



Mount Rogers Outdoor Recreation Economic Development Framework

PREPARED FOR

Mount Rogers Planning District Commission

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Mount Rogers Region

Outdoor Recreation Economic Development Framework

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Strategy Board

Mount Rogers Zip Code Survey Instrument

MRPD_OREI Impact Model



Mount Rogers Region

Outdoor Recreation Economic Development Framework

1.0 Introduction

This document provides a strategic framework for entrepreneurial and economic development for the Mount Rogers study area and its eight gateway communities. The report focuses on leveraging the region's outdoor recreational assets for positive economic development through the identification of targeted businesses, an assessment of themed opportunities for each community, as well as providing a collaborative data collection mechanism to track users and their needs.

Mount Rogers is the highest mountain peak in Virginia and provides unrivaled outdoor recreation opportunities for Southwest Virginia and beyond. Key destinations include Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, Hungry Mother State Park, Grayson Highlands State Park, and Whitetop Mountain, Virginia's second highest peak. Visitors can hike the Appalachian Trail, bike along the Virginia Creeper Trail, ride horses at Grayson Highlands, and fly fish along the New River, among other adventures.



Figure 1: View atop Mount Rogers



The outdoor experiences in the region are endless. They begin in the quaint downtowns and communities of Damascus, Glade Spring, Saltville, Chilhowie, Marion, Troutdale, Rural Retreat, and Independence.

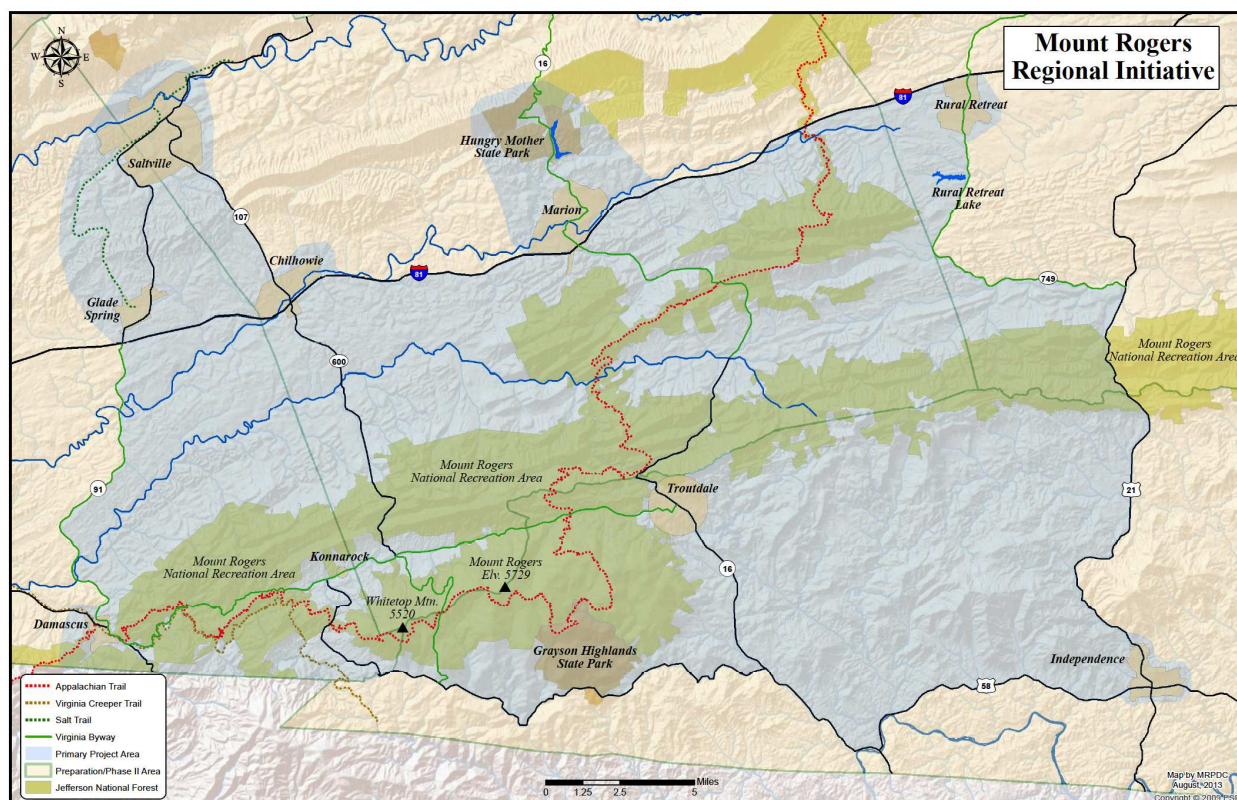


Figure 2: Mount Rogers Region. Source: Mount Rogers Planning District Commission

The Mount Rogers Planning District Commission (MRPDC) commissioned this study as an effort to identify specific strategies related to outdoor recreation within the study area shown above. The study area covers the immediate area surrounding Mount Rogers, and represents a smaller portion of the six-county/two-city MRPDC region.

This effort should be seen as a companion to the SET Economic Development Plan as well as the Mount Rogers Branding and Marketing initiative, both of which have been developed concurrently with this document.

This Economic Development Framework is divided into three sections:

- An **Assessment** that includes a general inventory of the regional assets and a study of strengths and opportunities based on stakeholder engagement and consulting team observations.
- An **Analysis** the region’s economic opportunities based on market trend data and regional demographics.
- An **Outdoor Recreation Economic Development Framework** which presents strategies for business development, marketing, and visitor measurement tools. This implementation framework provides the MRPDC, each gateway community, key destinations, and individual businesses with the tools to collectively leverage outdoor recreation for economic benefit.



2.0 Assessment

An understanding of the existing makeup of the Mount Rogers area and its gateway communities' outdoor assets will help build stronger strategies for economic growth.

2.1 Regional Assets

Mount Rogers has an abundance of outdoor recreation experiences to offer. Visitors seek out key anchor destinations but also local outdoor recreation business, restaurants, shopping and lodging. The Mount Rogers Planning District Commission keeps an ongoing inventory of these attractions by locality, experience type, and nearest attraction.

Anchor Destinations

- Mount Rogers National Recreation Area
- Hungry Mother State Park
- Grayson Highlands State Park
- Virginia Creeper Trail
- Appalachian Trail



Figure 3: Grayson Highlands State Park

Secondary Destinations

- Back of the Dragon
- Museum of the Middle Appalachians
- Rural Retreat Lake
- The Channels Natural Area Preserve (Glade, Chilhowie, Saltville area)
- Backbone Rock (TN)
- New River (Independence Region)
- Salt Trail
- Whitetop Mountain (Damascus)
- Civil Wars Trail



Figure 4: Downtown Glade Spring

Key Events

- Farmers Markets (Glade Spring, Marion, Rural Retreat, Independence, Chilhowie)
- Appalachian Trail Days
- Rural Retreat Annual Heritage Days
- Saltville Civil War Battle Reenactment
- Programming at State Parks
- Downtown programming, community, music and craft events
- Various 5k runs, biking and other events



Figure 5: Bike Shop in Downtown Damascus



Businesses

- Outfitters (biking, hiking, fishing, hunting)
- Lodging (Conventional hotels, Boutique hotels, B&Bs, cabins, campgrounds, hostels)
- Dining
- Specialty Shopping
- Agritourism (Christmas Trees, Wineries, breweries)

Organizational Assets

- Mount Rogers Planning District Commission (MRPDC)
- SWVA Cultural Heritage Foundation
- County Tourism & Economic Development Agencies (Grayson, Smyth, Wythe, Washington)
- Department of Housing & Community Development (DHCD)
- Business support agencies such as Small Business Development Center (SBDC), Blue Ridge Crossroads, etc.
- Non-profit entities such as Blue Ridge Discovery Center and Grayson Land Care
- Appalachian Trail Conservancy
- Heartwood/Round the Mountain/Crooked Road
- Friends of SWVA
- Chambers of Commerce and Visitor Centers
- People Incorporated of Virginia
- Gateway Towns
- Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC)

2.2 Strengths and Weaknesses

During the process, various stakeholders were interviewed in roundtable and one-on-one meetings held throughout the region. Participants included destination representatives, regional tourism and economic development officials, gateway community leadership, local businesses, and the SET (Stronger Economies Together) tourism cluster committee. Topics of discussion primarily included business development and opportunities for outdoor recreation based economic development within the study area. Also discussed were methods to target and grow the user market as well as how to position the region as a destination for recreation.

A synopsis of the stakeholder input and consultant observations is shown below:

Strengths

- With the destinations mentioned above, Mount Rogers truly does give its visitors an outdoor experience second to none.
- Whether it is the convergence of active trails in Damascus, the natural history of Saltville, or the music and art found in downtown Marion, each gateway community has its own unique contribution to the Mount Rogers region.
- The area enjoys an excellent location just a two-hour drive or less from Charlotte, Roanoke, Knoxville, Tri-Cities, and Asheville. Furthermore, Interstate 81 cuts through the northern portion of the study area and its intersection with I-77 is just fifteen minutes away in Wytheville. The urban areas of Atlanta, Raleigh, Columbia, Richmond and Nashville are just a day’s drive away.
- Southwest Virginia has an improving infrastructure, particular high speed internet and broadband, making the entire region desirable not only for visitors, but also new residents and entrepreneurs.
- For two decades, the small towns of the region have partnered with the Department of Housing and Community Development to revitalize their downtowns. While some communities are farther along than others, each of the eight gateway communities has a vision and plan for a vibrant downtown.



- Similarly, several regional initiatives have literally put Southwest Virginia (and Mount Rogers) on the map. These efforts focus on bringing visitors to experience the heritage and culture of Southwest Virginia. They include the Crooked Road Trail, Heartwood and Round the Mountain Artisan Network, among others.
- Most recently, the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation has developed a marketing program to promote the entire region, as well as its parts. Another effort going on currently with this project is a marketing program to promote the Mount Rogers area as a singular destination.
- The Appalachian Spring effort has been working to leverage the region's outdoor assets for economic development, and marketing tools have been created for outdoor recreation as part of the larger regional brand.
- The region, gateway communities, outdoor destinations and private businesses benefit from great partners that are focused on improving the region. DHCD, VTC, and the Cultural Heritage Foundation are just a few.
- This also includes the various institutions of higher education such as Emory & Henry College, Virginia Highlands Community College, and the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center.
- These partners already provide various business support and development resources including:
 - Town of Marion "Pop Up Marion" program
 - Mount Rogers PDC Business Planning contest
 - My SWVA Opportunity support and Entrepreneurial Business Challenges
 - People Incorporated, Chambers of Commerce, etc.
 - Blue Ridge Crossroads Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and Virginia Highlands SBDC.

