DAMASCUS
VIRGINIA
2050

Comprehensive Plan

Certified: 9/9/25

Damascus Planning Commission

Chairman

Adopted: 10/6/25

Damascus Town Council

Mayor

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This planning document was prepared by the Damascus Planning Commission, the Damascus Town Council, and the citizens of the Town of Damascus. A special thank you to all those that are not mentioned herein but who worked on this document throughout the planning process. The background research, writing, design, and assembly of the document was completed by the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission. The preparation of this document was funded by the Town of Damascus.

The contents of this document do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of any other agency or organization. This plan does not constitute a standard, specification, or regulation.

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Cover photography by Tyler Irving of Iron Mountain Media.

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Chapter I. Introduction

Photography by Tyler Irving of Iron Mountain Media.

Purpose

The purpose of the Damascus Comprehensive Plan is to provide a guide or a *vision* for the future development of the town. Planning is an organized way of determining a community's problems and opportunities, then setting goals, objectives, and strategies to address those problems and opportunities. Planning is a forward-looking process that bridges the gap between where we are today and where we want to go in the future. A comprehensive plan by its very name addresses a variety of often-interrelated public facilities and services, quality of life, economy, and transportation.

A comprehensive plan is a tool to guide local government decisions pertaining to the provision of a better environment and efficient public services, both now and in the future. To accomplish these purposes the plan must be comprehensive, general, and long range. A comprehensive plan should include surveys of existing conditions, an analysis of those conditions to determine what changes will take place, and recommendations for action on strategies that will improve existing conditions in order to prepare for the future.

Vision Statement:

The Town of Damascus is a welcoming community that sets a course for adventure and entrepreneurship.

Background

As of July 1, 1980, Title 15.2-2223 of the Code of Virginia states that all localities in Virginia had to have adopted a Comprehensive Plan. The Code of Virginia also requires that the plan be updated at least every five years and that "The comprehensive plan shall be made with the purpose of guiding and accomplishing a coordinated, adjusted and harmonious development of the area which will be in accordance with present and probable future needs and resources, best promote the health, safety, morals, order, convenience, prosperity, and general welfare of the inhabitants."

Damascus adopted a Comprehensive Land Use Plan on June 2, 1980, with subsequent amendments in 1988 and 1995. None of those amendments were a result of an overall review of the original plan, but were additions primarily necessitated by community improvement projects that were not included in the original plan. In 1999, the town completed a thorough update of the Damascus Comprehensive Plan, which formed the foundation for 2007 and 2013 plan amendments.

In 2019-2020, the town worked to develop a completely new and updated plan to meet the needs of the growing and changing footprint of Damascus – this process was delayed by the COVID-19 global pandemic and the correlated social and political challenges. This process is discussed further in **Chapter X. Implementation**.

Description of the Planning Area

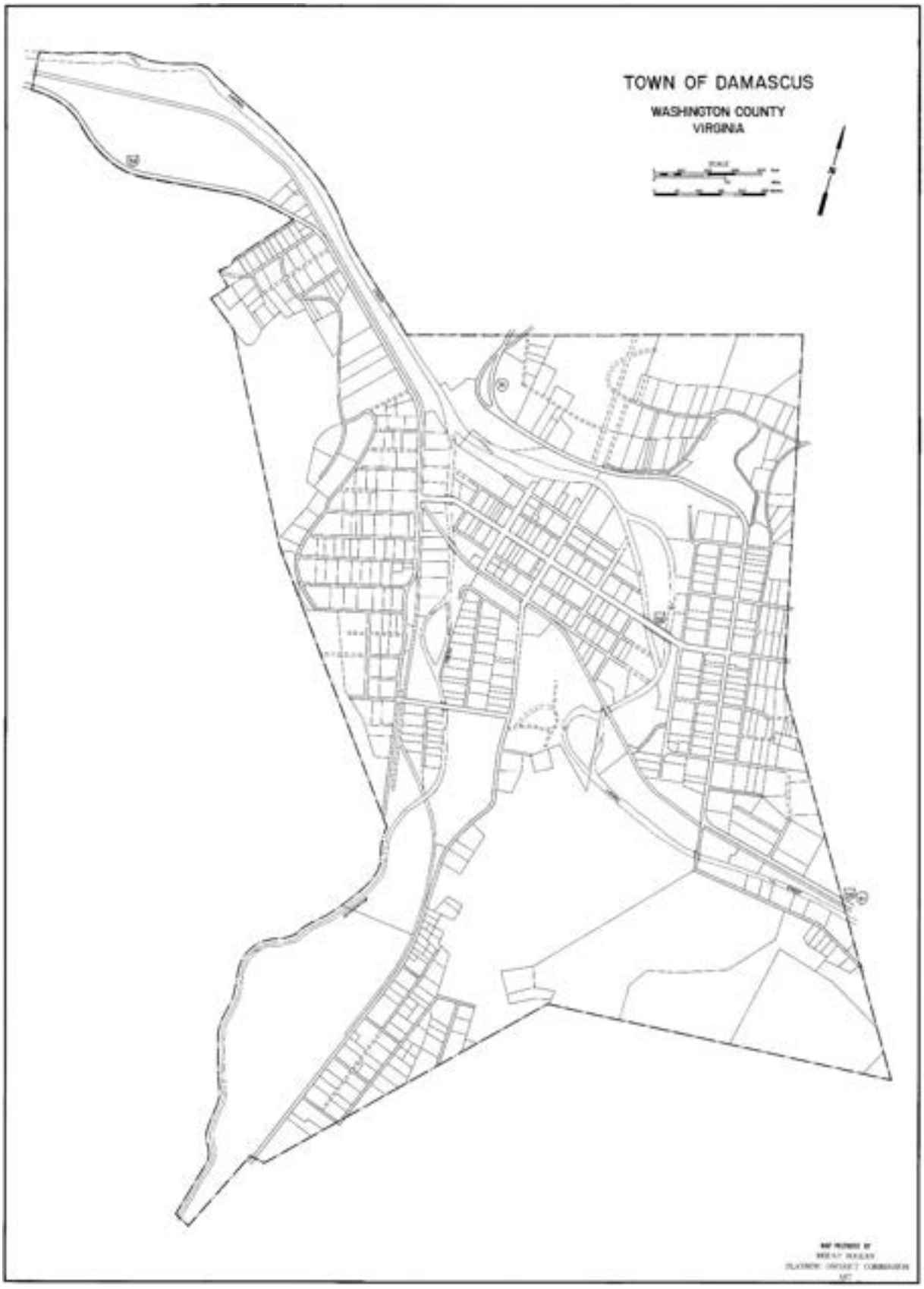
Damascus is located in the southeast section of Washington County. The town is 12 miles from the Town of Abingdon and Interstate 81 and 28 miles from Bristol. The Tennessee border lies 1 ½ miles to the south of Damascus and the Smyth County line is 17 miles to the east. Highways 58 and 91, as well as Laurel and Beaverdam Creeks, intersect within the corporate limits.

Damascus is favorably situated as a service area for a number of tourist attractions. Backbone Rock is two miles to the southwest, while Whitetop Mountain, Mount Rogers, and Pine Mountain, the three highest peaks in Virginia, are approximately 20 miles to the east. Grayson Highlands State Park is approximately 30 miles to the east, and to the south, east and west, adjoining the corporate limits, is the Congressionally designated Mount Rogers National Recreation Area of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests. The Appalachian Trail, Virginia Creeper Trail, Iron Mountain Trail, Daniel Boone Trail, the Crooked Road, and Transamerica 76 Bicycle Route pass through the corporate limits. Damascus also lies at the entrance to Shady Valley, Tennessee and joins the Cherokee National Forest to the south.

Originally mapped and platted[1] as the Plan of Damascus in 1887, the town didn't develop as envisioned, but much of the initial vision remains. The current corporate boundaries of the Town of Damascus are shown on **Map 1: Damascus Corporate Boundaries**. The map is dated 1977, and the corporate boundaries of the town have not changed. There is no geographic information on this map, however, aerial photography of the town is included throughout the plan. Additionally, the map is included at the end of this plan as a larger plate.

[1] Plan of Damascus by Alison Hutton, C.E. (1887), Washington County Courthouse, Virginia; Plat Book 16 Page 57.

Map 1: Damascus Corporate Boundaries



Source: Mount Rogers Planning District Commission 1977

Photography by Tyler Irving of Iron Mountain Media.

Relationship to Other Plans

The comprehensive plan is a general plan and is not designed to stand alone as the sole guide for the development of a locality. However, the plan fulfills a number of specific purposes. It is the basis for a town zoning ordinance and serves as a sounding board for examination of an application for rezoning. It provides a comprehensive frame of reference for the review and evaluation of conditional use permits, subdivision plats, site plans, and developmental proposals. It gives official recognition to areas of natural, historical, geological, or archeological significance, thus insuring their conservation and protection. The plan serves as a guide for efficient and coordinated improvements in public services. It identifies the assets of the town and outlines ways to preserve and take advantage of those assets. The comprehensive plan may be implemented by zoning ordinances, subdivision ordinances, and capital improvements programs. Other plans of importance to the town in the development of this plan include the Mount Rogers Hazard Mitigation Plan; Rural Long Range Transportation Plan; Washington County Comprehensive Plan; the Washington County 604(b) Comprehensive Water and Wastewater Quality Plan; the Mount Rogers Comprehensive Economic Development Plan; the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area Unit Plan; the VDOT Corridor Plans for U.S. Route 58 and Route 91; and the Highway Improvement Plans of Tennessee and North Carolina. Additional local and regional plans should be considered as they are developed.

Legal Purpose

§15.2-2232. Legal Status of Plan.

A. Whenever a local planning commission recommends a comprehensive plan or part thereof for the locality and such plan has been approved and adopted by the governing body, it shall control the general or approximate location, character and extent of each feature shown on the plan. Thereafter, unless a feature is already shown on the adopted master plan or part thereof or is deemed so under subsection D, no street or connection to an existing street, park or other public area, public building or public structure, public utility facility or public service corporation facility other than a railroad facility or an underground natural gas or underground electric distribution facility of a public utility as defined in subdivision (b) of § 56-265.1 within its certificated service territory, whether publicly or privately owned, shall be constructed, established or authorized, unless and until the general location or approximate location, character, and extent thereof has been submitted to and approved by the commission as being substantially in accord with the adopted comprehensive plan or part thereof. In connection with any such determination, the commission may, and at the direction of the governing body shall, hold a public hearing, after notice as required by § 15.2-2204. Following the adoption of the Statewide Transportation Plan by the Commonwealth Transportation Board pursuant to § 33.2-353 and written notification to the affected local governments, each local government through which one or more of the designated corridors of statewide significance traverses, shall, at a minimum, note such corridor or corridors on the transportation plan map included in its comprehensive plan for information purposes at the next regular update of the transportation plan map. Prior to the next regular update of the transportation plan map, the local government shall acknowledge the existence of corridors of statewide significance within its boundaries.

B. The commission shall communicate its findings to the governing body, indicating its approval or disapproval with written reasons therefore. The governing body may overrule the action of the commission by a vote of a majority of its membership. Failure of the commission to act within 60 days of a submission, unless the time is extended by the governing body, shall be deemed approval. The owner or owners or their agents may appeal the decision of the commission to the governing body within 10 days after the decision of the commission. The appeal shall be by written petition to the governing body setting forth the reasons for the appeal. The appeal shall be heard and determined within 60 days from its filing. A majority vote of the governing body shall overrule the commission.

C. Widening, narrowing, extension, enlargement, vacation or change of use of streets or public areas shall likewise be submitted for approval, but paving, repair, reconstruction, improvement, drainage or similar work and normal service extensions of public utilities or public service corporations shall not require approval unless such work involves a change in location or extent of a street or public area.

D. Any public area, facility or use as set forth in subsection A which is identified within, but not the entire subject of, a submission under either § 15.2-2258 for subdivision or subdivision A 8 of § 15.2-2286 for development or both may be deemed a feature already shown on the adopted master plan, and, therefore, excepted from the requirement for submittal to and approval by the commission or the governing body; provided, that the governing body has by ordinance or resolution defined standards governing the construction, establishment or authorization of such public area, facility or use or has approved it through acceptance of a proffer made pursuant to § 15.2-2303.

E. Approval and funding of a public telecommunications facility on or before July 1, 2012, by the Virginia Public Broadcasting Board pursuant to Article 12 (§ 2.2-2426 et seq.) of Chapter 24 of Title 2.2 or after July 1, 2012, by the Board of Education pursuant to § 22.1-20.1 shall be deemed to satisfy the requirements of this section and local zoning ordinances with respect to such facility with the exception of television and radio towers and structures not necessary to house electronic apparatus. The exemption provided for in this subsection shall not apply to facilities existing or approved by the Virginia Public Telecommunications Board prior to July 1, 1990. The Board of Education shall notify the governing body of the locality in advance of any meeting where approval of any such facility shall be acted upon. On any application for a telecommunications facility, the commission's decision shall comply with the requirements of the Federal Telecommunications Act of 1996. Failure of the commission to act on any such application for a telecommunications facility under subsection A submitted on or after July 1, 1998, within 90 days

of such submission shall be deemed approval of the application by the commission unless the governing body has authorized an extension of time for consideration, or the applicant has agreed to an extension of time. The governing body may extend the time required for action by the local commission by no more than 60 additional days. If the commission has not acted on the application by the end of the extension, or by the end of such longer period as may be agreed to by the applicant, the application is deemed approved by the commission.

F. A proposed telecommunications tower or a facility constructed by an entity organized pursuant to Chapter 9.1 (§ 56-231.15 et seq.) of Title 56 shall be deemed to be substantially in accord with the comprehensive plan and commission approval shall not be required if the proposed telecommunications tower or facility is located in a zoning district that allows such telecommunications towers or facilities by right.

G. A solar facility subject to subsection A shall be deemed to be substantially in accord with the comprehensive plan if (i) such proposed solar facility is located in a zoning district that allows such solar facilities by right or (ii) such proposed solar facility is designed to serve the electricity or thermal needs of the property upon which such facility is located, or will be owned or operated by an eligible customer-generator or eligible agricultural customer-generator under § 56-594 or by a small agricultural generator under § 56-594.2. All other solar facilities shall be reviewed for substantial accordance with the comprehensive plan in accordance with this section. However, a locality may allow for a substantial accord review for such solar facilities to be advertised and approved concurrently in a public hearing process with a rezoning, special exception, or other approval process.

Terminology

"Comprehensive" means that the plan must include all the land within the town as well as be cognizant of all decisions which may have an impact on the land.

"General" means that the plan does not dictate specific locations or include the ordinances which are needed to put the plan into effect. Rather a general plan provides the goals, objectives, and strategies to which decisions and ordinance of the local government can be directed.

"Long Range" means that the plan, while addressing current problems, also considers future situations and the impact of changes 10 to 15 years from now.

"Goals" are general statements or future conditions considered desirable to the town; they are ends toward which actions are aimed.

"Objectives" are statements of measurable activities to be accomplished in pursuit of the goals; they refer to some specific aspirations which are reasonably attainable.

"Strategies", "policies", or **"recommendations"** are specific proposals that directly relate to accomplishing the objective; they are the actions recommended to implement the plan. Strategies or recommendations represent the "*how we are going to get there*" component of the plan.

Images courtesy of Town of Damascus.

Chapter II. Community & Environment

Damascus is located in the southeast section of Washington County. The town is 12 miles from the Town of Abingdon and Interstate 81 and 28 miles from Bristol. The Tennessee border lies 1 ½ miles to the south of Damascus and the Smyth County line is 17 miles to the east. Highways 58 and 91, Laurel and Beaverdam Creeks, and the National Appalachian Scenic and Virginia Creeper Trails intersect within the corporate boundaries.

