

Making ends meet

Education, equity and rising costs define quality of life in 2023



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Community conversations — both formal and informal — over pay for educators, equity for underrepresented populations and housing affordability abounded in Western North Carolina in 2023. Those issues, as well as nationwide inflation, underpinned any efforts to improve the quality of life for Asheville-area residents.

Early in the year, educators lobbied both state and county governments — with varying degrees of success — to adjust budgets so they can better afford to live in the same county in which they teach. Affordable housing advocates asked local governments to do more to increase housing stock.

On the topic of social and environmental justice, nonprofits pushed for a countywide single-use plastic bag ban before being stymied by a rule passed in the state budget, and the City of Asheville and Buncombe County continued the work of a Community Reparations Commission to explore ways they can make amends for decades of systemic racism.

These issues and more informed newsmakers' reflections on quality of life in *Xpress*' 2023 Year in Review.

How has your neighborhood changed in 2023?

"New, expensive houses have continued to be built in my neighborhood this year. My neighbors continue to live under the threat of the I-26 expansion

project that will displace folks who've lived there for generations. [However,] the relationships that I have with my longtime neighbors continue to be strong and beautiful."

— **Grace Barron-Martinez**,
activist and Realtor

"I live in Kenilworth Forest, and we had a small neighborhood-owned, city-managed park. Recently, the city [indicated] they would no longer maintain it. The neighborhood stepped up, and we now have a chair swing, pollinator garden and lots of park benches."

— **Jessie Landl**,
executive director,
Preservation Society of Asheville

"My neighborhood [in Enka] is like most in Buncombe County. We are experiencing the change in ownership from an older generation to a new, younger generation and seeing more nonlocal buyers as opposed to long-term locals with deep roots in the community. We welcome these new homeowners and share in their excitement. These young families moving into the neighborhood are seeking a community of families that share the same dream for the future."

— **Keith Miller**,
tax assessor, Buncombe County

"I live in West Asheville and have noticed an increase in families with children moving into the area. Earlier in the year, homelessness, panhandling and theft were very prevalent. As of late, I have noticed a reduction in homelessness activity as well as panhandling. I have also noticed an uptick in homeless

services within the community, which has helped with the overall challenges."

— **Sandra Kilgore**,
Asheville vice mayor

"I've watched the affordability drastically change in my neighborhood, [and] with rising costs of basic necessities, it appears that needs for feeding programs, housing, heating and broadband are growing all around."

— **Sara Nichols**,
regional planner,
Land of Sky Regional Council

How has the local economy affected you, the broader community or both in 2023?

"I pinch my pennies. But I notice that fees are going up faster than my Social Security check. I have some savings I regularly dip into. Many people who live in the Vanderbilt [Apartments for senior citizens] like me, however, have no savings to fall back on. But we often help each other out."

— **Rachael Bliss**,
author and community activist

"With the amount of [tourism] dollars that come into Asheville on a yearly basis, I feel that we could provide more opportunities for individuals and families to thrive. The development of a strong workforce with living-wage salaries and affordable housing is a start."

— **Michael Hayes**,
executive director of Umoja Health,
Wellness and Justice Collective

"The local economy has been good for the travel industry. Unemployment

is low, and discretionary income is being prioritized for travel. Within our industry, wages are stronger than they've ever been, which is good for employees. However, again, the price of housing in our local market continues to be challenging."

— **Lew Bleiweis**,
president and CEO,
Greater Asheville Regional
Airport Authority

"I work for Buncombe County Schools and have not seen a significant raise in my wages in many years. As the cost of utilities, food and housing have increased, as well as interest rates, I have trouble buying basics like groceries and am constantly behind in paying for after-school care for my children and fixing my car. As I read my local parenting forums, more and more moms are posting daily for help with food, formula, how to get rental assistance and seeking better-paying jobs to support their families. Many moms express burnout, depression and hopelessness as we approach the holidays and nothing seems to be getting better. The disproportionate inflation in Buncombe County is real."

— **Joan Hoffman**,
teacher, A.C. Reynolds High School

"Locally, as it is nationally, prices are going up. Rather than buying less, I focus on buying smarter and more efficiently. But I also make sure there's room in the budget for fun and adventure."

— **Matthieu Rodriguez**,
marketing manager,
Harrah's Cherokee Center
— Asheville



MORGAN ALBRITTON



GRACE BARRON-MARTINEZ



AMEENA BATADA



LEW BLEIWEIS



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