



# Black Mountain Strong: Lessons & Stories from Helene

Morehead-Cain Civic Collaboration

Final Presentation

July 2025



“

*This community, I won't say it surprised me, but it impressed me. Yeah, yeah, it did. We all came together.*

– Vice Mayor Archie  
Pertiller



# Introduction

We are Morehead-Cain Scholars from UNC-Chapel Hill, and over the past eight weeks we have been...

- Creating a historical record of the Town's response to Helene
- Crafting a survey to assess residents' long-term resiliency priorities
- Designing social media graphics to facilitate effective communication



# How We Approached Our Project

1

## Research & Planning

- Researched Helene and its regional impact
- Reviewed Town documentation
- Studied the official FEMA disaster response processes

2

## Community Immersion

- Engaged with the Black Mountain community
- Identified community leaders and stakeholders
- Initiated outreach to coordinate interviews

3

## Story-Gathering Through Interviews

- Interviewed a diverse range of community members and local officials
- Gained an understanding of community challenges and resilience

4

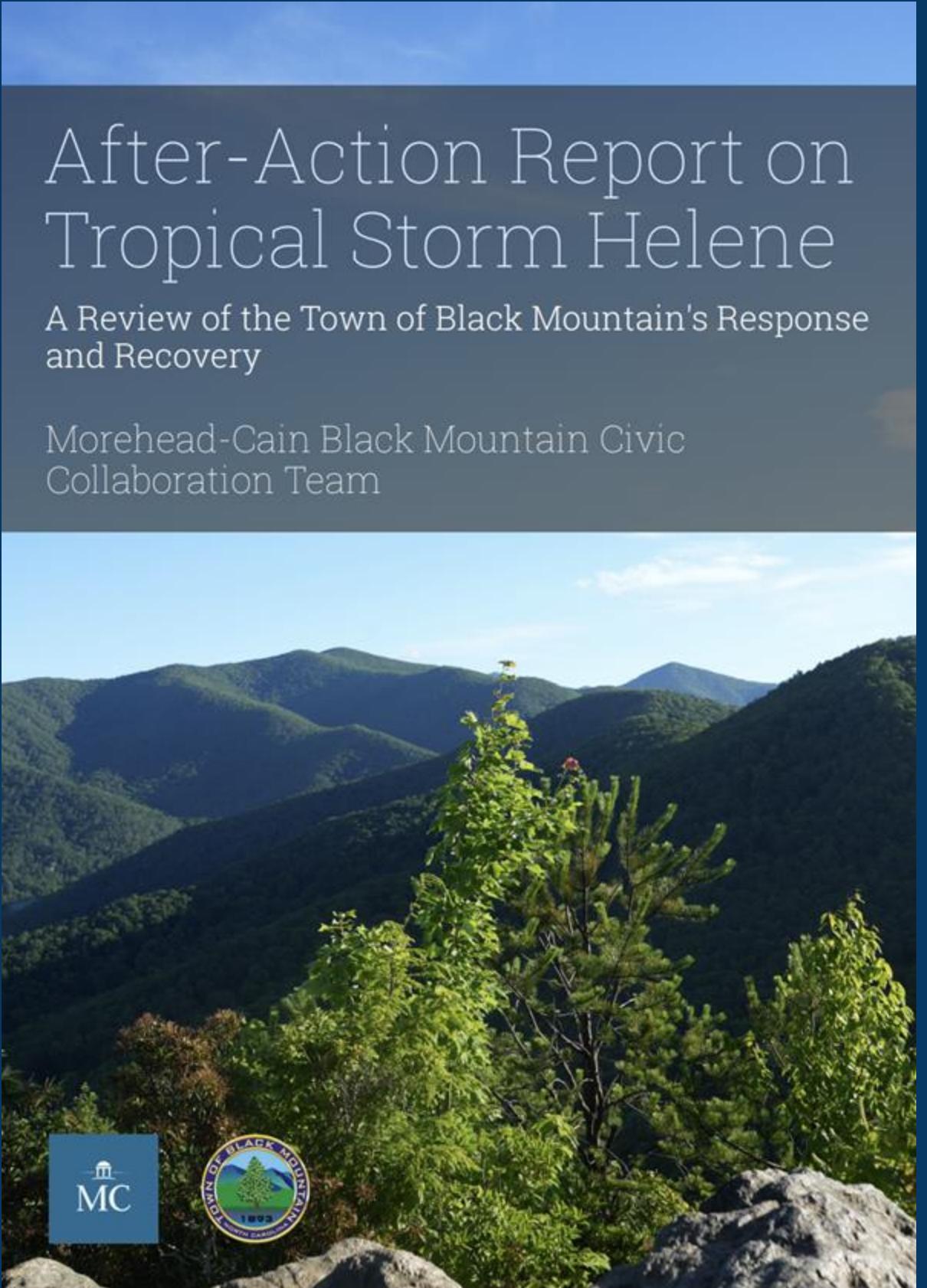
## Synthesis & Reporting

- Analyzed interview and document data to identify key themes
- Synthesized all findings and stories into a comprehensive final project report on the timeline of and response to Hurricane Helene



# Historical Record

- Created a report on how the Town responded to Helene before, during, and after the storm, focusing on:
  - **Public Safety & Local Government:**
    - Police, Fire, Public Works, Town Administration
  - **State and Federal Teams:**
    - Incident Management Teams, NC Governor's Office
  - **Community Actors:**
    - Local churches, volunteers
  - Lessons learned for future disasters
  - Long-term, ongoing struggles



# Executive Summary

In September 2024, Tropical Storm Helene devastated the Town of Black Mountain, North Carolina. This report provides a comprehensive account of the Town's preparation for and response to the emergency caused by Tropical Storm Helene. It details short-term recovery efforts and lessons learned for ongoing resilience planning, providing a historical record and suggestions for future crisis management. Drawing on interviews with Town staff, official records, and community testimony, this report endeavors to document how the Town of Black Mountain navigated an unprecedented disaster.

## Key Impacts

- Over 21 inches of rainfall fell in 72 hours following a Predecessor Rain Event (PRE), resulting in catastrophic flash flooding, landslides, and infrastructure failures.
