Morganton is working with local companies to find new ways to handle textiles and furniture. Downtown Morganton is also growing with breweries, restaurants and...
Inside a warehouse in a town once at the heart of North Carolina's textile manufacturing industry, Bobby Carswell and 18-year-old Angel Rojas sort and bale fabric.

The operation, located in Valdese, is anything but an assembly line: the two work alone, picking up fabric waste from textile and furniture manufacturers in the area, and bringing it to the facility. Carswell’s business, Material Return, recycles that waste, which is then used for furniture, T-shirts, hats or other products.

But Carswell's future was far from certain 15 years ago when he first started working in furniture manufacturing.

MORGANTON

Morganton's economy bounces back years after textile industry moved out

Morganton is working with local companies to find new ways to handle textiles and furniture. Downtown Morganton is also growing with breweries, restaurants and

BY JOSHUA KOMER

EXPAND ALL
“Some days you would go in and hope you had a job the next day,” he said.

Burke County, and its county seat Morganton, was particularly hard-hit during the recession: unemployment reached 15% in 2009 as manufacturing, which the area had long relied on for employment, moved overseas.

But a decade later, downtown Morganton is thriving. The brick buildings lining its main streets are brimming with new shops, restaurants and nightlife. There’s even a downtown hotel under construction.

And not all manufacturing jobs are gone, though increasingly, the operations look more like Carswell’s than a plant with hundreds of employees.

For Sara Chester, the area’s success shows that there’s more to communities than just the headlines that often portray despair and decline in small-town America.
Morganton: Seeing New Life After Manufacturing Job Losses

Morganton's economy bounces back years after textile industry moved out

Morganton is working with local companies to find new ways to handle textiles and furniture. Downtown Morganton is also growing with breweries, restaurants and... BY JOSHUA KOMER

Downtown Morganton has seen a boom of small business in the last five years thanks to expanding manufacturing in different industries and breweries becoming a destination. Joshua Komer

THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

Chester moved back to her hometown of Morganton after attending UNC-Chapel Hill and co-founded The Industrial Commons, a nonprofit that helps support manufacturing businesses and launch new ones.

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At the height of the recession, Chester recalls attending job fairs where there were 1,500 people in line to get in.

Part of the problem, Chester said, is that employment was concentrated in a handful of large-scale textile and furniture manufacturers that were not locally-owned.

Some of those companies still have a presence in the county, but their workforces are typically leaner than they once were, and are increasingly relying on new technology.

Through much of the 1990s, there were over 80,000 people working in manufacturing in the Hickory-Morganton-Lenoir metropolitan statistical area, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Now, there are about 43,000.

Still, Chester said the area shouldn’t just abandon the expertise its residents have in the industry.

“When you think about economic development, I think it’s a lot about chasing things and chasing something new or chasing something that is not really who you are as a community,” she said. “So if you already have this amazing infrastructure, how can you do both? You know, how can you chase something, but also leverage what’s here and help them do it in a new way?”

To do that, The Industrial Commons encourages small and mid-sized businesses like Material Return, and promotes employee-owned models, which Chester says are key to keeping local jobs.

“When you’re really rooting that wealth locally, and keeping the decision making and the power local, then there’s less opportunity for that work and those jobs to be extracted out of the community,” she said.
Morganton's economy bounces back years after the textile industry moved out

Morganton is working with local companies to find new ways to handle textiles and furniture. Downtown Morganton is also growing with breweries, restaurants and art galleries.

Angel Rojas, a worker for Material Return, pulls one of the clothing bales that is ready for processing in a warehouse in Valdese near Morganton, NC on Thursday, November 21, 2019. The small manufacturer has brought innovative solutions to a traditionally textile industry in their region.

THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

AVAILABLE HOUSING SHORTAGE

Burke County lost nearly 2,000 people from 2010 to 2017, according to a study commissioned for the local board of Realtors (though the census data shows a smaller loss of 785). Just over half of the households are over the age of 55.

The figures mirror a shift happening in many parts of the state, where young people are leaving smaller communities and flocking to major cities like Charlotte and Raleigh in search of better opportunity.

But there are signs that could be changing: census estimates show that Burke has...
It's a problem faced by major cities too, but homebuilders and developers haven’t been attracted to the region the way they have to places like Charlotte and Raleigh, said Alan Wood, president and CEO of nonprofit economic development agency Burke Development Inc.

“If you’re a builder where are you going to go?” he asked. “You’re going to go where the prime market is, and where you’re going to make the most money ... which is not necessarily in Burke County.”

The study projected that Burke County would see a decline in the number of households under 35 between 2017 and 2022, partially because of that lack of available housing.

Solving the shortage is a key priority for Wood and other leaders, who view housing as critical to economic development efforts.

“You can’t get that talent without the housing,” he said.
college after he graduated high school. Many of his classmates’ parents worked in manufacturing during the downturn, and discouraged their children from going into the industry.

But the job with Material Return was much different than what he expected.

“When I first came in, I just thought it would be like another factory job — you know, where you’re on a plant, doing whatever the boss tells you to,” he said. “But here we’re actually making a difference with our environment, in our community in general.”