Damascus is known nationwide for the wide variety of outdoor recreation activities, as it is favorably situated as a service area for a number of attractions. Backbone Rock is two miles to the southwest, while Whitetop Mountain, Mount Rogers, and Pine Mountain, the three highest peaks in Virginia, are approximately 20 miles to the east. Grayson Highlands State Park is approximately 30 miles to the east, and to the south, east and west, adjoining the corporate limits, is the Congressionally designated Mount Rogers National Recreation Area of the George Washington and Jefferson National Forests. The Appalachian Trail, Virginia Creeper Trail, Iron Mountain Trail, Daniel Boone Trail, the Crooked Road, and Transamerica 76 Bicycle Route pass through the corporate limits. Damascus also lies at the entrance to Shady Valley, Tennessee and joins the Cherokee National Forest to the south.

Environment

Physiographic Provinces & Geology

The town lies within the Blue Ridge subregion of the Appalachian Mountain Range; immediately north-northwest of the Appalachians, within which lies most of Wahington County. Damascus, at the division of these two subregions, is flanked by the Iron Mountains, which are part of the Blue Ridge.

Geologically, the Ridge and Valley are characterized by underlying layers of sedimentary rocks. Most of the sedimentary rock types in Washington County are sandstone, shale, limestone, and dolomite. Because such rock types are not particularly resistant to erosion and shifting, faulting has occurred throughout parts of the Ridge and Valley. In addition, the valleys of the county are characterized by sinkholes and underground caverns, which pose a problem in maintaining water quality. As development increases, if proper water and sewage treatments are not provided, pollution of springs and wells is ultimately unavoidable.

Unlike the sedimentary rock types of the Ridge and Valley, outcrops of rock characterize the Blue Ridge subregion around Damascus, which are volcanic in nature – sandstone, red shale, limestone, and dolomite underlie the town itself.

Relief

Generally, the elevation of the town ranges between 1,900 and 2,000 feet, with an average elevation of approximately 1,950 feet, though most of the core downtown area is approximately 1,920 feet. One knob, in the southeastern part of town, rises above 2,300 feet. Directly adjacent to the town is the Iron Mountain range, which has peaks of up to 4,000 feet.

Climatology

According to data from the National Center for Environmental Information, Damascus has a moderate climate with July being the warmest month and January the coldest month. The daily maximum temperature averages about 84°F with the average daily minimum temperature in January being about 23°F. The growing season ranges from more than 200 days in the western portion of Washington County to less than 160 days in the Konnarock area.

Average annual rainfall in Damascus is about 48 inches, up from 45 inches in 2013. Precipitation during the six warm months, April through September, averages approximately 25 inches. Snowfall averages about 11 inches annually, down from above 15 inches (2013).

The prevailing winds in the county are from a westerly direction, with southerly and northerly winds occurring less frequently. The mountains, along with the prevailing westerly winds, generally protect the county from severe storms originating in the

Atlantic Ocean. Tornadoes have been reported in Washington County at roughly ten-year intervals since 1944, with the most recent in 2011.

Hydrology

The hydrology associated with Damascus and the surrounding area is very important. The Town serves as a catch basin for water that flows out the adjacent mountains in the Jefferson and Cherokee National Forests. Beaverdam and Laurel Creeks join within the town and represent the culmination of water drainage from three major watersheds encompassing a 156 square mile area.

The Whitetop Laurel Drainage Area represents a 56.4 square mile watershed. Water drains in a southwestward direction from the Jefferson National Forest into Whitetop Laurel Creek, which flows into Laurel Creek at Laureldale. Although not as major a factor as the two other watersheds, the Whitetop-Laurel Drainage Area provides a significant volume of water to the streams that flow through town.

The Laurel Creek Drainage Area originates in Johnson County, Tennessee. Encompassing approximately 43.1 square miles, the watershed is bounded on the south by Lord Ridge, Red Fox Ridge, and Bald Knob. Elevations range from more than 4,300 feet at Bald Ridge to approximately 1,900 feet at Damascus. Laurel Bloomery is found in approximately the center of this watershed.

The Iron Mountain Ridge separates the Beaverdam Drainage Area from the Laurel Drainage Area. Located west of Laurel Creek, the Beaverdam Drainage Area also originates in Tennessee, encompassing the community of Shady Valley and part of the Cherokee National Forest. This natural bowl drains an average of 100 cubic feet of water per second into the town and encompasses a 56 square mile area. Because of these vast areas of drainage, particularly Beaverdam and Laurel, the town has suffered from severe floods, three of which occurred in 1977 (April, October, and November). The 1977 flood study, Comprehensive Flood Damage Reduction Study for the Town of Damascus[2] estimates the civil damage alone to have been $118,000 in the November 1977 flood (damage to business and personal property are not included in this estimate). The November 1977 flood was not the largest in the Town's history; however, it is the only one for which civil damages have been calculated.

Soils

Damascus has both sewage and water systems thus soil limitations to development due to slope, soil type and location or relation to the flood plain are the major deterrents to future growth. There are nine general soil types in the Town. The most prominent soil type is the Allegheny series that comprises 43.1 percent of the Town. The Allegheny series includes deep well-drained soils made of material deposited by Beaverdam and Laurel Creeks. The soils map shows that these soils comprise most of the flat land and developed area in Damascus. These soils make good agricultural land and are well suited for all types of development.[3]

The Jefferson Series underlies 21.2 percent of Damascus. This soil is formed from material that has washed down from nearby hillsides and is found in many locations with different slope characteristics. The Jefferson series is similar to the Allegheny series in its capability to support agriculture and development. However, these capabilities decline quickly with the steepness of the slope.

The next most prominent soil is the Braddock series comprising 13.9 percent of the town. The Braddock series is made up of material carried by the creeks and washed down from higher elevations. The Braddock soil type, while productive for agriculture, is unstable for building purposes due to its elasticity.

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[2] Dewberry, Nealon & Davis: Comprehensive Flood Damage Stud for the Town of Damascus, August 1979. Please note, due to its age, this document has not been hyperlinked similarly to other reference documents in this Plan.

[3] Soil information is Soil Survey of Washington County, Virginia, 1945, and Soil Survey Interpretations, by U.S. Soil Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The Ramsey series is found on the hills surrounding Damascus and comprises 11.1 percent of Damascus. Ramsey series soils are poor for agriculture and pose problems to building because the slopes are generally too steep and hard rock is usually encountered within seven to 20 inches of the surface.

The Weikert series, which accounts for 4.6 percent and the Gilpin series, which accounts for 2.5 percent of Damascus have similar characteristics. Both types are found on hillsides. Bedrock can be encountered at between 18 and 30 inches in depth, thus limiting development.

The remaining soil types are the Frederick (2.5 percent), Elliber (0.7 percent), and the Whelling series (0.4 percent). These soils account for only a small percentage of the land in Damascus. The Frederick series poses moderate limitations to development due to its slope and its clayey consistency that restricts its ability to support buildings. The Elliber series poses problems with development due to its stony nature. The Wheeling series poses only slight difficulty to development where the slope is moderate but poses serious problems where slope exceeds 15 percent.

Vegetation

Most of the original forests in the Town have been removed as development has taken place; however, even after the timber boom, the establishment of the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area has preserved much of the native vegetation. Though Southwest Virginia contains three different ecoregions, Damascus sits square on the boundary of the Ridge and Valley and the Blue Ridge Mountains regions (Hersh and Peters). Given the proximity of national forest lands, and creek basins, the Town should take care to maintain native vegetation[4] and to actively remove invasive vegetation that might threaten the maintained forest lands or be swept downstream to new areas. Maintaining a healthy urban forest environment will also contribute to quality of life.

In the surrounding mountains are found scarlet oak, chestnut, oak, locust, pitch pine, sourwood, hickory, white oak, red oak, black gum, tulip tree, hemlock, white pine, linden, cucumber tree, beech, maple, willow, sycamore, holly, elm, scrub pine, black walnut, red cedar, several types of cherry, mountain laurel, huckleberry, and rhododendron. Other vegetation includes broomsedge, greenbrier, blackberry, dewberry, raspberry, strawberry, ironweed, riverweed, nettle, thistle, mullein, ragweed, narrow-leaved plantain, mint, daisy, aster, and watercress.[5]

Community

The Town of Damascus has made its claim to fame as “Trail Town, USA” and “The Friendliest Town on the Trail” for many years; following the Town’s industrial period (including timber export), the community has adapted to an identity revolving to a great deal around outdoor recreation. Resilient communities generally consist of three components: social resilience, environmental resilience, and economic resilience.

Business Community

Damascus is at the intersection of two important Virginia highways: Virginia State Route 91, which continues from Tennessee Highway 91 just outside of Damascus and runs north to U.S. Highway 460 in Tazewell, and Highway 58, which runs the entirety of the Commonwealth from the Cumberland Gap to Virginia Beach. In addition to these important roadways, the Town is also the intersection of several nationally renowned trails, giving it the nickname of “Trail Town, USA.”

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[4] The Plant Southwest Virginia Natives campaign is a collaborative initiative by the state and regional organizations coordinated by the Department of Environmental Quality; the US Department of Forestry also maintains active campaigns (including funding) to protect and repopulate native forest habitats. By partnering with local organizations such as the Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists, or others, the Town can build upon its natural environment.

[5] Vegetation information is from Soil Survey of Washington County, Virginia by U.S. Soil Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Once an industry town, Damascus has seen a resurgence due to tourism, often related to trails, and now relies heavily on tourism as an economic driver. Damascus sees many out-of-state visitors due to its location, but also because of the variety of outdoor recreation opportunities within the town limits or within a short drive. However, despite the high number of visitors, Damascus is able to maintain the small town feel that makes it a must-experience destination. Retail shops line the streets of Damascus, and these outfitters, bike shops, restaurants, and other small businesses help provide the character of the town. The welcoming nature of the Damascus community intrigues newcomers, and many become return visitors, with many more becoming future residents.

Surrounding Community

Damascus is the smallest town in Washington County, which includes the towns of Glade Spring and Abingdon, and a portion of Saltville. Due to its location along state routes 58 and 91 and near proximity Interstate-81, Damascus is often a drive-through community for locals on the way to a larger destination, but that has not stopped the town from capitalizing on its unique features and becoming a destination of its own. Damascus is a popular shopping and dining location for many outside-of-town locals as it is one of the closest towns to residents living in the Virginia communities of Konnarock, Taylors Valley, and Green Cove, and the Tennessee communities of Backbone Rock and Laurel Bloomery.

Washington County surrounding Damascus is rural and consists of much farmland, especially as the County, per the 2017 Census of Agriculture[6], was the number two producer of sheep/goats and the number four producer of cattle within the Commonwealth. Of over 1,500 farms within the County, 98% are family farms, showing a trend that often ripples out beyond farm families: people in Washington County are willing to work hard to create something to be proud of in their community. As the smallest town in Washington County, Damascus leadership understands the necessity of working closely with the other towns and county.

Image courtesy of Town of Damascus.

[6] According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, https://www.nass.usda.gov/AgCensus/.

Chapter III. People

According to the US Census Bureau, there were 788 residents, and the median age of the population of Damascus reported through the 2020 Decennial Census was 42.9 years old, with a median property value of $175,000 and a homeownership rate of 51.1%. Of the total residents, approximately 21 percent held a bachelor's degree or higher education, and as typical with determining the health of a community and the wealth of its residents, the average household owned 2 cars, and the average commute time was reported at 19.3 minutes.

Population Trends

During the first half of the 1900's, the population of the Town of Damascus was on the rise, peaking at 1,726 in 1950. This trend was not smooth, however, as Damascus experienced wide fluctuations in population during that period. Between 1910 and 1920 the population increased, then leveled off through 1930. The population declined during the Depression era, but increased again in the 40's, finally reaching its peak in 1950. The next forty years posted a dramatic loss of over 800 people; over half of that decline occurred between 1980 and 1990. The 1990s and first five years of the 2000s posted a slight growth trend in population; however, by 2010, the population of the town had declined to just 814 people.

Most of the decrease in population during the 1980s in Damascus, Washington County, and the rest of the Mount Rogers Planning District occurred primarily because people left the area. Net out-migration of some 1,460 people occurred in Washington County. This number was determined by comparing the change in population over the time period to the natural increase (births minus deaths) that occurred over the same time period.

The early 2000s showed a return to population growth in Damascus, as well as the eastern portion of Washington County. The Town of Abingdon and Washington County as a whole experienced a much slower population growth during the same period, with increases of 1.9 percent in both localities. While population continued to increase in Abingdon and Washington County, the population in Damascus declined after 2003 due to out-migration.

Table 1: County-wide Population (1910 - 2020)

Year	Damascus	Glade Spring	Abingdon	Washington County
1910	1,299	324	1,757	32,830
1920	1,599	281	2,532	32,376
1930	1,610	669	2,877	33,850
1940	1,441	686	3,158	38,197
1950	1,726	827	4,709	37,536
1960	1,485	1,407	4,758	38,705
1970	1,230	1,615	4,376	40,835
1980	1,330	1,722	4,318	46,587
1990	918	1,435	7,003	45,887
2000	981	1,374	7,780	51,103
2010	814	1,456	8,191	54,876
2020	788	1,367	8,376	53,935

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census

As depicted in **Table 1**, from 1910 to 1950, the town has a relatively stable and growing population, but population began to decline following the 1950s and 1960s, much of which can be attributed to the changing timber and manufacturing industry, discussed in greater detail in **Chapter IV**.

During the period from 1910 – 2020, the population of Washington County and the other towns within the county have grown at relatively steady rates with significant increases maintained for periods of 2-4 decades each. From 1990 to 2010, the population of Damascus rose from 918 in 1990 to 981 in 2000 and then fell to 814 in 2010. In that same time period, Abingdon and Washington County both had high numbers of growth. Abingdon's population grew by 17.0% over the 20-year period to 8,191, while Washington County grew by 19.6% to 54,896.

The population of Damascus has been dramatically affected by the ever-changing local economy, but following 2010, the national and regional tourism industry has played a significant role in the population. Though the conversion of the abandoned railroad bed to the Virginia Creeper Trail was completed in the mid-1980's, which briefly stabilized the population decline, this point in time can also be seen as the beginning or a relatively intense period of sustained decline from 1980 – 2020 which has yet to turn around.

Table 2: Population Estimates

Year	Damascus	Glade Spring	Abingdon	Washington County
2010	814	1,456	8,191	54,876
2011	804	1,456	8,161	55,179
2012	802	1,454	8,155	55,479
2013	802	1,452	8,131	55,207
2014	798	1,445	8,093	54,943
2015	793	1,434	8,040	54,130
2016	794	1,435	8,034	53,410
2017	791	1,431	7,985	53,789
2018	789	1,430	7,963	53,992
2019	614	1,616	7,960	54,071
2020	653	2,019	7,936	54,005
2021	666	2,068	8,350	53,997
2022	767	2,249	8,346	53,985

Source: Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service; American Community Survey (ACS:S0101)

Since the 2010 Census, yearly population estimates from the Census Bureau have shown widely varied numbers for the towns in Washington County, so it is difficult to use these estimates with great certainty. Instead, population estimates for 2010-2018 from the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at the University of Virginia appear to be more accurate[7] and are listed in **Table 2**; however, the figures for 2019 to 2022 utilize the American Community Survey (ACS). These population estimates show slight decreases in all three towns, as well as Washington County. These decreases range from 1.6% in the county overall to 3.1% in the Town of Damascus. Weldon Cooper's population estimates are used by state agencies throughout the Commonwealth as a tool for planning processes, including budget development and public official salary determination.

