

Town of Andrews

Profile

Tucked into the far western corner of North Carolina, Andrews has a long history as a trading route, first for the Cherokee and later for white settlers. The route brought sorrow as well as commerce in the mid 19th century. Several encampments nearby marked the start of the Trail of Tears.

Andrews was incorporated as ValleyTown in 1905 and built its early modern economy around extractive industries: mining, logging, agriculture. Those industries brought the Western North Carolina Railroad to town, and the town was eventually renamed in honor of one of the railroad's leaders, A.B. Andrews. Textiles and apparel later assumed dominance, but now those industries have suffered near fatal blows. Of all the early pillars, agriculture retains the strongest hold today. The fertile mountain valley produces high yields of corn, and several farming alternatives – including strawberries and llamas – are being tested. Most important, the valley claims one of the largest trout-processing plants in the region, and a new winery has joined North Carolina's growing viticulture industry.

The population of Andrews today is 1,720. One resident in five lives in poverty. That's even higher than surrounding Cherokee County, where the unemployment rate runs at 5.4 percent.

The flagging economy has created a drag on downtown, but streetscaping and several renovation projects are under way to restore the vibrancy. The projects include a cultural arts center, located in a former church, and a memorial park on the site of the old high school. Adjacent to the new elementary school, the park soon will include an outdoor classroom pavilion that incorporates symbols of the area's Cherokee heritage. Elsewhere, the new owners of old buildings are talking about restoration, and a B&B has opened.

Community issues

The loss of textile and apparel plants has cost Andrews dearly. Between 1990 and 2000, the population dwindled by nearly 1,000 people. The few remaining industries strain to remain competitive. Local retailers feel the pinch, too, as big box stores in Murphy draw customers out of town. Vacant and underutilized buildings dot the business district. Projects such as the cultural arts center and memorial park rejuvenate hope, but even they must overcome the insider/outsider issues that face many a mountain community.

Opportunities

Andrews joins NC STEP's Western Cluster, which also includes Chimney Rock, Hayesville, Bryson City and Mars Hill. These towns have been working to strengthen place-based economies through cooperative marketing and the development of additional cultural and ecotourism outlets. The fit is a good one for Andrews, which hopes to pull in tourists and second-home development by increasing its cultural offerings and building a more vibrant downtown. The local airport may enable it to add another leg to its economic development stool: a convenient off-site location for storage and tech support for Atlanta area businesses.

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