

# GROWTH BOOM SENDS ASHEVILLE SOARING



**From infrastructure and land development to tourism hot spots, Buncombe County is open and ready for business.**

From left:

**Kit Cramer**, moderator, president and CEO, *Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce*

**David Dills**, market managing partner, *Dixon Hughes Goodman LLP*

**Richard Manske**, CEO, *Parsec Financial*

**Josh Dorfman**, CEO, *The Collider*

**Esther Manheimer**, mayor, *city of Asheville*

**Nancy Cable**, chancellor, *UNC Asheville*

**Ben Teague**, vice president for strategic development, *Biltmore Farms*

**Janice Brumit**, chair, *Dogwood HealthTrust*

**Mark Stone**, commercial banking manager, *First Citizens Bank*

**Arthur Salido**, executive director of community and economic engagement and innovation, *Western Carolina University*

The round table was hosted and sponsored by Asheville Area Chamber of Commerce. Additional sponsors were Biltmore Farms, DHG LLP, First Citizens Bank, Parsec Financial, UNC Asheville, Western Carolina University and The Van Winkle Law Firm. The transcript was edited for brevity and clarity.



## WHAT MAKES BUNCOMBE COUNTY ATTRACTIVE TO BUSINESSES?

**DORFMAN** I'm reminded of a conversation that I had on a visit to General Electric a couple years ago when we were talking with their HR manager. She was saying Asheville and Buncombe County are particularly unique because we're big enough to have businesses here of all sizes across different industries, and we're small enough for everyone to know each other. I think that is really unique.

And when you layer on our local culture that really is, in my experience in working with entrepreneurs, a pay-it-forward culture where if someone comes to this community and wants to get plugged in or tapped in, people are open to that and are welcoming of that. You have folks who are competitors but are also very willing to help each other. So, I think there's a uniqueness here and a culture that's also tied to our geography and the size of our population.

**SALIDO** I think we really punch above our weight when it comes to business resources and entrepreneurial resources. The Collider, being a climate science coworking space, is an incubator. But we have Hatch AVL Foundation, Venture Asheville, the small businesses centers and the Small Business and Technology Development Center. Every college is involved — like UNC Asheville and Western Carolina University — in incentivizing and helping students create businesses and start entrepreneurial activities while they're still students. I think that's very unique in a metro area of our size.

**MANHEIMER** We also try to create a welcoming environment. I hear from employers that the younger genera-

tions want to know that everyone is welcomed in the community, and that they're not going to see discrimination, whether it's gender identity or race or religion. That is actually a big concern of theirs — to make sure that their employees feel comfortable.

## HOW DO WE CONTINUE TO LEVERAGE THOSE ATTRIBUTES?

**MANSKE** I think it's more that we continue to recognize the role that the economy plays in bringing really great employees from all over the world to Asheville. We're competing against everyone now for great employees and great talent, and people can work from most everywhere these days in a lot of different professions. It works well for different demographics, too. There are step-down baby boomers that are coming into our market and bringing skill sets and different service-based jobs to our economy that are uniquely different than past periods of history.

**CABLE** I think one way to sustain this is to continue to recognize that intellectual capital is welcome here and it's already existing here. So many talented individuals in any form of business, creative arts, the arts itself, governmental work and educational work are welcome here. We can find a real merging here of creativity and intellectual capital that provides tremendous vitality for the region and particularly for the city.

## WHAT ISSUES DO YOU HEAR FROM INDIVIDUALS THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED?

**TEAGUE** During my time with the Economic Development Coalition and now at Biltmore Farms, we've contin-

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ued to be mindful of creating a place where people can raise their kids and raise their families, be healthy, get a great education, and then either stay or return here and have the job which gives them the quality of life that they want. There's a career ladder there, and I credit the Chamber of Commerce with thinking about this as they think about their strategic plans for the future — having a place at the table for everybody. That's important from the lower-skilled opportunities all the way to the Ph.D. opportunities. And our economy needs to be robust enough to be able to have everybody there.

