

# Resilient Futures Co-Lab

## Summary of Transition Pathway Workshops // October 2025

### Why We Came Together

In late October 2025, two full-day workshops were held in Charlotte and Asheville as part of an ongoing effort to explore transition pathways for the western half of North Carolina. These gatherings followed months of regional research, relationship-building, and on-the-ground engagement, including a multi-stop field trip across Charlotte, Morganton, Asheville, and surrounding areas. Together, they formed an important contribution to the exploratory listening, collective sensemaking, and early pathway formation that we are now engaged with as part of the broader initiative.

Both workshops opened by inviting people to share why they had chosen to be in the room and what connected them to this moment. In these opening exchanges, the impacts of Hurricane Helene - now a year ago - were present in the room. People spoke about ongoing recovery, disrupted livelihoods, damaged infrastructure, and the emotional toll of repeated shocks. At the same time, participants spoke with pride about the region's capacity to respond - mutual aid networks, civic leadership, local ingenuity, and a strong sense of responsibility to place and to one another.

Alongside these reflections, Metabolic shared the broader intention for the convening:

- to connect and support work already underway across the region;
- to clarify shared priorities, perceived barriers, and areas of possibility;
- and to begin shaping transition pathways that could attract and align additional capital from beyond the region - philanthropic, public, and private - in service of outcomes defined by people in the region itself.

These workshops were explicitly not about producing a finished plan. They were designed as an early coordination and orientation step: a way to surface common ground, identify tensions, and begin translating local realities into a form legible to a broader network of actors, including investors.

### What We Explored Together

Each workshop began with a presentation of system-level research on the western half of North Carolina, drawing on ecological, economic, demographic, and material-flow analysis. This included patterns of land use, food and fiber production, industrial and waste systems, health outcomes, ownership structures, and capital flows.

Participants then worked in groups to test this analysis against their own experience. People brought concrete examples from their own work - from farming and healthcare to textiles, finance, design, and watershed restoration - highlighting what kinds of dynamics showed up daily in practice.

Across both locations, several shared observations emerged:

- The region has extraordinary underlying assets - forests, soils, water, skills, institutions - but value is often extracted or leaks out rather than compounding locally.
- Many initiatives are strong in isolation yet constrained by fragmentation, short-term funding, and lack of connective infrastructure.
- Current economic and policy frameworks reward scale, speed, and financial return, while penalizing care, regeneration, and long-term resilience.

A nuanced picture started to take shape.



## What Participants Want to Preserve

Across Charlotte and Asheville, people consistently named:

- **Ecological foundations:** forests, biodiversity, watersheds, and regenerative agriculture as the biophysical basis of long-term prosperity.
- **Community capacity:** social cohesion, grassroots organizing, and the ability to mobilize in times of crisis.
- **Place-based identity and skills:** local manufacturing traditions, food culture, craft, and regionally rooted industries such as furniture and textiles.
- **Civic competence:** pockets of capable local government, public finance tools, universities, and anchor institutions that can act as long-term stewards when properly aligned.

In Western North Carolina specifically, participants emphasized the importance of cultural rootedness - learning with land rather than extracting from it - and the role of mutual aid, intentional communities, and shared systems in sustaining resilience.

## What Participants Want to Change

At the same time, there was strong alignment on the need to shift:

- Extractive economic logics toward shared value, local ownership, and wellbeing-oriented metrics.
- Food, housing, and transport systems that currently produce poor health outcomes, high costs, and dependency.
- Power and participation dynamics, including regulatory capture, racial inequities, and the exclusion of community voices from ownership and decision-making.
- Measurement and accountability, moving beyond GDP and narrow ROI toward plural value accounting that reflects ecological and social realities.

Participants were clear-eyed about the forces keeping the current system in place: financial and policy lock-in, distorted incentives, misinformation and narrative fragmentation, institutional inertia, and the cumulative exhaustion of people working against the grain.

## A Shared Sense of Direction: What We Are Transitioning Toward

Rather than converging on a single vision statement, both workshops generated a set of shared reference points — a direction of travel that can guide action without prescribing uniform solutions.

