Written by Gary Childers
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Elected officials and staff representing all the towns in Watauga County along with the Commissioners and members of Appalachian State University's administration held an intergovernmental retreat at the ASU Athletic Center Monday evening. Phillip Trew, Planning and Development Director, for the High Country Council of Governments explained the purpose of the meeting, "The towns of Boone, Blowing Rock, Banner Elk, Seven Devils and Beech Mountain and Watauga County came to me four or five years ago and said 'will you help us facilitate some retreats.' We decided to do it twice a year with the idea of getting elected officials and select staff together to talk about areas of mutual interest." The area of mutual interest chosen for highlighting during this retreat was the work being done by the High Country United Way. The United Way's efforts to restructure how they allocate the funds donated by citizens and groups from Avery and Watauga Counties to achieve greater effectiveness has attracted the interest of community, civic, business, and governmental leaders throughout both counties. The model they have adopted has been viewed as a positive step by many in these positions. Nancy Reigel, High Country United Way Board member and early leader of the initiative, explained why the funding process was being revised and provided an overview of the process, "Today, we fund programs that help pull kids out of the river. We need to make change in the community—lasting change. Let's get to the root cause of the problem." Following her comments Ms. Reigel introduced the facilitators of each of the Vision Councils the United Way established who then presented a synopsis of their group's work over the past 18 months. Facilitators for the Health Vision Council, Alice Salthouse and Bryan Belcher, identified their group's priorities as; (1) Creating an environment that supports health, (2) Providing needed health care & resources, and (3) Reducing substance abuse. Susan Jones along with Joe Furman, Income Vision Council facilitators, shared their group's priorities as; (1) Creating affordable housing, (2) Attracting, obtaining, and maintaining diverse industries, and (3) Creating sufficient affordable health care. Facilitators for the Education Vision Council, Gary Childers, Dr. Dick Jones, and Melissa Phillips, presented their committee's priorities as; (1) Expand non-traditional education opportunities, (2) Increase/change perception of value of education, and (3) Increase collaboration to align resources. The retreat concluded with Mr. Trew thanking the representatives of High Country United Way and Vision Council facilitators for sharing their work and encouraging the governmental representatives, if interested, to contact any of those individuals for further information.