The other thing that I would continue — or that I would want us to continue to think about — is the health of our families and kids in the future. Dogwood Health Trust will play a big part in that. You can't plant orange seeds and expect to get apple trees later. You can't plant unhealthy kids today and expect to get a healthy, functioning workforce in the future. So laying those plans that will have long-term benefits now is something that we really need to think about.

**THE ASHEVILLE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE HAS AN INITIATIVE, AVL GREATER, THAT FOCUSES ON LONG-TERM COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENTS. EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE IS ONE SPECIFICALLY, BUT THERE ARE OTHERS LIKE AFFORDABLE HOUSING. WHAT OTHER ISSUES CAN YOU THINK OF FROM AN INFRASTRUCTURE CAPACITY THAT NEED TO BE ADDRESSED?**

**DILLS** Well, from an infrastructure standpoint, I think connectivity. You know, when I talk to a lot of the businesses that I work with, that is probably one of the primary drivers as to where they put a new business or expand a business: their ability to connect and tap into that new economy. In Buncombe County, we



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**NANCY CABLE**  
UNC Asheville

have kind of a unique scenario in that within a three-hour drive, we can be in Charlotte, Atlanta and east Tennessee or Knoxville, which are three other large metro areas. That work and that collaboration with those communities will help drive business in Buncombe County.

But I do want to touch on something Ben talked about, which is that spot for everyone. I know in our industry, we find when we're recruiting talent to come into Buncombe County, the one thing we hear is, "Well, my spouse needs to find a job." Making sure that we have

enough high-paying opportunities for everyone — not only the person that we're recruiting but their family members once they get here — seems like one area that we could really ramp things up.

**IN TERMS OF WORKFORCE, WHAT ARE YOU HEARING FROM BUSINESSES? ARE PEOPLE ABLE TO FIND THE TALENT THAT THEY'RE LOOKING FOR?**

**STONE** That's probably one of the biggest challenges that we hear from local business people: The unem-





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ployment rate is low, but it's difficult for them to grow as they want to grow. How are we training our non-college students in the trades that they need as we continue to recruit industry and manufacturing here? Also the cost of living — it's like people have to live outside of Asheville to be able to work within Asheville. I think there's also some challenges around internet access in some of the rural areas. How do we extend water and sewer to some of the more rural areas? I've seen this group do a really good job of thinking regionally and including all the surrounding counties as they plan around these things.

**BUNCOMBE COUNTY DRAWS FROM MORE THAN 10 OTHER COUNTIES FOR LABOR, MEANING 40% OF THE POPULATION THAT WORKS IN BUNCOMBE EVERY DAY COMES FROM OUTSIDE THE COUNTY. THAT**

**IMPACTS ROADS, HEALTH AND SAFETY. IT'S ALSO A GREAT ASSET TO HAVE. ANY THOUGHTS ON TRANSIT?**

**MANHEIMER** Our city has the highest daytime to nighttime population change in North Carolina. We grow by 49% every day, and then we shrink every night. And that's a combination of workers coming into the city and visitors coming into the city. At my law firm in downtown Asheville, almost all of our staff don't live in the city limits and many don't even live in Buncombe County. If I said, "Hey, if I made it affordable for you to live in Asheville, do you want to move here?" They'd say no. They like living where they're living and commuting in.

I think we still do have a challenge around the budget in trying to support all the costs of being a host city. We are the hub of a regional

economy, and the structure in North Carolina for city funding is that cities have to rely on property taxes, some sales tax and fees. The cost of running a city grows every year at a pace that outpaces the natural growth of your revenue source. That's just math. That's just how it works. So, if you want to invest more in capital and deferred maintenance and all the things that you need to do to have a strong infrastructure for the city, you've got to get creative. The voters in Asheville recognized that back in 2016 when they approved \$74 million in general obligation bonds, which we've been methodically spending and investing.

There are some other challenges. Child care is a big issue. We have made offers to new attorneys trying to locate in Asheville, and they've had to turn us down because they could not find child care, and they

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went to another city like Atlanta. If you're looking for child care in Asheville, it's a several-months-long process to find quality child care. That is one of the collateral effects of having such a low unemployment rate: Those workers are not necessarily wanting to become child care providers.