[7] In 2010, the Demographics Research Group at University of Virginia's Weldon Cooper Center was awarded two federal grants to evaluate estimates and to advise the Census Bureau on how to improve their estimates program. The Cooper Center's research provided a detailed evaluation of the accuracy of a variety of small area estimating methodologies. Findings revealed that the Cooper Center ratio-correlation estimates performed better than estimates produced by the Census Bureau over the past decade. Following 2018, figures from the Weldon Cooper Center were no longer available.

The US Census Bureau also completes an American Community Survey (ACS), and although the ACS produces population, demographic and housing unit estimates, the decennial census is the official source of population totals for April 1st of each decennial year. Data is based on a sample and are subject to sampling variability, and the degree of uncertainty is represented by a margin of error, which is significant. For context, the population estimate from the 2022 ACS for Damascus is 767 +/- 192. The margin of error is generally considered less impactful in larger, more urbanized communities, but in Damascus, this figure becomes a significant consideration. Though the ACS is based on 5-year estimates, and is susceptible to sample variability, this data does assist in the planning process between decennial surveys, and includes some additional information not collected as part of the decennial survey.

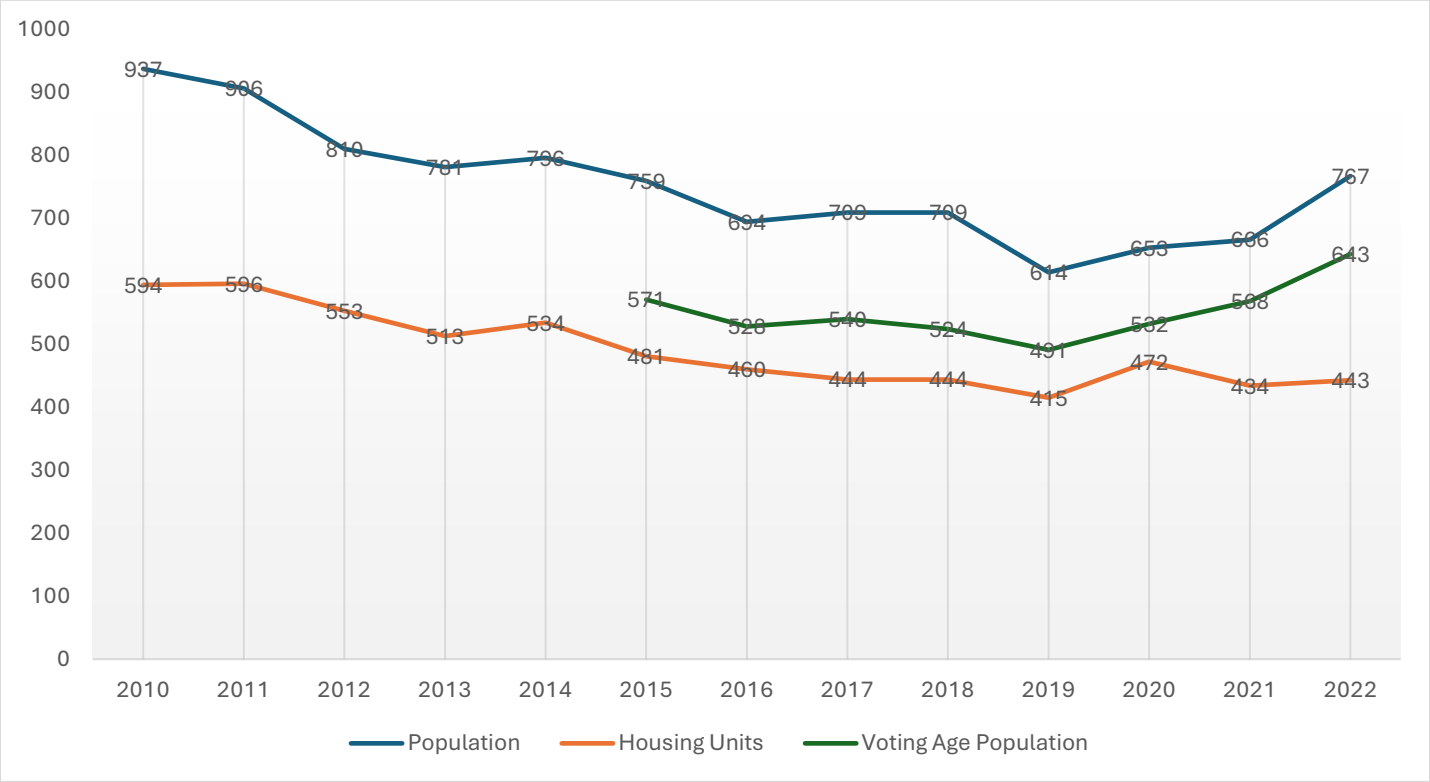
Table 3: Damascus Population & Housing Trends

Year	Population	Housing Units	Voting Age Population
2010	937	594	*
2011	906	596	*
2012	810	553	*
2013	781	513	*
2014	796	534	*
2015	759	481	571
2016	694	460	528
2017	709	444	540
2018	709	444	524
2019	614	415	491
2020	653	472	532
2021	666	438	568
2022	767	443	643
*	Data unavailable as part of American Community Survey (ACS)		

Source: American Community Survey 2022 (DP05)

The following **Figure 1: Damascus Population & Housing Trends**, illustrates the ACS population estimates by year from 2010 to 2022 for reference, alongside the housing units and the voting age population – this is the same data in **Table 3**. This illustration aids in the visualization of the town's current population and housing situation, though housing will be discussed in greater detail in the following **Chapter IV**. The table shows a correlation between the increase in total population and increase in voter age population. Two potential causes for this trend might be an aging-up of the population and/or in-migration of population age 18 and above.

Figure 1: Damascus Population & Housing Trends



Source: American Community Survey (ACS:DP05)

Population Density

Based on the 2000 population estimate, the population density for the Town of Damascus was 1.92 persons per acre. In 2010, the population density in Damascus was approximately 1.59 persons per acre. For 2020, the population density was approximately 1.54 persons per acre (985 people per square mile). The population density is shown to decline with the total population since the corporate boundaries of the town have not expanded.

The Town of Damascus has an incorporated size of 0.8 square miles, and because of physical constraints, particularly the flood-prone areas and steep mountain land, very little developable land for residential and housing development exists in Damascus without significantly increasing the development density patterns on land that is suitable for such development. This is discussed further in the chapter on land use.

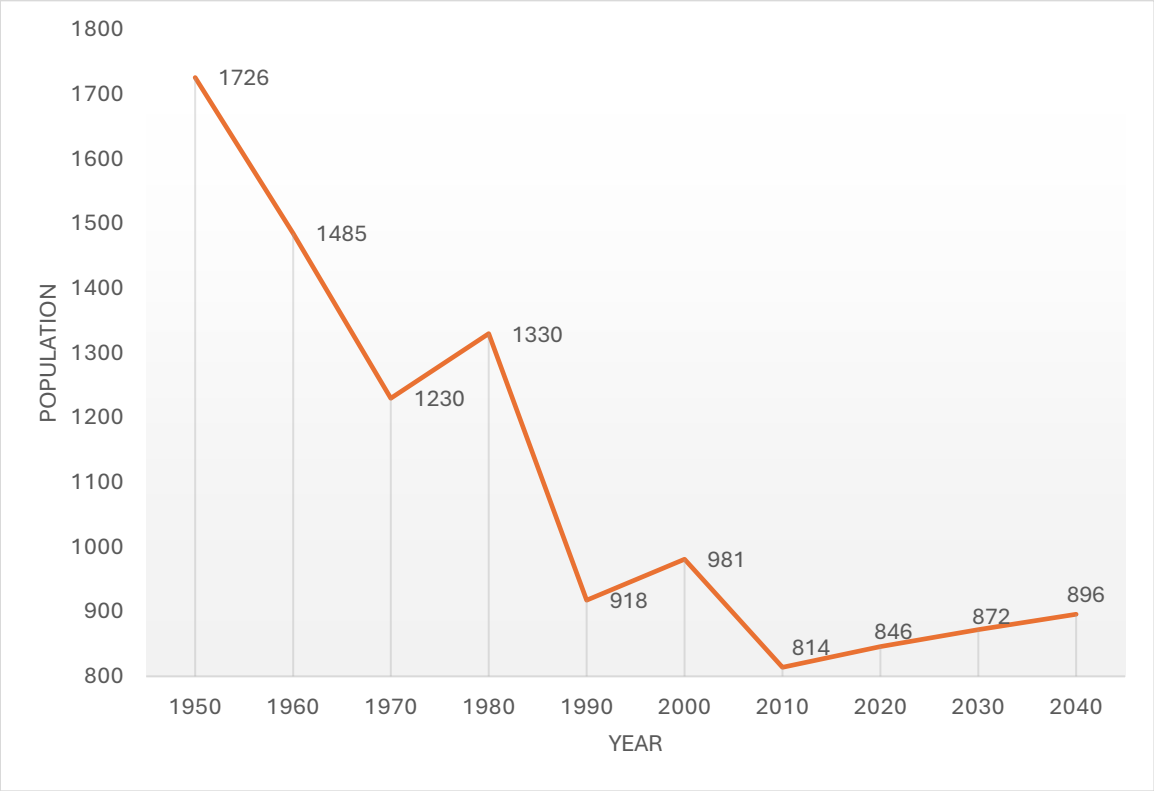
Racial Distribution

According to the 2022 American Community Survey (DP05), nearly 97% of the population of Damascus is white, with only approximately 0.5 percent of the population foreign-born. Though the Appalachian Trail traverses downtown Damascus, and visitors from all over the world pass through annually, there is only approximately three (3%) percent of the population that identifies as black, Hispanic, or multiracial. It is common for many small towns in Southwest Virginia to have a low racial diversity, and even with the Appalachian Trail, Damascus does not stray from this norm.

Population Projections

Figure 2: Damascus Population Projections shows the last population projections[8] released from the Weldon Cooper Center, showing projected population out to the year 2040. The projections show slow, but consistent, growth for the Town. This population projection is based on the continued growth of the local economy and availability of/potential for housing. If Damascus continues with its tourism and economic development projects and maintains its status as a premier outdoor recreation area, these projections may indeed be possible. With many younger people wanting to live in trendy, rural places with numerous outdoor recreation options and older generations looking for a slower pace of life that still allows them access to the natural assets while still being close to medical resources and creature comforts, Damascus is well-positioned for future growth and expansion.

Figure 2: Damascus Population Projections



Source: Weldon Cooper Center of UVA

Viewed alongside the ACS data for the population from 2010 – 2022, these projections from the Weldon Cooper Center – though usually accurate – do not appear to be holding true to current trends; however, the most recent two years released for the ACS do reflect a small population increase. Changing land use regulations, significant economic development, or increased development patterns may spur on increased population growth.

[8] Based on a previous 2013 Damascus Comprehensive Plan chart and Washington County population projections from the Weldon Cooper Center but sourced from the 2005 Town of Damascus Comprehensive Plan by the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission.

Population Migration

Like most of Southwest Virginia and Appalachia, Damascus and Washington County have seen out-migration of younger people, often referred to as "*brain drain*" in recent decades. The region's young people often leave after high school for college or other opportunities and do not return to the region, adding to the stress of an already aging population. Damascus, and the region in general, needs to retain its youth for a variety of reasons, including maintaining the population necessary to have an adequate tax base, workforce, and civic engagement.

Table 4 shows the net migration in Washington County since the 2010 Census using the Weldon Cooper population estimates (2010 – 2018) and the American Community Survey (2019-2022) as previously shown in **Table 2: Population Estimates**, including the natural increase (births minus deaths) as reported annually by the Virginia Department of Health. Barring the most recent reporting years, Washington County has had a positive natural increase for each year from 2010 until 2017, when the trend began to flip. Beginning in 2017, natural increase began to be negative, but migration into the County became positive – the County experienced a negative, natural increase as a result of less births than deaths, yet the population continued to grow due to in-migration. *NOTE: VDH has not released birth and death statistics for 2021 or beyond yet, and the birth and death information is not available for towns.*

The effect of the brain[9] drain phenomenon may be turning around in recent years as the outdoor recreation opportunities in the area and changing economies of Damascus and Washington County have been drawing people back and attracting new residents.

Table 4: Population Change in Washington County

Period	Population Change	Births	Deaths	Natural Increase	Net Migration
2010 – 2011	303	635	523	112	191
2011 – 2012	300	783	529	254	46
2012 – 2013	-272	750	519	231	-503
2013 – 2014	-264	807	551	256	-520
2014 – 2015	-813	706	562	144	-957
2015 – 2016	-720	737	665	72	-792
2016 - 2017	379	658	524	134	245
2017 - 2018	203	596	748	-152	355
2018 - 2019	-335	714	524	190	-525
2019 – 2020	-66	461	726	-265	199
2020 - 2021	-8	485	820	-335	327

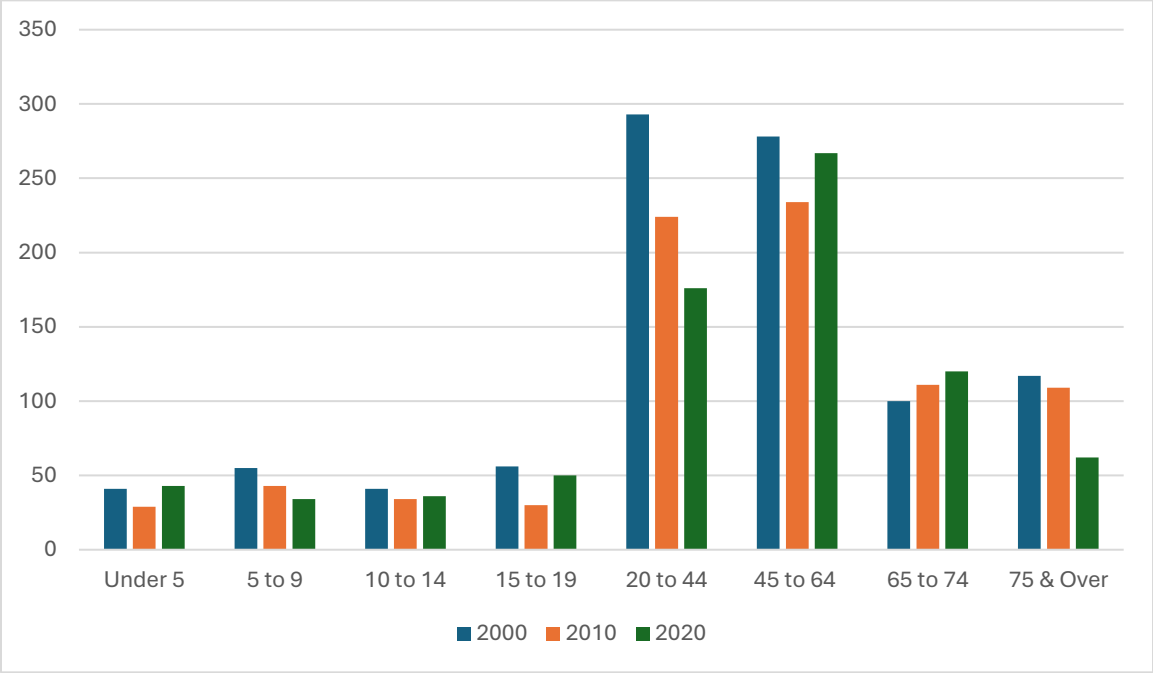
Source: Weldon Cooper Center; American Community Survey (ACS:DP05); Virginia Dept. of Health

[9] *Brain drain* is defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary as "the departure of educated or professional people from one country, economic sector, or field for another usually for better pay or living conditions". This trend has occurred worldwide periodically over the course of history (e.g. scientists during World War II) and can be applied to smaller scales, such as to states, counties, and towns.