- The storm resulted in four fatalities in Black Mountain, with a total of 43 deaths reported throughout Buncombe County.

## Strengths in Response

- Early and structured coordination between the Fire, Police, and Public Works departments.
- The adoption of a task force approach for efficient rescue and evacuation proved essential to the Town's success.
- Public safety task forces saved over 450 people, including 60 water rescues.
- The establishment of a municipal Emergency Operations Center (EOC) tailored to the Town's specific topography and needs.
- The rapid adaptation of mass communication strategies was a response to the availability of new technologies.
- Publication of CodeRED alerts, social media posts, daily press releases, and daily community meetings.
- Arrival and leadership of the first Incident Management Team (IMT) within 72 hours post-storm.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

- Multiple Communication System Failures: Complete failure of cell and internet services, near-failure of radio services, severely inhibited coordination and information flows.
- CodeRED alerts rely on a voluntary sign-up system; the program has 10,000 active recipients.
- Communication and leadership difficulties hindered the Town's EOC coordination with Buncombe County's EOC, resulting in increased confusion and delayed critical state aid.

- False reports and misinterpretations (e.g., the North Fork Reservoir failure, anhydrous ammonia leak at the Ingles warehouse) caused widespread panic and misdirected resources, underscoring the need for immediate, accurate information and effective methods to share it with emergency services.
- The disorganized influx of volunteers and unsolicited donations created logistical chaos and public safety concerns.
- The public safety building's generator failure compromised essential services.
- Elected officials' confusion over their role in crisis management increased the burden on Town staff.

## Ongoing Struggles

- Black Mountain's infrastructure remains partially compromised: roadways, greenways, and public facilities still require extensive repairs.
- The FEMA reimbursement process is slow and burdensome, placing additional strain on Town staff who are already working at capacity.
- Many residents continue to live in damaged homes or await public infrastructure repairs, and community morale is declining.
- The Town has identified adaptation and mitigation needs to enhance its preparedness for future natural disasters, but lacks the necessary funding to implement them.

