

# Grants assist businesses train, educate workers

**BY GINA LINDSEY**

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While the focus recently has been on Apple and other new businesses coming to the region, a new grant opportunity is available to support businesses already settled in the area.

The Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board is offering local businesses in the Unifour region of Catawba, Alexander, Burke and Caldwell counties up to \$20,000. The organization established the Local Incumbent Workforce Grant, a 12-month pilot program, designed to help local industries train and educate current workers.

"People, especially now, are looking for training opportunities and looking for ways to make themselves more competitive as a company," said Nathan Huret, existing industry coordinator at the Catawba County Economic Development Corp.

The goal of the program is to enhance employee skills, increase employee wages, provide training in transferable skills and promote business retention and competitiveness. The primary focus is on businesses

in fields such as health care, manufacturing, transportation, business and information technology.

"Existing companies are the ones that built this economy, and they are the lifeblood of it," Huret said. "When they are doing well, we're doing well. If they are hurting, we are hurting."

The grant could aid local businesses in a number of different ways. Huret said one of the most important outcomes would be to increase a company's competitiveness.

"People always want stronger employees who know what they are doing (jobwise) inside and out," he said.

A better-trained employee reflects well on a business through increased productivity, which equates to cost savings and other benefits, Huret said. It also helps reduce employee turnover.

The employee could increase skill proficiency and learn a new expertise. Huret said hopefully any new skill learned would also be one that could be used in other industries should the employee lose the job. The training may also qualify employees for a raise, depending on

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the company.

Any money received through a LIWG must be used to upgrade employee skills through courses at a community college or private company that supplies the training. A company can also use funds to either increase wages for workers or increase advancement opportunities for trained staff.

"It's fairly customizable to what they might need," Huret said. "They could pick from 100,000 different options."

Companies are also eligible to receive up to \$40,000 in additional funding through the State Incumbent Worker Program. However, Huret noted the state program is much more competitive with companies throughout the state applying for grant funding. Many companies won't receive funding from the state program the first or even the second time they apply because of the volume of applications, and it could be months before a company knows whether it will receive a grant.

Huret said the advantage of the program through the WPWDB is the Hickory-based board chooses the local companies to receive funding and are familiar with the business in the area.

The project application and guidelines are available at the Western Piedmont Workforce Development Board Web site at [www.westernpiedmontworks.org](http://www.westernpiedmontworks.org).

A company representative can call Huret at 267-1564 or Peggy Byrd at 485-4214 to apply or get more information about the grant opportunity.