

2026 CEDS Annual Report

Prosperity for All Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

October 2025 – September 2026

Centralina
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

Report Overview

This annual update reports progress in implementing the 2023 to 2028 Prosperity for All Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy during the period from October 1, 2025 through September 30, 2026. The report focuses on work completed by Centralina Economic Development District (CEDD) and regional partners, changes in regional conditions and priorities for the next reporting year.

During the year, Centralina concentrated on workforce and industry alignment, infrastructure readiness, regional disaster preparation and development of the next five year CEDS. The award of the EDA Helene Disaster Grant moved a major regional priority from project development into funded implementation.

Implementation Snapshot

58	46	2	10
CEDS actions tracked	**Advancing**	**Initiated**	**Not started**

Status reflects the June 2026 implementation dashboard. Activities continued to advance after this snapshot and are described in the goal sections below.

Key Results

- EDA Helene Disaster Grant awarded $400,000 for Built to Last Centralina Regional Infrastructure and Economic Readiness, supported by a $100,000 regional match.
- Centralina submitted its first regional Hazard Mitigation Grant Program application with five communities and six projects, then continued helping communities position projects for other funding opportunities.
- Centralina provided EDA project assistance and issued five CEDS alignment letters supporting regional applications and project development.
- The 2026 Prosperity Profiles replaced static comparison tables with interactive county profiles covering 16 indicators and added a three profile change over time view.
- The joint Rowan Cabarrus Child Care Economic Summit connected business, workforce and community leaders around practical workforce participation challenges.
- Centralina began the data review and stakeholder engagement process for the 2027 to 2031 CEDS update.

Regional Conditions and Data Update

The 2026 Prosperity Profiles provide the most recent shared view of economic conditions across the nine county region. Sixteen indicators are organized around community conditions, economic mobility and the ability to prepare for and recover from disruption. The profiles compare each county with the regional benchmark and show values published in 2022, 2024 and 2026. They are intended as a starting point for local discussion rather than county rankings.

The 2026 update also documented source periods, calculation methods and the review of data discrepancies. Most Census indicators use overlapping five year estimates, so small movements should be interpreted cautiously and paired with local knowledge.

Goal 1 Expanding Economic Opportunity for All

Centralina and its partners advanced workforce conditions. career awareness, child care solutions and stronger connections among employers, educators and anchor institutions.

CEDS recommendation	Progress during the reporting period	Status
Recommendation 1: Workforce and economic development alignment	Updated workforce and prosperity data resources and began collaboration with NC Commerce LEAD to strengthen data collection and presentation for the next CEDS.	**Advancing**
Recommendation 2: Talent pipeline	Worked with MyFutureNC and regional partners to strengthen educational attainment and career pathways. Advanced workforce planning for clean energy careers, including training pathways and strategies to address barriers to workforce participation.	**Advancing**
Recommendation 3: Child care and early education	Supported a joint Rowan Cabarrus Child Care Economic Summit during the reporting period, connecting employers and community partners around workforce participation, child care challenges and business supported solutions.	**Advancing**
Recommendation 4: Entrepreneurship and small business support	Submitted an application to the Creative EDC Creative Give Back Grant to support development of the Ready for Anything Small Business Toolkit, designed to help businesses prepare for disruptions, maintain operations and reopen more quickly.	**Initiated**
Recommendation 5: Anchor institutions	Initiated strategy discussions with UNC Charlotte and engaged MyFutureNC regional partners to identify opportunities for coordinated hiring, training and regional investment.	**Advancing**

Selected Workforce and Business Activities

- Completed and submitted the workforce strategy for the Climate Pollution Reduction Grant plan. The strategy connected clean energy investments with training pathways and addressed barriers such as child care and transportation.
- Expanded labor market coordination across the two-state region with the Catawba Regional Council of Governments to identify priority occupations and support employer training.
- Presented information on the AI economy and data center development to the Centralina Board of Delegates in August 2026, including community considerations for infrastructure, workforce and local decision making.
- Continued using workforce data to highlight growing demand in corporate, logistics, technology, health care and business occupations.

Goal 2 Building Community Supportive Infrastructure

Work under Goal 2 focused on transportation access, digital opportunity, infrastructure planning, brownfield redevelopment and helping communities prepare competitive funding requests.