Through structured visioning exercises, several priorities rose consistently to the surface:

- Regional food self-sufficiency linked explicitly to health, soil, and farmer wellbeing.
- Circular and regenerative material systems, particularly in textiles and construction.
- Cooperative and community-owned models for essential services such as food, housing, healthcare, and finance.
- Healthy watersheds and ecosystems maintained even as population and economic activity evolve.
- An economy that treats basic needs as foundations of resilience and invests in stable living.

Investing in these elements was seen not as an altruistic exercise, but rather a pragmatic response to constraints and pressures like climate volatility, rising living costs, and public health burdens. Addressing these challenges more structurally can lay the foundation for much greater collective resilience and prosperity.

## How We Are Thinking About Transition Pathways

We want to share how our team is currently thinking about transition pathways, based on what we heard in the workshops, the trip conversations, and the synthesis work we've been doing since.

We are using the term "transition pathway" as a way of describing how change could unfold over time. It is not a fixed plan, a funding pipeline, or a list of projects. It is a way of moving the regional system from where it is today - extractive, import-dependent, fragile, and not meeting the needs of all citizens - toward an economy that stays within local carrying capacity while supporting healthy communities and ecosystems.

Across the workshops, one framing consistently resonated as a useful anchor: a regenerative and circular bioeconomy, understood in a broad, practical sense. This means starting with food, land, forests, fibers, water, and health as the foundations of the regional economy, and then asking how housing, industry, finance, and services can be organized around those living systems.

Rather than working sector by sector in isolation, we are beginning to see a small number of pathways that naturally overlap and reinforce one another. At a high level, these are the pathways we are holding at the moment.

### Circular Bioeconomy

This pathway is about reducing dependence on imported food, materials, and energy, while keeping more value circulating locally. It builds on assets that already exist in the region - thousands of small farms, forests, a legacy textile and furniture base, and strong civic and educational institutions.

In practical terms, this means:

- increasing the share of food and materials that can be sourced within the broader bioregion;
- building shared infrastructure for processing, manufacturing, and distribution;
- and developing a small number of regional export strengths (such as engineered wood products, circular textiles, and advanced biomaterials) where North Carolina has clear potential.

Some effort and capital will continue to support smaller-scale community initiatives that strengthen social resilience. At the same time, meaningful system change will require larger investments in value-chain infrastructure that can operate at scale.

### Health and Resilience

A second pathway that came up repeatedly is health and resilience. Participants consistently pointed out that health outcomes are shaped far more by food systems, housing quality, water, air, and social connection than by healthcare alone.

This pathway focuses on treating food, housing, and ecosystems as core health infrastructure. Examples include food-as-medicine approaches, reduced exposure to toxins, cleaner water and air, and community-scale resilience hubs embedded in everyday places such as schools, clinics, and faith buildings. Over time, this also points toward healthcare, housing, and insurance systems that invest more upstream in prevention and resilience, rather than only responding after crises occur.

### Security and Livelihoods

A third pathway is about security and livelihoods - people's ability to afford housing, access stable work, and remain rooted in their communities as the region changes.

This includes low-carbon, flood- and heat-resilient housing built with local bio-based materials; cooperative and community land trust models; and workforce development linked to regenerative food, construction, textiles, and ecosystem restoration. The emphasis here is on reducing precarity and displacement while building stronger social fabric - not just creating jobs.

### How These Pathways Fit Together

We do not see these pathways as separate tracks. Progress in one supports progress in the others.

More resilient food systems improve health and stabilize farm livelihoods. Circular textiles and biomaterials connect agriculture to manufacturing and construction. Affordable, resilient housing supports workforce stability. Healthier ecosystems reduce long-term public, healthcare, and insurance costs.

Our intention is to support these pathways through a place-based transition portfolio that blends grants, concessional loans, and investment capital over time - starting with pilots and barrier removal, and gradually scaling approaches that prove durable and effective.

## What This Means for the Next Phase

The October workshops produced a sense of direction and the early contours of transition pathways that are grounded in both lived reality and data.

The next phase will focus on:

- Deepening and refining the pathways through conversations with targeted working groups.
- Translating these pathways into investable propositions without diluting their integrity.
- Continuing to spend time in the region, strengthening relationships and governance capacity.
- Building the translational layer that connects local work to aligned capital and enabling infrastructure at state, national, and global levels.

This work sits deliberately at the intersection of slow, relational place-based change and the urgency of systemic transformation. Holding that tension is one of the core design challenges ahead.