
JACKSON COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

ATTN: ALL MEDIA

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Jackson County Chamber of Commerce

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PRESS RELEASE:

Headline: Jackson County Chamber of Commerce directors retiring

1 photo attached

Cutline:

Photo by Scott Baker

Jackson County Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Julie Spiro Donaldson and Assistant Director Kelly Donaldson are retiring from their positions, effective July 4, 2025.

PRESS RELEASE:

On Thursday, May 1, 2025, Jackson County Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Julie Spiro Donaldson and Assistant Director Kelly Donaldson informed their Board of Directors that they will be retiring, effective at the end of the chamber's July 4 Fireworks Festivities.

Julie's retirement ends an incredible 26 and a half years at the helm of the chamber. Kelly, a newspaper editor for 15 years prior, will end an 11-year term as Assistant Director of the chamber.

Erica Bullock, Chair of the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, praised the Donaldsons for their service and commitment to Jackson County.

"On behalf of the board, we want to say THANK YOU to both Julie and Kelly for their many years of service to the Chamber," Bullock said. "The impact that they have made will be felt for many generations. They are handing off a strong and successful Chamber to their successor. They leave a legacy of service, dedication, positivity, and love for our Jackson County community. Congratulations on your retirement and we wish you all the best!"

Over the last 26 years as Executive Director, Julie and the chamber collectively restored the crumbling Hooper House into a National Historic Landmark, chamber headquarters, and one of the most recognizable structures in Jackson County. They endowed two scholarships at Western Carolina University and Southwestern Community College to assist in providing educational opportunities for the students of Jackson County. Through

partnership with the Jackson County Tourism Development Authority, they created and trademarked the nation's first Fly Fishing Trail. To create economic vibrancy in downtown Sylva, Julie, the chamber, the Town of Sylva and the Jackson County Parks and Recreation Department founded Concerts on the Creek, now in its 16th season, and one of the signature events in Jackson County. Under Julie's leadership, the chamber has provided over \$150,000 in grant funds to deserving non-profits in Jackson County. Over the years, Julie helped create many events and activities during slower times of the year to bring people into the area such as the Tour de Tuck Bicycle Race, Kris Kringle Mingle, Boutique Week, Chamber Challenge Golf Tournament and more.

"Together we have established Jackson County as a vibrant hub in Western North Carolina," Julie said in her resignation letter.

Outside of the chamber, Julie represented Jackson County on the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina, North Carolina Travel Industry Association, Carolinas Association of Chamber of Executives, as well as on many wonderful local boards and committees serving Dillsboro, Sylva, and Cullowhee.

Upon Kelly's arrival 11 years ago, he and Julie immediately established Jackson County as the North Carolina Trout Capital. Through creative partnerships they were able to bring back 11 years of Fourth of July fireworks in Sylva after a short hiatus. They also partnered with the county to secure a tract of land for the fireworks display. They elevated the Independence Day celebration into a three-hour concert with food and beverage trucks and family activities. Julie and Kelly introduced holiday fireworks in partnership with the Jackson County Parks and Recreation Department and partnered with the Town of Sylva to create an official Christmas Tree Lighting event and holiday concert on the chamber porch. Last year, they established Concerts on the Creek as one of the top six outdoor concert events in the USA TODAY. They have kept a membership of over 400 members despite an ever-evolving economy and a worldwide pandemic. They created a popular festival for fishing, music and craft beer; established the annual Friends Night Out event; served as the Main Street Sylva Directors for a year; enhanced the chamber's STIR Business After Hours events; and established an annual Open House March Madness two-day event.

They brought the advertising sales and production of the annual Our Town community guide and chamber membership directory in-house and created the "Eating Out in Jackson County" dining guide, which has become one of, if not the most popular products our visitors enjoy. Last year, the chamber organized a fundraising effort to create a new outdoor paver patio area for locals and visitors after celebrating the chamber's 100th anniversary.

Kelly has served actively on the Greening Up the Mountains organizing committee for 11 years, acting as the emcee of the festival for about 10 years. He sat on the Jackson County Parks and Recreation Advisory Committee for a year, and was called upon to act as a part-time Jackson County Public Information Officer for a year during the Covid pandemic. He also served as a Town of Webster Commissioner for four years.

"Together, we have survived a rockslide on I-40, a fire in the historic district of downtown Sylva, an economic recession, bridge construction in Dillsboro, the Covid pandemic, Hurricane Helene flooding in Dillsboro, and ongoing road construction projects," Julie

said. "We've held hands as we completed grants, applied for small business loans, and navigated numerous business and technology platforms. We learned together."

"It has been the most rewarding professional experience of my life," Kelly said in his resignation letter. "I am awfully proud of the many positive things we made happen together. I am very lucky to have worked with some exceptional staff members over the past 11 years and have enjoyed growing our chamber alongside our many ambassadors and board members who have rotated in and out over this time. This chamber runs best as a collective unit and we've had the best team I've ever been around."

The Jackson County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors has already formed a search committee to find its next Executive Director. The job will be posted on the chamber website at www.mountainlovers.com very soon, as well as with other regional, state and national organizations and job boards.

"The search committee is composed of local business, government and education leaders," said Chamber Board member Rich Price, WCU's chief marketing and strategic partnerships officer. "The process of determining a successor is a well defined and planned process."

The Donaldsons plan to offer their full assistance in bringing the new Executive Director up to speed so they can continue to lead the chamber to its full potential going forward.

"In the meantime, our staff will remain dedicated to providing the professional assistance and service that you and our community are accustomed to," Julie said in an email to members. "It is our sincere goal to make this transition without a hiccup in leadership. We are excited for the new leadership and future of the chamber. We encourage everyone to continue to support the chamber."