Challenges

- There are two distinct "sides" to the Mountain that create a separation between the gateway communities, access, and opportunity. Some of the gateway communities may not connect to each other depending on what side of Mount Rogers they are on.
- While the region has great access to nearby population centers, it is still very rural. The overall market is limited, and it can be difficult to get outdoor focused businesses up and running.
- There is a general lack of visitor support services, particularly lodging. Damascus and Marion each have a cluster and variety of lodging products, but the remainder of the region has limited product, particularly Independence, Saltville, and Troutdale.
- I-81 offers a number of hotels and motels. However, outside of Marion, the quality of product is lacking and travelers are more likely to stay in nearby Wytheville and Abingdon.
- Similarly, outside of Marion and Damascus (in-season), most of the gateway communities have limited restaurant offerings to support visitor traffic.
- It is difficult for individual businesses to market themselves due to the limited overall market. Likewise, existing businesses state there is not enough people or uses to sustain their business. There is a lack of critical mass of existing businesses as well as a general lack of connectivity between them.
- Businesses mentioned a lack of personal funding and grant resources to devote to marketing. This is a common issue in any small town or rural setting.
- It was stated that in Independence, the lack of public water and sewer makes it too difficult to start a restaurant. This includes the capital costs required as a result of Virginia regulations.
- There is a very complex challenge with the seasonality of businesses:
 - The lack of off-season customer traffic creates a challenge for an entrepreneur to have year-round income.
 - Many business owners and operators enjoy the seasonality of business and leave the region for the winter. These owners have no intention of remaining open in winter.
 - There is a lack of indoor venues for activity during the winter months. Even in-season, there are no poor-weather options for gatherings and events.



- There is a lack of knowledge between destinations and business owners of other regional offerings such as events, businesses, destinations, etc. This is a fairly common issue in most communities, only made more complex here due to the size of the study area.
- Certain segments of the outdoor recreation market are totally self-sufficient and leave less impact. For example, horseback riders general bring all of their equipment and supplies with them and leave after the activity.

Opportunities

- Independence is on the south side of Mount Rogers, and is connected more to North Carolina than the rest of the region. It has the potential to serve as the gateway to Mount Rogers from the Charlotte metro and the rest of North Carolina.
- Given the limited number of small businesses, there is the potential to pool marketing resources to promote the region and private businesses. This is a common practice with merchants’ associations and Chambers of Commerce, and could be applied to Mount Rogers businesses.
- Several creative business opportunities may exist outside of traditional downtown business:
 - Pick your own Christmas Tree – offseason & primarily in Independence area
 - Survival training
 - Agritourism and nature based tourism – foraging, bird watching, photography, geology and ecology education, etc.
- There is the potential to mirror Marion’s award winning Pop Up business program in other gateway communities.
- Connecting the Salt Trail loop to downtown Glade Spring will not only connect Saltville to Glade, but also open cooperative marketing and itinerary development between Damascus, Glade, and Saltville.
- Similarly, there is the potential to cooperatively package experiences between destinations and communities.
- Entrepreneurial development curriculum can be added in high schools and enhanced at local community colleges.
- Offseason events could include wintertime adventure races and other activities.
- Seasonal adventure competitions such as biathlons and ultramarathons, long distance bike races, and trail running could be developed.
- Heartwood-style digital kiosks can be added to stores or at destinations throughout region. Like Heartwood, these kiosks could interpret and promote the outdoor resources within the region.
- Mount Rogers has the opportunity to be the first sub region within Southwest Virginia to deploy and capitalize on the regional outdoor recreation brand, and can be a model for other sub regions.



Figure 6: Mural in Downtown Chilhowie



Needs

The following businesses, activities, and visitor support service needs were identified during the process.

- Additional lodging facilities including improved variety, quality, and location.
- Additional and larger meeting spaces for events, retreats, meetings, and gatherings.
- Tour guides who understand the regional offerings, both general and specialized.
- Greater restaurants and food offerings in our gateway communities or near attractions.
- Better access to creative economy (music, art) throughout the region outside of Marion.
- Horseback riding support services such as tack & equipment, outfitters, etc.
- Regional event coordinator who can be the knowledge base for area events, but also coordinate efforts between destinations and communities.
- Need to create a method of tracking users across the region, with the ability to share collective data.
- Need to connect the existing businesses within the region to establish that regional “critical mass” of business.
- Need seed money/initial operating funding for businesses. Need to be able to stay afloat for three years before they are established.
- Need to define experiences for our visitors and consumers.
- Need for consistent hospitality training and workforce development specifically to support outdoor recreation business and tourism.
- Need to build an understanding across the region of the wealth of recreational assets, but also the strong connection between recreation and culture as it relates to business economy.
- Similarly, there is a need for recreation-based businesses as well as other tourism businesses to understand that their market includes local residents, not just visitors coming from the outside.



3.0 Regional Market

Various market indicators can inform the opportunities for growing outdoor recreation businesses and activities in the study area. This can include occupancy rates for lodging, travel expenditures, and sales tax revenues, particularly as they change over time. Regional and national tourism trends can also lend data to inform growth and development strategies. Some information is not quantifiable and relies on local knowledge and intangibles.

3.1 Regional Demographics

It is important to note that any business in the study area cannot rely on visitor traffic alone. Outside of lodging, each business will see a significant portion of its market coming from the local consumer base. Similarly, the success of business and outdoor recreation in general will lead to job creation. Therefore, we will first look at an overview of regional demographics.

- The study area is generally bounded by the eight gateway communities that surround the Mount Rogers Natural Recreation Area. This is a portion of the larger MRPDC district that covers six counties and two cities.
- **Population:**
 - The study area’s 2016 population is 38,921. It declined by 3.47% between 2000 and 2010, and another 0.68% from 2010 to 2016.
 - Population shows a slight uptick over the next five years with a projected growth of just under 1% to 39,302.
- **Age**
 - The study area has a median age of 45.7 in 2016.
 - The two largest segments are the ages 45-54 (14.35%) and 55-64 (15.12%).
 - This seems to mirror the recent SET Economic Development Plan that shows a significant decline in percentage of population in the 20-39 age ranges, with older age ranges increasing.
- **Income**
 - The median income in the study area is \$38,198 for 2016, with the largest segment being \$50k-\$75k (18.16%).
 - At 4.3%, the unemployment is relatively low considering the more rural nature of the region. This is compared to 3.9% for Virginia (April 16) and 4.7% for the United States (May 16).
 - On the other hand, 44.8% of the population 16 years and older are not in the labor force. This could be due to many factors including the increasing age within the region, as well as the desirability of the area for retirees.
 - 2016 median housing unit value in the study area is \$96,523.

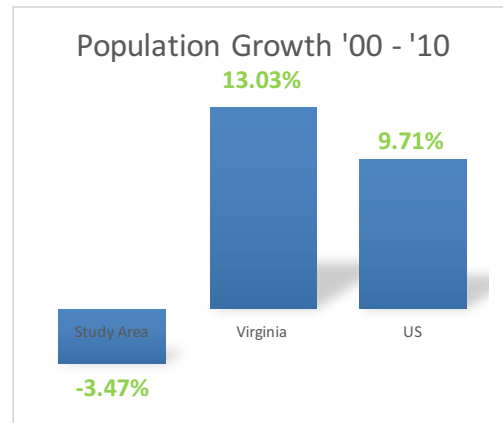


Figure 7: Study Area Population Growth

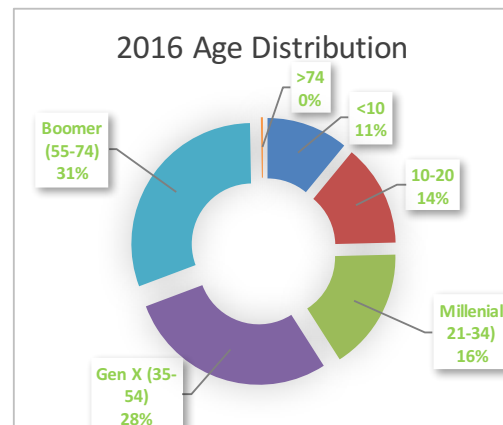


Figure 8: Study Area Age Distribution



3.2 Market Segmentation

A better understanding of the makeup of the regional market can be made by performing a market segmentation study. This breaks down the counts and percentages of social group cluster and will help identify the existing population based on their demographic groupings including age, gender, income, education, occupation, and ethnic group. Each cluster group will desire specific products, as well as enjoy different recreational activities.

All data comes from PRIZM NE cluster groups as calculated by Nielsen Claritas, Inc.

Primary Trade Area Segmentation Observations

- Greater than 50% of the regional households are classified as “Mature Years”. This is common in rural regions with aging populations and is due to younger persons and families leaving the region because of a lack of opportunity, but also because of the desirability of the region for retirees.
- The largest segments include “Back Country Folks” (20%), “Crossroads Villagers” (10%), and “Blue Highways” (9%). These segments are generally downscale, blue collar families who are primarily white. Like any consumer, they are important to regional businesses.
- While they spend on staples such as grocery, pharmaceutical goods, clothing, and general merchandise, they also enjoy a variety of outdoor activities.
- By the same token, local residents include segments such as “Big Sky Families” and “Mayberry Times.” These families with and without children represent a healthy portion of the market and are generally midscale to upper end incomes.
- The region overall should strive for a mix of businesses that appeal to all of these segments, rather than targeting just one. Still, in order to be successful year round, individual businesses should keep in mind the primary segments that exist.

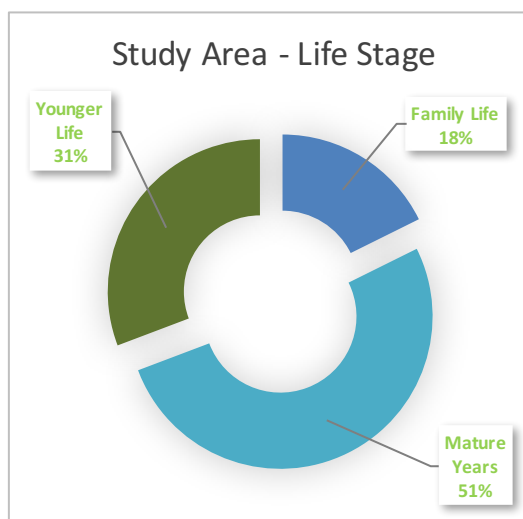


Figure 9: Study Area Life Stage Categories

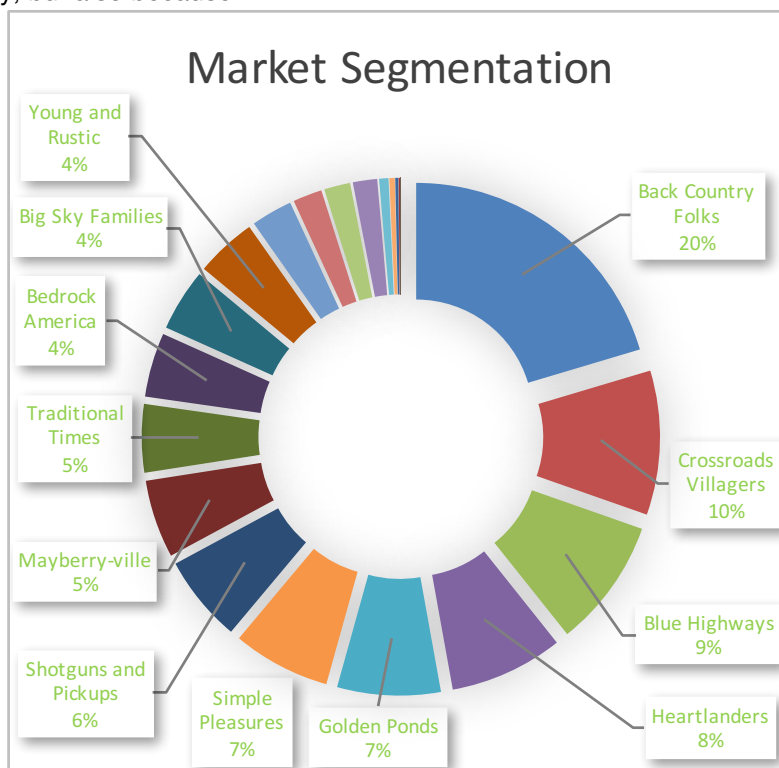


Figure 10: Study Area Market Segmentation

Select key categories are described below. A detailed description of all segments that make up the Mount Rogers study area market can be found at www.mybestsegments.com.