**DO YOU HAVE ANY THOUGHTS ABOUT HOW HIGHER ED WORKS WITH THE REST OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM?**

**CABLE** Let's focus for a minute on the achievement gap in our K-12 system. It's particularly third-grade reading levels, and it's eighth- and ninth-grade mathematics skills levels where there is a divergence that happens even in our very strong city and county school system. We at UNC Asheville are trying to address this and, frankly, have been for quite

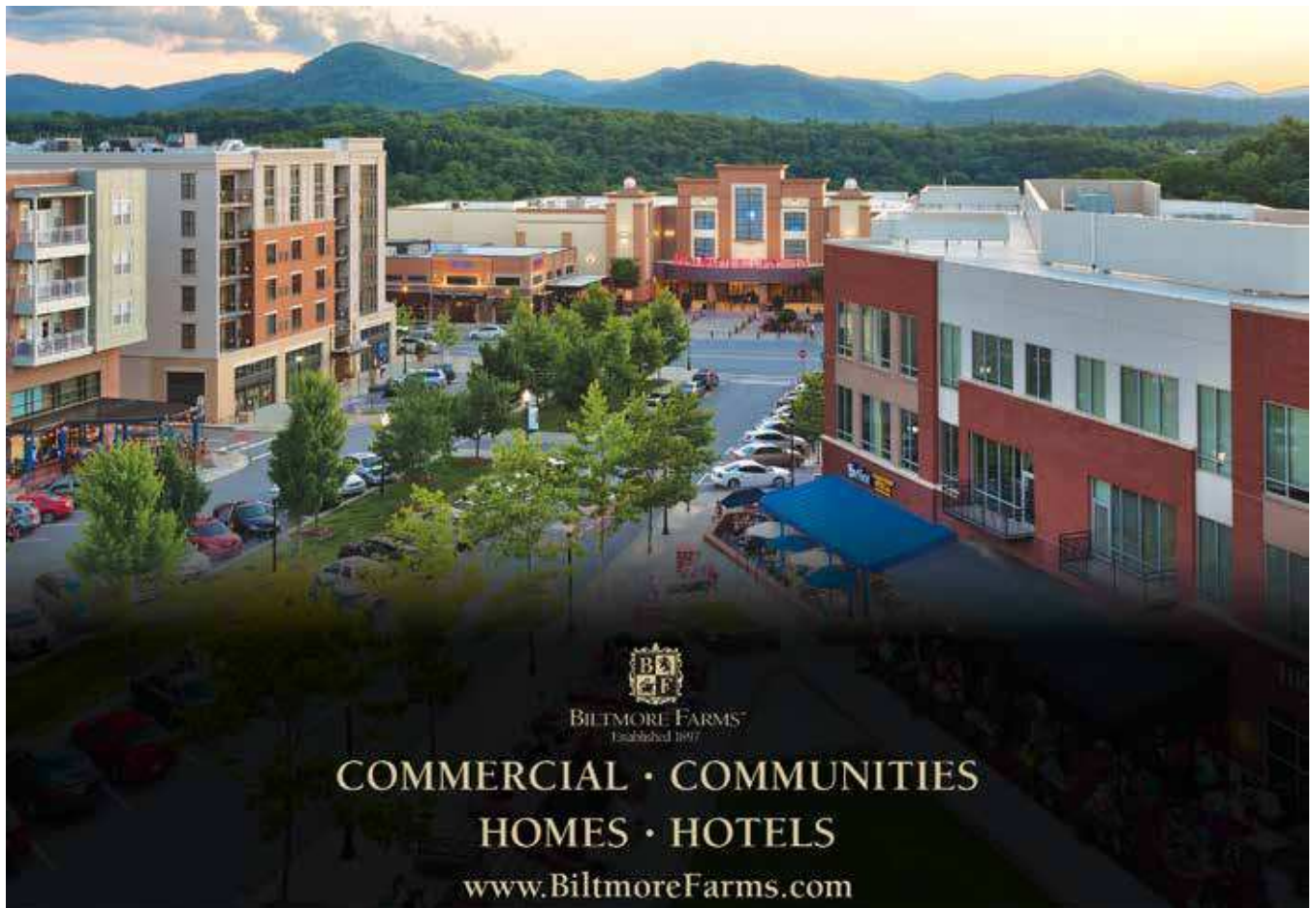
some time by deploying a number of student tutors into all kinds of different levels of student intervention with tutoring. We have the Marvelous Math Club, which is located in one of the neighborhoods and closing that achievement gap – both in reading and in math – through an after-school program that started as only tutoring, but became the hottest club to be a member of in town.

