

County builds on economic momentum

By [Larry Clark](#) | Hickory Daily Record

Leadership drives the future.

That was the recurring theme of Tuesday's meeting of the Catawba County Economic Development Corp.

Scott Millar, EDC executive director, referred to leadership often in praising the partnerships among governments, business and industry responsible for investment and the addition of jobs.

"Our partners and allies are key to our success," Millar told a packed house at the Hickory Metro Convention Center.

"There has been a lot of activity in the last 12 months, and other areas are taking notice" of Catawba County, he said.

Millar cited the attraction of new industry to the area and the opportunities gained by working with existing industry for economic growth.

He also referred to the deal with Apple for the giant data center in Maiden, a billion-dollar investment.

"This is a transformational opportunity," Millar said. "We have the means to continue the data initiative," indicating that Apple and Google, in Caldwell County, are not the end of data-oriented business recruitment.

Millar listed the old Carolina Mills property in Maiden, low water and electricity rates, the multi-jurisdictional park and the Committee of 100 through the Chamber of Commerce as marketing assets.

Leadership through partnerships has given Catawba County numerous successes, he said, and the next opportunity is energy, he said.

Millar pointed to the county's Eco-Complex and the relationship with Appalachian State University as critical to developing an energy initiative.

ASU is expanding its program on green energy and research.

Millar left no doubt that the time to move on an energy initiative is now.

J. Keith Crisco, N.C. secretary of Commerce, also hammered on proactivity.

"The future depends on leadership," he said. "The economic model of today won't last."

Crisco said leadership is innovative, bold and nimble.

"Always ask, what's next? It's the only way to grow and be successful."

Crisco touched on the Apple project and praised the local development effort. Success, he said, is the reason "I can't get the smile off Scott's face."

He emphasized North Carolina is committed to boosting existing industry as well as recruiting new business.

"The governor (Bev Perdue) is sales oriented," Crisco said. "She gets it on economic development."

The continuing budget resolution passed Monday by the General Assembly didn't appear to sit well with Crisco, but he said he expects a state budget to be in place by the end of the month.

He and Perdue plan to visit several states and foreign countries, including China, to get a better grip on the global economy.

"We must understand the global economy," he said, because part of North Carolina's future is to attract foreign investment.

Crisco cited a European trip where he went to the Paris Air Show, considered to be the premier event of its kind in the world.

Contacts made there resulted in "a lot of interest from the aerospace industry."

Crisco said state priorities include working to lower the 15 percent unemployment rate, aggressive pursuit of federal recovery money and exploiting the community college system's focus on leading career areas.

Leadership and continuing the strong local and state partnerships are keys to success, he said.

"You have a great community, and I'm proud to be a small part of it," Crisco said.

The undercurrent of the meeting was unmistakable: Because of recent successes, the future is brighter.

"The economy has been challenging for all of us," said Tony Rose, EDC chairman, "but the (EDC) staff has worked hard" and it's paid off.

And although relatively little was said about Apple coming to Maiden, its importance in Catawba County's future seems secure.

Millar quoted a contact of his in the data industry.

"There's not a chief information officer in the country that can ignore the Apple/Google data center corridor."

How Catawba County got to that point and will move beyond it was summed up when Millar told the business and industry representatives at the meeting, "Thank you for your leadership."