Mount Rogers Study Area Market Segmentation									
Code Name	Households	Pct. Pred. Inc.	Age	Pred HH Comp.	Pred. Tenure/Type	Pred. Education	Pred. Employment	Pred. Race	
58 Back Country Folks	3,350	20.38% Downscale	Age 55+	Married Couples	Owner / SFDU, Mobile	Elem. School, H.S.	Service, BC, Farm	W, B	
56 Crossroads Villagers	1,643	9.99% Downscale	Age <45	Married Couples	Owner / SFDU, Mobile	Elem. School, H.S.	WC, Service, BC, Farm	W	
45 Blue Highways	1,467	8.93% Downscale	Age 65+	Mostly Singles	Renter / SFDU, Hi-Rise Multi	H.S. Graduate	WC, Service, BC	W, B	
43 Heartlanders	1,292	7.86% LowerMid	Age 45+	Married Couples	Owner / SFDU, Mobile	H.S. Graduate	WC, BC, Farm	W	
55 Golden Ponds	1,176	7.16% Downscale	Age 65+	Singles/Couples	Owner / SFDU, Mobile	H.S. Graduate	WC, Service, BC, Farm	W	
38 Simple Pleasures	1,114	6.78% LowerMid	Age 65+	Singles/Couples	Owner / SFDU, Mobile	H.S. Graduate	WC, Service, BC, Farm	W	
51 Shotguns and Pickups	991	6.03% LowerMid	Age 25-44	Families w/Kids	Owner / SFDU, Mobile	H.S. Graduate	WC, BC, Farm	W	
37 Mayberry-ville	889	5.41% Midscale	Age 35-64	Married Couples	Owner / SFDU, Mobile	H.S. Graduate	WC, BC, Farm	W	
28 Traditional Times	777	4.73% Midscale	Age 55+	Married Couples	Owner / SFDU	Some College	WC, BC, Farm	W	
64 Bedrock America	732	4.45% Downscale	Age <35	Families w/Kids	Mix / SFDU, Mobile	Elem. School, H.S.	Service, BC, Farm	W, B, H	
33 Big Sky Families	709	4.31% Midscale	Age 25-54	Families w/Kids	Owner / SFDU, Mobile	Some College	WC, BC, Farm	W	
48 Young and Rustic	695	4.23% LowerMid	Age 65+	Singles/Couples	Owner / SFDU, Mobile	H.S. Graduate	WC, Service, BC	W, B, H	
57 Old Milltowns	470	2.86% Downscale	Age 65+	Singles/Couples	Mix / SFDU, Mobile	Elem. School, H.S.	WC, Service, BC, Farm	W, B	
20 Fast-Track Families	332	2.02% Upscale	Age 25-54	Families w/Kids	Owner / SFDU	College	WC	W	
9 Big Fish, Small Pond	298	1.81% Upscale	Age 45+	Married Couples	Owner / SFDU	College Grad.+	Exec, Prof, WC	W	
25 Country Casals	276	1.68% UpperMid	Age 35-64	Married Couples	Owner / SFDU	Some College	WC, BC	W	
50 Kid Country, USA	106	0.65% LowerMid	Age <45	Families w/Kids	Mix / SFDU, Mobile	Some College	WC, Service, BC, Farm	W, H	
42 Red, White and Blues	61	0.37% LowerMid	Age 25-44	Married Couples	Owner / SFDU, Mobile	H.S. Graduate	WC, Service, BC	W	
32 New Homesteaders	35	0.21% Midscale	Age 25-44	Families w/Kids	Owner / SFDU, Mobile	Some College	WC, BC	W	
23 Greenbelt Sports	23	0.14% Midscale	Age 25-54	Married Couples	Owner / SFDU	College	Prof, WC	W	

Figure 11: Market Segmentation for Mount Rogers Study Area

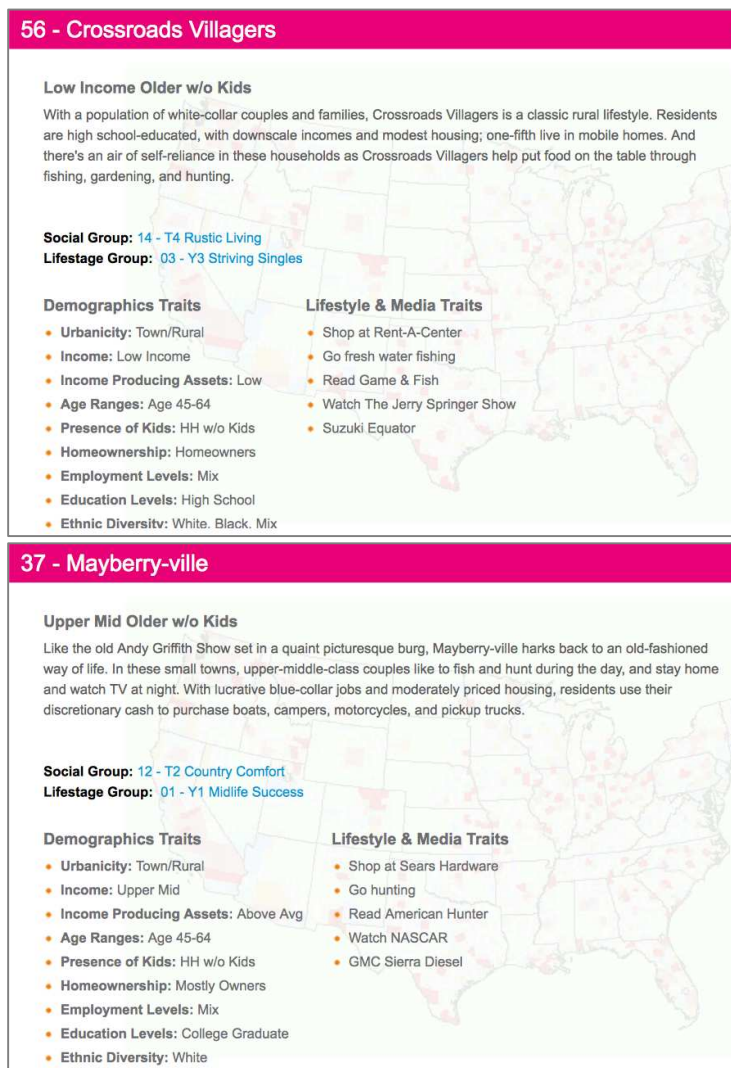


Figure 12: Key Market Segments



3.3 Gateway Community Market Opportunities

Each of the study area gateway communities has completed varying levels of planning as part of the Department of Housing and Community Development’s business district revitalization process. These plans include a number of recommendations to improve downtown, many of which related to outdoor recreation development. Similarly, the MRPDC has worked with each community to complete an inventory of existing businesses, as well as identify properties that have the potential to support more recreation-focused businesses.

This section outlines the general findings of each of these plans (to the extent they were available), key inventory data, as well as market findings and data gathered during this process.

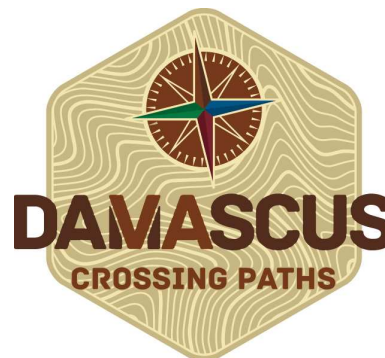
Chilhowie

- **Market Data:**
 - In the 2015 economic restructuring plan completed by Arnett Muldrow, Chilhowie showed potential for 94,907 square feet of new retail. The 2016 update showed the same potential.
 - This included 2,607 square feet in sporting goods stores, as well as 9,227 square feet in new restaurant space.
- **Downtown Inventory:**
 - Chilhowie currently has two outdoor outfitters, one mercantile/ice cream parlor/sandwich shop, and three independent restaurants.
 - There are three fast food restaurants and three gas/convenience stores adjacent to downtown.
 - There are two vacancies identified with potential for recreation-based business.
- **Market Opportunity:**
 - Chilhowie ideally sits along I-81. While there is a captive traveler market, its trade area is small and localized.
 - The Smyth County Visitor Center is in a historic home adjacent to downtown and brings in hundreds of visitors each year.
 - Chilhowie should consider an alternate location for the Farmers Market in central downtown, as well as identify a venue for music and jam sessions, and Apple Festival events.



Damascus

- **Market Data:**
 - In 2015, the Town of Damascus showed potential for 109,360 square feet of new retail. This is based on its economic restructuring plan completed by Arnett Muldrow in 2015 and has been updated to 2016.
 - This included 14,905 square feet in new restaurant space.
- **Downtown Inventory:**
 - Damascus has ten outdoor recreation outfitters catering to bikers on the Creeper Trail, and Hikers on the AT and various other trails. It has a brewery, a fishing equipment store, a gunsmith, and numerous restaurants.
 - Moreover, Damascus has a wide variety of lodging establishments that include simple hostels, bed & breakfast operations, cabins, and a boutique hotel.
 - There are six vacancies identified with potential for recreation-based business.





- **Market Opportunity:**

- Damascus currently has the highest concentration of outdoor recreation businesses in the study area. Due to its location along the AT, Virginia Creeper Trail, and other trail networks, along with its critical mass of business, it is best poised to continue to grow access to outdoor recreation and associated business.
- The proposed Outdoor Recreation & Nature Center will make Damascus a national destination for outdoor recreation.
- Damascus also has the potential to recruit businesses that connect to active recreation lifestyles such as health food stores, farmers market, etc.
- Along with the existing Appalachian Trail Days, Damascus has the potential to be the anchor of regional-focused events such as bike races, triathlons, and fishing tournaments. This includes off-season extreme activity competitions.

Glade Spring

- **Market Data:**

- Glade shows potential for 65,963 square feet of new retail based on its economic restructuring plan completed by Arnett Muldrow in 2012.
- This includes 1,578 square feet for sporting goods (limited) and 8,151 square feet in new restaurant space. There was also demand for 3,489 square feet of grocery/specialty foods.



- **Downtown Inventory:**

- Glade currently has the Town Square Center for the Arts and a very active downtown Farmers Market. It has a new brewery/restaurant in downtown, as well as café/meeting space that hosts weekly concerts.
- There are three vacancies identified with potential for recreation-based business.

