

OPINION

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“We stand firmly with Winston-Salem and our region. We’ll demand accountability and vision from our leaders, and we’ll try to provide you, our readers, with the same. We’ll advocate, celebrate, commiserate, berate and sometimes aggravate. But we will never hesitate in voicing our opinion of what’s best for Northwest North Carolina.” — **The Journal Editorial Board**

Forsyth County stands at a critical crossroads

Forsyth County stands at a crossroads, and the path we choose will define not only our economic future, but our moral one. The strength of our community will not be measured by growth alone, but by whether that growth reaches the families working every day to stay afloat.

I lead United Way of Forsyth County as president and CEO, but long before I carried this title I understood what it meant to live in a household where hard work did not always equal stability. I know what it feels like when a family does everything right and still struggles to make ends meet. I know the quiet stress when bills are due and there is simply not enough. And I know the life-changing power of a community that decides to step in, stand up and invest in its people. That is why this moment in Forsyth matters so deeply.

Nearly four in 10 households in our county are either living in poverty or are ALICE: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. These families are working. They are contributing to our economy, raising children, caring for aging

parents and serving in essential roles across our community. Yet their incomes cannot keep pace with the true cost of housing, child care, health care, food and transportation. These families are not failing. The math simply isn’t working. Every day I see what happens when systems are fragmented and when families fall through the cracks. I also see what is possible when a community aligns around shared purpose.

United Way is often described as a fundraiser. Yes, we raise resources. But that is not our true role.

We are a convener, bringing together nonprofits, businesses, educators, faith leaders and public officials to solve problems no single organization can solve alone.

We are collaborators, aligning dollars and strategy so that investments lead to measurable outcomes.

We are catalysts, driving long-term solutions in education and economic mobility that change trajectories, not just circumstances.

When a child is not reading proficiently by third grade, their likelihood of graduating from high school drops significantly. When parents cannot afford reliable child care, they cannot fully participate in the

workforce. When one unexpected expense pushes a working family into crisis, the ripple effects reach our schools, our employers and our neighborhoods.

Education and economic mobility are inseparable. If we want a strong workforce tomorrow, we must invest in children today. If we want thriving neighborhoods, we must ensure working families can achieve stability. If we want sustained economic growth, we must confront the reality that a significant portion of our neighbors are struggling to afford necessities.

This is not charity. It is an investment in the strength and sustainability of Forsyth County. The need has grown while resources have tightened. Nonprofits are serving more families with fewer dollars. Costs continue to rise. ALICE households often earn too much to qualify for assistance and too little to achieve security. They are one emergency away from financial collapse.

To meet this moment, we must expand literacy efforts so more children read on grade level. We must strengthen workforce and financial stability programs. We must coordinate services across sectors instead of duplicating efforts. Most importantly, we must

stabilize families who are working hard but are living on the edge. If we do not act, we will pay in other ways with overwhelmed classrooms, strained health systems, workforce shortages and lost human potential. The cost of inaction will exceed the cost of investment.

This is not simply about meeting a fundraising goal. It is about who we choose to be as a community. We cannot celebrate economic development in one breath and ignore economic instability in the next. We cannot say children are our future while hesitating to invest in their readiness to learn. We cannot champion growth while nearly 40% of our neighbors struggle to stay afloat. This is a declaration that in Forsyth County we do not look away from working families. It is a commitment that our values and our investments will align.

History will not judge us by what we intended to do. It will judge us by what we chose to do when the need was clear. The need is clear. The question is whether we will rise to meet it. I believe we will. And I am asking you to rise with us.

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