

Woman works to boost county's economic health

By [John Dayberry](#) | Hickory Daily Record

Hundreds of Catawba County residents can thank Julie Pruett for their jobs.

Pruett, director of business recruitment for the Catawba County Economic Development Corp., played key roles in bringing several job-producing projects to the area in recent years.

Those projects include a Flowers Foods bakery, Convergys and Fiserv customer service centers, Baker Furniture's administrative headquarters and consolidated distribution center, and manufacturing facilities for heat-transfer technology specialist Turbotec.

"This county has landed hundreds and hundreds of jobs as a result of Julie's efforts," said Scott Millar, president of the Catawba County EDC.

"She's definitely a team player, and she places the goals of the community and the EDC paramount."

It's the only way to be truly effective in economic development, said Pruett, who has been with the Catawba County organization for six years.

"My work is about job creation, but it's also about making Catawba County a better place," Pruett said.

"To walk through a vacant building with a client, and then go back a year later and see a full parking lot, that's rewarding. It takes a lot of planning and teamwork to make it happen, but it's rewarding."

An Elkin native, Pruett earned an undergraduate degree in political science at Lenoir-Rhyne College and a master's degree in public administration from Appalachian State University.

She worked in planning and budgeting capacities for several municipalities before joining the Caldwell County Economic Development Commission, where she was employed for seven years.

At Catawba County Economic Development Corp., Pruett tries to attract businesses to the area and connect them with whatever resources they need to be successful here. She and other Economic Development Corp. staffers also spearhead incentive negotiations with the state, Catawba County and area municipalities.

Once a business locates or expands here, Pruett helps it get established and work through any problems that arise.

"We don't just sell the area to clients, we build relationships with them," Pruett said.

She and Millar said close working relationships among Economic Development Corp. staffers is crucial to their effectiveness.

The team also includes Nathan Huret, existing industry coordinator; Tim Bolick, marketing and administration; Vivian Gilliam, office administration; and Susie Miller, special projects consultant.

"Everything we do, we do as a team," Pruett said.

"And we couldn't do what we do without the support of local elected officials, the Employment Security Commission, Catawba Valley Community College, our EDC board and a lot of other people.

"It's a cooperative effort."

With Catawba County's unemployment rate hovering at about 14 percent, the effort is crucial.

Pruett said tight credit continues to frustrate some businesses that would like to locate in Catawba County or expand their operations here.

"Companies make decisions based partially on a lot of in-depth research on the communities they are considering," she said.

"But decisions are also based on what's going on within a company at any given time, and on what the overall economy is doing.

"Right now, a lot of companies are in a holding pattern, waiting for the economy to turn around."

Pruett has faith that Catawba County will bounce back economically, and wants to be a part of the process.

Married with two daughters, she said the county is a great place to raise a family.

"I want to stay in economic development, and I want to stay here," she said.