

Marion, NC – Accelerate & Innovate McDowell (AIM)

Location: Marion, NC

Venue: McDowell Technical Community College Small Business Center

Intro to the City, Distinctive Aspects and Demographics:

With its historic buildings set against the backdrop of picturesque Mount Ida, Marion is the heart of our county and a central point for Blue Ridge Mountain adventures. Highlights include tastes of local flavors in our eclectic downtown, and explorations of the outdoors and surrounding mountains by foot, bike, RV, or car.

Marion's historic Main Street is where one will find former banks and warehouses brought back to life as locally owned restaurants, craft breweries, bakeries, ice cream parlors, unique shopping boutiques and art galleries.

Main Street is the site of several mountain craft fairs and community celebrations throughout the year. Marion boasts of its Historic Marion Tailgate Market held on Tuesdays, May through October, for local produce and artisan goods like bread, jams and handmade soaps, and the WNC Bigfoot Festival in Marion each September. Marion is also famous for their family-friendly Mountain Glory and Livermush Festivals.

Marion is conveniently located to a variety of outdoor adventures, many accessible all year round. Visitors and locals can enjoy walks or biking along the river on the Joseph McDowell Historic Catawba River Greenway at the edge of town, or a scenic drive on the Blue Ridge Parkway to see stunning mountain vistas. Marion offers beautiful waterfalls and access to many more hiking trails including the Mountain to Seas Trail and OverMountain Victory State Trail. Just a few miles away is Lake James State Park with hiking and biking trails, canoe and kayak rentals and a swimming beach perfect for staying cool on a hot summer day. Many find their home away from home at one of Marion's accommodations, including hotels, motels, campgrounds and private cabin and home rentals.

Geographic Area - The City of Marion, approximately 6.3 square miles in size, is ideally situated in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina. Marion is located just 30 miles east of Asheville, which is well known for being the home of the Biltmore Estate and a destination for arts, culture, and recreation enthusiasts; and just an hour's drive from Charlotte International Airport. Major highways serving Marion include Interstate 40, U.S. Highway 70, U.S. Highway 221, NC Highway 226, and the Blue Ridge Parkway which offer convenient access between the mountains and piedmont regions of North Carolina and locations beyond.

The City of Marion, serving as the county seat of government for McDowell County, offers convenient access to year-round outdoor recreational activities including water sports and fishing



on Lake James and the Catawba River, hiking trails to scenic waterfalls and wildlife observation areas, golfing, snow skiing, gem and mineral mining, historical and cultural destinations, and so much more. To learn more about activities and events in and around Marion please visit the McDowell Tourism Authority.

Local Economy - In 2011, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that Marion had a permanent population of 7,838 residents, as of the April 1, 2010 Census, an increase of 58.6% over the 2000 Census figure of 4,943 for Marion. This considerable increase places Marion among the fastest-growing communities in North Carolina over the past years. The City's 2017 State-certified population is 8,601 and continues the rapid growth shown by the City of Marion in recent decades. Since 1970, Marion has increased in population by 158%.

Micropolitan Statistical Area

Because of Marion's growth in recent years, Marion was designated by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2013 as a Micropolitan Statistical Area. Micropolitan Areas are a fairly recent designation of the U.S. Census Bureau and are defined as areas with an urban core of at least 10,000 residents but less than 50,000 total population plus adjacent territory that has a high degree of social and economic integration with the urban core. The Marion Micropolitan Area includes a population of approximately 45,000 people. The Marion Urban Core has a population of 13,363, according to the 2010 U.S. Census, representing approximately 30% of the population of the Marion Micropolitan Area.

Marion is one of 25 designated Micropolitan Areas in North Carolina and one of 536 such areas in the United States. The Marion Micropolitan Area ranks in the top half in population among the 536 Micropolitan Areas in the United States. Marion was named one of the Top 100 Micropolitan Areas in the United States, in terms of economic growth, in 2014 by Site Selection magazine. Past trends and its excellent location indicate that Marion and its Micropolitan Area are poised for additional growth in the future.

Culture - One of the greatest assets in McDowell County is the confidence and collaborations among our interconnected partners. We have a Workforce Pipeline that originated years ago and brought all entities together with the goal of meeting the needs of industry and small businesses. This group has evolved to also including the Department of Social Services, the McDowell County Schools (MCS), McDowell Access to Care & Health, and others.

Support - The McDowell Economic Development Association (MEDA), The Chamber, The Marion Business Association (MBA), the Old Fort Business Association (OFBA), MCS, and MTCC collectively provide supportive programs, business counseling, information, resources, and classes to support small businesses and start-ups. The MTCC SBC provides no cost confidential counseling, seminars, and resources. In partnership with the MBA and Chamber, we also provide the Growing Entrepreneurs Marion start-up seminars, and grant program. Additionally, we offer online classes and seminars at no cost to the client. Students have access to statewide seminars as well. The MTCC SBC is one of the 58 community colleges that is part of the North Carolina Community College Small Business Center Network.

Resources: In addition to the partners mentioned, the MTCC SBC works with the SBA, the SBTDC (Small Business Technology Development Center), the NC Rural Center, Mountain BizWorks, the WNC Western Women's Business Center, VEDIC, Score, and the local rotary to



provide funding, business counseling, and other business services. The City of Marion and Centro Unido Latino Americano (CULA) each provide space for classes and seminars.

Connections: Our network of invested partners include MTCC, McDowell County Schools, manufactures, NC Works, McDowell Economic Development, the Chamber, the Marion Rotary, CULA, and the MBA. We are members of one another's boards, volunteer together, and work united to build economic growth and impact in our county.

The Poverty and Disadvantage Challenge in the City - McDowell County has an estimated poverty status of 16.1% as determined in the past 12 months. This is much more than the North Carolina, 14.7%, and the national average of 13.4%. African Americans in our community experience a poverty rate over 29%, and Latinos experience a rate of 17.3%.

Program Introduction - The Accelerate & Innovate McDowell (AIM) Program will serve underserved populations in McDowell County who want to start a small business, but who also face barriers. The program will be offered by the McDowell Technical Community College Small Business Center which is part of the Small Business Center Network of the North Carolina Community College System. The program will start each January and will end each October with the first year program offered in Spanish only.

Program Goals - The MTCC SBC plans to establish this annual program to address the small business start-up needs of disadvantaged populations in McDowell County. The program will provide the information, support and resources for entrepreneurs to learn the skills to overcome obstacles and barriers they encounter due to their lack of economic stability. The focus of the AIM program will be to prepare them to overcome anticipated barriers for success in small business start-ups and sustainability beyond start-up.

After the initial successes of the program, the MTCC SBC plans to start an entrepreneurial certificate program. Future plans are to expand the certificate program to offer a diploma program. Eventually, with the success of those two programs, our goal is to submit an application to offer a college transfer program in entrepreneurship education.