CEDS recommendation	Progress during the reporting period	Status
Recommendation 1: Regional mobility initiatives	Advanced Integrated Mobility Hub pilots in Lincoln County and the cities of Belmont, Huntersville and Kannapolis to improve connections to employment and services.	**Advancing**
Recommendation 2: Transportation coordination	Continued coordination among transportation, land use and economic development partners and secured a USDOT Build America Bureau Regional Infrastructure Accelerator award for commuter solutions during I-85 and US-74 construction.	**Advancing**
Recommendation 3: Infrastructure and utility gaps	Secured the EDA Helene Disaster Grant award to assess infrastructure conditions, identify priority projects and prepare readiness plans. Provided EDA project assistance to local governments and educational institutions.	**Advancing**
Recommendation 4: Land use and development decisions	Hosted the 2025 Regional Brownfields Summit with technical assistance partners and continued discussion of redevelopment opportunities with the North Carolina Railroad Company.	**Advancing**
Recommendation 5: Broadband and digital infrastructure	Presented the Gaston County Digital Opportunity Plan, promoted the regional Digital Resource Hub and hosted a digital readiness webinar session connecting access to emergency communication and community safety.	**Advancing**

Project Development and Technical Assistance

Centralina provided project development and technical assistance for EDA opportunities to Catawba College, Gaston College, Rowan Cabarrus Community College and Lincoln Economic Development Association. Assistance included project scoping, eligibility and CEDS alignment. Centralina also issued five CEDS alignment letters during the reporting period, including a letter for Union County and a letter for WrightDesign75 supporting its FocusWorkshops Rural Digital Media Workforce Training Program in Cabarrus County and surrounding rural communities under EDA's Public Works and Economic Adjustment Assistance nonconstruction program.

Centralina also conducted EDA outreach through the Lincoln Industrial Managers Association and regional city and county manager networks, reaching more than 45 stakeholders with information about funding and project readiness.

Goal 3 Strengthening Economic Resilience and Global Competitiveness

Centralina used regional convenings, sector research and project development to strengthen the region's ability to respond to disruption and prepare for emerging economic opportunities.

CEDS recommendation	Progress during the reporting period	Status
Recommendation 1: Regional cluster strategy	Used workforce and industry data to examine clean energy, advanced manufacturing, logistics, information technology and the emerging AI economy. Began incorporating these findings into the next CEDS process.	**Advancing**
Recommendation 2: Advanced manufacturing	Advanced analysis of workforce and infrastructure needs affecting advanced manufacturing and incorporated the sector into the Built to Last regional readiness initiative.	**Advancing**
Recommendation 3: Regional knowledge sharing	Convened the Regional Resilience Collaborative as an ongoing forum for local governments, emergency management, utilities and community partners. Building on the June 2025 Built to Last workshop, the Collaborative supported regional knowledge sharing on hazard mitigation, water and flood risk, emergency communications, financial administration, infrastructure funding and project readiness.	**Advancing**
Recommendation 4: Research and development capacity	Supported education and research partners with EDA project development and continued coordination with UNC Charlotte around data and anchor institution opportunities.	**Advancing**
Recommendation 5: Global engagement	Published the Global Connections, Regional Impact article and informational handout to increase awareness of the region’s connections to the global economy and support continued discussion of global engagement opportunities.	**Initiated**

Regional Resilience and Readiness Activities

- Continued the Regional Resilience Collaborative, established following the June 2025 Built to Last hazard mitigation workshop, as a recurring forum for communities and regional partners to identify infrastructure and hazard mitigation needs, share technical resources and position projects for funding. Five RRC meetings were held during the reporting period, with 122 total participant instances.
- Promoted FEMA Public Assistance financial administration training to more than 70 regional contacts and completed follow up evaluation of the self-paced course.
- Supported hazard mitigation projects in Harrisburg, Spencer and Charlotte-Mecklenburg after Centralina could not serve as the direct applicant.
- Participated in statewide and regional discussions with the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality (NC DEQ) about water infrastructure and the North Carolina Flood Resiliency Blueprint.

From Regional Priority to Funded Implementation

Built to Last Centralina Regional Infrastructure and Economic Readiness

In October 2025, Centralina submitted an application to the EDA FY25 Helene Disaster Grant program to address a recurring regional challenge identified through ongoing resilience and infrastructure discussions: communities often know which infrastructure systems are vulnerable or limiting development but need coordinated analysis and project solutions to develop competitive funding applications.

The EDA awarded the project in August 2026. The $500,000 initiative includes $400,000 in EDA funding and a $100,000 regional match. It will connect the TS Helene resources and information on flood and hazard exposure with the energy, water and sewer, transportation, communications and supply chain systems that support major employment centers, communities and regional industry.

Planned work	Expected result
Regional infrastructure and economic project inventory	A shared view of projects, infrastructure conditions, flooding and hazard exposure and economic importance
Regional prioritization method	Consistent criteria for identifying 5 projects with the strongest readiness and regional value
Local readiness plans for approximately 15 to 20 sites or projects within the regional priorities	Clear project needs, preliminary costs, next steps and potential funding pathways
More detailed analysis for five priority regional projects	Bolster preparation for engineering, financing and grant applications
Three sector playbooks and employer and utility roundtables and a separate Regional Infrastructure Resilience Working Group for ongoing local government and infrastructure coordination	Creating a lasting framework for regional collaboration among local governments and practical strategies that connect infrastructure decisions with advanced manufacturing, logistics and information technology.