- **Market Opportunity:**

- Glade has a town square that has benefited from active implementation of recent downtown revitalization planning. Several new businesses have opened in downtown over the last two years. There has been some turnover, however current momentum is very positive.
- Glade has the particular potential to tap into the Emory & Henry student body. While students have limited disposable income, they are more predisposed to patronizing outdoor recreation businesses. Glade already serves as the “downtown” to Emory students, which is evident in the activity at the Farmer Market, local restaurants, events, and brewery.
- This potential extends to coordinating with the Business and Mass Communications department at Emory to provide curriculum to have students assist local businesses in marketing and business planning.
- Glade and Saltville are actively pursuing the final connection of the Salt Trail from its current terminus just outside of downtown, to the square. This will ultimately connect Saltville and Glade via an active bike trail, much like the Creeper does for Abingdon and Damascus.
- The town of Glade has an interchange on I-81, but downtown is not currently connected. Signage and bannerling will help interstate travelers connect to downtown and its businesses.
- The town, in partnership with MRPDC, is working to develop an indoor farmers market/mercantile/event venue at the southern anchor of downtown.



Independence

- **Market Data:**
 - In 2007, Independence’s economic restructuring plan showed potential for about 90,000 square feet of new business.
 - However, Independence and its trade areas have experienced population decline of 3% since the 2000 census, and its opportunity for new business has likely shrunk as well.
 - A current (2016) look at Independence’s retail market shows a \$17 million demand for new goods and services. This retail market power study compares trade area consumers’ expenditures to local sales. It shows about \$700,000 in potential sales (leakage) for sporting goods stores, and about \$2.4 million in potential for new restaurants.
 - This is true potential and points to the fact that Independence has limited supply overall.
- **Downtown Inventory:**
 - Independence has a few unique businesses related to outdoors including a canoe sculpting artisan, a leather goods store catering to motorcyclists, an outfitter, and a gunsmith. This includes “The 1908” historic courthouse that serves as a museum, gallery, and music venue.
 - Independence has a downtown deli/restaurant, in addition to a Mexican restaurant and a regional barbeque chain just outside of downtown.
 - Opportunities for new business locations are mixed. As a county seat, many of downtown’s buildings have county services or attorneys. There are a few vacant buildings and spaces, yet some have fallen into disrepair and require significant improvements to be usable.
 - The town is fortunate to have a nice, locally owned budget hotel with about 28 rooms. A historic bed & breakfast has closed in recent years.
- **Market Opportunity:**
 - Independence’s biggest opportunity lies with being the southern gateway into the Mount Rogers region, as well as the Grayson Highlands State Park. It has the potential to serve as the “North Carolina” gateway for Charlotte, Winston-Salem and beyond.
 - It also is the only portion of the study area that connects to the New River and its fishing, boating, and floating opportunities.
 - There is the potential for an outfitter catering to fly fishing and activity on the New River, as well as a tack shop. Downtown Independence has immediate demand for dining.



Marion

- **Market Data:**
 - Marion is a retail magnet that showed an inflow of over \$93 million in sales (over local consumer expenditures) in the past 12 months.
 - Equidistant from Abingdon (south) and Wytheville (north), Marion is the commerce and cultural center of a large rural area.
 - Even with its annual gain in sales, Marion shows opportunity for new sporting goods (\$2.1 million in leakage), and restaurant (\$14.3 million). The vast majority of restaurant demand is in “limited” service.





- **Downtown Inventory:**
 - Marion has a historic downtown theater and nearby drive-in, numerous independent downtown restaurants, galleries, and cultural venues. It also has a new outdoor outfitter, and two gift/mercantile businesses.
 - Marion is by far the biggest town in the study area, and therefore has a much larger stock of downtown buildings. There are nineteen vacancies identified with potential for recreation-based business.
- **Market Opportunity:**
 - Like Damascus with its concentration of outdoor recreation businesses, Marion has by far the largest concentration of visitor support businesses in the study area including various lodging and numerous restaurants. This includes a historic boutique hotel in downtown.
 - It also has a great deal of activity that complements an outdoor recreation visitor who may be looking for additional things for the family including cultural events, theater, arts and crafts, and shopping, among others.
 - With an active downtown revitalization organization, Marion will continue to solidify itself as one of the “coolest” downtowns in all of Southwest Virginia and beyond.

Rural Retreat

- **Market Data:**
 - Rural Retreat’s 2015 downtown redevelopment plan completed by Anderson & Associates showed potential for the downtown to support 48,000 square feet of commercial space.
 - Opportunities identified in that 2015 report that are related to this outdoor recreation plan primarily include new restaurants (farm to table, café, etc) and a brewery similar to Damascus and Glade Spring. Expanded grocery & specialty food potential was also identified.
 - Finally, a number of “lifestyle” retail operations that directly or indirectly complement outdoor recreation were identified including craft and piece goods, motorcycle and ATV sales and services, and traditional sporting goods such as biking, hunting, and fishing.
- **Inventory:**
 - Rural Retreat has a few key destinations including a local winery/distillery, a rural history museum, and the Rural Retreat lake. There are efforts to create additional catalyst destinations.
 - There are two nearby outfitters, one catering to fishing, and the other a seasonal store at the lake campground.
 - There is a limited pool of building inventory in downtown overall, with one or more vacant buildings with recreation potential.
- **Market Opportunity:**
 - Several catalyst projects are being pursued in Rural Retreat to spark economic growth in downtown. This begins with the town and MRPDC cooperating to solicit proposals for the Dr. Pepper Pharmacy development, a restored historic drug store/destination connected to the founder of Dr. Pepper soft drink.
 - Other projects include the renovation of the historic train depot as a destination, and the development of a covered farmers market venue downtown.



Source: Town of Rural Retreat



Saltville

- **Market Data:**

- The town of Saltville has been successful in pursuing key projects that drive visitors and recreation activity into the community. This includes a wayfinding strategy, the Salt Trail, and Museum of the Middle Appalachians.
- Within a 15-minute drive time trade area from downtown Saltville, there is a demand of \$37 million in sales (residents’ expenditures above existing store sales). This seems to be a tremendous amount of opportunity, but it should be noted that this market area overlaps completely with that of Glade Spring.
- Still, there does seem to be an opportunity for specialty foods (\$2.4 million gap), sporting goods (\$1.4 million), and restaurants (\$14 million). Considering the overlap with Glade’s market, not all of this could be recaptured in Saltville, but certainly a portion could be successful there.



Source: Town of Saltville

- **Downtown Inventory:**

- Saltville has three key destinations related to outdoor recreation and travel including the Wave Pool, Museum of the Middle Appalachians, and a golf club.
- A detailed inventory was not available, but it appears that there are a number of vacant buildings along West Main Street that may be able to support business, and possibly recreation based businesses.

- **Market Opportunity:**

- Saltville has an incredible opportunity to tap into a very unique market. With the history in the community as the location of salt mines, there is strong connection to this Country’s Civil War history.
- More importantly perhaps is the unique geological heritage of the community, which is currently interpreted at the Museum of the Middle Appalachians. While this is not outdoor recreation, it does provide a unique experience for the visitor who may be looking for additional destinations.
- Downtown Saltville’s most immediate need is downtown dining.

Troutdale

- **Market Data:**

- Troutdale is the smallest community in the study area. Its 2016 population of just 151 people, is down over 56% from 349 at the 2000 census.
- With such a dramatic decrease in population coupled with the 2016 estimated median household income of \$31,000, there is very little, if any, opportunity for new business generated by local residents.
- Any real opportunity therefore would need to be created by true visitors coming to Mount Rogers itself.

- **Downtown Inventory:**

- There are seven vacant structures in downtown Troutdale, including an old frame hotel structure and old mercantile.
- Most vacant buildings are in various states of disrepair.

- **Market Opportunity:**

- Troutdale is a “gateway” community to Mount Rogers, but actually exists in the geographic center of the study area.
- It lies on the road from Damascus to Marion, the study area’s two visitor anchors, and is the closest community to Mount Rogers itself. Most of Troutdale’s opportunity lies with capturing visitors traveling along that scenic route.



3.4 Overall Study Area Market Demand

As shown above, each community has very specific needs and opportunities both for outdoor recreation related businesses, as well as visitor support services. Gateway communities range from Marion, with its current strong concentration of visitor services and activities, to Damascus with its tremendous amount of outdoor recreation businesses. While they are poised to capitalize on the growth of outdoor recreation and tourism more quickly, most of the other gateway communities fall somewhere between the two.

The primary study to identify current market opportunity for business growth is a retail leakage analysis. “Retail leakage” refers to the difference between the retail expenditures by residents living in a particular study area and the retail sales produced by the stores located in the same area. If desired products are not available within that area, consumers will travel to other places or use different methods to obtain those products. Consequently, the dollars not spent in local stores in the designated area are said to be “leaking.” If a community is a major retail center with a variety of stores it may be “attracting” rather than “leaking” retail sales. In general, leakage translates directly to demand opportunity.

When leakage and demand were discussed for the individual communities above, it was based on that community’s specific trade areas established during Economic Restructuring plans completed by Arnett Muldrow. If Arnett Muldrow did not work on the plan for that town, a 15-minute drive time trade area was used. All previous data was updated to 2016. The data below show current year market opportunity for the **entire** Mount Rogers study area as identified in figure 2.

Retail Leakage Opportunity Gap

Retail Store Categories -NAICS code	Mount Rogers Study Area			Notes
	(Consumer Expenditures)	(Retail Sales)	Leakage (Inflow)	
Total Retail Sales Incl Eating and Drinking Places	647,949,204	614,206,956	33,742,248	
Motor Vehicle and Parts Dealers-441	129,180,650	82,817,873	46,362,777	
Other Motor Vehicle Dealers-4412	13,261,307	8,453,860	4,807,448	Includes ATV sales, service, equip.
Furniture and Home Furnishings Stores-442	11,580,618	3,142,980	8,437,638	
Electronics and Appliance Stores-443	9,763,205	3,637,543	6,125,662	
Building Material, Garden Equip Stores -444	69,214,305	28,795,221	40,419,084	
Hardware Stores-44413	5,959,294	1,429,851	4,529,443	Could include general mercantile that sale certain recreation goods. IE Suber & Sons in Glade selling fishing worms.
Nursery and Garden Centers-44422	7,219,358	7,134,068	85,290	
Food and Beverage Stores-445	85,549,076	192,601,284	(107,052,209)	
Supermarkets, Grocery (Ex Conv) Stores-44511	51,428,925	109,835,437	(58,406,511)	Grocery for locals including food to support visitors
Convenience Stores-44512	3,793,384	10,058,290	(6,264,906)	Convenience for locals & visitors
Specialty Food Stores-4452	6,683,619	417,900	6,265,720	Specialty foods could be supported in fresh markets, farmers markets
Health and Personal Care Stores-446	42,291,430	46,272,050	(3,980,620)	
Gasoline Stations-447	47,877,248	97,616,243	(49,738,995)	
Gasoline Stations With Conv Stores-44711	35,084,093	61,440,572	(26,356,479)	I-81 type gas & convenience
Clothing and Clothing Accessories Stores-448	25,354,040	4,077,139	21,276,901	
Sporting Goods, Hobby, Book, Music Stores-451	9,847,864	8,921,797	926,067	
Sporting Goods Stores-45111	4,643,094	8,640,998	(3,997,904)	Traditional sporting goods
General Merchandise Stores-452	75,487,482	76,440,616	(953,134)	
Specialty Store Retailers-453	18,915,558	4,663,955	14,251,602	
Gift, Novelty and Souvenir Stores-45322	4,251,958	1,377,287	2,874,671	Could include general mercantile/gifts
Used Merchandise Stores-4533	1,070,024	76,582	993,442	Antique or consignment businesses
Non-Store Retailers-454	59,974,632	28,648,252	31,326,380	
Foodservice and Drinking Places-722	62,913,097	36,572,002	26,341,095	
Full-Service Restaurants-7221	28,111,163	17,528,222	10,582,941	Sit down restaurants where served at table.
Limited-Service Eating Places-7222	25,341,677	13,439,534	11,902,143	Counter service or fast food restarants.