On a recent Thursday afternoon, a handful of visitors meander through downtown Morganton’s shops and restaurants. Christmas wreaths line the lampposts, and local leaders are setting up for a winter carnival in front of the historic county courthouse.
Morganton's economy bounces back years after the textile industry moved out

Morganton is working with local companies to find new ways to handle textiles and furniture. Downtown Morganton is also growing with breweries, restaurants and businesses. (Photo: Joshua Komer)

Across the street, Mike Brown, owner of Brown Mountain Bottleworks, is invigorated by that new life. He purchased the bottle shop this year as his “retirement plan” after watching it grow in the five years it had been open.

“I don’t think we’ll go back to the old Morganton,” he said.

“I don’t know that we ever need to look back.”
Downtown Morganton has seen a boom of small business in the last five years thanks to expanding manufacturing in different industries and breweries becoming a destination. JOSHUA KOMER  
THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER

Danielle Chemtob covers economic growth and development for the Observer. She’s a 2018 graduate of the journalism school at UNC-Chapel Hill and a California transplant.
Far From Washington, Americans Are Finding Solutions

National politics may be paralyzed by partisanship, but local governments and institutions are coming together with ordinary citizens to get things done.

By Gerald F. Seib

As debate about police behavior raged over the summer in the wake of George Floyd’s death in Minneapolis, the nation’s elected leaders in Washington seemed unable to agree on any response, except perhaps to amplify the shouting.

In Kansas City, Mo., however, Mayor Quinton Lucas took the simplest of steps to build public confidence in police accountability: He moved to make it easier for a citizen to file a complaint about police behavior, in part by removing a legal requirement that any complaint had to be notarized.

“Washington did not become a place for positive results in law-enforcement reform,” says Mr. Lucas, who is a Democrat.

Similarly, while the national debate over abortion rights has escalated in response to Donald Trump’s Supreme Court appointments, Kathleen Wilson, the founder of an organization in Fredericksburg, Va., that provides homes for pregnant women seeking an alternative to abortion, pointed to a local solution — buying a house for expectant mothers, “We had enough funds left over to help young mothers unable to make rent payments amid the coronavirus economic shock. ‘I don’t think of this ministry as being political,’ she says of her organization, Mary’s Shelter. ‘We try not to be.’

And while national politicians lashed into finger-pointing over shortages of masks and surgical gowns during the pandemic, two businesswomen in Morganton, N.C., organized an network of small textile companies in the area to begin producing half a million masks and surgical gowns for the region’s doctors, hospitals, businesses and citizens. “In the early days it was like Rosie the Riveter,” says Sara Chester, one of the businesswomen. “Everybody wanted to do their part.”

There are potentially big lessons in each small step. At a time of deepening national divisions and political tribalism, many Americans have decided to rely less on Washington to deal with problems and have turned for answers to local institutions, state governments, business leaders, their own communities and one another.

It’s no secret that Washington isn’t working particularly well these days. That may change under the Biden administration. The new Congress will be almost evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans, and there is at least a chance that the close division of power will have a moderating effect.

But as just as likely to see more gridlock and gridlock in Washington and more of the same that has recently dominated national political discourse, in that case, the need to find solutions to the nation’s problems may well find expression elsewhere.

“One of my deepest hopes is that in the midst of all this noise and chaos and lack of trust people will say, ‘Yes, I’m going to vote on who’s going to Washing-

ton, but I’m going to make my neighbor-

hood, the five blocks around where I live, the best possible place to live,’” says Sen. Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican.

The idea of looking downstream for action and answers has long been a basic tenant of conservatism, who tend to distrust centralized power. But Robert Putnam, the for-

mer dean of the John F. Kennedy School of Govern-

ment at Harvard University and a self-described “good liberal Democrat,” says that to-

call is increasingly common. Please turn to the next page.

Inside

Deborah Madison has long been America’s leading authority on vegetarian cooking, but she doesn’t like too much about it. C18

Heard of a secret Federation of space aliens? OK, relax: It mostly endless meetups about zoning. C18

Books of The Year

Our editors and columnists choose the best in fiction, nonfiction, local authors and literature. C5-16

PHOTOGRAPHY

Always in Vogue: The life, work and celebrity of Richard Avedon.

Books C13
The countless numbers of people on community streets who work to replace the programs that have gone past. And, I think the leaders who have shared their experience with us—whether the leaders from coast to coast. "We have been working with them," says Robin Kariwa, former executive director of the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. "One community that picked up the program was the town of Tiyeni, which found that several years after it was implemented, a group of people who had been arrested for minor offenses had been released. The idea was to keep them in touch with the community in which they had lived. And this year, there has been a significant increase in the number of people who could directly vote on local issues.

The reason is basically they just don’t want to deal with practical solutions. The State governments are much better than the federal government. In Duluth, Minn., an area of about 2,000 on Lake Superior, community offices are working much better than the federal government. In Duluth, Minn., an area of about 2,000 on Lake Superior, community offices are working much better than the federal government.

The Pew Charitable Trusts has been working more aggressively to deal with the coronavirus in western North Carolina, a region long driven by tourism, among other issues. The state has been more successful than the federal government in its efforts to deal with the coronavirus.

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In Duluth, a city of about 85,000 on Lake Superior, community offices are working much better than the federal government and the state government in their efforts to deal with the coronavirus. The city’s downtown, which was once a hub for industrial activity, is now a bustling center for businesses and houses of worship. Local election officials are being threatened by several laws that have been passed in recent years to include free community college education, as well as requiring hospitals and houses of worship to be more involved in treating patients. Officials are being threatened by several laws that have been passed in recent years to include free community college education, as well as requiring hospitals and houses of worship to be more involved in treating patients.

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