits of their students, visitors and alumni.

Moscow, Idaho-based EMSI found that the region’s public higher education institutions injected at least $2 billion into the state’s economy during fiscal year 2012-13. About 75% of that remained in Buncombe, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Macon, Madison, Swain and Transylvania counties.

But the economic-development support offered by the region’s three public universities goes beyond dollars. They also provide postsecondary education opportunities for students and professionals along with technology, innovation and entrepreneurial support.

UNC Asheville opened STEAM Studio in 2016. It’s a 12,000-square-foot multidisciplinary space filled with state-of-the-art equipment in downtown Asheville. Here, art freely mingles with STEM — science, technology, engineering, math — studies, which are the basis of modern workforce training.

Brent Skidmore, a sculptor and associate art professor, teaches at the studio. He was drawn to the new curriculum after a successful career as an artist. “Thanks to technology, we artists can make anything we can dream about.” STEAM Studio includes woodworking and metalworking shops, which allow art and engineering students to collaborate on a variety of projects, from electric vehicles to equipment that helps disabled people. He says the disciplines complement each other more than one might believe at first glance. “The art students bring artistry and design to engineers, and the engineers bring their aptitude for the way things work to artists.”

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a $700,000 grant to UNC Asheville in April. It will support an arts and education initiative focused on public humanities and community engagement. The grant will help fund UNC Asheville: Leading the Public Arts and Humanities in Asheville. “We don’t want to be an inaccessible college on the hill,” says Joseph Urgo, provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs. “We want and need to reach out and entice others to come onto our campus.”

The four-year initiative has four goals. Urgo says it will expand the university’s partnership with Black Mountain College Museum and Arts Center. It will document the influence of African-Americans on the region’s culture, and it will create partnerships with local community colleges and education institutions. Lastly, it will establish an affiliates and fellows program in humanities and create models for public liberal arts and humanities through programming at the Center for Creative Entrepreneurship and STEAM Studio.

Cullowhee-based Western Carolina University’s Corporation for Entrepreneurship and Innovation is in its third year. Operated by WCU’s College of Business, it facilitates public-private partnerships of business owners, faculty and students. The university also offers existing businesses support — from finding funding to selling to the government — through the UNC System’s Small Business Technology Development Center, whose local offices are in Cullowhee and Asheville. It also has small-business support centers at the region’s community colleges.

Watauga County, home to Boone-based Appalachian State University, works in a unique economic-development setting, says Joe Furman, the county’s economic-development director. “Industrial development is difficult here because of the challenging topography of Watauga County and its elevation. We have no rail, no airport and no interstate. But we do have space to accommodate entrepreneurial endeavors.”

Appalachian State is cultivating student startups by partnering with Startup High Country, a team of entrepreneurs, coders, investors and technology professionals that have a passion for connecting high-tech and the community to spur economic growth. Startup High Country is branding the region as Silicon Hollar to highlight the area’s unique qualities and create a regional identity as an innovative community. A key component to Startup High Country’s success lies in the available resources ASU has to offer, according to the organization’s website. Local university contacts have helped pave the way by linking Startup High Country with students and faculty who have a vision and drive to start new companies locally. Both Startup High Country and ASU provide office space and resources to help budding entrepreneurs connect with professional services, funding, and mentors.

Students at Appalachian State University learn about entrepreneurship through partnerships with the local business community.
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Flat Rock and Brevard, offers an early college program and a career academy, which help students start business careers.

N.C. Department of Transportation is planning to widen 22 miles of Interstate 26 in Henderson and Buncombe counties. That will help grow businesses that supply the automotive industry, specifically The BMW Group's assembly plant in Spartanburg, S.C., about 50 miles to the south. “In Henderson County, we’re developing into an employment destination for western North Carolina between Asheville and Greenville, S.C.,” Tate says. “Overall, we are seeing tons of growth in plastic and metals and food and beverage. We are pursuing industry and some industry is reaching out to us.”

Last November, Germany-based specialty fabrics manufacturer Norafin Industries announced plans for an $18 million factory that will employ 46 people in Henderson County, its first in North America. GF Linamar, a joint venture between Switzerland-based GF Automotive and

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Canada-based Linamar Corp., will open a die-cast plant in Mills River, creating about 350 jobs in two phases over the next six years. The factory is spurring Southeastern Advanced Molding Technology Education Center, a job training initiative at Blue Ridge Community College that will provide quality workforce training in high pressure die casting of aluminum and magnesium parts and the production of a variety of plastic products through injection molding and extrusion processes.