Bold categories are primary category
Non-bold are sub categories

Figure 13: Retail Leakage for 2016 for Mount Rogers Study Area



It should be noted that the data above is for the **study area** for this project. It does not include the entire six county/two city geography of the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission. Had we used the larger MRPDC area, the data would be skewed given that the retail centers of Abingdon/Bristol and Wytheville would be included. Those data are not reflected above.

Observations

- Stores in the Mount Rogers Study area (including all gateway communities) had \$614.2 million in sales over the previous twelve months.
- Residents who *live* in the study area purchased \$647.9 million in retail goods during the same time period.
- Therefore, the study area has an overall leakage (demand) of **\$33,742,248**. This means that study area residents are spending at least \$33.7 million each year **outside** of the area.
- These dollars are spent in Abingdon, Wytheville, the Tri-Cities and beyond, and are likely due certain goods or services that are needed but are not located here.
- Key opportunities for growth in the region include:
 - **Restaurants** (\$26 million)
 - **Specialty retail** (\$14 million)
 - **Specialty foods** (\$6 million) – This is relevant to farmers’ markets
 - Other motor vehicle dealers (\$4.8 million) – This includes **ATV and motorcycle related** sales, among others.
 - **Hardware Stores** (\$4.5 million) and Gift Stores (\$2.8 million) – Both of these categories could include stores within the region that have sales that cater to outdoor recreation and tourism. For example, Surber & Sons hardware in Glade Spring sells light fishing gear and tackle.
- Two categories related to recreation and visitors show significant gain – convenience (\$6.2 million in gain) and sporting goods (\$4 million in gain). Convenience in particular is due to the fact that I-81 cuts through the study area and has gas/convenience at every exit. Sporting Goods gain is simply due to the fact that the recreation opportunities in the area has created a need for outfitters and sporting goods, and those existing stores are enjoying a certain amount of visitor traffic.
- Two final key points:
 - The retail sales figures for stores *does* include those sales to area visitors. Therefore, locals are spending more than the \$33.7 million outside of the study area.
 - Just because there is inflow (sporting goods in particular), does not mean there isn’t an opportunity for growth. That category will appeal to visitors and therefore *should* have a gain. If it did not, it would be room for concern.



3.5 Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Market

The exact impact of a tourism market is a challenge to define. There are sales and lodging tax revenues, but it is difficult to determine exactly what sales are the result of true visitor traffic. By the same token, a destination may keep a record of visitor zip codes, but those do not adequately tell the actual impact of visitors. There are however certain tourism data we can look at to help describe the visitor impact and potential in the Mount Rogers Study area. National Trends can help us understand opportunities for growth in recreation traffic.

Ultimately, true outdoor recreation user impact must be determined using an economic impact model utilizing key multipliers for monetary impact. This model requires survey input data in order to be accurate. During the stakeholder interview process, it was learned that user impact data and simple traffic figures are sorely lacking with regional destinations and businesses. The economic framework recommendations in the next chapter present both a survey methodology to use to track users, as well as an economic impact model to input the data over time. This section presents a review of general tourism data.

Virginia Tourism Trends and Opportunities

VTC collects ongoing data for the state and each sub region to help inform localities of emerging trends. This data is in turn used by local agencies to plan for product development. Most recently, the Mount Rogers Region SET process used this information to direct some of the recommendations of its Tourism Cluster committee. There were common findings of this Outdoor Recreation Economic Development Framework for the Mount Rogers study area, and that of the SET Plan for the entire MRPDC region.

Key findings of the SET Plan and the Virginia Outdoor Demand Survey are shown here:

- The 2016 Mt Rogers Region SET Plan identifies the need to:
 - Implement a hospitality training program to create a high standard of service and to project Southwest Virginia as a region of choice for visitors and investment.
 - Secure funding to grow and attract new tourism businesses.
 - Increase local business sourcing by aligning local resources with regional tourism cluster needs.
- Results of the 2011 Virginia Outdoors Demand Survey (due to be updated by end of 2016) indicated that the top-6 desired activities for the state, and, specifically, for the Mount Rogers Region were:
 1. public access to state waters for fishing, swimming, etc.
 2. trails for hiking and walking;
 3. natural areas;
 4. historic areas;
 5. trails for bicycling;
 6. trails for wildlife watching and nature study.
- Additionally, public access to state waters for non-motorized boating (canoeing, kayaking, etc.), trails for horseback riding, and trails for off-road motorized vehicles also had significant demand in both the Mount Rogers region and the State.
- Finally, the report noted the following opportunities and recommendations:
 - Due to the popularity of single-track mountain biking trails at Matthews State Forest (just outside of the study area), there may be an opportunity to expand that activity throughout the Mount Rogers Region.
 - The Blue Ridge Highlands Fishing Trail is a successful model for creating and promoting fishing activities/destinations.
 - Complete connections to The Great Eastern Trail.
 - Continue to promote and develop the Wilderness Road.



- Need to continue planning and development of the New River Blueway and collaboration with the New River Community Partners to increase regional recreation capacity.
- Develop the Salt Trail.
- Evaluate the Trans America Bike Trail to insure the route is still suitable for bike traffic.
- Long distance ATV and horse trails are needed, along with support facilities (restrooms, signage, etc.), that connect communities and public facilities.
- Continue to develop the Virginia Mountain Bike Trail.

This data clearly demonstrates that the Mt. Rogers Region has existing outdoor recreation tourism products that can be scaled-up and/or developed to increase visitation, local use, and support the development of new/additional outdoor focused businesses and events. In other words, partners in the region should take a focused, three-pronged approach of:

- 1) packaging and promoting existing opportunities;
- 2) creating new outdoor recreation focused products, opportunities, and events to create new/additional demand; and
- 3) encourage the development of tourism-support infrastructure (lodging opportunities and additional eating/dining opportunities are primary concerns).



Figure 14: Kayak storage at Hungry Mother State Park near Marion



National Trends in Outdoor Recreation

National trends in particular can help us understand opportunities to grow outdoor recreation uses and businesses in the future. Local businesses can adjust their merchandising based on these trends as well as local observation. The data below comes from the most recent “Federal Outdoor Recreation Trends: Effects on Economic Opportunities” report, and shows change in specific outdoor recreation activity projected through the year 2030.

Outdoor recreation activity groups & associated activity composites w/ projected change in visitor days			
Activity Group	Modeled Activity Composite	Activities Included in Modeled Activity Composite	Projected Change in Visitor Days 2008-2030
Visiting Developed Sites			
	Developed site use	Family gathering; picnicking; developed camping	26.6%
	Visiting interpretive sites	Visiting nature centers, zoos, historic sites, and prehistoric sites	34.1%
Viewing & Photographing Nature			
	Birding	View or photograph birds	32.5%
	Viewing	View/ photograph natural scenery, flowers, birds, other wildlife; gather mushrooms, berries, etc.	23.9%
Backcountry Activities			
	Challenge activities	Caving; mountain climbing; rock climbing	30.5%
	Day hiking	Day hiking	31.7%
	Equestrian	Horseback riding on trails	33.5%
	Visiting primitive areas	Backpacking; primitive camping; visiting wilderness	22.6%
Motorized Activities			
	Motorized off-road use	Off-road driving	17.3%
	Motorized water use	Motorboating; waterskiing; personal watercraft use	12.1%
Hunting and Fishing			
	Hunting	Big game; small game; migratory birds	39.5%
	Fishing	Anadromous; coldwater; warmwater; saltwater	28.6%
Non-motorized Water Activities			
	Swimming	Swimming in lakes, streams; snorkeling; surfing; scuba diving; visit a beach; visit waterside besides beach; windsurfing	31.7%
	Floating	Canoeing; kayaking; rafting	22.1%

Figure 15: National Outdoor Recreation Trends

The data above is adapted from “**Federal Outdoor Recreation Trends: Effects on Economic Opportunities**” National Center for Natural Resources Economic Research (NCNRER) NCNRER Working Paper Number 1 – October 2014. Eric M. White, J.M. Bowker, Ashley E. Askew, Linda L. Langner, J. Ross Arnold, Donald B.K. English.

In addition, **World Travel Market** is predicting that cycling will rival golf for leisure time for middle aged men in the Americas. The current term describing this trend is MAMIL (Middle aged men in lycra).



According to the **2016 Outdoor Foundation Topline Report**, the following activities have experienced positive 3-year and 1-year growth:

Activity	3-year growth	1-year growth
Stand-up Paddleboarding	26%	10%
Traditional/Road Triathlon	18%	24%
Kayak Fishing	17%	9%
Non-traditional/Off-Road Triathlon	12%	13%
Adventure Racing	10%	21%

Figure 16: National Growth in select Outdoor Recreation activities.

A 2014 report published by the **Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation** in cooperation with the Outdoor Foundation found that there were approximately 8.6 million newcomers to fishing from 2012-2014; 42% of first-time fishing participants are female; and Hispanic fishing participants spend an average of 24.4 days on the water per year (almost 5 days more than average for all participants).



4.0 Outdoor Recreation Economic Framework

The outdoor recreation economic development framework builds off of the market opportunities and stakeholder input. It focuses on the need to establish connectivity between the destinations and gateway communities, as well as creating an ongoing mechanism to track visitors and gauge the economic impact of outdoor recreation and its users.

This document presents a platform for the partners in the Mount Rogers region to follow in order to create a healthy business environment and grow outdoor recreation business opportunities that are unique to Mount Rogers and the eight gateway communities. The actions below are based on four core strategic areas that have been identified through community engagement and market research.

- **Product Organization & Tracking**
- **Business Development**
- **Target Marketing**
- **Partnerships**

4.1 Product Organization & Tracking

The first and most important thing for the Mount Rogers partner organizations to do to grow outdoor recreation activities and build an environment for healthy business, is begin to collectively track users, their needs, and their impacts. The actions below focus on building a communication network to connect the region's assets, as well as provide ongoing inventory and user tracking.

