

# **Railroads and Regional Economic Development Conference**

**Wednesday, March 18, 2026**

## **Morganton Community House**

120 N King St, Morganton, NC 28655

Organized by: The Western North Carolina Rail Committee, Inc

\$40 per person with light breakfast, snacks and lunch provided

8:00 - 8:30 a.m. **Light Breakfast** - Sponsored by Great Smokey Mountain Railroad

8:30 - 8:40 a.m. **Welcome** - Morganton Mayor Ronnie Thompson

Marion Mayor Steve Little, Co-Chair, WNC Rail Committee, Inc.

Mimi Phifer, co-founder, Waiting for the Train

8:40 - 8:50 a.m. **Mission, Purpose, History of WNC Rail Committee**

Ray Rapp, Co-Chair, WNC Rail Committee, Inc.

8:50 - 9:30 a.m. **"NCDOT Rail Division Programs for Freight and Passenger Rail"**

Jason Orthner, Director, NCDOT Rail Division

Jason Myers NCDOT Program Manager

9:30 - 9:45 a.m. **"Amtrak: Restoration of Passenger Rail Service to WNC"**

Anna Stokes, Amtrak Senior Project Manager

9:45 - 10:00 a.m. - Break

10:00 - 10:30 a.m. - **"The Future of Rail Service After Helene Part I"**

John Dillard, Director, State Government Relations NC/SC, CSX

10:30 - 11:15 a.m. Panel: **"The Future of Rail Service After Helene Part II"**

Carl Warren, President and CEO, NC RR

Kyle Ogle, GM Blue Ridge Southern

Matt Haynes, Martin Marietta / Giles Chemical

Bill Slagle, Mitchell County Chamber of Commerce

Ashley Bolick, Caldwell County Economic Development

11:15 - 11:45 a.m. - **"What Can NS Do for You?"**

### **How to Approach Economic Development with A Class One Railroad"**

Mary Lesa Pegg, Director Industrial Development - NC, Norfolk Southern

11:45 - 12:00 Noon - **Introduction of Special Guests**

Michelle Hollowell, Executive Director, Railway Association of North Carolina

Dylan Reel, Lobbyist with Kilpatrick Stockton, Railway Association of North Carolina

Martin Wheeler, President, Carolinas Association for Passenger Trains

12:00 - 1:00 p.m.- **Lunch and Speaker** -

NC Speaker of the House - Destin Hall

1:00 - 1:30 p.m. - **Mayor Comments from our Rail Corridor's Anchor Cities**

Introduction and Moderator: Mayor Steve Little, Marion, NC

East Anchor City: Mayor Pro Tem (and former Mayor) Susan Kluttz, Salisbury, NC

West Anchor City: Mayor Esther Manheimer, Asheville, NC

1:30 - 2:00 p.m. - **"Rail Tourism: What It Means to WNC"**

David Huskins, GSMR Government Relations

Rocky Hollifield, Craggy Mountain Line

Jarrold Monaghan, Andrews Valley Rail Tours

2:00 – 2:30 p.m. **"State Rail Funding for the Future: NC's Fair Share"**

State Legislative Panel: Rep. Steve Tyson, Rep. Jay Adams, Rep. Zach Hawkins,  
Sen. Kevin Corbin - Invited

2:30 – 2:45 - Break

2:45 - 3:15 p.m.- **"Chasing Federal Rail Dollars"** Federal Panel

Jim McClesky, Director of North Carolina Washington Office  
Offices of Sen. Tillis and Sen. Budd  
Offices of US Reps Moore, Edwards, Harrigan, McDowell

3:15 - 3:45 p.m. **"Role of the MPO/RPO"**

Moderator: Todd McNeill; ED NC Association of COGs  
Averi Ritchie, WPCOG  
Tristan Winkler, Land of Sky  
Magnolia Long, Foothills Regional Commission

3:45 - 4:00 p.m. **"Why Does This All Matter?"**

Paul Ballard - American Public Transit Association Hall of Fame and  
Western North Carolina Rail Committee Member

4:00 - 6:00 p.m. **Drinks at the Depot, Morganton Depot**

Sponsored by Morganton Waiting for the Train

The Morganton Community House has plenty of free parking just across the street, very conveniently located. <https://www.morgantonnc.gov/community-house/page/free-parking>

The WNC Rail Committee is honored for support and partnership of the following

Conference Sponsors:  
NCDOT Rail Division  
Morganton Waiting for the Train  
City of Morganton  
Great Smoky Mountains Railroad  
Carolinians Association for Passenger Rail  
Carolinians For Passenger Rail, Inc.  
Southern Environmental Law Center  
North Carolina Railroad

**Note – Speakers are subject to change based on availability.**