Age & Gender Distribution

Below, **Table 5: Population by Age** shows the age distribution by percentage of the population in Damascus over the period from 2000 to 2020. Though the population has continued to decline, thereby changing the total number of persons to be distributed across categories, the statistics reflect that more of the population is falling into the demographic of ages 45 to 75, likely a factor of in-migration of a group known as "*empty nesters*", defined by Merriam-Webster's dictionary as people "whose children have grown and moved away from home". A look at the educational attainment levels in a later section appear to corroborate this rising demographic in Damascus, though without the death and birth statistics from the Virginia Department of Health available for Damascus, as it is with Washington County, it is difficult to calculate the true in-migration for the Town.

Table 5: Population by Age

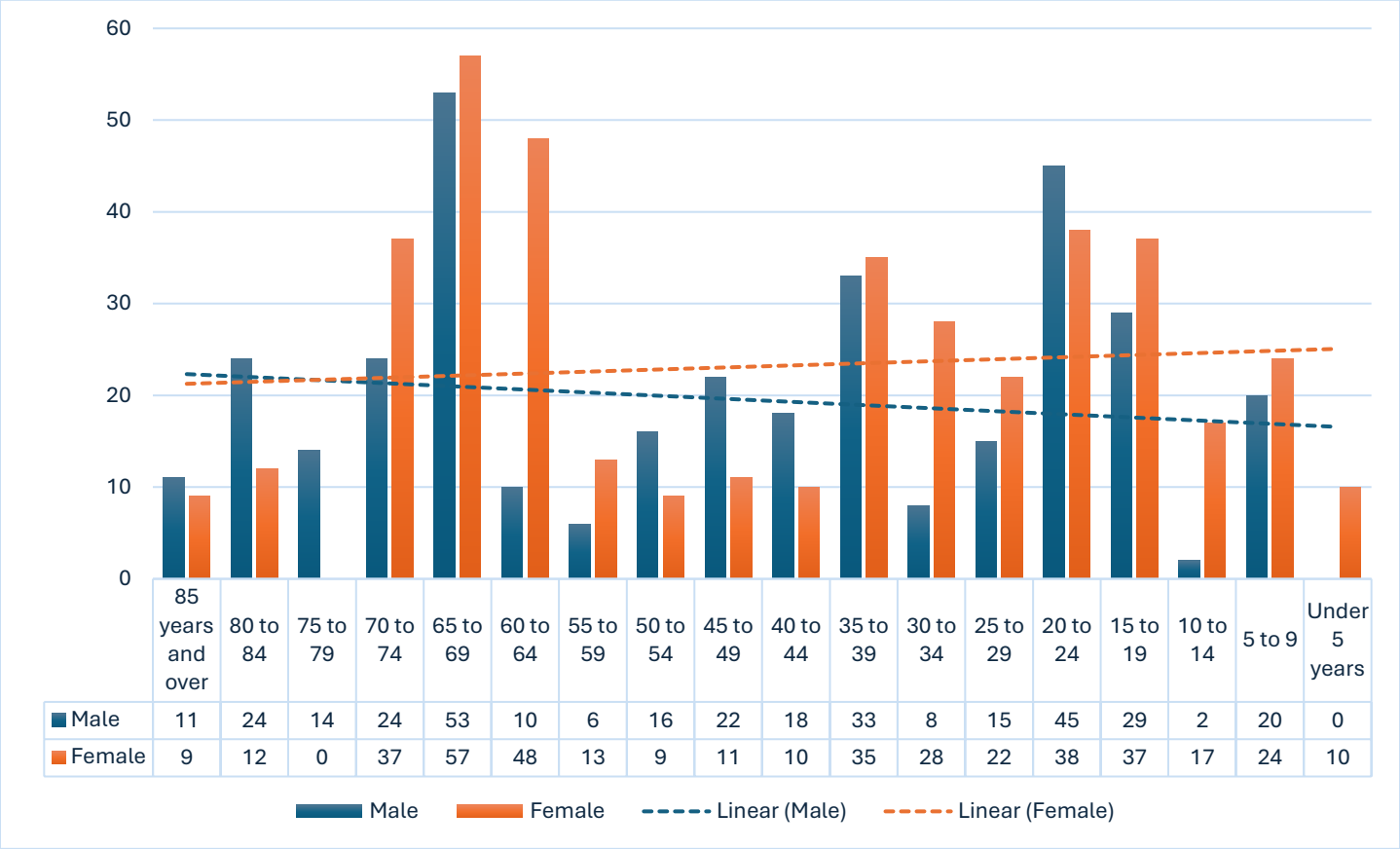


Source: US Census Bureau, Decennial Census 2000, 2010, 2020 (DP1)

While the Commonwealth of Virginia in 2022 is younger by far – with a median age of 38.7 years – than many localities in Southwest Virginia, Damascus has a younger demographic with a median age of 42.9 years as compared to Washington County with median age of 46.8 years, which continues to trend upwards. In fact, other than for Glade Spring (35.7), which has a lower median age thanks to Emory & Henry College, Damascus has one of the lowest median age's around, as compared to: Abingdon (46.4), Marion (44.3), Chilhowie (47.1), Saltville (44.3), Wytheville (45.2), Independence (55.2), and Hillsville (45.5).

The following **Figure 3: Population by Age and Sex** provides a complete breakdown of census age groups according to gender, including a linear trend line for male and female. The male population appears to be trending upward in age, whereas the female population is slowly trending downward in the age range. This shows that there is an increasing number of males in the higher age groups, and a lower number of females in higher age groups, both compared to the total population.

Figure 3: Population by Age and Sex



	85 years and over	80 to 84	75 to 79	70 to 74	65 to 69	60 to 64	55 to 59	50 to 54	45 to 49	40 to 44	35 to 39	30 to 34	25 to 29	20 to 24	15 to 19	10 to 14	5 to 9	Under 5 years
Male	11	24	14	24	53	10	6	16	22	18	33	8	15	45	29	2	20	0
Female	9	12	0	37	57	48	13	9	11	10	35	28	22	38	37	17	24	10

Source: Damascus Census Bureau Profile; American Community Survey 2022 (S0101)

Educational Attainment

For 2022 (ACS:S1501), of the population 25 years and over (545 of 767 total), 500 had a high school degree or higher, and of those, 114 had a Bachelor's degree or higher education; however, 56 of those 114 Bachelor's degrees or higher form of education were held by residents 65 years of age or older. There appears to exist a trend of in-migration of educated citizens above the age of 65 years old.

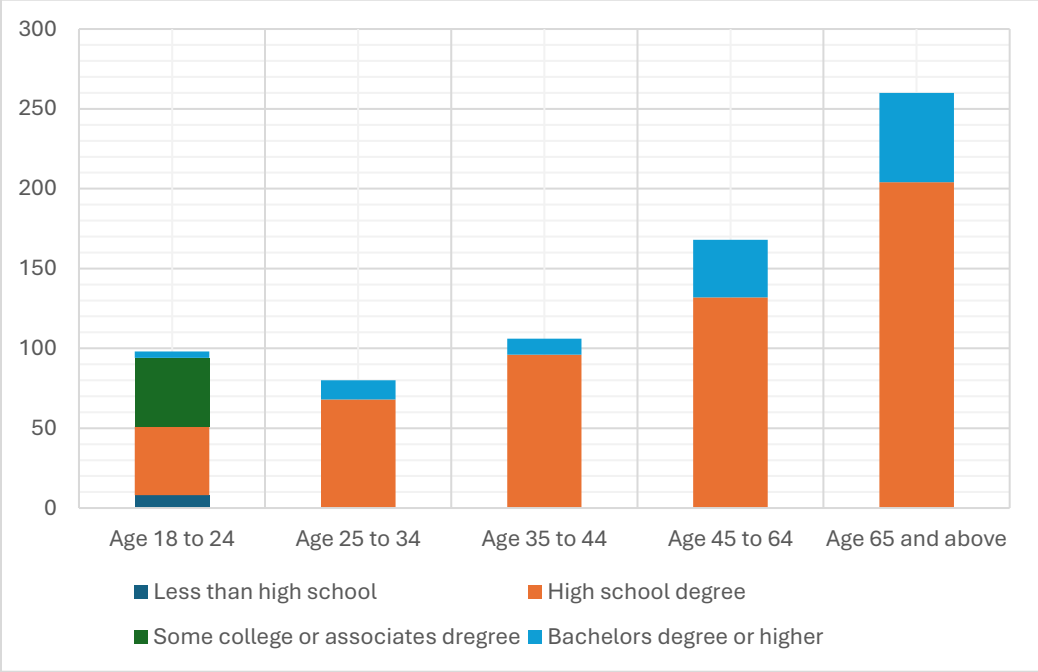
Table 6: Educational Attainment of Population 25 Years and Over

Population (25 and over)	Damascus	Washington County
Total	545 (100%)	40,259 (100%)
Less than 9th grade	27 (4.9%)	1,656 (4.1%)
9th to 12th grade (no diploma)	18 (3.3%)	2,673 (6.7%)
High school graduate	233 (42.8%)	14,412 (35.7%)
Some college (no degree)	121 (22.2%)	7,618 (18.9%)
Associate's degree	32 (5.9%)	4,010 (10.0%)
Bachelor's degree	40 (7.3%)	6,328 (15.7%)
Graduate or professional degree	74 (13.6%)	3,562 (8.9%)

Source: American Community Survey 5-year Estimates 2018-2022 (S1501)

In **Table 6**, the educational attainment for various levels is broken out only for ages 25 and over, compared as a percentage of population age 25 and older to Washington County. The population of Washington County age 25 and older has a higher educational attainment as compared to Damascus except for when compared on graduate or professional level degrees. **Figure 4** as follows illustrates the educational attainment level for each age group, showing that the highest percentage of bachelor's and graduate level degrees are held by residents of age 45 to 64 (27.3%) and age 65 and above (27.5%). This may be related to the mobility of retirement age individuals moving into Damascus.

Figure 4: Educational Attainment by Age of Population



Source: American Community Survey 5-year Estimates 2018-2022 (S1501)

Chapter IV. Housing

The provision of affordable and adequate housing is vital for supporting a sustainable community. Without access to affordable housing, economic development and support for a resilient downtown may become challenging. The demographics of the town and surrounding community play an important role in the development of policies and regulations related to housing and land use. Truly sustainable communities provide housing options for residents of all demographics, allowing residents to remain vested in their community even as their housing needs shift over throughout their life stages. Sustainable neighborhoods provide a mixture of housing forms, sizes, prices, and densities, as well as opportunities for social interaction, access to nature, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, as well as the potential to supplement incomes through family-friendly means. A family that can easily finance their home, have low-cost transportation, and secondary or supplemental income, will typically remain more vested in the health of their community and have disposable time and income to invest.

The Code Virginia § 15.2-2223.D. requires, among other things – mostly transportation – that "[t]he comprehensive plan shall include the designation of areas and implementation of measures for the construction, rehabilitation and maintenance of affordable housing, which is sufficient to meet the current and future needs of residents of all levels of income in the locality while considering the current and future needs of the planning district within which the locality is situated." Most other states in the nation have a similar mandate for affordable housing to be considered as part of a locality's comprehensive plan.

Providing a balance of housing types can be a challenge since local housing issues often involve a broad range of considerations; however, there are state and federal agencies that can be of assistance, providing useful methodologies and standardized terminology. Many planners consider it crucial that housing be considered through many lenses, as it may be one of the most important factors for a community to consider. From an economic perspective, workforce housing adequate to maintain and enhance the community's economic health, creating high-quality employment options, is a critical consideration. From an environmental perspective, housing should be efficient, which is where neighborhood design, transportation planning, density regulations, proximity to employment options, and many other factors must be considered.

The housing needs of the community should always be considered, but even more so in more urbanized areas, and always in relation to regulatory processes involving land use and policy.

Demographics

A demographic analysis of the existing Damascus housing market provides insight into the current state of housing within the town. While certain demographic factors (primarily household income) are directly applicable to eligibility for future CDBG funding, other demographic characteristics provide insight into the existing conditions of the Town of Damascus, and how those conditions may affect housing. It should be noted that decennial Census data and, particularly, American Community Survey estimates may vary from on- the-ground documentation.

Population

The population of Damascus has decreased significantly in recent decades. U.S. Census data reveal a decline from 1,330 persons in 1980 to 814 persons in 2010, a drop of 38.8 percent (%). Interim 2018 population estimates of 709 persons reflect a total decline of 12.9 percent (%) during the timeframe from 2010 to 2018. From 2010 to 2020, the actual population decline slowed, falling from 814 to 788, a decline of approximately one percent (1%) – less than what was estimated for 2018.

Age

The median age in the town increased from 38.6 years in 1980 to 46.4 years in 2010. This "aging" of the town's population is reflected in the age distribution in **Table 7** below. For 2020, the median age decreased to 42.9 years of age.

Table 7: Age Distribution

Age	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
Median Age	38.6	44.4	45.3	46.4	42.9
Under 5 years	4.6%	4.7%	4.2%	3.6%	5.5%
5 to 17 years	20.2%	15.1%	13.8%	11.8%	15.2%
18 to 64 years	57.7%	55.6%	59.9%	57.6%	56.3%
65 years & over	17.5%	24.6%	22.1%	27.0%	23.2%

Source: US Census Bureau (Decennial Census:DP1)

Income

Table 8 shows recent average household income for both owner- and renter-occupied households. While owner-occupied income has seen a noticeable increase in the past eight years, renter-occupied income has seen an increase that is less than half of what was seen by owner occupied, further increasing the disparity in income levels.

Table 8: Average Household Income

Household Income	2010	2018	2020	2022
All households	$24,805	30,595	$25,833	33,750
Owner-occupied	$30,598	45,357	68,750	54,674
Renter-occupied	$15,714	18,409	22,273	21,000

Source: American Community Survey 2010, 2018, 2020, 2022 (ACS:S2503)

Low- and moderate-income households in Virginia are defined by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) as "individuals or households whose household income is equal to or less than 80 percent of the area median income (AMI) for like-sized households are determined to be low- and moderate-income (LMI)". According to this methodology, the 80-percent median for 2022 is $37,009.60 and of the total 348 occupied households, there were approximately 210 low- and moderate-income households in Damascus in 2022.