In terms of workforce development, I'm really proud to say that of UNC Asheville's graduating class, roughly 60% to 70% of them want to stay in Asheville. Most of them are employed here and our electrical and mechanical engineering students are in huge demand at General Electric Aviation. Together with Western Carolina University and Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, we are working in pretty synergistic ways to provide really

talented intellectual capital for the workforce here.

**AN OVERLAP OF SOCIAL ISSUES WITH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IS BEING EXPERIENCED ACROSS THE COUNTRY. WHAT IS DOGWOOD HEALTH TRUST DOING TO BE IMPACTFUL DURING THIS TIME?**

**BRUMIT** When HCA Healthcare purchased Mission Health, they paid \$1.5 billion for the assets. That money will come to Dogwood Health Trust. Our purpose is to dramatically improve the health and well-being of the citizens and communities in western North Carolina. That's an 18-county region. Every year starting in 2020, we will be awarding grants to nonprofits, health departments and governmental agencies to address the social determinants of health. What that means is upstreaming the things





that make people unhealthy or communities unhealthy. That comes to \$50 million to \$75 million in the region — that is unheard of in western North Carolina.

We will be addressing things in our communities like safe and affordable housing and food insecurity. We've talked about education. When a child goes to school and they are hungry, they can't learn. We will be talking about whether people choose food over medicine. We'll be talking about how we address the opioid epidemic. Our first \$25 million will be going to addressing the opioid crisis in western North Carolina. We know how that affects families. We know how that affects our workforce. We know that that's a huge economic deterrent, because if you don't have a workforce that is stable and that is healthy, we can't grow our economy. So that's very critical.

We're searching for a CEO. We



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We've continued to be mindful of creating a place where people can raise their kids and raise their families...

**BEN TEAGUE**  
Biltmore Farms

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have world-class candidates nationwide to run this organization. We've got a lot of things in the pipeline, but that's just a brief snapshot of what we'll be doing. Only The Duke Endowment in North Carolina is larger than us. In the United States, we are the largest per-capita foundation in the country. So, we're talking about around a million people, and we feel like over a period of time, we can be a model of healthy, resilient communities in America. We can be the poster child for health, wellness and economic stability, because this is going to be generational. We're not going to touch the corpus of the \$1.5 billion. We are going to live off of the investment income and push that out into communities so that we can really do things that don't put a Band-Aid on problems. We want to get to the source of the problem and create real solutions.

### AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT WILL ALSO BE A PRIORITY?

**BRUMIT** Absolutely. But if you don't have healthy communities, you don't have healthy growth in workforce and you don't have healthy growth in communities. We see that we can go in and really change the dynamic of communities. But it's not Dogwood doing it; it's the communities telling us what they need and us deploying the resources. So exciting.

**MANSKE** The Dogwood Health Trust as it relates to the size of the population is a very unique opportunity. And it really is something where our community needs to look at the role of something, like emotional intelligence in K-12 learning, and why we need to actually address all of the underlying causes of a lot of the different problems. That per capita versus

the size of the trust is very unique in trying to tackle something that, perhaps, is a little untraditional.

**BRUMIT** Well, 85% of the things that drive your health are outside of health care. It's not going to the hospital or to your doctor; it's what you do and how, your community and your environment and how safe your community is, how much nutrition you get, how much prevention you do. Your ZIP code is more important than your genetic code.

