

Around the region

Mill closing, trail progress, new elected officials mark year in WNC

BY JUSTIN MCGUIRE

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For Western North Carolina cities and towns, 2023 was a year of endings and beginnings.

Canton was dealt a devastating blow when the Pactiv Evergreen paper mill shut down after 115 years. Hendersonville and Brevard, on the other hand, got some good news as construction on the long-planned Ecusta Trail finally got underway.

Meanwhile, Woodfin elected a new mayor for the first time in two decades, while Weaverville welcomed two new Town Council members. All these municipalities and others continued to deal with the region's enormous population growth and related issues such as housing costs, transportation, employment and environmental protection.

Amid these changes, *Xpress* launched "Around the Region" — the monthly feature you are currently reading — in November. In it, we examine topics of concern to small cities and towns outside Asheville.

For this month's feature, *Xpress* asked leaders and residents of these communities to weigh in on the issues that shaped 2023 — and to take a look ahead to 2024.

SMALL TOWNS

YEAR IN REVIEW



END OF AN ERA: Canton, which has long billed itself as Papertown, faces life without a paper mill for the first time in more than a century. Photo courtesy of the Town of Canton

Who made the biggest impact on your community in 2023?

"The biggest impact in our community has, in fact, been the WNC community itself. I will never be able to adequately say thank you to the people, businesses and prayers that have been bestowed upon Haywood County this year. At our lowest, it was our friends that came to our need and lifted us up to remind us that towns like Canton and her people matter; their stories, their setbacks and their successes."

— **Zeb Smathers**,
Canton mayor

"Not just one person but a group — Friends of the Ecusta Trail. This rail-

to-trail will connect Hendersonville to Brevard. Hendersonville funded initial feasibility studies, but a grassroots coalition of passionate community members, nonprofits and governmental entities, working since 2008, has led to the recent groundbreaking. This project will have major impact on Hendersonville, Henderson County, Brevard and Transylvania County for our economy, recreational amenities and healthy lifestyle."

— **Barbara Volk**,
Hendersonville mayor

"The City of Brevard has definitely made the biggest impact on our community. Two years ago they didn't hesitate to step forward to take on the responsibility for constructing and managing the Ecusta Trail in Transylvania County. This year they

applied for and received grants totaling nearly \$46 million toward construction of the trail. Because of their leadership, the Ecusta Trail should be completed in three to four years if all goes according to plans."

— **Mark Tooley**,
president,
Friends of the Ecusta Trail

"Hands down, that person is **Judy Butler**, Town Council member and board member of MANNA FoodBank. Judy personally leads the monthly food distribution in town and led the task force that raised over \$300,000 to build a new playground at Woodfin Elementary School."

— **Jim McAllister**,
Woodfin mayor

"We have been fortunate to have a tremendous manufacturing com-

munity in Fletcher. We are thankful for their consistent investment in our community. Our manufacturers have created high-quality and high-paying jobs. Additionally, we are excited about new manufacturers coming into town. For example, the French tech company Tageos has decided to establish a North American headquarters in Fletcher. Tageos will invest \$19.25 million and bring 64 jobs to Henderson County."

— **Preston Blakely**,
Fletcher mayor

"The biggest impact has been made by forging strong, collaborative teams. The Ecusta Trail is progressing in partnership with Henderson County, NCDOT, Friends of Ecusta Trail, Conserving Carolina and our representatives in Washington, D.C. Our beautiful new soccer field



PRESTON BLAKELY



MAUREEN COPELOF



JOE FISHLEIGH



JIM MCALLISTER



SARA NICHOLS



ZEB SMATHERS



ASHANTI TERNOIR



MARK TOOLEY