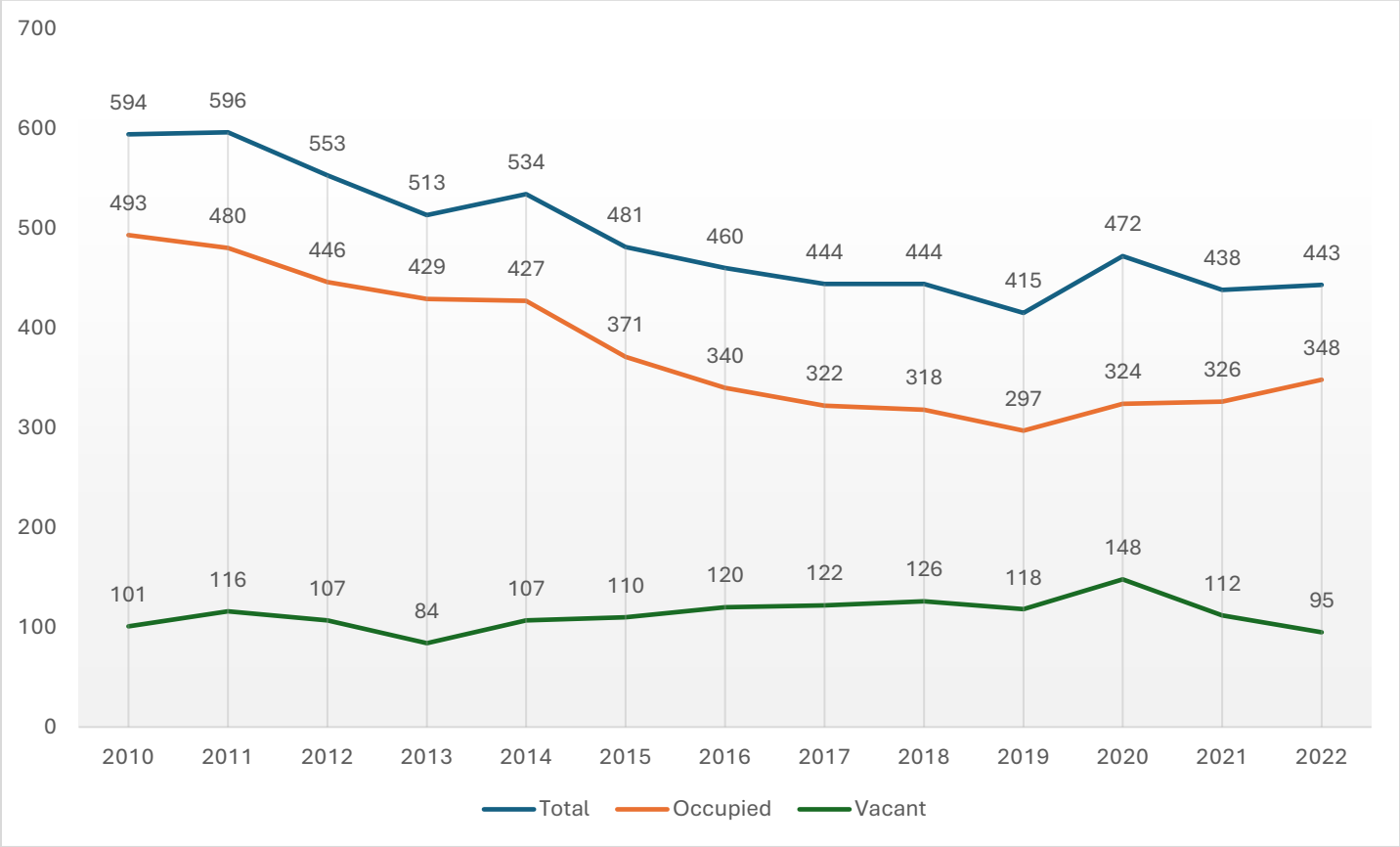
Housing Availability

Housing Occupancy

Figure 5 illustrates the housing unit availability trends from 2010 to 2022, comparing the total available housing units to the number of units occupied and vacant. The trend describes a gradual, and nearly continuous decline in the total housing units available, with a general increase in the percentage of vacant vs. occupied – though this trend appears to reverse after 2019.

For the year 2020 of the total occupied housing units (399), 54.6% (218) were owner-occupied and 45.4% (181) were renter occupied. When compared to the figures for Virginia, 64.9% and 35.1% respectively, the home ownership rate for the Town of Damascus is lower than that of Virginia.

Figure 5: Housing Unit Occupancy, Damascus, 2010-2022



Source: American Community Survey (ACS:DP04)

Housing Physical Characteristics & Value

Single-family detached homes comprise 62.1 percent of the housing units in the town, with mobile homes accounting for 3.8 percent. The remaining units are multi-family or attached single-family units.

Almost 50 percent (48.1%) of the town's housing stock was built prior to 1960. The next spike in housing creation occurred in the 1990's, when a staggering 23.9 percent of the town's housing stock was constructed. In contrast, housing stock that has been built since the millennia (2000) accounts for less than three percent. Since 2010, there has been an increased rate of housing restoration. This trend has been observed primarily related to two different types of housing units: 1) housing units rehabilitation or substantially reconstructed through government subsidies, and 2) housing units benefiting from the outdoor recreation tourism industry.

> *A commitment to intense, ongoing maintenance of high-productivity neighborhoods.... [t]hat is where nearly all the city's time and resources should be directed[.]*
>
> *Charles L. Marohn, Jr., PE*[10]

Table 9: Physical Characteristics; Age of Housing

[10] Strong Towns: A Bottom-up Revolution to Rebuild American Prosperity.

Structure	Units	Percentage	Year Built	Units	Percentage
1-unit, detached	275	62.1%	2020 or later	0	0.0%
1-unit, attached	3	0.7%	2010 to 2019	12	2.7%
2 units	21	4.7%	2000 to 2009	0	0.0%
3 or 4 units	8	1.8%	1990 to 1999	106	23.9%
5 to 9 units	13	2.9%	1980 to 1989	44	9.9%
10 to 19 units	14	3.2%	1970 to 1979	29	6.5%
20 or more units	92	20.8%	1960 to 1969	39	8.8%
Mobile home	17	3.8%	1950 to 1959	55	12.4%
			1940 to 1949	39	8.8%
			1939 or earlier	119	26.9%

Source: American Community Survey 2022 (ACS:DP04)

The median value of owner-occupied housing units in Damascus is $175,000 (up from $103,100 in 2018), which is significantly lower than Washington County's median value of $181,000 ($141,300 in 2018), but barely more than half of Virginia's median value of $281,900 ($264,900 in 2018) for owner-occupied housing units.

Table 10: Value of Owner-occupied Housing

Value (Owner-occupied only)	Units (of 178)	Percentage
Less than $50,000	27	15.2%
$50,000 to $99,000	16	9.0%
$100,000 to $149,999	38	21.3%
$150,000 to $199,999	23	12.9%
$200,000 to $299,999	47	26.4%
$300,0000 to $499,999	18	10.1%
$500,000 to $999,999	9	5.1%
$1,000,000 or more	0	0.0%

Source: American Community Survey 2022 (ACS:DP04)

The average (owner-occupied) household size in Damascus in 2022 is 2.22 persons (down from 2.36 persons in 2018), declining compared to Washington County at 2.44 persons. The median number of rooms for housing units located within the Town is 5.1 rooms, similar to the 5.9 room average in the County. The majority of houses in Damascus have two-to-three bedrooms (65.2 percent combined), with a significant portion only one bedroom (20.3%), compared to Washington County with 48.7 percent of houses shown as three bedrooms. The Town has a much higher percentage of one-bedroom units (20.3 percent) than Washington County (4.4 percent), with the County overall yielding a higher percentage of units with four or more bedrooms.

Table 11: Average Household, Occupied Housing Unit Size

	Persons
Average Household Size	---
Owner-occupied	2.22
Renter-occupied	2.19

	Units	Percentage
Total Housing Units	443	---
No bedroom	12	2.7%
1 bedroom	89	20.1%
2 bedrooms	149	33.6%
3 bedrooms	140	31.6%
4 bedrooms	28	6.3%
5 or more bedrooms	25	5.6%

Source: American Community Survey 2022 (ACS:DP04)

Housing Condition

Finalized in August of 2020, a windshield survey[11] was performed through each neighborhood area; all residential streets were covered to identify general neighborhood housing conditions and any concentrated areas where the houses are in greatest need of housing rehabilitation. **Table 12: Housing Conditions Assessment** summarizes the housing conditions assessment.

The Town of Damascus contracted with Anna F. Meade, Rehab Specialist Services, to conduct a housing conditions assessment of residential structures in the town. A street-by-street windshield survey of housing conditions was conducted for the Town during June and July of 2020. The visual assessments were based on observations of building exteriors from the public right-of-way. The condition ratings utilized in this initial assessment were:

- Sound / Good Condition: well-maintained appearance
- Requiring Rehab: failing exterior condition such as roof, windows, porches, siding, etc.
- Major Deficiencies: broken windows / doors, failing roof coverings, damaged foundations, structural failures, etc.
- Vacant: houses with no visual residents, posted for sale or rent, or listed with realtor
- Abandoned: houses in non-livable condition with structural damage, burned out, or overgrown structures and sites.

The condition assessment categories were based on the amount of Community Development Block Grant funds available per unit for rehabilitating each property using DHCD's Housing Quality Standards. If the property appeared to require more than the $40,000 maximum to rehabilitate, the house was noted as having "major deficiencies" and will probably require auxiliary funds or be a "substantial reconstruction".

[11] Anna F. Meade, & Mount Rogers PDC. *Town-wide Housing Needs Assessment*. Damascus, Virginia (2020). Windshield surveys are completed based on exterior conditions, and tables from the rehabilitation specialist may differ from the ACS 5-years estimates and/or decennial census data due to collection methods. Rehab specialist identified 408 houses as of August 3, 2020.

Table 12: Housing Conditions Assessment

Condition	Number (of 408)	Percent
Sound/good	241	59.0%
Requiring rehabilitation	75	18.4%
Major deficiencies	70	17.2%
Vacant, for sale or rent	9	2.2%
Abandoned	13	3.2%

Source: Anna F. Meade, & Mount Rogers PDC. Town-wide Housing Needs Assessment. Damascus, Virginia (2020).

Manufactured Housing

As noted in **Table 9: Physical Characteristics; Age of Housing**, only roughly four percent of Town's housing units are manufactured homes. Because of their age and condition, many of these units cannot be repaired to suitable standards under existing federal funding guidelines and will eventually need to be replaced with conventionally constructed or modern modular units.

Accessible Housing

Though the Town has a population with a median age of only 42.9 years, this median age is still higher than that of Virginia (38.7), North Carolina (39.1), Maryland (39.1), and Tennessee (38.9). Though still lower than some other nearby towns such as Abingdon (46.4) and Chilhowie (47.1), the Town of Damascus is still home to an ever-aging population and people of special needs that will require accessible housing. As a popular tourist destination, the needs of visitors must also be factored into housing availability and design standards.

Accessible design and "*visitability*"[12] are related concepts that address the design of homes to accommodate individuals with all levels of abilities, as well as the ability of physically handicapped individuals to visit a home or community without needing assistance. Since the cost of converting a built home to accessible standards is much greater than that of building accessible homes initially. According to the National Council on Independent Living, the following minimum requirements for new homes are recommended in order for a house to be deemed "visitable":

- 32-inch-wide passage doors and hallways.
- At least a half bathroom on the main floor which is large enough to accommodate a wheelchair; and
- At least one "zero step" entrance, approached by an accessible route where feasible due to flood zone requirements.

These guiding standards should be different enough to reflect topography, development patterns, and community character, but by considering these needs in the planning process and incorporating provisions into land use regulations, the Town can increase its resilience long term.

[12] The National Council on Independent Living hosts visitability.org and collects resources and information related to "visitability" and universal design guided by the principal that everyone should have basic access to homes.

Affordable Housing

According to the Commonwealth of Virginia (Code of VA § 15.2-2201. Definitions.) the term "'[a]ffordable housing' means, as a guideline, housing that is affordable to households with incomes at or below the area median income, provided that the occupant pays no more than thirty percent of his gross income for gross housing costs, including utilities."

Annual incomes are noticeably lower for citizens in Damascus than in the unincorporated portions of Washington County. The difference in income and housing cost is most apparent when comparing the Town and County is with renter occupied units. Housing costs as a percentage of median income are higher within the Town, in every group represented below, but most noticeably with renter-occupied units.

While the average owner-occupied household pays much less than 30 percent of its income for housing in Damascus, there are still some households for which housing is unaffordable. *Housing Unaffordability* is defined as monthly housing costs that exceed 30% of monthly income.

Table 13: Housing Cost, Income Ratio (2018)

	Town of Damascus		Washington County	
	Median Income	Housing Cost	Median Income	Housing Cost
Occupied Units	$30,595	23.5%	$46,262	16.2%
Owner-occupied	$45,357	16.0%	$53,704	12.9%
Renter-occupied	$18,409	38.0%	$28,519	28.8%

Source: American Community Survey 2018 (ACS:S2503)

Median income has risen significantly from 2018 to 2022, as Table 11 below shows. In Washington County, median income rose for each segment by approximately $13,000; however, in Damascus occupied units and renter-occupied units specifically only rose by approximately $3,000, while the median income for owner-occupied units rose by approximately $9,000 – all segments falling below the County.

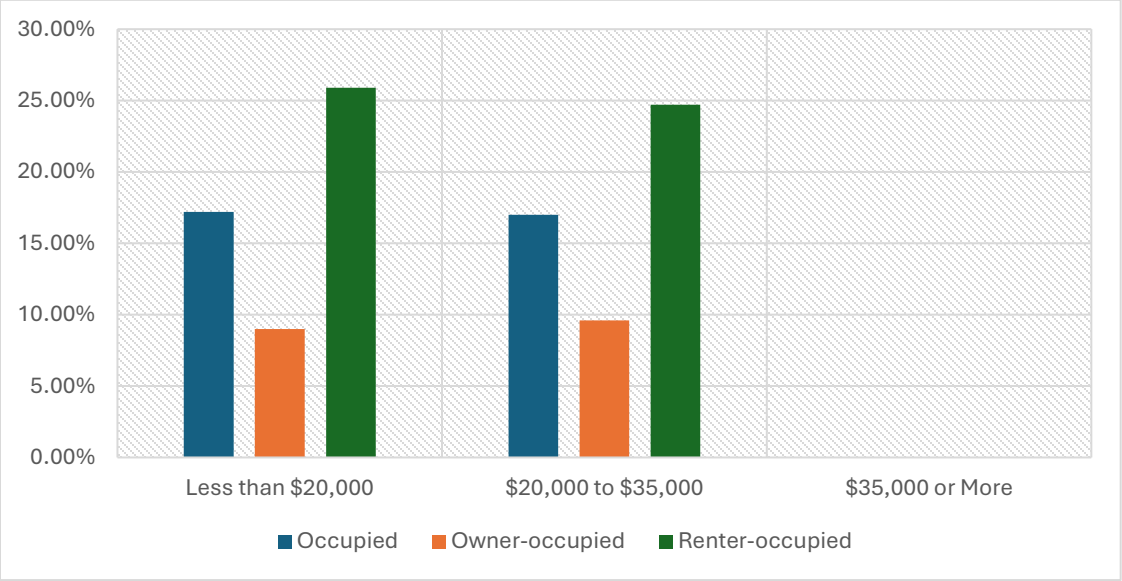
Table 14: Median Income by Occupancy (2022)

	Town of Damascus	Washington County
	Median Income	Median Income
Occupied Units	$33,750	$59,116
Owner-occupied	$54,674	$67,798
Renter-occupied	$21,000	$40,457

Source: American Community Survey 2022 (ACS:S2503)

Figure 6: Households Paying 30% or More for Housing (below) illustrates that households that spend more than 30 percent of their income for housing are most commonly renter-occupied households with annual incomes less than $35,000 per year. By using the definition of unaffordability that was previously stated, roughly 33% of all occupied households in the Town of Damascus are living in unaffordable housing.

Figure 6: Households Paying 30% or More for Housing



Source: American Community Survey 2022 (ACS:S2503)

The median monthly cost for homeowners with a mortgage in the Town of Damascus is $1,112 (ACS S2506). Just 45.9 percent of the Town's homeowners with a mortgage pay less than 20 percent of their household income to monthly costs, while a combined 63.1 percent pay less than 30 percent. The remaining 36.9 percent of Town homeowners pay more than 30 percent of their household income to monthly costs.

The median monthly cost for homeowners without a mortgage in the Town is $497 (ACS S2507). The majority, 69.3 percent of homeowners without mortgages in the Town pay less than 20 percent of their household income toward household costs, while 14.3 percent require more than 30 percent of their monthly income to cover housing needs – only those with incomes less than $20,000. The other 16.5 percent that pay between 20 and 29 percent of their income on housing costs, have incomes between $20,000 and $50,000.

