

Marion will enact a plan to make the city's services more accessible to residents whose first **language** isn't English and reduce the barriers for some of **McDowell's** population.

Marion's **Language Access** Plan was adopted at Tuesday's meeting of the Marion City Council, which was held at the Marion Community Building.

At the beginning of the meeting, the leaders of Centro Unido Latino Americano (CULA) distributed electronic devices to all those who attended. Based in Marion, CULA works on educational, economic and recreational opportunities for the Latinx community.

The devices had an earpiece so the listener could hear the city council meeting being translated in either English or Spanish. The devices were aimed demonstrate how **language** can be a barrier for people from different backgrounds, and an example of the kinds of services that will be available as part of the **language access** plan. Mayor Steve Little and the council members wore them as well as numerous others at the meeting.

The city's **Language Access** Plan, which has been in the works since 2023, was developed by the Institute for the Study of the Americas at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the city of Marion and CULA. This plan directs the city of Marion to create more multilingual resources and have more bilingual staff. The goal is to make Marion a more welcoming community for people whose second **language** is English, representatives from CULA said.

Around 14% of Marion's residents were born outside of the United States. The majority of them are from Mexico, the Philippines, Costa Rica, Canada and Guatemala, according to a presentation Tuesday by Brianna Gilmore from UNC-Chapel Hill. About 20% of Marion residents speak a **language** other than English, including Spanish, Hmong, Tagalog and American Sign **Language**, Gilmore said.

The city of Marion and CULA were jointly awarded a grant for an initiative that partners local governments and community leaders together to improve communication, public safety, mobility, entrepreneurship and leadership for immigrant and refugee residents. The LAP is a product of this grant.

The plan recognizes Marion's linguistic diversity and "establishes policies, procedures, and an implementation plan to ensure that all residents have meaningful **access** to city services, information, and opportunities in the languages they prefer to speak," according to a memo from City Planner Vance McNeas.

The LAP builds upon the city of Marion's non-discrimination policy, which ensures that no person shall be excluded from participation in any city program or activity based on level of English proficiency or national origin.

Under the plan, the city will create a **Language Access** Committee with representatives from each department. Marion will select a variety of qualified **language** service providers for the city's translation, interpretation and **language** assessment needs. The city will develop preliminary guides, procedures and training materials to provide **language** services.

Carlos Lopez with CULA said the purpose of the interpretation devices distributed at the meeting was to provide a way for multilingual people in a meeting or conference to be able to participate, engage and listen even if they don't know the **language** being spoken.

"The devices allow the interpreters to communicate the information back to the listener in their first **language** or **language** of preference, allowing for inclusion of everyone in the room," he said.

In addition, the demonstration of the devices at Tuesday's meeting "exemplify the challenges of listening to a meeting in a **language** you do not know and serve as an example of the type of interpretation devices and

services provided by interpretation companies that can result from the **Language Access Plan**," he said.

The council voted unanimously to adopt the plan.

To celebrate, CULA members held up flags from their respective countries.

On Saturday, CULA will host a festival celebrating Latinx culture and promoting ways to reduce **language** barriers for some of **McDowell** County's population. This event will be held at the Marion Community Building and will feature folkloric dance performances, food from local vendors and prize raffles.

Tourism in **McDowell**

During Tuesday's city council meeting, Shannon Odom, director of the **McDowell** Tourism Development Authority, gave Marion officials an update on efforts to promote **McDowell** as a tourist destination.

Visitors to **McDowell** County spent \$107.9 million in 2022, an increase of 6.6% from 2021. **McDowell's** tourism industry employs more than 660 people and the total payroll generated by the tourism industry in **McDowell** was more than \$26 million, Odom said.

The slogan for **McDowell's** tourism is "No Boundaries" and it conveys the boundless potential of what our community has to offer, he said. As part of a new approach, Marion is now branded as "Main Street" and Lake James is branded as "The Blueway." Old Fort is referred to as "Basecamp" and Linville Falls is "The Gorge." Little Switzerland is branded as "The Outpost."

Marion's downtown will be promoted with the slogan "Eat, drink and be Marion."

Odom released a list of projects that the TDA is funding. They include the **McDowell** House, the Old Fort streetscape, the Bernard Mountain Trail, the Peavine Trail, Phillips Landing, **McDowell** County wayfinding signs, Mill Creek Park in Old Fort, Historic Carson House, the Fonta Flora Trailhead Park in Old Fort and improvements at Catawba Falls.

The TDA is also promoting tourism in **McDowell** on various social media platforms and **news** outlets. A billboard has been placed outside Columbia, S.C., and three more billboards along Interstate 40 are planned, said Odom.

CITATION (CMS STYLE)

nconley@mcdowellnews.com, MIKE CONLEY. "City of Marion planning increased access for non-English speakers." *McDowell News, The (Marion, NC)*, June 21, 2024. *NewsBank: America's News - Historical and Current*. <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/199D7771B4233AA0>.

© Copyright 2024, The McDowell News, Marion, NC