## Recommendations

- Designate Safe Zones: Establish pre-identified, safe sites for public information, supply distribution, emergency shelter, and volunteer coordination.
- Enhance Multilingual Outreach: Include Spanish translations of all public communications to increase accessibility and reach a broader audience. Consider hiring a fluent Spanish speaker for a public safety role to foster trust and enhance communication with Spanish-speaking communities.
- Formalize Interagency Coordination: Establish formal task force structures and protocols to ensure a transparent chain of command, adhering to Incident Command System (ICS) guidelines.
- Invest in Redundant Communications: Expand capacity to handle communication outages through point-to-point radios, satellite connections, and analog backup systems.
- Expand Staff Capacity: Enhance staff capabilities to effectively manage disaster grants and restore infrastructure.
- Clarify the Role of Elected Officials: Clearly define the roles of elected officials in emergencies, aligning with ICS protocols.
- Enhance Social Media Communications: Incorporate timestamps within the text of social media posts to improve message clarity and enhance communication efficiency.

This report affirms the extraordinary resilience of the Black Mountain community. It also emphasizes the urgent need for future disaster planning and sustained investment in recovery and preparedness initiatives to help this community adapt to a future increasingly shaped by extreme weather events.

# Long-Term Resiliency Planning

- Created a community survey to understand priorities in resiliency & hazard mitigation planning
  - Focus on preferred communication methods
- Designed social media graphics to facilitate information sharing
  - Identified essential distribution platforms: Town Facebook, Instagram, potentially monthly newsletter

Town of Black Mountain: Hurricane Helene Impacts & Long-Term Resiliency Survey

**Survey Overview**

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. It has been nearly a year since Hurricane Helene happened, and the Town of Black Mountain is seeking your input on what impacts you experienced from the Hurricane and what you prioritize in future disaster resiliency measures. Through widespread survey engagement, Town officials will be able to take into account public sentiment when shaping long-term recovery and resiliency priorities. Resilience and mitigation measures are important for reducing risk, not just for future storms but for disasters of any kind.

Your responses are confidential and will be combined with feedback from across the community for analysis. This survey should take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

If you have any questions, please contact:

**Section 1: About You**

1. Do you live primarily (at least six months out of the year) in Black Mountain?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
2. Where in Black Mountain do you live? (Please provide your general neighborhood or street. This helps us identify localized impacts.)
3. What is your age?
  - a. Under 18





# TOWN OF BLACK MOUNTAIN

Our town is also focused on two crucial long-term goals for a safer community: Here's the difference:

## Resilience

Our town's ability to withstand and quickly adapt when disaster hits.

(e.g. Having our own **EOC** ready to go when we got cut off; the North Fork dam's special design to withstand water pressure)

## Sustainability

Our long-term commitment to adapting to the environment and protecting resources for the future.

(e.g. Addressing new risks like **landslides** and **wildfires** after Helene changed our landscape)

The homepage of the Town of Black Mountain website. It features a large banner with the town's name and a seal. Below the banner are sections for 'IMPORTANT UPDATES' and 'COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION'.



# TOWN OF BLACK MOUNTAIN

Every disaster involves two critical action phases: what we do before it happens, and what we do during and after it happens.

## Mitigation

Actions before a disaster to lessen its impact and reduce the severity

(e.g. Clearing blockages from local waterways in Summer 2023)

## Recovery

Actions during and right after a disaster to restore services and stabilize the community.

(e.g. Rescuing over 450 people, restoring power and water supply)

# 4

## Town Preparations and Emergency Measures

Fire Chief John Coffey had been a part of Buncombe County's Urban Search and Rescue Team during the 2004 flood, which heavily informed his and the Town's preparations as Helene approached. He recalled: "All of us that are still working today that remember 2004—that's what we were preparing for."

The Fire Department's jurisdiction stretches beyond the Town of Black Mountain to include the entire 54-square-mile East Buncombe County Fire District, with over 22,000 permanent residents. Although the Fire District's jurisdiction extends beyond that of the Police Department, which is responsible for safety within the Town limits, coordination between the Fire Department, Police Department, Public Works Department, and the Town Hall staff occurred early and frequently. Chief Coffey and Police Chief Steve Parker highlighted the challenge of serving a town of over 8,000 residents, which, with visitors, can swell to as many as 30,000 people on any given day. With Helene approaching, these challenges became more apparent as the Town escalated its preparations.

### Tuesday, September 24th

Town department leadership convened for their standard weekly meeting at Town Hall at 09:00 on Tuesday, September 24th. This meeting focused on the initiation of the Town's

7

preparation for Tropical Cyclone Nine, which at 11:00 that morning was designated as Tropical Storm Helene by the National Weather Service. While Town Manager Josh Harrold was in Pittsburgh, PA, for a work commitment, Assistant Manager Jessica Trotman emphasized the importance of this meeting, recalling that "we had those conversations before the storm hit: what are we doing, how are we doing it, and who's doing what?"