Table 15: Monthly Costs for Homeowners illustrates the median cost of housing for homeowners using selected monthly costs for owner-occupied units. These selected costs include property expenses such as mortgages, property insurance, real estate taxes, utility and fuel bills, and, where appropriate, condominium fees and mobile home costs. Monthly costs are not shown separately for units with and without a mortgage.

Table 15: Monthly Costs for Homeowners

Monthly Housing Costs Per Unit		
Less than $300	15	8.0%
$300 to $499	31	17.4%
$500 to $799	58	32.6%
$800 to $999	22	12.4%
$1,000 to $1,499	43	24.4%
$1,500 to $1,999	3	1.7%
$2,000 to $2,499	0	0.0%
$2,500 to $2,999	0	0.0%
$3,000 or more	6	3.4%

Monthly Housing Costs as A Percent of Income		
Less than 20 percent	103	58.0%
20 to 29 percent	30	16.8%
30 percent or more	45	25.4%
Zero or negative income	0	0.0%

Median Cost ($)	677
Occupied Units	178

Source: American Community Survey 2022 (ACS:S2503)

Gross rent, or total housing costs for tenants, is the contract rent plus the average monthly cost of utilities and fuels paid by the renter. Displayed in **Table 16: Monthly Costs for Renters** (below), the median gross rent paid by Town renters in 2018 was $583, but rose to $660 in 2022, with nearly all but 4.1 percent below $1,000 per month. The median rent for Washington County exceeds that of the Town at $797 for 2022.

The median cost of gross rent is lower than the monthly cost for Town homeowners with a mortgage, but more than the monthly cost of Town homeowners without a mortgage. Just over 50 percent (50.6% exactly) of Town renters require over 30 percent of their income to meet monthly housing costs. According to Virginia's definition, over 50 percent of the renters in Damascus do not have affordable housing.

Table 16: Monthly Costs for Renters

Monthly Housing Costs Per Unit		
Less than $300	29	17.1%
$300 to $499	25	14.7%
$500 to $799	55	32.4%
$800 to $999	42	24.7%
$1,000 to $1,499	7	4.1%
$1,500 to $1,999	0	0.9%
$2,000 to $2,499	0	0.0%
$2,500 to $2,999	0	0.0%
$3,000 or more	0	0.0%
No cash (rent)	12	7.1%

Monthly Housing Costs as A Percent of Income		
Less than 20 percent	37	21.7%
20 to 29 percent	32	18.8%
30 percent or more	86	50.6%
No cash (rent)	12	7.1%
Zero or negative income	3	1.8%

Median Cost ($)	660
Occupied Units	170

Source: American Community Survey 2022 (ACS:S2503)

Housing Demand

Affordable housing remains a national level priority, identified as a bipartisan national priority. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimates that there is a housing shortage of approximately two million houses nationwide. This same trend has been seen within Virginia, the Mount Rogers Planning district, and Washington County. According to the Mount Rogers Regional Housing Study completed in 2023, Washington County + Bristol City[13] as an identified study area does not contain sufficient housing stock to meet demand. The Study further calls for the construction of more than 800 new housing units to meet existing and projected housing demand for the county and city; this includes market rate and affordable apartments, for-sale and rental houses, patio homes, single-family and townhomes, and of course housing to meet the demands of the senior population, which is underserved. These recommendations should apply generally to Damascus as well, with its aging demographics and need for affordable housing. Housing demand is being generated, however, much of the region has had very little new housing built since the 1990s, including Damascus. There are also additional recommendations related to land use regulations, discussed further in **Chapter VII: Land Use**, to allow for needed residential development, including:

- Allowing for varied residential developments.
- Allowing for greater flexibility for residential development in commercial zones.
- Allowing accessory dwelling units.

The study does not address tourist homes or short-term rentals, nor does it address market demand for transient occupancy such as hotels and motels; however, the trends that housing stock does not meet demand, senior housing demand exceeds supply, and that most housing was built decades ago persist across the planning district.

Photography by Tyler Irving of Iron Mountain Media.

[13] Mount Rogers Regional Housing Study, Mount Rogers Planning District Commission and S. Patz & Associates, Inc, 2023. The study includes the City of Bristol within the same study area with Washington County, therefore information includes more urbanized areas beyond just the incorporated towns within the county.

Chapter V. Economy

General Description

The Town of Damascus can be considered a former factory town that has resurrected itself with a reliance on tourism-related businesses as its primary economic driver. The core business district follows U.S. Highway 58, which passes through Damascus on its way from Abingdon to Whitetop – areas that coincide with the ends of the Virginia Creeper Trail. A secondary business district has formed along the Route 91 corridor, while another more recent development area has arisen at the western end of town, near an old industrial site.

A major goal for Damascus's future is to become a year-round destination that can support itself despite seasonal weather conditions, ultimately shrugging off the inherently negative cyclical aspects of its heavily tourism-reliant economy. However, as with many small towns in the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission's service area, Damascus has suffered a continued decline in the vitality of its commercial business district. As Damascus is so dependent on its seasonal, tourism-based economy, many of the associated jobs are centered in the service industry. With this being the nature of the industry in Damascus, many of its residents are reliant on surrounding areas of the county, larger neighboring towns and cities, as well as nearby states to fulfill their workforce needs. That said, many of Damascus's service industries also recruit workforce from surrounding areas of Tennessee and Washington County toward Grayson County – areas with fewer job opportunities than Damascus.

Adorning Highway 58, which cuts through the heart of Damascus's central business district, is an array of small, local shops that make up the majority of business in the town. These businesses include selling clothing, merchandise, camping and outfitting equipment, and many other recreationally based stores – mainly specialty retail. The community also supports restaurants (those that cater to visitors and/or locals), medical services, banking, grocery, plus the necessary local government buildings and services.

Damascus is a destination point for people who want to leave behind the traffic, smoke, and hectic pace of city life. The town is at the crossing of seven significant trail systems for hiking, biking, and horseback riding. The Appalachian Trail is routed along Laurel Avenue, the community's main street. The Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, a congressionally designated parcel within the Jefferson National Forest, surrounds the town. The Crooked Road: Virginia's Heritage Music Trail and the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail also run through Damascus. Special events draw thousands of visitors who come to sightsee, stay overnight, dine, and shop for crafts.

"Planning is the continuous process of making present entrepreneurial [risk taking] decisions systematically and with the best possible knowledge of their futurity."

Peter F. Drucker

Historic Trends

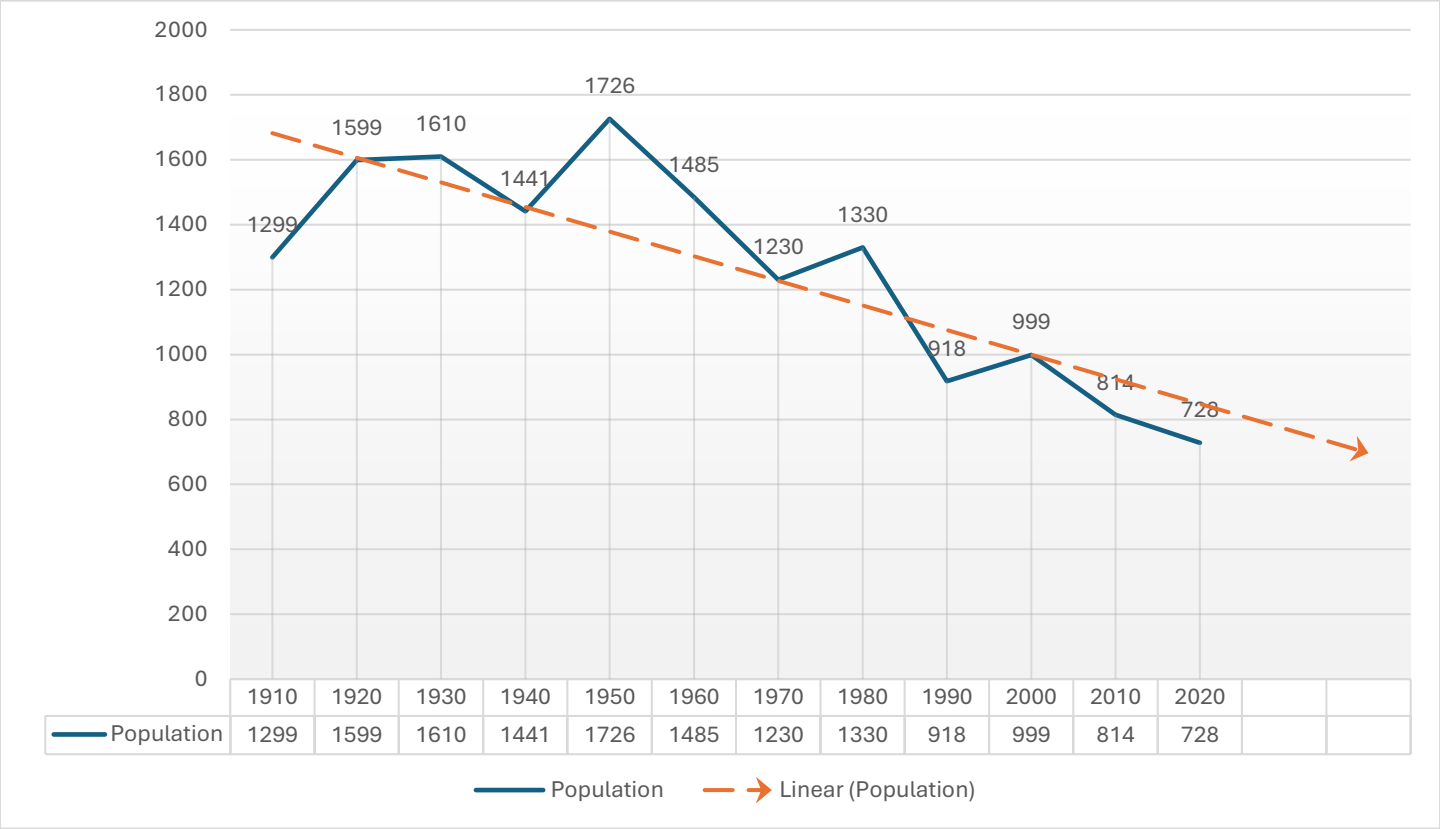
Like many small towns in the planning district, Damascus has an ever-challenged commercial business district, a light manufacturing base in and around the town, and a heavily seasonal service providing industry; but this wasn't always the situation. According to the National Lumber Magazine, in 1912, Washington County was producing more lumber than the whole of the state of Pennsylvania, most from around Damascus; however, the lumber boom only lasted about 25 years.[14] The timber boom lasted from around 1907 to 1930, not long before the official designation of the George Washington and

[14] Hall, Louise Fortune. A History of Damascus, Virginia, 1793-1950. United States: Louise Fortune Hall, 1950.

Jefferson National Forests by Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Lincoln Industries Mills closed following the loss of the local timber industry and the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area was established by Congress in 1966. The Virginia Carolina Railroad was bought out by Norfolk & Western in 1919, which abandoned the rail line in 1977. The abandoned lines were converted into the Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail from 1984 to 1987, with ongoing work into 1989. Following the abandonment of the rail line, the dye plant closed in 1987, followed by the hosiery mill in 1995.[15] Additionally, the passage of the Clean Air Act (1970), Clean Water Act (1972), and Endangered Species Act (1973), and the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement ("NAFTA" - effective January 01, 1994) would have created national-level pressures for the region's local industries. These events can roughly be seen in **Figure 7** as major crests and troughs in the population graph; a trend line is also included in the projection.

Over the last decade, the town has focused on continued development of their tourism/recreation, travel, and lodging industries. These being the primary market types for Damascus and many of the other surrounding towns and cities allows for communities of the surrounding region to benefit from one another; one example of this is the Hometowns of Mount Rogers initiative, spearheaded by the Town of Damascus in 2014. Through a collective effort, the region was able to attract visitors with each locality benefiting in various ways depending on its unique market offerings. Damascus is unique as the crossing location of seven significant trail systems utilized for hiking, biking, cycling, and horseback riding. Debatably the most famous, the Appalachian Trail, has heavily integrated into the core business district by the community, essentially rerouting its corridor along Laurel Avenue, which functions as the community's main street.

Figure 7: Population Trend (1990 - 2020)



Source: Decennial Census 1910, 1920, 1930, 1940, 1950, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, 2010, 2020

[15] Medeiros, Bunny. Friendliest Town on the Traill: Damascus, Virginia. United States: Reed & Blake Press, 2014.

Appalachian Trail Days Festival®

The Appalachian Trail Days Festival, a three-day celebration and event to honor the Appalachian Trail brings as many as 2,000 hikers and over 15,000 visitors to share in the events of the weekend. The first Trail Days festival in Damascus was held in 1987, following its inception in 1986 when the Appalachian Trail conservancy held their 50th anniversary. The event famously consists of a hiker parade, arranged by the year each returning through-hiker completed the AT, the hiker talent show, live music, food and craft vendors, gear repair stations, eating and other sports contests, raffles, volunteer opportunities, games, book sales and signings, arts and crafts, training and educational classes and exhibits, and just about any other activities that can be packed in over the course of a weekend.

The event has continued to grow year-over-year, and due to Damascus's seasonal economy as a tourist town, the event remains a staple revenue source for local businesses each Spring following the slow winter months. Though a key event for local businesses, the event hasn't always been profitable for the local government host, but the crucial addition of sponsorship opportunities in the early 2000's, and more recent (post-2020) staff additions, fee increases, and general policy changes have created a much more financially feasible event for the town. This event is now capable of funding much of the Parks & Recreation Department operations and programming.

