



A portion of the bond money would pay for improvements to downtown Hickory.

OUR TOWNS

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*Hickory hopes a new bond package will repair its reputation as one of the nation's most-depressed metros.*

**Dubious achievements**

**2012**  
U.S. News & World Report's eighth-worst city for finding a job

**2014**  
Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index's fifth most-miserable metro

**2014**  
Forbes' 10th-worst place for business

**I**f it were a high-school kid, Hickory would get stuffed into lockers a lot. Lately, the media and pollsters have been bullying the state's eighth-largest metro area, with Mayor Rudy Wright especially peeved by a poll of most miserable places to live. "I believe they had us 25 spaces below Detroit. So, yeah, we're not happy with that, and we recognize we've got to tell a better story."

Hickory became an easy target after its textile and manufacturing jobs headed to Asia in the 1990s. City officials hoped fiber optics was the future, but job cuts by Corning, N.Y.-based Corning Inc., which has a plant there, and other companies proved otherwise. Many former mill towns are struggling, but none more than

his, Wright insists. "We're like no other place in this state. Look at the numbers." Over the last two decades, Hickory-Lenoir-Morganton lost nearly 15,000 jobs. Rocky Mount, down about 8,000, is the only other metro to record shrinking employment. (However, it lost about 11% of its 1994 jobs, compared with 9% for Hickory.)

Instead of cowering, the metro is seeking solutions, says Scott Millar, president of Catawba County Economic Development Corp. Those include four commercial sites in Catawba that opened last month. But persuading residents to learn skills for high-demand jobs, such as industrial maintenance mechanic, remains a major hurdle, he says.

Another problem is the exodus of younger people. From 2000 to 2010, the number of 25- to 34-year-olds living in the metro fell 18.6%. "We're getting killed in that category because of the loss of jobs," Wright says. In November, Hickory residents will vote on a \$40 million bond package called "Inspiring Places." The money would finance park improvements, bike trails, sidewalks and other capital projects to attract young people and, according to the master plan, "reshape the image and perceptions of the city."