The Industrial Commons’ 2030 Vision

It is the year 2030. Entering the doors of The Industrial Commons, I am surrounded by warmth from the people I encounter and the sunlight that radiates throughout the foyer. This is a place of business but it is intriguing and inviting. I spy a piece of art that has many facets to it depending upon the angle at which it is viewed. I reflect upon my role here. I’m proud to be part of an organization that values people. Settling in for another day’s work, I peer out my office window. I see students, both interns and smiling children, too young to be in school. It reminds me that this is truly a place of community. TIC is a place for ALL to participate in the new economy we are building.

With over 150 employees in TIC enterprises and a suite of dynamic programming, TIC is well known in our region. We are excited about the work that has brought us here and what is on the horizon. Three new enterprises (a Repair Nook, a transportation business and a childcare co-op) are all thriving at the Innovation Campus in Downtown Morganton. The Institute, TIC’s training program, welcomes 10 rural communities to Morganton each year to learn our model of ecosystem development. Faculty is composed of individuals from the TIC and Poder Emma ecosystems who are sharing their expertise and knowledge. We run a networking program where 20-30 local business owners connect with each other monthly to share opportunities and resources. Our staff is 40% BIPOC and we have 30% BIPOC leadership.

Our adjacent 501c4 is improving economic conditions for workers and businesses. We have co-developed a fund in partnership with the state that supports conversions so aging business owners in rural NC don’t close their doors but have succession planning support and we have seen shifts throughout the state for how economic development projects are evaluated (based on job quality and local ownership, not just weekly wages). Through a collaborative effort, we are setting the bar for the rest of the state for how rural communities can raise the floor through progressive, community led economic development. We were recently cited in a New York Times article as the “Mondragon of the U.S.” and our model was described as a successful model for rural communities. Our nonprofit programs have not only met but exceeded their goal of 40% fee for service income. Capital for the Commons has become a CDFI, turning $2M annually to support local and minority owned businesses. The Co-op Council has representatives from all areas of the ecosystem and is setting system level policy for our continued growth.

The Innovation Campus has had a major impact on Morganton. The old Drexel 3&5 site has evolved from an abandoned lot to a thriving hub of our community. We host TIC workers in spaces MADE for the work and the campus facilitates opportunities for meaningful interaction, teaching, and reflection. As one of the largest Living Buildings in the country (and the first in a rural community focused on manufacturing) the campus draws students and professionals in the building and design fields. We have added a course that details our building experience to the Institute and have provided inspiration to communities that are now developing similar new green buildings. The beauty and functionality of
the campus has created a new spot for gatherings. Even on evenings and weekends, the campus is always buzzing with activity.

Land for the Commons’ housing development that started on Church Street has grown to the largest Limited Equity Coop in the Southeast with 50 units and a second multi acre project underway. Selling a home to the Co-op while living in it, has allowed nearly 50 low- to middle income home owners to stay in their homes - creating real, liquid wealth while protecting against the rising tide of gentrification, and ensuring a pool of affordable housing for years to come. This “scattered site” co-op has become a national model for ensuring marginalized homeowners can access their wealth without being displaced. This success has helped launch several small trades co-ops (carpenters, plumbers, electricians, landscapers) to maintain and repair our growing inventory of land, homes, and manufacturing buildings.

Western NC houses the fourth largest concentration of employee owned firms and our Workplace Development programs ensure their success through the Great Game of Business, Supervisor Training, Worker Committees and evaluations. We support 25 businesses annually in developing high quality jobs, resulting in increased productivity, employee engagement and retention. The team actively supports 2 conversions and 2 start-ups, building on the existing 12 employee owned companies in the region. This work is supported with robust youth development. The Opt-In program, run by Work in Burke, is celebrating its 8th year of mentorship and internship programming for high school seniors with 100 graduates and 30 employers. J.E.T. (Opt-In's sister program for 19-24 year olds) has helped 40 young adults secure quality jobs. WIB continues to have a strong presence in the community and, through its partnerships with Burke County Public Schools and Western Piedmont Community College has seen a 15% increase in high school students pursuing post-secondary education and a 10% decrease in Opportunity Youth.