**CABLE** The Dogwood Trust also allows for leveraging additional philanthropic dollars, and we're seeing that movement forward. We've long been a recipient of grants from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. We're seeing a new inflow of additional grants in chemistry and the basic sciences

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from GlaxoSmithKline. We should, as a community, understand that it's an enormous game-changer in many ways, but it also leverages a tremendous amount of grants that feed the basic sciences, feed the social determinants, public health and the pharmacy issues.

#### HOW DO THE RECENT STOCK MARKET CHANGES AFFECT THE LOCAL ECONOMY?

**MANSKE** I think futures are up. It is true that a huge constituency of ours is retired investors throughout the bounds of western North Carolina. And the role of the national economy, global economy, stock market, big capital markets, like the direction of interest rates and other things, are going to have a huge impact on what happens in Buncombe County. We have a lot of people living on their money in

the mountains of western North Carolina.

I think it's an important contributor, and longevity is a concept that we really embrace at Parsec. We're looking closely at what affects our clients and our constituents as we all age and the decisions that are made. There's many different supporting industries that can really help service a huge base of customers and clients for lots of different businesses. So the role that the retired community plays is pivotal, and, of course, the quality of life that brings so many retirees here has to be protected and we will continue to benefit from a great trend.

#### THE AREA IS KNOWN FOR ITS BEAUTIFUL MOUNTAINS, BUT THEY CAN REPRESENT A DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGE. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON DEVELOPMENT AND AVAILABLE LAND?

**MANHEIMER** Right now, we're seeking public input following our comprehensive land-use plan rewrite and adoption last year. We're now fleshing out some of the things in that plan. Right now, we're asking people to give us input about our urban-code rezonings. These are large urban intersections in our community that have traditionally seen more of the old-school strip-mall concept, like the Kmart Plaza at Louisiana and Patton Avenue, and we are trying to think about redevelopment that's much more dense and has a more urban feel, a walkable feel, a livable feel. We know a lot of people want to live in cities now. They're moving back into cities, and they want to try to not own a car sometimes. They want to live close to where they work. We're trying to make sure that we get ahead of the redevelopment of those particular areas of town so that we see a product that does that.

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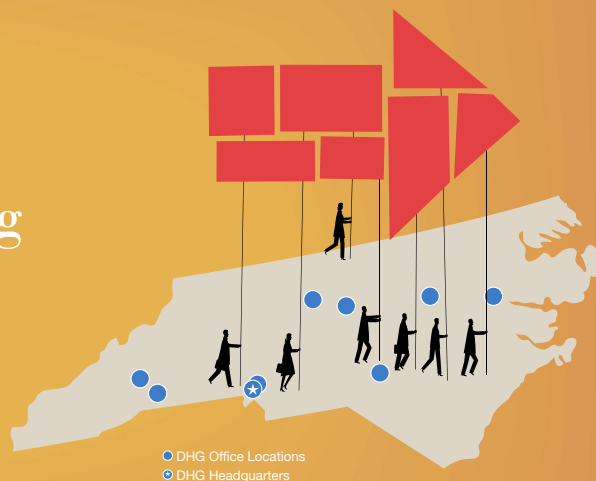
To go dense and up is a little bit of a challenge. I will tell you in Asheville, if you haven't heard, there are quite a few folks that would hope that we don't grow at all, that we stay just like we are. But that's a challenging sentiment, because the reality is that North Carolina's growing and we're one of the fastest-growing states in the nation. Not growing isn't really an option, as far as I am aware. Asheville is growing. It's not growing as fast as Raleigh or Charlotte, even, but it is growing. We want to preserve these beautiful mountains. Just growing out endlessly is not healthy for the environment, and that is not a healthy way to grow. The healthier way to grow is to grow in and grow up. I try, as mayor, to educate myself on best practices around growth and go visit a lot of places and study how it's done, but then also try to talk to constituents here about the real choices we should be making for our own community. ■



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We want to preserve these beautiful mountains. Just growing out endlessly is not healthy for the environment.

**ESTHER MANHEIMER**  
City of Asheville

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