During the meeting, Chief Coffey exercised his administrative power as a municipal Fire Chief to establish an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) in Black Mountain. Drawing upon his experiences from 2004, Coffey made this decision to be independent of the Buncombe County EOC due to Black Mountain's population density and the unique risks of its topography. This proved to be a strategic decision after the Town's eventual isolation due to impassable roads during the storm.

The EOC brought together Chiefs Coffey and Parker, alongside Deputy Police Chief Chris Kuhn, Public Works Director Jamey Matthews, and support staff Stacey Cox (Police Department) and Asia Hobbs (Water Department). Located in the training room of the public safety building, between the Fire and Police zones, the EOC immediately initiated an escalation in the town's preparation. Key flood-prone areas were reviewed and mapped, while the Town

# 5

## Crisis Operations: Initial Short-Term Response

### Public Safety and EOC Operations

#### Friday, September 27th

The most severe conditions of the storm hit Black Mountain at approximately 00:45 on the morning of Friday, September 27th, lasting until around 05:00.



Figure 5.1: North Fork Reservoir

Chief Coffey received a phone call from Ryan Cole, Buncombe County's Emergency Services Assistant Director, just after 01:00, who shared that the dam bucket at the North Fork Reservoir had broken. Dam buckets, or "flip buckets" are "used to discharge flow away from a hydraulic structure into a plunge pool to dissipate energy."<sup>16</sup> According to their real-time understanding that the dam had failed, Chiefs Coffey and Parker believed that there was a "20-foot surge of water" from the North Fork Reservoir headed in the direction of the first responders. Chiefs Coffey and Parker had to decide whether to allow the firefighters to continue their rescues despite the immediate threat to life and safety or to instruct them to pause their efforts.

Chief Coffey instructed all personnel to pull out via radio. Fire and rescue responded to inform Chief Coffey that they were in the middle of rescues in the Tanglewood neighborhood, where the water level had risen to the rooftops.

12

Town Manager Josh Harrold asked Chief Parker what they could possibly do about the water coming from the North Fork Reservoir, to which Chief Parker responded, "We'll just keep rescuing people until we all die." There was no way to evacuate people or to communicate the inbound threat. Chief Coffey describes the decision to recall his personnel: "The decision fell on my shoulders... Do I let them continue to rescue the people and hope they survive, or do I

# Takeaways & Reflections



# Key Takeaways & Reflections

## Effectiveness of Town Response

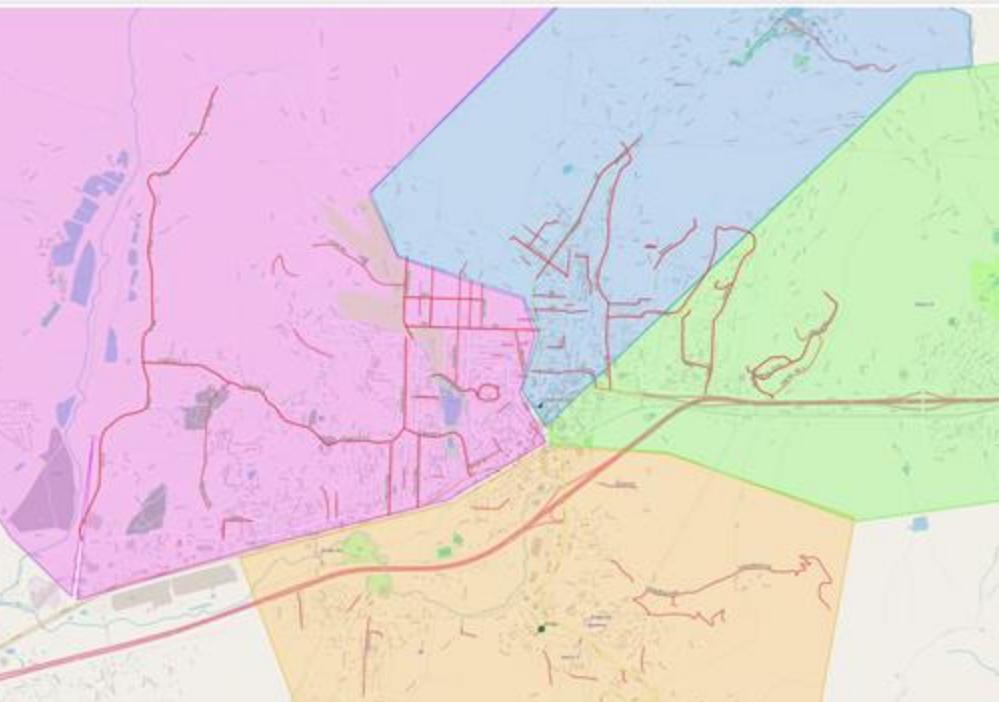
- Experience of Town leadership
- Strength despite isolation
- Role model for other small towns
- Cross-agency coordination and proactivity