Table 17: Trail Days Event Revenue by Year

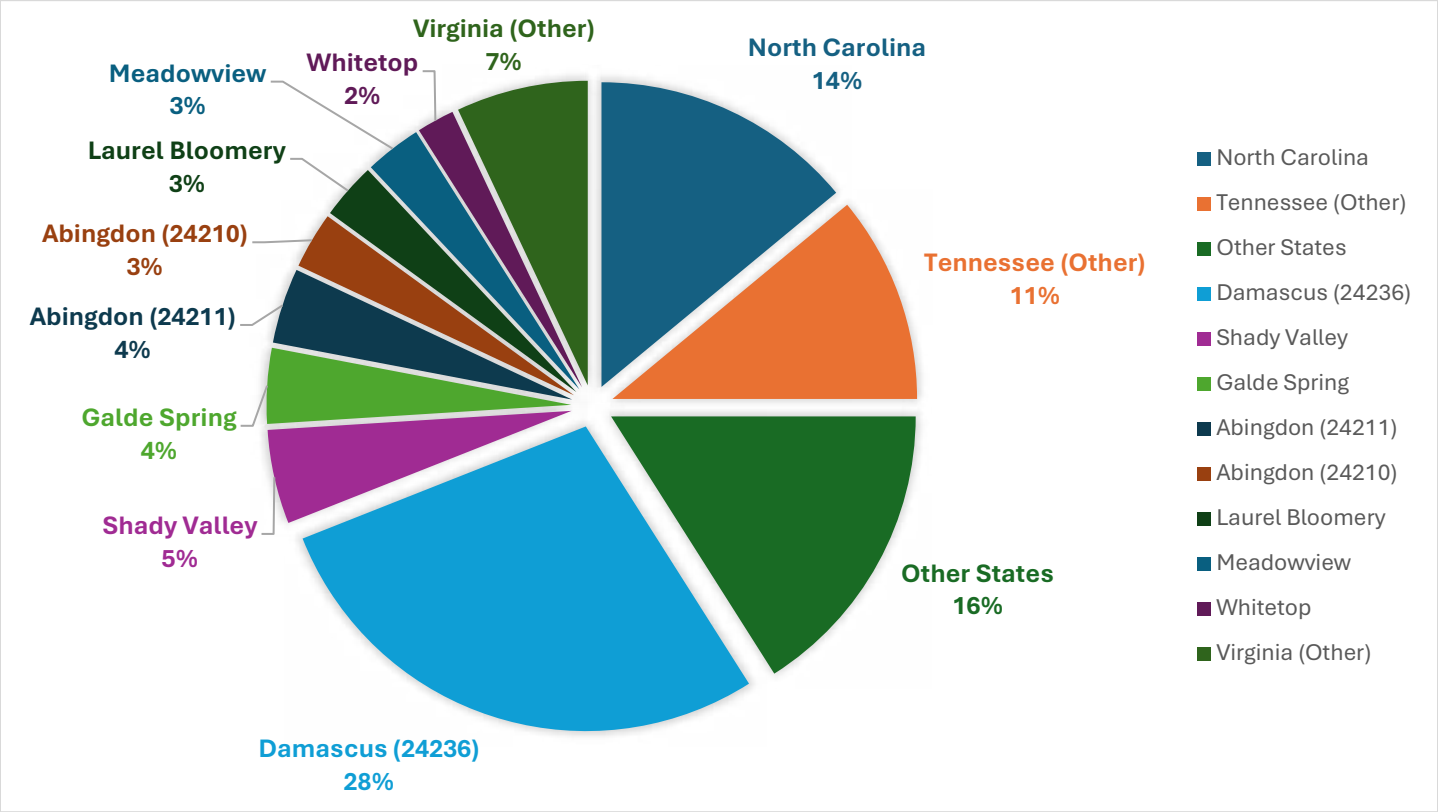
Year	Gross Revenue	Gross Expenses	Net Outcome
2003	$21,251.00	$29,617.86	($8,366.86)
2004	$24,929.92	$12,741.17	$12,188.75
2005	$28,370.08	$15,134.35	$13,235.73
2006	$30,701.39	$17,083.17	$13,618.22
2007	$36,568.15	$23,107.89	$13,460.26
2008	$44,748.49	$16,609.87	$28,138.62
2009	$46,092.00	$23,698.84	$22,393.16
2010	$27,396.00	$20,713.00	$6,683.00
2011	$43,781.00	$26,752.00	$17,029.00
2012	$41,219.00	$30,431.00	$10,788.00
2013	$57,554.00	$32,686.00	$24,868.00
2014	$60,822.96	$40,323.65	$20,499.31
2015	$67,662.64	$48,896.45	$18,766.19
2016	$75,869.83	$48,048.59	$27,821.24
2017	$79,198.98	$51,305.64	$27,893.34
2018	$69,968.60	$49,987.38	$19,981.22
2019	$90,558.79	$52,893.40	$37,665.39
2021	$82,109.45	$59,668.90	$22,440.55
2022	$104,704.60	$47,990.95	$56,713.65
2023	$137,397.83	$59,894.70	$77,503.13
2024	$165,604.18	$66,358.70**	$99,45.48**
* The data for the 2020 event is unavailable due to cancellation during the COVID-19 global pandemic.			
** Data incomplete due to pending accounting reconciliations.			

Source: Town of Damascus 2003-2024

Market Reach

Beginning in 2014, as part of the Damascus Downtown Revitalization initiatives, the town partnered with Arnett Muldrow & Associates[16] to complete an the Damascus Economic Restructuring Plan, including a market assessment, gap analysis, and recommended action strategies. The town partnered again in 2023 to update the market assessment (2023 Damascus Zip Code Survey), and conducted three week-long zip code surveys, one in April (same time as 2014 survey), one in July, and one in October. As shown in greater detail in **Figure 8** below, customer visits according to the 2023 study were recorded by location of residence, totaling 5,921 respondents; of those, 51% were from Virginia, 19% from Tennessee, and 14% from North Carolina. A further breakdown reveals that 41% of customers are from Washington County, with 28% from the zip code identified as Damascus (24236), while 11% are from Johnson County, TN. Arnett Muldrow also created the Town's first modern branding package; however, the towns' brand has evolved since and was updated by internal staff in 2023.

Figure 8: Customer Origin by Zip Code (2023)



Source: Arnett Muldrow & Associates: Zip Code Survey Study, pg. 5. November 2023.

When considering visitation to different market bases for businesses by type, 50% of the general retail market is from the Damascus zip code compared to only 17% of the food and beverage market and 11% for specialty retail. 37% of customers to the businesses outside the downtown area are from Damascus, whereas 25% of customers to the downtown area are from Damascus, correlating to more specialty retail in the downtown, and a higher reliance on visitors.

The *primary trade area* for Damascus includes Damascus (24236), Whitetop (24292), Shady Valley (37688), and Laurel Bloomery (37680), with Whitetop located in Grayson County and the other two in Tennessee. The *secondary trade area* is composed of Glade Spring (24340), Meadowview (24361), Abingdon (24210 and 24211), and Mountain City (37683), TN (Arnett Muldrow, 2023). The following **Table 18** provides a more detailed analysis of visitation according to locales within the

[16] Arnett Muldrow & Associates: Zip Code Survey Study, pg. 5. November 2023.

trade areas. It is important to note that 46% of the total visitation from the 2023 study came from outside the primary and secondary trade areas. This is somewhat typical for a community reliant on high levels of tourist visitation.

Table 18: Damascus Trade Areas (2023)

Zip Code	Area	Population (2023)	Visits	Visits per 1000 Population
Primary Trade Area				
24236	Damascus	2,918	1632	559.29
24292	Whitetop	376	140	372.34
37688	Shady Valley	973	300	308.32
37680	Laurel Bloomery	695	183	263.31
Secondary Trade Area				
24340	Glade Spring	5,145	227	44.12
24361	Meadowview	5,379	177	32.91
24211	Abingdon	9,963	202	20.28
24210	Abingdon	17,207	199	11.57
37683	Mountain City	12,824	133	10.37

Source: Arnett Muldrow & Associates: Zip Code Survey Study, pg. 8. November 2023.

Observations

From the 2014 survey to the 2023 survey, Arnett Muldrow & Associates noted several key findings, paraphrased below:

- Abingdon zip code 24210 joined the Town's secondary trade area, but Damascus's core market remained local.
- Visitor market reach increased significantly from 2014 to 2023, increasing from 294 to 1,324 unique zip codes, including visitation from an additional 13 states (36 to 49).
- The visitor market is becoming a larger portion of the Town's market share, growing from 10% in 2014 to 30% in 2023.
- Compared to the Spring and Summer seasons, even including the annual Trail Days event, the market is strongest in the Fall season – called "leaf season".
- The general retail market serves more locals, whereas the lodging and bicycle-related businesses serve mostly visitors, with food and beverage and specialty retail serving a mix of locals and visitors.
- The downtown businesses generally serve more visitors than locals, whereas other businesses in the town generally serve more locals.

"Damascus makes a strong case for rural small towns reinventing themselves through outdoor recreation and tourism - and for good reason. For many years, we've been lucky to have forward-thinking folks that lead the community in making the most of what we have here. Now that we are seeing record trends in outdoor recreation across the country, others are looking to Damascus as a model for their own local economies."

Julie Kroll
Parks & Recreation Director, Damascus

Household Income

Income levels for Damascus are directly linked to the age distribution of the town's population. The 2010 population of Damascus was reported by the U.S. Census Bureau at 814 persons with twenty-seven percent (27%) of the population was age 65 and over. By 2022, according to the American Community Survey, the population had declined to 767 with approximately thirty-one percent (31.4%) of the population age 65 and over. Approximately seven percent (7.1%) of families in Damascus were below the poverty line in 2022– that's 169 families(ACS:S1702), or 223 unrelated individuals (ACS:S1701). Examination of income brackets, per capita income, mean income, median household and family income aid in describing income and disparities and inequities in the town versus Washington County and Virginia.

As shown in **Table 19**, the majority of households in Damascus earn less than $35,000 per year, accounting for 52.9 percent of all households' earnings. The largest income group in Damascus was the $25,000 to $34,999 at 17.2 percent, closely followed by the $15,000 to $24,999 at 16.1 percent. For Washington County, the largest income group was the $50,000 to $74,999 at 17.9 percent (ACS:S1901).

Table 19: Households by Income Groups

Income	Washington County	Town of Damascus
Households (Total)	100% (22,013)	100% (348)
Less than $10,000	4.0%	7.8%
$10,000 to $14,999	5.4%	11.8%
$15,000 to $24,999	9.8%	16.1%
$25,000 to $34,999	11.3%	17.2%
$35,000 to $49,999	12.2%	7.5%
$50,000 to $74,999	17.9%	14.9%
$75,000 to $99,999	12.7%	11.2%
$100,000 to $149,999	16.5%	7.5%
$150,000 to $199,999	5.4%	3.2%
$200,000 or more	4.8%	2.9%
Median household income	$59,116	$33,750
Mean household income	$80,203	$57,449

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2018-2022 (ACS:S1901)

For family households specifically in 2022, the median income in Damascus was $62,734, significantly higher than for households generally, and the mean income was $66,645 (ACS:S1901). For nonfamily households in Damascus, the median and mean incomes were significantly less, with median income of only $21,083 and mean income of $47,916; nearly fifty-six percent of nonfamily households in Damascus earn less than $25,000 annually. This may correlate to the higher proportion of the elderly population which may be living on fixed incomes. This data is tabulated in its entirety in the following **Table 20: Family Households by Income Group** and **Table 21: Non-family Households by Income Group.**

Table 20: Family Households by Income Group

Income	Washington County	Town of Damascus
Households (Total)	100% (14,411)	100% (169)
Less than $10,000	2.2%	3.6%
$10,000 to $14,999	2.9%	3.6%
$15,000 to $24,999	4.9%	7.1%
$25,000 to $34,999	8.3%	9.5%
$35,000 to $49,999	11.3%	11.8%
$50,000 to $74,999	19.5%	30.8%
$75,000 to $99,999	15.8%	16.0%
$100,000 to $149,999	21.3%	11.2%
$150,000 to $199,999	7.5%	6.5%
$200,000 or more	6.3%	0.0%
Median household income	$76,444	$62,734
Mean household income	$97,062	$66,645

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2018-2022 (ACS:S1901)

Table 21: Non-family Households by Income Group

Income	Washington County	Town of Damascus
Households (Total)	100% (7,602)	100% (179)
Less than $10,000	8.6%	11.7%
$10,000 to $14,999	10.3%	19.6%
$15,000 to $24,999	21.3%	24.6%
$25,000 to $34,999	16.7%	24.6%
$35,000 to $49,999	13.1%	5.6%
$50,000 to $74,999	15.6%	0.0%
$75,000 to $99,999	5.8%	4.5%
$100,000 to $149,999	5.1%	3.9%
$150,000 to $199,999	1.5%	0.0%
$200,000 or more	2.1%	5.6%
Median household income	$29,469	$21,083
Mean household income	$45,462	$47,917

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2018-2022 (ACS:S1901)

Income inequality, as compared to the state, is of great concern across all of Southwest Virginia, as shown in **Table 22: Per Capita, Median, and Mean Household Income 2020**. Calculated per capita income for Damascus rose slightly from 2010 to 2020 from approximately forty-eight percent to approximately sixty-one percent of the state, compared closely to Washington County and the Mount Rogers Planning District. Median household income in 2020 showed a different pattern with Damascus at approximately one third of the state level. The mean income for Damascus remains higher relative to median income as compared to other jurisdictions though, representing a more significant income disparity among Damascus residents – this can be more common with urbanized areas.

Table 22: Per Capita, Median, and Mean Household Income 2020

Jurisdiction	Per capita Income (Mean)	Median Household Income	Mean Household Income
Town of Damascus	$24,980	$25,833	$48,277
Washington County	$26,757	$50,928	$68,544
Mount Rogers Planning District	$28,987	$45,768	$62,457
Commonwealth of Virginia	$41,255	$76,398	$106,023

Source: American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates 2018-2020 (S1901), (S1902)

For reference, the 2020 median household income for Virgina according to the Decennial Census was $85,873, higher than that of the ACS 5-year Estimates 2015-2020 of $76, 398, as shown in **Table 22**, thus the estimates may be low. Please note that the ACS 5-year Estimates for 2018-2022 were not available for the Mount Rogers Planning District but showed a significant increase in median income for Damascus at $33,750, Washington County at $59,116, and Virginia at $87,249. For 2022, the median per capita income for Damascus was $27,301 (DP03).

The number of households by income type is shown in **Table 23**. Data in this table further supports a dominance of elderly and retired persons on fixed incomes of social security and retirement. The percentage of households with social security and retirement incomes have increased drastically, while less than fifty-three percent (down from 55%) of the households in Damascus work and have wage and salary income. Even fewer of those now have supplemental income from self-employment. Even more concerning is the increased number of households with public assistance income, up to 24.4% from 2.9% over the course of 11 years. For 2022, of the estimated 787 residents, there are 112 (14.6%) that are living below the poverty line.

Table 23: Household Income by Type (2022)

Town of Damascus	Number of Households		Percent	
Year (for comparison)	2011	2022	2011	2022
Households (total)	480	348	100%	100%
With Wage or Salary Income	264	184	55.0%	52.9%
With Self Employment Income	55	30	11.5%	8.2%
With Social Security Income	222	198	46.3%	56.9%
With Retirement Income	62	140	12.9%	40.4%
With Public Assistance Income	14	85	2.9%	24.4%

Source: American Community Survey 5-year Estimates 2018-2022 (S1902)

Employment

Damascus has a younger demographic with a median age of 42.9 years as compared to Washington County, which has a median age of 46.8 years, and a younger demographic than most of the other localities in the Mount Rogers Planning District, with the exception of the Town of Glade Spring due in part to Emory & Henry College. Historically, much of the workforce with a bachelor's degree has come from Emory & Henry, Virginia Tech, or East Tennessee State University.

Educational Attainment

For 2022, according to the American Community Survey (S1501), median earnings for people in Damascus with high school degrees or some college was only $25,781 and $25,156 respectively; however, median earnings for those with a Bachelor's degree were significantly higher at $77,083. For Washington County, these figures are similar with high school degrees ($36,509), some college ($35,700), and $55,246 for those with a bachelor's degree. Even with a graduate or professional degree, the median income in Washington County only reaches $63,902. Residents of Damascus with a Bachelor's degree are earning more than their counterparts in Washington County, however, this may have to do with experience in the field due to the higher age demographics and in-migration.

According to the American Community Survey 5-year Estimates for 2018-2022 (B15014), residents of Damascus with a bachelor's degree age 25 to 39 years old had an estimated median earning of $55,625, compared to $48,003 for Washington County. When stepping up to the 40-to-64-year age range, median income figures increase significantly to $120,375 for Damascus, but only $75,658 for Washington County.

Labor Force

A greater percentage of the population age 25 and over for each educational attainment group in Damascus, as compared to Washington County, is not in the labor force, this can be seen in **Table 24**. Some of the skew toward a higher percentage of population outside the workforce may be related to a higher age demographic but it may partially be related to a higher rate of poverty as well. Additional labor force and employment ratio statistics for Damascus are included in **Table 25: Employment Status (2022)**, as compared to Washington County.

