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The Story of North Carolina Counties
County **QUARTERLY**
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Federal Issues... Considering NC County Interests

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As the 115th Congress wraps up, there are a number of issues important to North Carolina counties that merit an update. This edition of Washington Watch provides a synopsis of various federal issues NCACC tracks. To request more detailed information on any of the issues covered, contact Hugh Johnson, NCACC Government Relations Coordinator, at hugh.johnson@ncacc.org or (919) 719-1153.

CONGRESSIONAL SCHEDULE

November 13 marks the first day of the lame-duck session following midterm elections. Upon members' return to Washington, Congress will address seven unfinished spending bills before the current Continuing Resolution expires on December 7. It must also pass a Farm Bill Reauthorization, address emergency spending for recent natural disasters, and any other issues that were left unfinished before adjournment. The results of the midterm elections could significantly impact final compromises made during the lame-duck session. NC counties are encouraged to meet with their federal elected officials during the remainder of the 2018 calendar year to keep relationships strong and county priorities top-of-mind.



DISASTER RECOVERY

Congress passed \$1.14 billion in disaster relief funding for North Carolina as a down payment to help address the damage caused by Hurricane Florence. The current funding approved is under the Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) program, which supports a variety of activities, including housing redevelopment and rebuilding, business assistance, economic revitalization, and infrastructure repair. The bill also includes a policy fix to ease duplication of benefits rules that will allow more North Carolinians to receive CDBG-DR funding. Constituents who have sustained severe storm or flood property damage from Hurricane Florence are encouraged to apply for federal assistance online at www.disasterassistance.gov. While not every NC resident who suffered property damage will be eligible for federal disaster assistance, those who are initially denied can appeal the decision to FEMA (<https://www.fema.gov/blog/2012-11-09/appealing-fema-assistance-denial-decision>).



OPIOID EPIDEMIC

Congress passed the Substance Use-Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment (SUPPORT) for Patients and Communities Act (H.R. 6), now P.L. 115-271. The measure combined several bills that had been introduced to address the opioid epidemic through treatment, prevention and recovery assistance. The package includes Medicaid, Medicare, and public health reforms that create, expand and reauthorize programs and policies covering nearly every federal agency. It provides funding for, but not limited to, \$500 million per year FY19-FY21 for an existing grant program, with emphasis on outreach to rural and underserved communities, and tripling from \$12 million to \$36 million annual funding for first responders training.



Person County held a ribbon-cutting event to commemorate its broadband project.



BROADBAND

Broadband internet providers interested in serving rural areas pressed Congress for a predictable funding mechanism to support projects. The Universal Service Fund (USF) high-cost program, which allows eligible carriers to recover some of their costs associated with providing rural broadband access, was slated for a 15% cut under budget control mechanisms adopted by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to ensure carriers do not receive more support than needed. Although the FCC authorized an additional \$540 million for the fund as a stopgap, providers say it is not enough money and the lack of funds will force them to halt or forego planned buildouts. Rural Utilities Service (RUS) funds also remain critical, in addition to any potential rural broadband focus included in a future infrastructure package. A forthcoming RUS pilot program will provide \$600 million for rural broadband buildouts, but it is not clear yet which providers are eligible.



FEDERAL SPENDING

On September 28, President Trump signed two minibus spending packages into law. The measures include five of the 12 annual appropriations bills approved to date. Specifically, P.L. 115-244 provides FY19 funding for the Legislative Branch; Energy and Water Development, and Related Agencies; and Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies. P.L. 155-245 provides FY19 funding for Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education and Related Agencies; and Defense. There is increased funding for county eligible competitive grants in these approved spending packages, as well as the remaining seven spending bills that are pending final approval during the lame-duck session. NC counties are encouraged to use FY18 competitive grant notices of funding availability (NOFAs) to start preparing for FY19. ■

FARM BILL

Congress did not pass the Farm Bill Reauthorization (H.R. 2) before the September 30 deadline, nor did it pass a short-term extension. Nevertheless, major programs such as SNAP and crop insurance will continue, and leadership assured stakeholders that arrangements were made to prevent a lapse in authority for roughly 40 other agriculture programs at risk. Negotiations between the House Agriculture Committee leadership and the Senate Agriculture Committee leadership continue with the goal of having a conference bill ready for passage during the lame-duck session.