Students are also engaged with TOSS, a robust arts education program that brings two visiting artists to the Innovation Campus each semester. TOSS supports 2,000 students annually through the TOSSworks program (which is in 7 elementary schools twice monthly) and its after school program, TOSSafter. They completed their 10th public art project, which is used for educational programs, and they host an annual gathering to share their model with other counties, advancing student learning through competitive opportunities, and solving real world problems. When people experience TOSS, they feel a sense of belonging. They feel comfortable trying new things, making mistakes and working with others. TOSS works closely with Hometown Walkabout (HTWA), our flagship equity program, to advance critical conversations in our community. HTWA educates 250 individuals annually about the racial diversity of our rural Appalachian town, offering unique virtual and in-person immersive experiences. A group of 10 facilitators and a corps of 20 storytellers help participants translate their shared learning into conversations that advance community inclusivity and civil dialogue. Common Ground, a lecture and conference series, educates 500 members annually on other forms of diversity, social issues, and inequities.

We extend values of equity not only within our community but through the manufacturing sector. The Carolina Textile District (CTD) is the “go to” organization for textiles in the South. CTD Standards are nationally recognized and have a measured impact with 75 members representing 5,000 workers. The Industrial Sewing Program and Furniture Upholstery Program are training 75 workers annually.
Through a partnership with the NC Department of Public Instruction, CTD's 8 staff have created a sustainable textile curriculum that is available in every NC high school and they host 3 trainings each year for high school instructors. The Repair Nook (launched in 2026) mends garments for Morganton residents and generates revenue for the training programs. Each year over 150 entrepreneurs participate in Sewn Goods, Crafted Production and Sustainable Textile workshops and CTD hosts 5 college immersion trips to educate the next generation about domestic manufacturing. The Circular Collaborative, which had its kick-off in Italy in 2024, highlights the work of CTD members with 10 brands and 15 circular manufacturers participating. CTD's brand **COLLECTION** has a strong regional presence as a leading platform for textile innovation and sustainability with over 15 amazing artist and factory collaborations and annual sales of $200k.

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**The Industrial Commons Corporation (TICC)** is now a staff of 4 with a CEO, HR Director, Process Engineer (COO) and Administrative Director. Worker-members lead a strong board that shepherds new business opportunities. TIC Enterprises, which now number eight total with 150 employees, are generating $10M in revenue annually. The Corporation's flagship enterprise, **Material Return** is the heart of the U.S. capital for textile circularity. With 20 employees and 10 worker-members, they annually aggregate 3 million pounds of textile waste with 25% being converted into circular products. Their yarn is sold via ReturnTex and it includes multiple blends with natural and circular fibers. They have added three cards and two spinning lines to increase annual revenue to $4M. Material Return was just featured in Our State Magazine for a recent "collab" with **Seat at the Table**, which continues to make contract furniture for partners in our ecosystem and also launched their own line in 2025, has 12 workers and $2M annual revenue. Located at a green certified building on the Campus, they have a full production facility with frame builders, packers, insiders, trimmers and sewers. Their pieces are sold at the Campus retail space and can be returned by customers for end-of-life recycling. Students tour the facility on a mezzanine that allows them to see the work happening on the plant floor. All businesses in the Commons Corporation utilize **Good Books**, a hardworking and diverse team of 10 (with five worker-members) that provides accurate financial services and bookkeeping. Using their unique sliding scale to accommodate a variety of businesses and adding a tax accountant/preparer has allowed them to grow, and they now manage over 150 clients with $20M in assets. They continue to serve Spanish speaking communities with translation services and are known as being trustworthy, friendly and encouraging!

At the end of the day what we most see, feel and hear from our community are stories of hope and transformation. People that we don't even know tell us about the work of The Industrial Commons and how it is making this community and region a thriving place to live and work!