I try to keep track of the Helene recovery efforts in other communities in Western North Carolina. It becomes a rather daunting task when one realizes that there are so many wide-ranging problems yet to be fully resolved in the aftermath of this terrible disaster.

Many infrastructure challenges still remain. Roads and bridges need to be rebuilt, and massive amounts of debris remain to be removed. Some of these problems directly impact the tourist economy, which so many communities depend on for jobs and economic vitality. For instance, there is a major effort to remove fallen trees and trash from many pristine rivers and streams before visitors return to fish, canoe, tube, and kayak in these waters. Trails, camp sites, and parks need clearing, also. Beyond the infrastructure challenges, there is the personal toll as folks are still searching for functional housing after losing their homes to the hurricane.

Small-town businesses are also suffering from the disaster's impact. Two prime examples are Lake Lure and Chimney Rock. The two towns were featured in a recent Asheville Citizen-Times article about how businesses and residents struggle to recover. I have a soft spot in my heart for these two communities because we spent a big family vacation week at Lake Lure last summer before the hurricane hit. Our grandchildren loved the vacation and liked visiting Chimney Rock, the state park there, and, of course, Lake Lure. One of my fondest memories was fishing in the lake and then doing a family fish fry, like I remember from my childhood in South Georgia. You can’t beat Hush Puppies, cheese grits with fried bream, catfish, and bass, all of which we had from the lake.

After reading the article in the Citizens-Times, I realized much of what we enjoyed is now gone. Boats, houses, and docks were damaged and destroyed by the storm. Lake Lure was overwhelmed with debris from the Rocky Board River, so much so that the lake is closed for this season. Chimney Rock was partly destroyed, but due to the people’s determination, they are now rebuilding.

That is the bad stuff these two communities are dealing with, but there is hope, as there is a resurgence coming forth. The people and businesses in these two communities, as well as the other impacted communities in WNC, are proud and independent just as we are. They appreciated the outpouring of support they received immediately after the hurricane, but that period is now coming to a close.

Many businesses are now open for business in places like Lake Lure, Chimney Rock, Bat Cave, Canton, Burnsville, Asheville, and Spruce Pine, and more will be ready by Memorial Day. In order to reopen, almost all of their businesses are saddled with debt and major loans. What they need now are customers to get the cash flow going again to pay operating expenses and meet payrolls.

That is where we all can come in to help. Sallie and I, and I hope you, too, will go and visit these impacted communities this season. A visit to a community to have lunch and shop on Main Street, even for a day, will help in their recovery; it will be a wonderful visit for everyone. Now, don't get me wrong, I want folks to visit our town too, but anyway we can promote visits to our neighboring communities will be appreciated. After all, that terrible Hurricane Helene taught us we are all dependent on one another, that is the essence of community. So, let's help our neighbor and have an enjoyable experience doing so, enjoying this wonderful Western North Carolina we call home.