## Importance of Novel Strategies

- Police, Fire, Public Works task force approach
- Town square community meetings
- Municipality quadrant / 3-sector division

## Short and Long-Term Communication

- Adapting in the short-term
- Misinformation
- FEMA processes and long-term recovery outlooks



# Key Takeaways & Reflections

## Power of Community-Building & Connections

- Government and private connections (water access, community distribution sites, pool)
- Civil society, church communities, and volunteers

## Need for Redundancies and Formalization in Planning

- Infrastructure back-ups and communication alternatives (Starlink, radios, water independence)
- Press and information streamlining and preparedness
- Formalize Task Force approach
- Shelters and Safe Zones



# Town's Response



S

W

O

T

## Strengths:

- Success in isolation
- Proactivity in Municipality coordination
- Powerful sense of community
- Effective supply distribution

## Weaknesses:

- Multi-system communications failure
- Formal Protocols
- Language and technology equity gaps
- County disconnect

## Opportunities:

- Lesson learned and future events
- Harness leadership experience
- Black Mountain's response as a blueprint

## Threats:

- Climate change and increased risk of natural disasters
- Continuity of risk knowledge and disaster experience



# Long-Term Resiliency Planning

**Governance and Operational Structure**

**Resilient Infrastructure and Logistics**

**Community Preparedness & Communication**

**Improve Psychological Preparedness**

# Governance and Operational Structure



- Formalize the Incident Command System
  - Establish & share EOC access procedures
- Strengthen inter community relationships
- Codify emergency SOPs



# Resilient Infrastructure and Logistics

- Build a redundant communication network that can be used in disasters
- Ensure critical facilities
- Enhance water system resilience
- Establish a Volunteer & Donation Management Plan



# Community Preparedness & Communication



- Develop a unified public information strategy
- integrate a Spanish language resource
- Formalise a public shelter and support agreement



# Improve Psychological Preparedness

- Prioritise first responder well being
- Expand risk assessments and flood plain assessments



# Voices from Helene



# Voices from Helene

## Challenges in Aid & Rescue

"We are now trapped in Black Mountain, we are an island. And nobody's coming in to help us, nobody's coming out." - Police Chief Parker

"We had people take on feet of water in their home or business that were outside of both the hundred and five hundred year flood plains." - Anne Phillip

## Communication Challenges

"The town has not done an effective job of continuing to communicate its disaster response long-term with people who are not technologically engaged... No little bit. Drop the little bit. Totally. Totally. We're totally on our own." - John and Valorie Snell



# Voices from Helene

## Leadership Response

"Without good staff, you're a boat sitting in the water with no rudder. You've got no direction, so you're only as good as what your staff is, which I'm very thankful to have really good, skilled staff, for one." - Jamey Matthews

"Their success was really credited to their leadership. It was clear that the town manager... police chief... fire chief... and the public works director... All really four fabulously strong leaders that had really good, clear working relationship with each other. They understood their lane." - Kirby Saunders



# Our Experience: Black Mountain Strong

**Community**

**Resilience**

**Intersystem  
Collaboration**

**Equity**



# Community

- Community is built in actions, not words
- Once you become a part of a community, people are more likely to open up to you and tell you their stories



# Resilience



- Full recovery from a disaster requires becoming stronger for the next one
- Need for tangible, concrete changes to address gaps



**FEMA**

- Recovery requires government & community actors at all levels to work together
- Not a unilateral process

# Intersystem Collaboration



- Necessity of equitable recovery and resiliency planning
- Ensuring access to public information (emergency & recovery)

- Language
- Technology / Age

  
**TOWN OF BLACK MOUNTAIN**  
160 Midland Avenue • Black Mountain, North Carolina 28711  
Phone (828) 419-9300 • Fax (828) 419-7210 • TDD 800-735-2962  
[www.townofblackmountain.org](http://www.townofblackmountain.org)

**WATER SUPPLY UPDATE**

- Starting on October 10<sup>th</sup> we will be reconnecting with the City of Asheville's water supply.
- This water is not drinkable, even if you boil it. It is **NOT TO BE USED** for anything other than flushing toilets.
- This warning will be in effect until further notice.
- Due to the high amount of sediment in the water, expect to see discoloration.