1. **Enhance Asset Inventories:** The existing asset inventories prepared by MRPDC are excellent tools. These inventories should be enhanced and used as an informative tool that all area destinations, partners, and businesses have access to. The inventory should be expanded to include contact information, pertinent web addresses, hours of operation, event and seasonality notes. The inventory should also be mapped and provided as a clickable database on the Mount Rogers website (website action mentioned in 4.3 below).
2. **Ensure sites are on Virginia Outdoors Plan Mapper:** The VOP Mapper developed by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation is a companion tool of the comprehensive Virginia Outdoors Plan. It provides data on recreation resources statewide including trails, trailheads, blueways, public lands and lakes, etc. The mapper is more of a planning and inventory tool rather than one for marketing, but should include all appropriate data for the study area. The VOP Mapper and the Outdoor Plan should also be in the hands of every destination, recreation resource, and partner in the region. The data and its findings can help in seeking funding and grants. <http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/recreational-planning/vop>
3. **Ensure sites and businesses are listed on the MYSWVA.org and its Outdoor Recreation interactive mapper:** The myswva.org website has long been a tool for marketing all of Southwest Virginia's 19 counties and their destinations for cultural, heritage, arts and music, and outdoor recreation. Friends of Southwest Virginia is currently in the development stage of creating a dedicated website for the Appalachian Spring initiative. Among other things, the site inventories and lists assets by "anchor areas" of which the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area is one. As that site is being finalized, the Mount Rogers area partners should maintain communications with Friends of SWVA to ensure all sites and assets are included, but also that Mount Rogers region is effectively promoted. It is important for this (and the VOP Mapper above), that coordination is not once-and-done, but rather maintains consistency as assets are enhanced in the region.



4. Implement Zip Code tracking system using high traffic destinations:

It is critically important that a tracking system be employed that is consistent across the region. Work with existing attractions (sample of hotels and restaurants, Mt Rogers, Hungry Mother, key convenience stores – exits 35 and 45, Dip Dog stand, outfitter in Marion, businesses in Damascus, etc.) to begin collecting zip codes and reporting them to the MRPDC on a quarterly basis. In addition to the zip code, the date of the visit should be recorded as well.

The survey mechanism can and should be simple to use. All destinations should use the same written form. An initial training session should be held with the destination/business partners to deploy.

Zip Code Survey of Users - Mount Rogers Region

Business/Destination: _____ Dates: _____

Instructions

1. Simply ask users, "We're conducting market research for the Mount Rogers Region, can I have your zip code?"
2. Please record the residence zip code for each customer who enters your business/destination. Input visitor zip codes.
3. Print multiple copies and use as needed, making sure to record dates.
4. A representative from the Mount Rogers PDC will collect the surveys at regular intervals.

For more information, contact Gavin Blewitt at gblewitt@mrpdc.com

Zip Codes sample:

Figure 17: Zip Code survey tracking instrument developed as part of this report.

5. Design and implement a visitor intercept survey:

Implement an iPad based **visitor survey** to be deployed at attractions and events. By collecting a few pieces of key data, local tourism marketing organizations and businesses will be able to build ground up models of economic impact, as well as understand general characteristics of their market.

This should be used not only to track growth or decline in outdoor recreation’s impacts to the local economy, but also create visitor profiles and define target markets. Local colleges and universities are best equipped to administer the survey and assist with data analysis. If local institutions such as Virginia Highlands Community College or Virginia Tech are unable to accomplish this task, Clemson University’s Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management can assist either to implement the survey, or train local institutions to do so. This survey should be a maximum of 6 questions including the following 3 questions at a minimum:

- What is your zip code?
- Are you staying overnight in area? If so, how many nights and which hotel/motel or other lodging type?
- Estimate your total daily expenditures in the area to include:
 - eating/drinking places
 - groceries
 - gas, auto/other transportation
 - lodging
 - shopping/retail.

An iPad based survey using Qualtrics or some other similar survey software should be developed. Portable and lockable bases are very inexpensive and will allow the iPads to be moved from site to site as appropriate. <https://www.tryten.com/locking-base-plate-for-ipad-kiosk.html?gclid=CLGwh7T-mM0CFdcRgQodMEYCSA>



6. **Use data from intercept surveys to into the MRPD_OREI Impact Model.** A ground-up economic impact model has been created as part of this plan. The proprietary model provides a metric to track growth in the outdoor/adventure travel sector and was developed using existing data/impact studies and multipliers calculated using the IMPLAN model. Data collected from the iPad based survey system can be plugged into this model to estimate impacts on:

- Direct Expenditures
- Jobs Created
- Government Revenues
- Total Output/Impact

In addition to quarterly, bi-annual, or annual overall impacts in the sector, this model may also be used to calculate impact estimates for specific events or projects when data is collected or is available. This tool is provided as a separate spreadsheet in this plan.

7. **Require Outdoor Recreation Element of all downtown and community development planning processes:** As mentioned previously, most of the eight gateway communities have completed or are working on planning exercises as part of the Department of Housing and Community Development’s business district revitalization process. Across the state, these plans have required elements of planning, physical design improvements, and economic restructuring. Some communities that undergo this process have opportunities and priorities that don’t always fit perfectly with the top-down plan. In the case of the Mount Rogers region, it is recommended that all future business district and community development projects administered by DHCD or the MRPDC have a specific requirement that outdoor recreation be addressed in some form or fashion, perhaps as a dedicated element. The success of these communities is directly related to leveraging outdoor recreation for economic development.

8. **Create experience based itineraries:** Focus group participants provided several examples of weekend itineraries that could be packaged and promoted that included rides on the Virginia Creeper, evening picnics at Whitetop, riding the Back of the Dragon, moonshine tasting, stays in B & B’s, breakfast at the Saltbox, Sunday buffet at the Riverfront, fishing at Tumbling, riding ATV’s, hiking the Channels, and visiting the Museum of the Middle-Appalachians - just to name a few.

Huntsville, Alabama’s Trip Builder tool is an excellent example of a simple web tool that a visitor can use to create their own itinerary and travel resource: <http://www.huntsville.org/tripbuilder/>. In addition to custom itineraries, “stock” itineraries should be created and available as well based on interests or themes. These themes are discussed in section 4.3 for market positioning. In order for this to be successful, an internal inventory of experiences must be made and all destinations should participate to effectively design and plan the itineraries.

9. **Organize biannual discovery tours:** The SWVA Branding project completed for the SWVA Cultural Heritage Foundation began with five weeks of travel throughout the region. The purpose was not only for the design team learn about the region, but also to connect the local human capital. It was learned during that process that most regional partners and assets knew little of what was going on regionally, as their own focus was with their particular destination or community. The benefits of that simple series of meetings will last for years, as a stronger network was created, and area stakeholders became more informed of regional destinations, projects, and initiatives.

It is recommended that the partners of the Mount Rogers study area stage similar “van tours” annually or twice a year with the simple goal of solidifying the partnership and outdoor recreation network. Each day-long tour can highlight a specific destination, gateway community, or recreation theme. Topics/destinations can rotate each successive tour.



4.2 Business Development

The previous section focused on creating connectivity between the outdoor recreation assets and business, and building data sets to track users and their impact. This section outlines actions to create an enhanced business environment where outdoor and visitor businesses can grow and be successful.

10. Coordinate Hospitality Training with VTC: This was brought up as a critical need in all of the stakeholder discussions. It was noted that not only do front-line tourism workers not have a great understanding of regional offerings, but many also need training on how to interact with consumers and users. For the Mount Rogers study area, this education program should focus on creating community pride and an understanding of all that the Mount Rogers Area has to offer. Having citizens engaged, excited, and informed about the opportunities available is essential to any tourism strategy. Visitors will not be impressed and not be inclined to return if they have less than ideal encounters and interactions with local citizens. It is important that local citizens and service sector employees be ambassadors for the place.

Hospitality education training for service sector employees could include the following:

- Basic customer service skills
- Sales techniques and product presentation
- Communication skills
- Courtesy and etiquette
- Understanding customer behaviors
- Knowledge of local, regional, and state tourism attractions

This was also identified in the SET Economic Development Plan as a need for the entirety of the Planning District Region. In fact, this is one of the primary goals for tourism in that plan. The SET plan suggests a hospitality training program that will evolve from training a representative from individual communities and establishing tourism ambassadors, to creating a web-based program for tourism workers. This task has begun and is initially being led by VTC.

11. Incorporate outdoor recreation curriculum into Community Colleges: Mount Rogers recreation partners should work with VA Highlands and Wytheville Community Colleges to expand existing business development support and training to incorporate outdoor-recreation specific training to include operating a guide service, outfitters, marketing to active users, etc. Southwest Virginia Community College in Richlands has programming that could serve as a model. Its “Adventure Tourism and Outdoor Recreation” curriculum focuses on entrepreneurial development in the tourism and recreation industries. The program is geared towards small business, including course work in business management, marketing, communications, tech, and recreation. <http://sw.edu/ator/outdoor-adventure-programs/>

12. Incorporate entrepreneurial curriculum in area high schools: Similarly, regional partners may look to partners with area high schools to create entrepreneurial training. The program could have a focus on recreation in tourism, as well as provide general small business training. There are several exceptional programs in Virginia that could serve as models, including:

- The Entrepreneurship and Business Academy at Kempsville High school in Virginia Beach offers curriculum in business and info tech, corporate finance, and entrepreneurship. Students can earn credits for associates degree at Tidewater Community College. http://www.vbschools.com/curriculum/academyprog/eb_acad.asp
- Virginia Commonwealth University’s School of Business Management offers an “Entrepreneurial Boot Camp” for rising juniors and seniors in local high schools. The two-day workshop focuses on learning about entrepreneurship, startups, developing business skills, business planning. <https://business.vcu.edu/departments-and-centers/management/entbootcamp.html>



Entrepreneurial training in secondary education curriculum can prepare local youth for starting their own business, ultimately keeping their talent in the local community. It can also prepare them for business management and innovation curriculum at Emory & Henry, Virginia Tech, and community colleges.

13. Expand local small business incentives and business planning competitions: Southwest Virginia, and particularly the Mount Rogers region is fortunate to have a number of excellent small business programs. From the Pop-up Marion program to the My SWVA Opportunity Entrepreneurship Business Challenges, the region is looked at statewide and beyond as a model for providing small business support.

In addition to these great programs, area economic development partners should look to expand local incentives and use them to target specific outdoor recreation businesses including outfitters, guide services, and needed visitor support such as restaurants and lodging. Finding additional funding for existing grant programs, along with partnering with agencies like People Incorporated and others for financing, including:

- Micro-loan for startup and working capital.
- Waived permit fees and concessions on permitting requirements for restaurants, etc.
- Marketing grants or negotiated discounted ad rates for new business.
- Rent subsidies or down payment assistance.

The SET Economic Development Plan identifies the need to secure additional funding to grow existing and support new tourism businesses. Key actions in that plan include the expansion of area business planning competitions through securing additional funding and increased communication of the program and its successful businesses. It goes on to recommend growing partnerships and training opportunities specifically for outdoor recreation businesses.

14. Establish a certified guide program: Stakeholders mentioned the need for guides, ranging from specialized guides who can lead users on kayak events, all the way to general knowledge guides who can tour visitors around the various gateway communities. Ventures such as this would likely be a second job for many guides, and their resources for promotion and marketing would be limited.

The creation of a “certified guide program” was recommended as part of the SWVA Branding initiative, and could be deployed initially in the Mount Rogers area. The program would first ensure that each guide is connected to the regional network and aware of all other asset and opportunities for visitors. It would also create an opportunity for joint market and awareness for the adventure seeker.



