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[Home](#) / [news](#) / [local](#) /

## Commissioners want legislators to back projects

By Sharon McBrayer

Making the county better able to compete for state funding for economic development projects is at the top of county leaders' agenda.

Catawba County Board of Commissioners will meet with local state legislators Dec. 20 to talk about how they can help the county when the legislature reconvenes for a new session in January. Both the state House of Representatives and Senate will fall under Republican control. Catawba County is predominately Republican.

The meeting between commissioners and legislators starts at 3 p.m. in the large meeting room at the county Government Center in Newton. Commissioners will hold their regular meeting following the get-together with legislators and will vote on the legislative agenda.

Commissioners plan to ask legislators to support changes to the way counties are ranked and, therefore, are awarded tax credits for economic development projects, according to county officials. The state also should stop funding projects that shift jobs from one part of the state to another, according to commissioners' legislative agenda.

Assistant County Manager Lee Worsley said the state's current way of determining whether and how much in state credits a county gets for economic development projects puts Catawba County at a disadvantage. It's a ranking system to identify the most economically distressed counties in the state based on things such as unemployment, population growth and property value assessments, Worsley said.

The ranking is from one to three, with one being the most distressed and three being the least distressed, he said.

Catawba County is ranked at two, with around 40 counties ranked at one, Worsley said.

The determining factors of unemployment, population growth and property value assessments aren't the best way to determine if a county is economically distressed, Worsley said.

He said the county's stance is that a greater emphasis should be based on unemployment, but population growth and assessed property value should be taken out of the equation. The two don't illustrate true economic distress and don't "allow the tier structure to respond quickly enough to changing economic conditions," according to the county's legislative agenda.

The county's unemployment rate was 11.4 percent in October, according to state unemployment numbers.

The other major issue on the county's legislative agenda is making the ban on public-sector collective bargaining stronger, Worsley said. North Carolina General Statutes make labor or trade unions for public-sector employees or agencies illegal.

Worsley said county officials would like the state legislature to strengthen the ban on collective bargaining. Options to strengthen the ban could happen by approving it by a two-thirds majority — a super majority — or trying to make it a state constitutional amendment, he said. A super majority approval would make it harder to remove the ban, Worsley said. Commissioners also want legislators to oppose any state or federal attempt to get around the ban, according to information from the county. A proposed bill introduced in the U.S. Senate, Senate Bill 3991, would allow fire, police and emergency services personnel across the country to be represented by unions.

Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., introduced the bill Dec. 1, which prompted Hickory Mayor Rudy Wright and other local elected officials to speak out against it. They argue the bill would cost local governments more money and would undermine their apolitical atmosphere.

Worsley said the county now analyzes salaries and benefits of its employees against others in the state to ensure they're competitive.

Other issues on the commissioners' legislative agenda:

- Opposing any state effort to take local revenues to balance the state budget and any unfunded mandates.

- Supporting a method that would equally distribute N.C. Education Lottery money to schools.
  - Opposing the transference of responsibility for infrastructure of secondary roads to counties.
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