This reconnection will allow our crews to find and repair the many leaks that occurred during the flooding. Once repaired, water will be tested, and our system will be one step closer to fully operational. We greatly appreciate your patience as we work through this difficult process.

As a reminder, if you have not been receiving Code Red announcements, please go to [www.TownofBlackMountain.org](http://www.TownofBlackMountain.org) to register for Code Red for water and emergency updates.

  
**TOWN OF BLACK MOUNTAIN**  
160 Midland Avenue • Black Mountain, North Carolina 28711  
Phone (828) 419-9300 • Fax (828) 419-7210 • TDD 800-735-2962  
[www.townofblackmountain.org](http://www.townofblackmountain.org)

**ACTUALIZACION DEL AGUA POTABLE**

- Comenzando el 10 de Octubre, estaremos reconectados con el sistema de agua de la Ciudad de Asheville.
- Esta agua no es potable, aun si la pone a hervir. **NO SE DEBE USAR** más que para los inodoros.
- Esta advertencia estará en efecto hasta futuro aviso.
- Debido a la alta cantidad de sedimento en el agua, espere ver agua cafecita.

Esta reconexión permitirá a los trabajadores encontrar y reparar varias fugas que ocurrieron durante la inundación. Una vez reparadas, el agua será probada y nuestro sistema estará a un paso mas cerca de funcionar en su totalidad. Apreciamos enormemente su paciencia mientras pasamos por este proceso tan difícil.

Como recordatorio, si no ha estado recibiendo nuestras alertas Código Rojo, por favor visite [www.TownofBlackMountain.org](http://www.TownofBlackMountain.org) para registrarse y recibir los Codigos Rojos de agua y actualizaciones de emergencias.

# Equity

# Personal Reflection

Before our internship, none of us were familiar with Black Mountain or what it meant to recover from a natural disaster. Since arriving in Black Mountain in May, we have...

- Immersed ourselves in the community
- Gained insights into how a small town operates
- Inspired & moved by the stories of heroism and sacrifice that the community shared with us



# Some of the faces we've met...



**Fire Chief  
Coffey**



**Pam King**



**Police Chief  
Parker**



**Jessica Trotman**



**Josh Harrold**



**Wesley Barker**



**Jamey Matthews**



**Lisa Jennings**



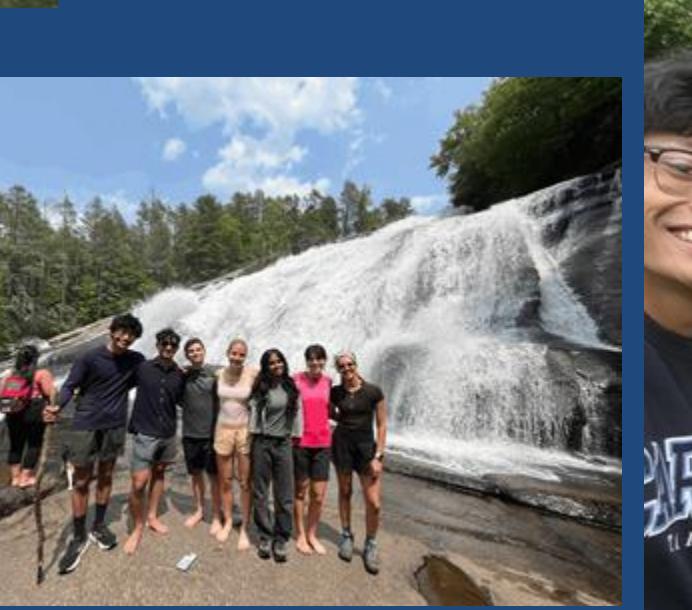
**Scott Elliott**



**Anne Phillip**



# THANK YOU!



**QUESTIONS?**  
**COMMENTS?**