The Regional Resilience Collaborative will provide an ongoing forum for this work, allowing local governments, utilities and other partners to continue sharing infrastructure priorities, technical resources and funding opportunities beyond individual projects or grant periods. In this way, Built to Last will strengthen both the regional project pipeline and the network needed to continue advancing infrastructure readiness.

This award is a direct example of CEDS implementation. It advances Goal 2 infrastructure recommendations and Goal 3 readiness priorities while creating a stronger pipeline of projects that local governments can move toward funding and construction.

Regional Hazard Mitigation Pipeline

Centralina Regional Resilience Collaborative as a result of the June 2025 Built to Last event submitted its first regional Hazard Mitigation Grant Program application with five communities and six projects. When the proposed regional applicant structure did not align with program requirements, Centralina adjusted its approach and continued supporting individual jurisdictions with BRIC and HMGP project development. The experience helped clarify applicant eligibility and reinforced the value of maintaining both a regional project pipeline and a continuing forum for local coordination.

Performance Measures

The measures below summarize implementation activity completed or advanced during the reporting period. They are program outputs and milestones rather than estimates of regionwide economic impact.

Measure	2026 result	Explanation
CEDS implementation	**58 actions tracked**	46 advancing, 2 initiated and 10 not started in the June 2026 dashboard
EDA project support	**4 organizations assisted**	Catawba College, Gaston College, Rowan Cabarrus Community College and Lincoln Economic Development Association received project development or technical assistance
CEDS alignment	**5 letters issued**	Letters supported regional applications, including WrightDesign75's rural digital media workforce training proposal
Hazard mitigation pipeline	**5 communities and 6 projects**	Included in Centralina's first regional HMGP submission
EDA outreach	**More than 45 stakeholders**	Reached through industry and local government networks
Recovery training outreach	**More than 70 contacts**	Received information about FEMA Public Assistance financial administration training
Regional Resilience Collaborative	**5 meetings; 122 participant instances**	Convened local governments, emergency management, utilities and regional partners around hazard mitigation, infrastructure readiness, funding and technical resources.
Child care engagement	**1 regional summit**	Joint Rowan Cabarrus Child Care Economic Summit held during the reporting period.
Prosperity Profiles	**9 counties and 16 indicators**	Interactive 2026 update with a profile

Measure	2026 result	Explanation
		change over time view
Infrastructure readiness	**$500,000 awarded**	$400,000 EDA investment and $100,000 match for Built to Last

Strategy Review and Adjustments

No formal changes were made to the three CEDS goals during the reporting period. Work through the Regional Resilience Collaborative and the Built to Last initiative reinforced the importance of maintaining a regional infrastructure and project readiness pipeline that can move local priorities toward technical assistance and funding opportunities. Implementation experience also identified several issues for the next CEDS: clearer ownership for partner led actions, fewer overlapping actions, stronger measures and greater attention to infrastructure capacity, hazard exposure, the AI economy, data centers, child care and workforce participation.

Centralina began internal team reviews, data coordination with NC Commerce LEAD and early Board discussion to prepare the 2027 to 2031 CEDS. These activities will inform the regional public engagement stakeholder perspectives to inform the action item activities during the next reporting year.

CEDS Oversight

The Centralina Economic Development District Board reviewed implementation progress through quarterly dashboards and approved the annual work plan and implementation priorities. Centralina staff coordinated data collection, partner engagement, project development and required EDA reporting throughout the year.

Priorities for the Next Reporting Year

- Complete the 2027 to 2031 CEDS through regional data analysis, stakeholder engagement, CEDD Board (aka CEDS Steering Committee) work sessions and public engagement and document review.
- Launch EDA Helene Disaster grant and work with the technical consultant, local governments, utilities and employers to build the regional project inventory and prioritization method.
- Prepare readiness plans for up to 5 regional projects that incorporate approximately 15 to 20 sites or projects and more detailed analysis for five priority projects.
- Continue EDA project development assistance and maintain a pipeline of infrastructure, workforce and economic development opportunities.
- Use the updated Prosperity Profiles and NC Commerce LEAD analysis to identify significant changes in regional conditions and inform the next CEDS.
- Continue regional learning and technical resources related to the AI economy, data centers, infrastructure requirements and workforce implications.
- Continue convening the Regional Resilience Collaborative economic resilience program and connect local projects with appropriate state and federal resources.