

# County Sets Its Priorities

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Creating jobs is the No. 1 priority of Catawba County Commissioners again this year as government officials strive to tackle high unemployment.

"The health of families and communities is based on employment," said Kitty Barnes, chair of the Catawba County Board of Commissioners. "If people aren't working, they can't afford food and a roof over their head."

She said that is why job creation remains a vital goal in Catawba County. She said jobs and the education that provides people with the skills they need to get jobs will always be a major focus. It was the top priority in 2008-09 fiscal year and will continue to be in the 2009-10 fiscal year.

Catawba County leaders set goals for each fiscal year, running from July 1 through June 30. When commissioners discussed goals for the 2009-10 fiscal year, there were many goals they wanted to continue from 2008-09.

The county wants to continue to help residents secure jobs through educational opportunities, investments in infrastructure and recruiting desirable businesses to the area.

"What makes the next year tricky is the economy," said Assistant County Manager Dewey Harris.

Barnes said an important element in job creation is also the recruitment of new jobs to the area. She said two successes in that area have been in Convergys and Covation. Convergys has already hired about 200 people with plans to hire as many as 500. Meanwhile Covation, which announced plans to move into a shell building in the McDonald Business Park last week, will hire 914 people over two years.

"Obviously we're still working on the whole economic development piece," Barnes said. "In this economy, I think that will be something continual."

Harris said the county's partnership with Catawba Valley Community College will help ensure that the workforce is trained for tomorrow's jobs, particularly in the field of technology. Barnes said nursing is another area of focus, especially as medical services continue to rise in demand as the population ages.

The 2010 goals also continue the county's mission to provide services to residents without raising the current property tax rate of 53.5 cents per \$100 valuation. The county is in deeper economic turmoil than it was last year, but Harris said leaders are committed to providing the same level of services as much as possible in light of the economic uncertainty.

"It's not a good time to be taxing people," Harris said.

He said it will place a bigger financial burden on the county though, especially in a time when local officials can't count on state or federal funding. Harris said if President-elect Barack Obama's plan to stimulate the economy through billions in new infrastructure projects passes, that would provide more funding for other necessities.

"Certainly this is not the time to try to do capital projects and borrow money from the government," said Barnes.

She said the county is in a good position with capital projects in the current fiscal year with everything funded except the justice center expansion. Though she noted it's early for that anyway.

"We're going to have to continuously pay attention to when is the right time to launch something in our capital plans," Barnes said. "If there is a stimulus package we might be able to take advantage of, it might be beneficial for us."

New goals beginning in July will include a greater focus on communications with citizens. In September, the county became one of the first governments in the state to start using Facebook, an online social and informational network. Catawba County is also now utilizing Twitter, a service that networks people through their mobile phones. Harris said in the future, the county would also like to use the government channel on Charter channel 3 more effectively than it has been as a means of getting information to the public. Since 1998, the county has only used the channel for text announcements.

Harris said the county also plans to begin implementation of improvements to the county's court system to address the need for additional courtroom space. In November 2007, residents voted in favor of the quarter-cent sales tax, the proceeds of which will go toward a courtroom expansion at the Catawba County Justice Center among other county projects.

The EcoComplex is another new priority for the county as leaders strive to promote its environmental and economic development purposes to the public and the region. Harris said the county plans to emphasize its potential for research, including alternative fuels.

"We're on the cutting edge of green technology," Barnes said.

She said the EcoComplex will continue to evolve its concept of recycling and reusing materials for the betterment of multiple businesses or entities.

Looking back on 2008, Barnes feels confident the county is heading in the right direction. Though the economy will present a challenge, she said perhaps it will provide a good assessment of the things the county is doing well and those that it could do better.

“I just have a lot of hope that we will have a very productive year in Catawba County in finding additional employment opportunities,” Barnes said. “We’ve been fortunate to have a number of economic development from the east coast and all over come here and look at different opportunities that are available here. I think our EDC (Economic Development Corps.) has positioned us well if the economy can cooperate to see some positive attraction here.”

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