15. Maintain and enhance an interactive inventory of developable buildings: The MRPDC has created a simple list of vacant buildings in each gateway community that could support an outdoor recreation-based business. This list should be enhanced to include square footage, up fit needs, rental rates and sales pricing, typical utility costs, and notes on building condition. It should include contact information for each property and should be provided as an interactive inventory on the MRPDC website. It should also be provided to all regional real estate professionals and chambers.



16. Recruit and develop additional lodging targeting the outdoor enthusiast: Outside of Damascus and Marion, there is little lodging opportunity available to the outdoor enthusiast or traveler who wants an experience, not simply a place to stay along the interstate. Some gateway communities have a greater need for lodging than others, and development of new product may need to be a bit outside the box. This could include:

- Targeting a new owner for the Davis Bourne Inn in Independence.
- Identifying sites for additional campground or RV parks.
- Encouraging private citizens to provide lodging on AirBNB.com or other services (several rooms in Damascus and Marion are currently listed on this site)
- Working with property owners in Glade and Saltville to provides rooms such as cabins or hostels to be available when the Salt Trail is completed.

17. Target outdoor businesses, but also those that complement the experience: Recruit outdoor recreation based business such as outfitters, sporting goods, tack shops, gunsmiths, etc. Also target new business that complement the outdoor experience, including breweries, restaurants, local craft, gift stores, etc.

18. Create an inventory of current meeting facilities: Build a simple inventory to identify meeting space across the region including size, programming, purpose, availability, etc. Work with facility owners and stakeholders to determine additional need, if any for new space. If necessary, conduct feasibility study for facility of any significance. Provide inventory to all area partners, outdoor clubs and organizations, lodging establishments, and tourism destinations.

19. Identify priority targets specific to each gateway community's core theme. These special targets would in no way be intended to be the only business target in each community, nor circumvent any normal traditional economic development. However, any effort to solidify each community's unique connection to the region, or simply provide a specific business need or activity will help all business. This could include:

- Chilhowie – downtown Farmers market/venue for downtown events.
- Damascus – Outdoor Recreation & Nature Center.
- Glade Spring – Indoor Farmers Market/Mercantile/Event Venue.
- Independence – Tack Shop and/or fly fishing outfitter (would likely be part of other business). Also downtown restaurant.
- Marion – Expanded heritage craft and arts business.
- Rural Retreat – Dr. Pepper Pharmacy/ destination mercantile.
- Saltville – Downtown restaurant.
- Troutville – Convenience.



4.3 Target Markets

Understanding that the makeup of the Mount Roger area market is comprehensive (locals, visitors, outdoor enthusiasts, etc), it is important to be strategic in targeting users for destinations and patrons for area businesses. The actions below are tailored specifically to the Mount Rogers Study area, and should complement the ongoing efforts of the SWVA branding and marketing effort, the SET Tourism cluster work program, as well as the Appalachian Spring Initiative.

20. Develop and adopt the Mount Rogers

Brand system: Similar to what was done for the Clinch River Valley Initiative, Arnett Muldrow has completed a branding project for the Mount Rogers region itself. The MRPDC and its partners should first adopt the unified brand and “Virginia’s High Point” tag line.

As identified in the SET Economic Development Plan as well as the Mount Rogers Branding Plan, Mount Rogers has the opportunity to be the model to collectively implement the SWVA brand as well.

The SET plan outlines a deployment strategy that uses regional destinations and entrepreneurs as brand partners to organically utilize the brand and messaging. This would include a set of marketing strategies providing a toolkit of brand delivery collateral. Brand deployment would be expanded through pilot communities and regional training.



Figure 18: Mount Rogers Regional Brand

Figure 19: Brand Partner worksheet & card.



How to be a Brand Partner

Go to brandSWVA.com & sign up

Download and read the brand manual

Install the fonts

Download the brand package

Add some photos to the photo gallery

Now you are ready to be a part of A Different Side of Virginia

From here, it's completely up to you, your community, your event, or your organization. There's no proper order, only the things that make sense for you!

<p>Brand SWVA Merchandise</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hats ● T-Shirts ● Coffee cups ● Decals ● Bumper stickers ● Bags ● Shopping bags ● Cycling jerseys ● Pint glasses ● Guitar picks ● Water bottles ● Outdoor gear ● Polo shirts ● Climbing chalk bags ● Hiking stick medallions ● Rain jackets ● Guitar straps ● Koozies ● Socks ● Invent something 	<p>Brand your Digital Presence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Add logo to website ● Add logos to Facebook as a gallery ● Link from web to mySWVA.org ● Use hashtag #SWVA ● Share photos of branded items ● Tweet the web address ● Link google photo galleries to share ● Profile pics ● Send other businesses and organizations to the web address ● Instagram people having fun 	<p>Brand Your Place</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Request interest icons ● Look for brand extension opportunities ● Organizational logos ● Street banners ● Wayfinding signage ● Open signs ● Store hours signs ● Shopping & dining guides ● Advertising ● Pocket folders ● Visitor guides ● Business cards ● Brochures ● Annual reports ● Maps ● Trail guides ● Shopping bags ● Loyalty cards 	<p>Share With us</p> <p style="font-size: x-small;">We would love to hear from you about all the amazing things you come up with to do with the SWVA brand. Please share images and stories of the brand at work with us at brandSWVA@gmail.com</p>
<p>Share With You</p> <p style="font-size: x-small;">On a quarterly basis, we'll share important information with you, like added resources, usage stats, exciting implementations, and a report of the growing brand equity of SWVA!</p>			

Check off one of the suggestions, and you are a **Brand Partner!**



21. Coordinate market identities for each Gateway Community: Each gateway community is unique in its offerings, but also in the way it relates to the Mount Rogers region. While not focusing on one asset or theme, these communities should collectively look to position each based on its primary contribution to the region. This will allow the communities to focus on their uniqueness, but also present a comprehensive experience for the user.

- Damascus – The **Base Camp for the Outdoors** particularly with the Virginia Creeper, Appalachian Trail, and other trails that converge in town. It is also providing one of the key lodging concentrations in the region.
- Glade Spring – The **Home Town for Mount Rogers** with its stereotypical small town square, locally owned businesses, old time hardware store, and local farmers market. Glade is the resilient town that has survived turmoil and disasters through the communal support of its residents. It also has the potential to be the college town.
- Saltville – The **Natural History Destination**. With its unique salt mining history, the Museum of the Middle Appalachians, and being the gateway to the Channels, Saltville offers a unique geological and ecological interpretation of the region's history.
- Chilhowie – The **Front Door to Mount Rogers** – Chilhowie is the primary entrance into the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area with its strategic position off of Interstate 81. Known as the “Valley of the Deer” and with its hunting outfitter downtown, it can provide the active hunting needs for Mount Rogers visitors.
- Marion – The **Cultural Center of Mount Rogers** region. Marion is the largest town in the region and has all of the amenities that a visitor would need including a variety of dining, shopping, and lodging resources. With the Wayne Henderson School and the Lincoln Theater, among others, it is also the creative and cultural center of the region.
- Rural Retreat – **Mount Rogers Railroad Town**. With its railroad depot being listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Rural Retreat has a unique history that dates back to the railroad first coming to Southwest Virginia. It is also the livestock and dairy capital of this region.
- Troutdale – The **Heart of Mount Rogers**. Troutdale is a crossroads town in the center of the Mount Rogers Region. It abuts the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area and is a key crossroads community between Marion, Independence and Damascus.
- Independence – The **River Side of Mount Rogers**. Independence is the only gateway community with access to the New River. Unique outdoor opportunities not found elsewhere in the region include fly fishing and rafting. It also is the main access for horseback riders going to the Grayson Highlands State Park.

22. Themes: Similarly, collaborative marketing should focus on key user groups. There are too many themes to focus on all, while each gateway community may connect best to certain users. Key groups to target include:

- **Outdoor Enthusiast** – Those users that enjoy the occasional day-trip excursion whether it be mountain biking, hiking, hunting and fishing.
- **Extreme Adventurer** – These are the users that do the more specialized and strenuous outdoor activities such as the Appalachian Trail, bouldering, whitewater rafting, and horseback riding.
- **Heritage Tourist** – These are the visitors who enjoy a wide range of traditional visitor experiences including dining, shopping, culture, and history. They also tend to want more conventional accommodations and hospitality.
- **Scenic Driver** - These motorists take their autos or motorcycles on the Back of the Dragon, or simply along the winding roads throughout the Mount Rogers region.
- **Agritourist** – Mount Rogers has the unique opportunity to attract the agritourist, particularly with the Christmas Tree industry in Independence. There is also the unique natural history in Saltville.



- **Ecological Interpretation** – The region has unique opportunities for ecological education and interpretation with its natural preserves, rare fishes, mussels, salamanders, etc.

23. Develop Visit Mount Rogers Website: This site should be a separate site to the existing MRPDC site, focusing on visitors. It should be a simple web portal to local businesses web and social media sites, SWVA Outdoor Recreation site, VOP mapper, etc. It can also have a user version of the asset inventory mentioned above.

24. Branded Wayfinding system: Implement a regional wayfinding program to be implemented over time. Much like the Hometowns on the Clinch, it should allow each gateway community to display its unique identity, but incorporate the brands of Mount Rogers and SWVA to inform the user that they are in distinct and unique place.



Figure 20: Hometowns of Mount Rogers logo.

25. Develop Mount Rogers Endurance Series: The creation of a Mount Rogers Endurance Series could be used to organize and promote a menu of events that occur throughout the year and across activities. For example, one event may be something similar to the Assault on Mt. Mitchell in SC and NC. Another opportunity could be a multi-day adventure race. Additional events could include both on and off-road triathlons, multi-stage paddleboard and canoe races or alternative duathlon type events, trail running, mountain biking, winter survival, etc. A series would allow participants who compete in multiple events to accumulate points and win overall prizes. These events can be (and should be) designed on multiple scales (local/regional draw, multi-state regional draw to national draw) with the goal to create at least one event that becomes a major national event that occurs in the winter/off-season. Examples include:

- CCPRC Sprint Triathlon Series (within Charleston County, SC) – Participants can take part in one or all races and accumulate points for an overall trophy. <https://www.ccprc.com/1507/Charleston-Sprint-Triathlon>
- Assault on Mt. Mitchell: <http://theassaults.com/assault-on-mt-mitchell/>
- Ontario Wilderness Traverses: <http://www.wildernesstraverse.com>
- Untamed New England: <http://www.untamedne.com/ExpeditionRace.aspx>
- US Adventure Racing Association: <http://www.usara.com/default.aspx?ReturnUrl=%2f>

26. Complete the Salt Trail: A huge opportunity on the horizon is the enhancement of the leisure and fitness cycling market that currently exists in Damascus with the Creeper Trail. Efforts to complete the Salt Trail into downtown Glade should take priority, and upon completion the three gateway communities (Damascus, Glade, Saltville) and businesses should coordinate marketing and shuttling services.



