

# Family-friendly, Affordable Buncombe

## Investing in families as a long-term workforce and economic mobility solution

As we look for ways to keep our county prosperous, addressing both its civic and financial health, we need to think of the connection between families and economic development. Healthy, economically-mobile families are a cornerstone of a prosperous community and sustained workforce.

Parents work every day in our schools, hotels, nonprofits, restaurants, stores, health care facilities, and local businesses providing the backbone of our local workforce and economy. But wages for so many employees have not kept pace with the skyrocketing costs of housing, child care, and transportation. As Asheville and Buncombe County becomes unaffordable for more families, we risk losing not only employees and entrepreneurs, but also a generation of civic and cultural engagement – e.g. PTA parents, faith community members, volunteers, board members, artists, neighbors.

The ingenuity of people who call Asheville and Buncombe County home has risen to meet challenges time and again. It's time to tap that ingenuity to invest the historic, increased property tax revenue that will result from the sale of Mission Health's properties to HCA for a family-friendly, affordable Buncombe.

Leadership from three broad-based community coalitions – Asheville-Buncombe

Preschool Planning Collaborative, Success Equation, and Asheville Regional Transit Coalition – have come together to support a visionary plan for investing the Mission property tax revenue. The plan builds on past successes and current best-practices to accomplish the following:

- **Expand high-quality, affordable early education for all children;**
- **Increase the number of apartments and homes affordable for working families; and**
- **Connect families to jobs, schools, and amenities with frequent and reliable transit.**

### 1. Expand high-quality, affordable preschool to all children

#### **Establish and fund an accountable, public-private Early Childhood Trust - \$3M annual**

The Trust will be tasked with implementing the Asheville-Buncombe Preschool Planning Collaborative's (ABPPC) Preschool Expansion Plan to provide an affordable, high-quality preschool option to all 3-4-year-olds and meet their long-term vision to ensure that every child age *birth to five* in Buncombe County has access to high-quality, affordable early care and education. Other counties are leading the way in investing property tax revenue to expand PreK programs – Mecklenburg (\$9M) and Durham (\$3.6M) both passed visionary plans in 2018 [see handout].

When we invest and replicate high quality programs for children, we can solve problems in early childhood development and show significant long-term improvements for children. ABPPC members spent a year and a half examining the research and the current landscape to develop a plan that fits

#### **Buncombe Families with Children**

Households w/ Children: 21,933

% Low Income Households w/ Children\*: 46%

% of Cost Burdened Renters\*\*: 51.5%

Affordability of Homes: 4.2x higher than Median Income

Average annual transportation costs (2 adults): \$4,428

Average annual enrollment fee for high-quality preschool: \$9,300

*\*less than 200% of federal poverty line equal to a family of 3 earning less than \$40,180/year*

*\*\*paying more than 30% of income on rent/utilities*

the needs of our county. We can improve affordability for parents while providing our children a foundation for their future educational –and career—success, leading to positive economic mobility.

## **2. Increase the number of apartments and homes affordable for working parents**

### ***Increase funding for the County's Affordable Housing Services Program - \$3M annual***

The County uses this fund to partner with nonprofit and private developers for new construction, home repair, down payment assistance, and rental assistance. These are important focus areas, but unfortunately the \$450K fund has not grown to keep pace with local families' needs. We have a strong local track record of using public funds to leverage the development of new apartments and homes through the City of Asheville's Housing Trust Fund. Wake County is leading the way with a \$15M property tax revenue investment to assist 100 families with homeownership and create 2,500 new units over five years.

Research is confirming what we've long known - that the neighborhoods and communities that families call home have enormous impact on their children's health, well-being, and educational success. Pediatricians, city planners, social workers, and teachers are all talking about the benefits of affordable, safe housing. Investing in proven affordability strategies – like down payment/rental assistance, public-private development loans, and repair/rehab – allows families to put down roots close to jobs and schools and raise our county's next generation of innovators.

## **3. Connect families to jobs, schools, and amenities with frequent and reliable transit**

### ***Fund the expanded, frequent service outlined in the Transit Master Plan - \$6M annual***

The City of Asheville recently approved a new Transit Master Plan. The year-long planning process engaged advocates, bus riders, and planners to design a right-sized transit system for our growing city and county that offers reliable and wide-spread service. Recent incremental investments in Asheville's transit system to extend hours and add Sunday service are already paying off with increased ridership and parents able to reach their jobs for Sunday shifts.

Transportation expenses represent a significant portion of a family's budget – increasing the further away you live from jobs and amenities. We want to invest first in funding the Transit Master Plan to bring Asheville's regional transit system into the 21st century, so riding the bus works better for city and county residents who have depended on it for years as well as making it an easy, reliable choice for new riders.

## **Conclusion**

Our vision for a family-friendly, affordable Buncombe requires \$12M in annual allocations from an estimated \$15M in new Mission Health property tax revenue between Buncombe County and the City of Asheville. These interconnected strategies of preschool, housing, and transit have broad community support, have traditional linkages to employability, and should be viewed as powerful economic development tools. Additionally, local public-private partnerships across our state are proving that innovative and significant investments can make a big difference on these issues. The Mission Health sale presents us an opportunity to make long-term investments in what matters - without raising current property taxes. Let's not waste this incredible opportunity.