Blue Ridge recently received a $550,000 Economic Catalyst grant for SAMTEC from Rocky Mount-based Golden LEAF Foundation, which invests the state’s share of the national tobacco settlement in economic-development projects. The money will purchase training equipment. GF Linamar, Holland, Mich.-based BuhlerPrince Inc. and Switzerland-based ABB also will donate $768,000 worth of equipment to SAMTEC. The equipment can simultaneously train 15 people, says Shanda Bedoian, Blue Ridge’s director of corporate and customized training. She works with manufacturers and others who need skilled workers, developing course work to meet current and future workforce needs. “This is the only hands-on training site in the country. It teaches maintenance, technology, quality control and operations.”

SAMTEC will support workforce training for any company in the region that uses injection molding and extrusion processes. “We are starting to entertain meetings with other companies to use this training program and equipment,” Bedoian says. “We will continue to develop content and classes, starting with continuing education and doing the groundwork to develop a foundation to build a curriculum guide.” She says eventually it could become a certificate or degree program.

Agriculture always has been strong in western North Carolina, where apples and Christmas trees are the top crops. Years ago, burley tobacco was king, but the federal tobacco buyout that started in 2005 has ended its cultivation, says Bill Yarborough.
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regional agronomist with Raleigh-based N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. “We have a strong beef industry thanks to the Western North Carolina Regional Livestock Center. We have sold $80,000 worth of cattle since the center opened [in 2011].”

Metzger says craft brewing has influenced agriculture businesses as smaller breweries search for hops and barley. “Scientists at N.C. State University are working on varieties of grains that will grow in our climate.” Asheville-based Riverbend Malt House has begun malting organic barley and wheat cultivated near Salisbury. It produces 12 to 16 tons of hand-crafted malt per month, and its goal is to eventually source all its raw materials from within 500 miles.

Locally produced foods are a growing market. Candler-based Blue Ridge Food Ventures helps startups take their creations from kitchen to store. It offers a test kitchen, navigation through complex FDA

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BRCC opened its Southeastern Advanced Molding Technology Education Center (SAMTEC) in May 2017 to serve the training needs of GF Linamar employees, as well as molding and die cast training for companies locally and across the nation.

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rules and lessons in marketing techniques. “Seventy companies have come through the program and are currently producing food,” Yarborough says. “It is a value-added business that is an economic driver and job creator.”

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College’s business incubation program provides space for startups to work, do inventory or organize a warehouse. “We help them take their businesses out of their homes and into an environment where they can network and collaborate,” says Shelley White, the college’s vice president of workforce development and continuing education. “They can use our space for four years and then transition out into the marketplace.” The incubation program has 18 companies, which combined employ about 50 people.

White says A-B Tech serves 10,000 students per year. Emerging courses of study include advanced manufacturing, hospitality and tourism, and biotechnology, which supports the craft-brew industry. A-B Tech also provides training to growing Asheville-based Mission Health, including a short-term electronic health records certification program. “Health records certification is a seven-month program that prepares students to take a national exam,” she says. “After a clinical internship our students can leave here making $14 or $15 an hour.”

Mission Health has locations in six western North Carolina counties. It’s investing $400 million in its Mission Hospital for Advanced Medicine, building a $45 million hospital in McDowell County and modifying maternity and outpatient centers at Angel Medical Center in Franklin, which serve patients from Jackson, Swain and Macon counties. It also is expanding the emergency department at Transylvania Regional and Highland-Cashiers hospitals and adding outpatient services at its Blue Ridge Regional Hospital in Spruce Pine.

Mission Health estimates its annual economic impact across the 18-county region at $976 million. That includes approximately 12,800 jobs, $335 million in earnings, $305 million of retail and wholesale trade activity, $171 million in health and education services, and $71 million in construction activity.

Hendersonville-based Park Ridge Health is the longest-serving hospital in Henderson County. Its network of more than 250 physicians and providers care for people at more than 30 locations. It has led the way in many medical firsts for the region, from hiring the state’s first registered nurses in 1916 to being the first and only health system to offer nanotechnology in the operating room with the Titan Spine NanoLock implant and the Pro-Axis Spine Surgery table, which uses specially designed software to precisely position the patient.

— Teri Saylor is a freelance writer from the Triangle.

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MANNA FoodBank
Chief Development Officer

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