- 27. Top 5 Things to do in region by individual theme:** Identifying the top-5 destinations and activities by theme (enthusiast, adventurer, scenic driver, etc) will help plan for growth in each area but also can be used for marketing and promotion. The list should be added to the website and also be used in a rack card for area visitor centers.
- 28. Create a North Carolina specific marketing strategy:** With Independence as the front door, build marketing tools to target North Carolina horseback riders, fisherman, kayakers, and other outdoor enthusiasts. Deploy using billboards and other advertisements along I-77, I-74, and I-40 and in welcome centers.
- 29. Create a social media strategy to collectively market themes and the region:** Social Media is a very effective platform for communicating with residents, visitors, and others about events and destinations within the region.



4.4 Partnerships

The Mount Rogers Planning District Commission has built strong partnerships over time, whether it be with statewide entities like DHCD or VTC, individual communities, or downtown businesses. The MRPDC and its partners realize that in the Mount Rogers area, and really all of Southwest Virginia, the partnerships that bring success are more grass-roots in nature.

Implementation processes cannot be overly structured in this region, as it has the tendency to limit flexibility and creativity. This is certainly the case with this plan, particularly since the partners not only include state agencies and local governments, but also non-profit destinations, private businesses, and local entrepreneurs. Each has its own strengths and limitations regarding capacity and resources.

In order for this plan to be successful, each stakeholder must play a role in implementation.

- 30. Create a formal marketing team/promotions committee to collective market the study area:** This team would include representatives from each gateway community, anchor destination, and select private businesses. It is important that the representatives have a marketing interest, and not simply be a seat at the table. It is likely that this entity could be the existing SET Tourism Cluster committee. Ultimately, this marketing/promotions committee would be charged with the implementation of the marketing strategies of both the SET plan and the Mount Rogers branding and marketing project. It would meet regularly, identify and complete marketing tasks, including building cooperative marketing tools and funding.
- 31. Create informal association of private businesses to network and market:** With such a large region comprised of so many communities, it would be difficult to create a typical business or merchant's organization, particular when many of the businesses are entrepreneurs. Unlike a structured merchants group like the Damascus Business Group, this group would meet quarterly at rotating locations throughout the region. These meetings would be informal workshops to train and learn from their peers, share success stories, and discuss co-marketing opportunities across private business.
- 32. Create a similar informal association of regional lodging establishments:** This entity would meet in a similar fashion to the business group, with the participation of each County's tourism office. The goal of this group would be to identify and implement cooperative marketing activities. This could be a regional lodging guide, shared costs of billboards, ads, etc.
- 33. Identify and develop location to create shared space for outdoor business startups:** Similar to a traditional incubator but less formalized, this space would be a location where regional startups can find low-cost or free rent for a short period of time. The space, perhaps called **Mount Rogers adVenture Center**, would ideally provide these entrepreneurs with access to area partners, community colleges, SBDCs, etc. mountain
- 34. Coordinate and partner to seek funding for planning and marketing projects:** MRPDC and its staff is no stranger to grant writing, and should continue to look for creative funding for financing future planning efforts, economic development and marketing projects. This could include the usual grant funding from DHCD, Tobacco Commission, etc, but also non-traditional mechanisms such as crowd-sourcing and venture financing.
- 35. Bring in regional adventure groups to network and cross promote:** This could include any adventure clubs tied to the region's themes, regional conservation groups, or local and regional marketing organizations. For example, there is likely value in Independence and Grayson to collectively market with Sparta and Alleghany County NC. The two communities are just 15-minutes apart, and have a mutual connection to the New River and its activity.



36. Create a formalized recruitment team to target business across the region: The Mount Rogers Study area is a collection of small towns and rural locales. None of the communities (outside of Marion) have the capacity or resources to pursue economic development or recruit business. It is recommended that a business recruitment team be created to pursue economic development in more of a grass-roots manner. This team would effectively function as a high level ambassador group for the entire region. Each member would be well-versed on all of the plans and projects that are underway within the region, as well as all region's overall value proposition for outdoor adventure. Its responsibilities would include:

- Having a working knowledge of all regional assets, market positions, competitive advantages, and incentives.
- Providing tours/entertaining prospective business owners and investors.
- Participating as a collective delegation in Richmond when needed to represent the values and needs of the region.
- Participating in delegation as needed to visit prospects or engage potential partners outside of the region (for example – participating in or organizing a joint outdoor recreation/economic development conference with Western North Carolina tourism entities).

The recruitment team would be intended to be nimble, and likely would not meet on a regular basis. Rather it would be ready on short notice to assemble members of the team to accomplish any of the ambassadorial tasks above. Members of the recruitment team can/should include representatives from each gateway community, business owners who have invested in the region, destinations, tourism and economic development partners, etc.

4.5 Strategy Board

All recommendations are outlined on the companion **Strategy Board** on the following page. The strategy board includes all actions organized by the four strategic areas above. Each action has a timeframe, lead partner, and progress towards status. Ultimately, the strategy board is a working document for benchmarking and ongoing evaluation of the implementation process.

It is recommended that the MRPDC conduct a meeting with its regional partners to present the plan's findings and recommendations, but also discuss roles and responsibilities, time frames and benchmarking. Any changes to the plan can be added to the strategy board. The group should be reassembled on an annual basis to evaluate progress, discuss new priorities, and amend the strategy board as needed.

Mount Rogers Area – Outdoor Recreation Economic Framework

The strategies below represent the collective economic development framework for the Mount Rogers study area. Strategic areas show core actions, timeframes, lead partners, and progress towards completion.

Strategies	Actions	Timeframe	Lead Partner(s) <i>** suggested lead, partners will be determined during initial leadership meeting</i>	Progress
Product Organization & Tracking	1. Update and enhance existing asset inventories and provide it to regional partners.	Begin and complete in 2016. Ongoing	MRPDC	Begun
	2. Ensure all outdoor recreation sites are on Virginia Outdoor Plan mapper.	Begin and complete in 2016	MRPDC, VDCR	
	3. Ensure sites and businesses are listed on the myswwa.org and Appalachian Spring interactive mappers.	Ongoing	MRPDC, Friends of SWVA	
	4. Implement Zip Code tracking system using high traffic destinations.	Begin tracking Fall of 2016. Ongoing.	MRPDC, Gateway Communities	
	5. Design and implement visitor intercept survey at key destinations, events.	Begin surveys Fall of 2016. Ongoing	MRPDC, Destinations, Event Planners	
	6. Utilize MRPD_OREI Economic Impact Model tracking developed for this plan.	Begin 2017. Ongoing	MRPDC	
	7. Require outdoor recreation element into all downtown and other plans.	Varies. Begin during future grant cycles of funding/planning agencies	DHCD, Other State Partners	
	8. Created experience based itineraries for multi-day travel (adventure, culture, etc).	Assemble Team Fall of 2016. Develop Itineraries 2017. Deploy mid-2017	Destinations, Gateway Communities	
	9. Organize biannual discovery tours internally with destinations, businesses, marketing & economic agencies.	Annually/biannually beginning Fall of 2016	County Tourism Agencies	
Business Development	10. Coordinate Hospitality training with VTC and Community Colleges.	Begun. Timeline according to SET plan	VTC	Begun
	11. Incorporate outdoor recreation curriculum in Community Colleges, Blue Ridge Crossroads Institute	Begin planning 2017	VA Highlands, Wytheville CC, Friends of SWVA	
	12. Incorporate entrepreneurial curriculum in high schools.	Begin planning 2017	County Economic Development Depts, MRPDC	
	13. Expand Business Planning competitions and incentives for business development.	Ongoing	DHCD, MRPDC, Gateway Communities, other ED partners	Begun
	14. Create a certified guide program for joint marketing, growing the destination network, building awareness.	Establish 2017	Friends of SWVA	
	15. Enhance and maintain ongoing and interactive inventory of developable buildings in gateway communities.	Ongoing	MRPDC	
	16. Recruit and develop additional lodging targeting the outdoor enthusiast.	Begin 2016. Ongoing	MRPDC, Gateway Communities	
	17. Recruit outdoor recreation based businesses as well as those that support the user or visitor.	Begin 2016. Ongoing	MRPDC, Gateway Communities, ED partners	
	18. Inventory current meeting facilities across region including size, programming, purpose, etc.	Begin and complete in off season 2016. Ongoing	MRPDC	
	19. Create priority targets specific to each gateway community's core theme.	Begin 2016. Ongoing	Gateway Communities	

Mount Rogers Area – Outdoor Recreation Economic Framework

The strategies below represent the collective economic development framework for the Mount Rogers study area. Strategic areas show core actions, timeframes, lead partners, and progress towards completion.

Target Markets				
	20. Develop and adopt the Mount Rogers Brand System and use as pilot to implement regional SWVA brand	Adopt 2016	MRPDC, SWVA CHF	Regional deployment begun.
	21. Coordinate marketing identities and efforts for each Gateway Community	Upon adoption of MR Brand	MRPDC, Gateways, Marketing/Promotions committee (action 30)	
	22. Develop Visit Mount Rogers website gateway.	2017	MRPDC, Friends of SWVA	
	23. Create and implement over time a regional wayfinding system incorporating brands of SWVA and gateway communities.	Begin 2017. Implement as needed over time	Gateways, SWVA CHF	
	24. Develop competitive adventure races coordinated to connect two or more gateway communities, including off-season events.	Plan one to two for 2017. Begin series 2018.	Destinations/Gateways, Area adventure clubs	
	25. Complete the Salt Trail into downtown Glade Spring and coordinate marketing & shuttling between Glade/ Saltville/ Damascus.	Planned. Funding being sought. Marketing when completed.	MRPDC, Project Glade, DBA, Saltville, Private sector	
	26. Create distinct marketing message for different themes unique to the Mount Rogers region (enthusiast, adventurer, heritage tourist, scenic driver, agritourists, ecological interpretation)	2017	MRPDC, Marketing /Promotions committee (action 30)	
	27. Create a top 5 list of things to do by theme and add to websites, marketing materials.	2017	MRPDC, Marketing /Promotions committee (action 30)	
	28. Create North Carolina specific marketing strategies (billboards, ads, etc) for south side and Independence.	2017	MRPDC, Marketing /Promotions committee (action 30)	
	29. Create social media strategy to collectively market themes and region.	2017	MRPDC, Marketing /Promotions committee (action 30)	
Partnerships				
	30. Create formal marketing team/promotions committee with marketing partners from gateway/anchor/private businesses. This could be the existing SET Tourism committee.	Summer 2016	MRPDC, SET	
	31. Create informal association for private businesses to regularly meet across the region to train each other, share success, co-market.	Offseason 2016/2017 form & plan	Private businesses with MRDPC guidance	
	32. Create similar informal association of regional lodging establishments across types and location.	Offseason 2016/2017 form & plan	County Tourism Departments	
	33. Identify and develop location to create a shared incubator space for outdoor businesses.	2017 plan. 2018 develop	DHCD, MRPDC, County ED agencies	
	34. Coordinate and partner to seek funding and grants for planning and projects.	Ongoing	MRPDC, DHCD, Gateways	
	35. Bring in regional (NC and VA) adventure and tourism groups to experience region and cross promote.	2017	MRPDC, Marketing /Promotions committee (action 30)	
	36. Create a formalized recruitment team to target businesses across the region.	Identify and form Summer 2016. Train Fall 2016. Begin 2017	MRPDC & all Partners	

