

A happy birthday?

Appalachian Regional Commission's 20th anniversary may be its last

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Twenty years ago someone recognized a problem and did something about it.

As a result, living conditions are better in the Appalachian region today, say supporters of the Appalachian Regional Commission.

Since the creation of the ARC in 1965 by a Congressional act signed by former President Lyndon Johnson, more than \$5 billion have been funneled into the Appalachian region, including Burke County, to provide facilities to accommodate growth in the region's underdeveloped areas. But for the past three years funding has been on the decline.

"North Carolina gets about \$2 million (annually) now, but in its heyday the state got as much as \$8 million or more (annually)," said Bobby White, field coordinator for the ARC in Burke, Caldwell and Alexander counties.

On March 9, the commission celebrates its 20th anniversary. But, as activities are being prepared to commemorate past successes, the usual high-spirited excitement associated with celebration has been squelched by the tinge of fear that the ARC will feel the budget ax of President Ronald Reagan.

"The ARC and its funds may not be here next year because it's presently targeted for extinction by (fiscal year 1986) budget cutting in Washington," said Western Piedmont Council of Government Director Doug Taylor during an address at the council's annual meeting recently.

In addition, White said, "There are proposals now to rescind funds already made available (to the state) for current funding." If those available funds are rescinded, Burke County will lose a \$36,639 grant approved for the Emery Corp. to install a sewer facility at its new industrial plant north of Morganton, White added.

White said the state has approved the Emery grant, and

the next step will be to have the project approved on the federal level.

The Emery project is one of six projects in North Carolina that has already been approved for funding from the state's 1984 ARC allocation. But if the state's \$1.4 million in ARC funds are rescinded, the local grants will be killed.

Congressman James Brophy of the 10th Congressional District, which includes Burke County, said recently "it's too early to know" what will happen to the commission.

Brophy said he would propose ARC be phased out and not "just dropped off a cliff," but he added he is more concerned about keeping alive federal revenue sharing programs for states and cities than some of the other domestic programs such as the ARC.

Revenue sharing can meet some of the needs now provided by the ARC, Brophy said. Revenue sharing

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ARC faces its last birthday

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gives the "greatest flexibility and greatest direct amount of help to local communities without all that red tape," he explained.

A regional economic development agency, ARC assists areas in 13 states in the Appalachian Mountain range and was the first domestic program to form a partnership among federal, state, and local governments.

The commission's membership is composed of governors of the 13 states and a federal co-chairman appointed by the president.

Winifred A. Pizzano currently serves as federal co-chairwoman along with the governors of North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia.

The commission covers 397 counties in the 13 states and affects a total of 745,000 square miles and a population of more than 20 million people.

The Western Piedmont Council of Governments, based in Hickory, is the sponsoring agency for the local ARC development district of Burke, Caldwell and Alexander counties. The local district is one of six in the state.

Congress appropriates annual funds to the ARC to fund area development programs, community facilities, health and education programs, housing, highway and other projects that promote economic development.

Each state sets needs and priorities for ARC funds through the governor's office funds after consultation with local governments through regional development districts. Programs and projects get final approval annually by the commission.

Taylor said ARC funds are supplemental, and in most cases another basic federal grant must first be obtained.

Through 1984, \$20.2 million in ARC funds have been spent in this region. Taylor said those funds supplemented \$61.6 million in grants for 121 projects.

Of those funds, Burke County received \$9.1 million, which supplemented \$36.8 million in grants for about 40 projects.

Grace Hospital received the largest single ARC appropriation back in the early 1970s when a new hospital was being built. More than \$2 million in ARC funds went into

the current hospital complex.

More recently, the \$10.9 million Lake Rhodias Waste Water Treatment plant in Valdese was built in part with \$46,500 in ARC funds.

In education, numerous ARC dollars have been given to programs and projects at East Burke and Freedom high schools and at Western Piedmont Community College. ARC funds helped build vocational education buildings at all three schools. ARC grants totaling \$1.3 million were applied to construction of vocational education facilities at the county's high schools, and the college received \$401,000 in ARC funds.

In addition, a \$26,165 ARC grant was funded to strengthen the county's vocational education programs. And, a \$977,602 grant helped the development of the college's health education program.

A total of \$239,000 went to the construction of the access roads at both high schools.

In addition to the Valdese wastewater treatment plant, other water and sewer projects and studies in the county were partially funded by ARC to the tune of \$1.7 million.

If ARC funds are abolished for the future, White said local governments' biggest problems will be keeping up with water and sewer needs. Water and sewer will be one of the biggest issues of the 1980s. The services are necessary in bringing new industry and jobs into the county, White said.

In the past, ARC assisted a wide range of local needs required for an area to grow, such as high school vocational education, community library improvement and expansion, developing and improving reading levels, medical facility and health care improvements, and improvements in solid waste disposal, White said.

However, he said, as ARC has matured, it has moved from a generally broad economic funding plan to a narrower purpose of creating new jobs. "Local governments are going to need some type of help in providing basic water and sewer service... needed to continue growth in local economy through housing, business and industry," White added.

Burke, Caldwell and Alexander counties have experienced tremendous economic growth in the last 20 years, and the elimination of ARC funds would not be as catastrophic as if they had never existed, White said.



ARC funds helped health education programs such as this one for WPCC.