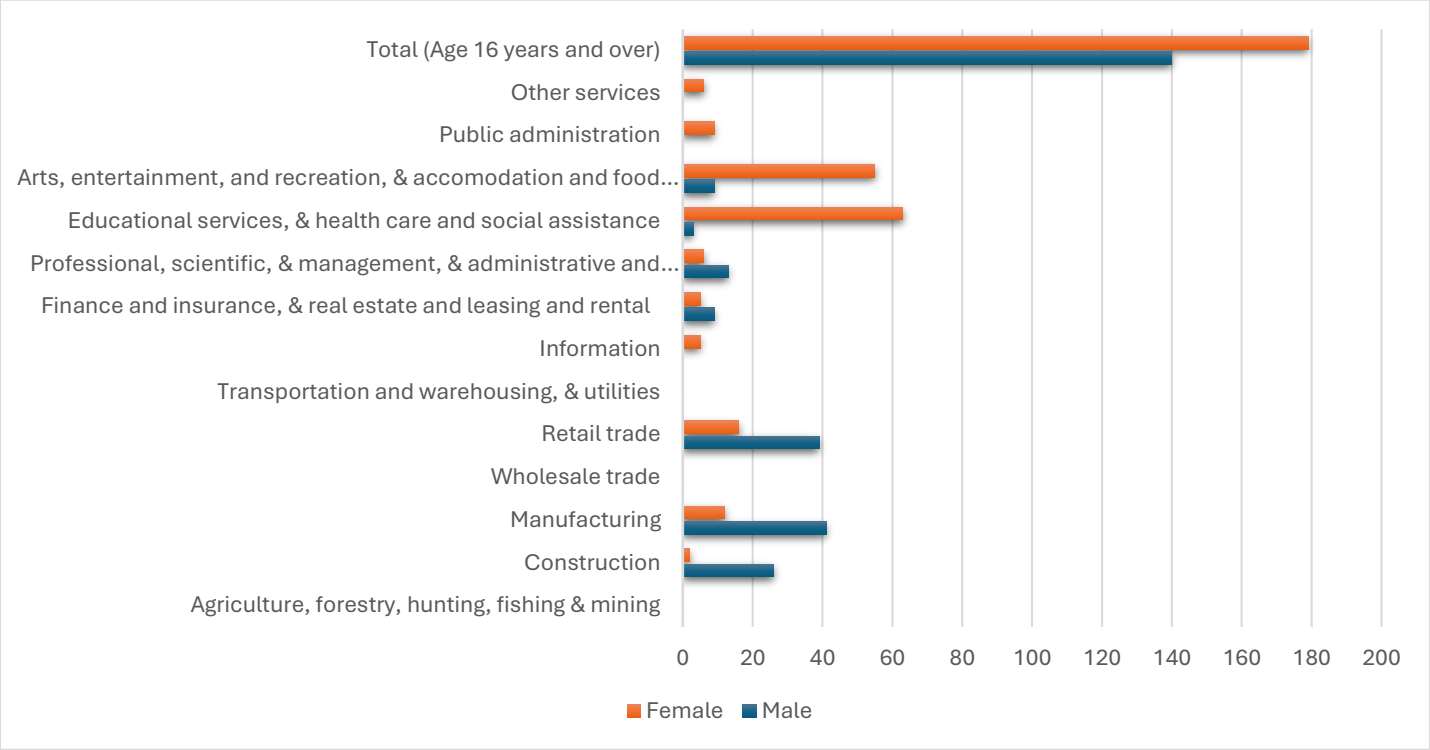
Table 24: Educational Attainment and Employment Status (2022)

Population (25 and over)	**Damascus**	**Washington County**
Total	545 (100%)	40,259 (100%)
Less than high school degree	45 (8.3%)	4,329 (10.8%)
In labor force	10	1,140
Not in labor force	35	3,189
High school graduate degree	233 (42.7%)	14,412 (35.8%)
In labor force	91	7,240
Not in labor force	142	7,172
Some college or associates degree	153 (28.1%)	11,628 (28.9%)
In labor force	72	6,826
Not in labor force	81	4,802
Bachelor's degree or higher	114 (20.9%)	9,890 (24.6%)
In labor force	61	6,593
Not in labor force	53	3,297

Source: American Community Survey 5-year Estimates 2018-2022 (B16010)

For 2022, as illustrated in **Figure 9** below, there were more female residents of Damascus in the workforce, 179, compared to 140 for males. Referencing back to **Figure 3: Population by Age and Sex**, the Damascus demographics for males and females by age groups, illustrates that the number of males age 75 and over is higher as compared to females age 75 and over, with a trend toward a higher ratio of younger age females – this may explain why there are more females in the Damascus work force. Otherwise, the ratio of males and females by industry type is stereotypical, with females dominating the certain industries and males dominating other industries.

Figure 9: Industry by Sex for Civilian Employed (2022)

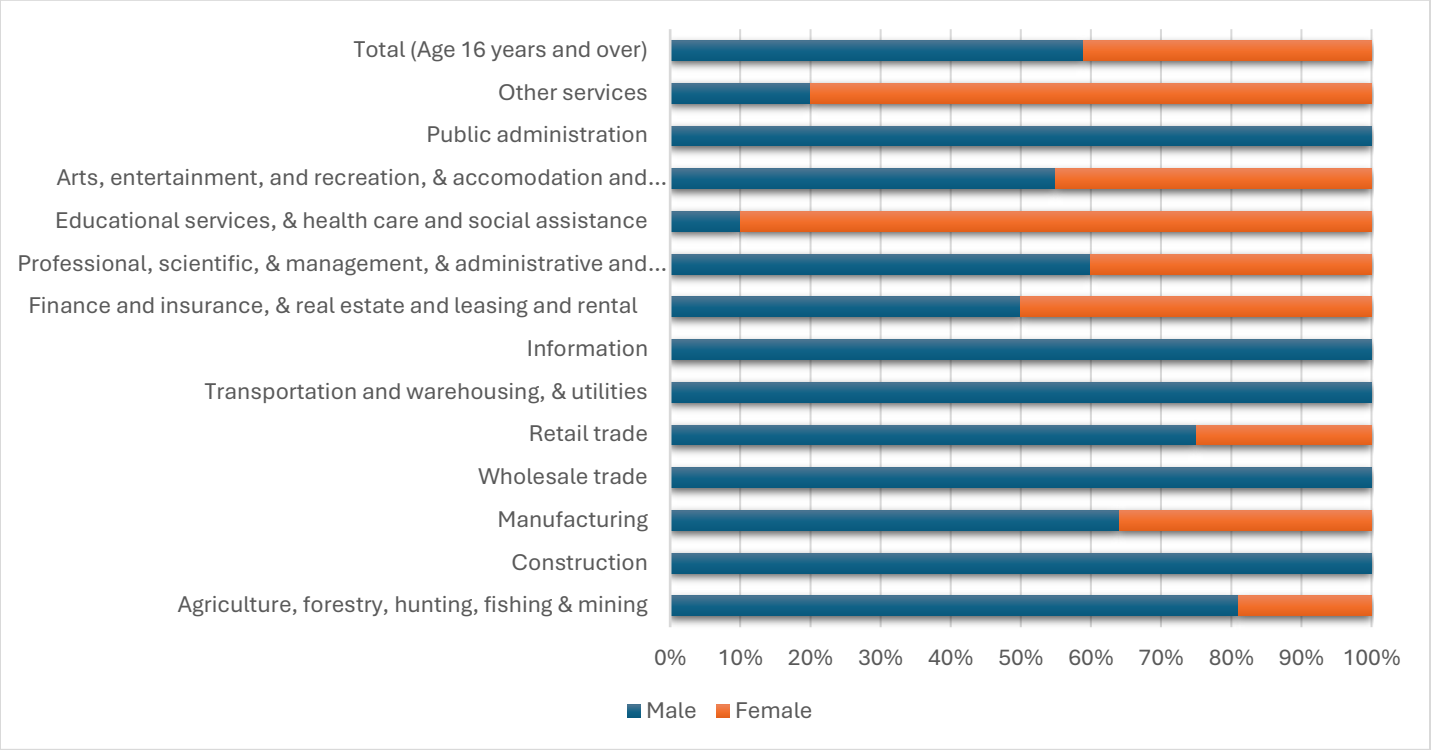


Source: American Community Survey 5-year Estimates 2022 (S2403)

When analyzing how the labor force has shifted relative to total workforce, and workforce by industry and sex, the most immediate observation is that there has been a reversal of sex dominating the workforce. In 2010 the workforce was 59% male, but in 2022 the workforce was 56% female; this can be visualized in **Figure 10: Industry by Sex for Civilian Employed (2010)**. The workforce has declined from 347 in 2010 to 319 in 2022, and there has been a loss of labor force employed in jobs related to information, transportation and warehousing, and agriculture, forestry, hunting, fishing, and mining. This shows a continuation of the shifting industry patterns from a more industrialized economy to a more recreational tourism and service industry-based economy.

Table 26: Industry by Occupation Type 2022 (Age 16 years and over) provides a deeper comparison of the 2022 Damascus labor force in each occupation, including a percentage by type of occupation within each industry classification. This does not breakdown the labor force by sex but does compliment the data in **Figure 9** by separating the occupational types within each industry according to the entire labor force.

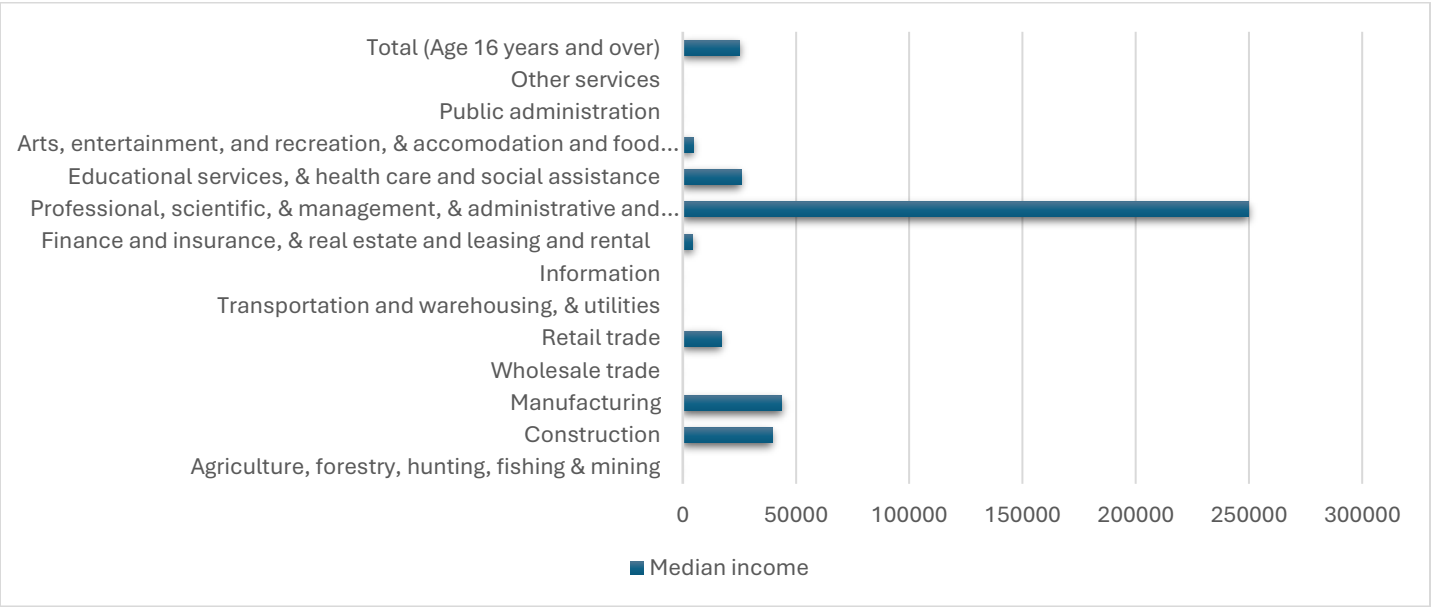
Figure 10: Industry by Sex for Civilian Employed (2010)



Source: American Community Survey 5-year Estimates 2010 (S2403)

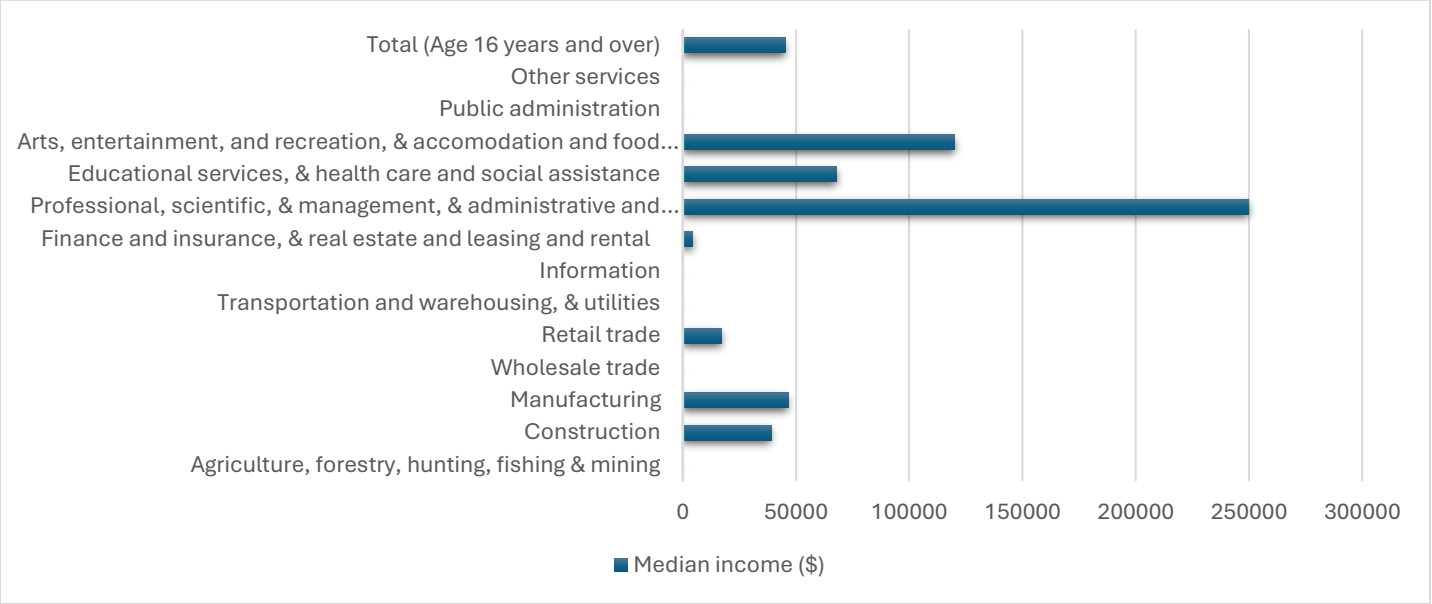
Median earning by industry in **Figure 11** illustrates the disparity in earnings depending on the industry classification, illuminating the fact that professional, scientific, and management, and administrative services have a median income exceeding $250,000 annually, following by manufacturing ($43,750) and construction ($39,500). Industries like manufacturing have been replaced by lower median income industry classifications like retail and arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services – many of which are part-time.

Figure 11: Median Income by Industry (2022)



Source: American Community Survey 5-year Estimates 2010 (S2413)

Figure 12: Median Income by Industry for Full-time, Year-around (2022)



Source: American Community Survey 5-year Estimates 2010 (S2414)

When comparing median annual income by industry for all employment types (including full-time, part-time, temporary, and year-around) versus only full-time, year-around employment, the median increases significantly for full-time, year-around as we would expect, from $25,219 to $45,139. However, this difference in median income is almost exclusively related to the arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services industry ($4,722 compared to $120,125), as well as the educational services, and healthcare and social assistance services industry ($25,833 compared to $67,917). This is understandable given that the discussed industry classifications contain a higher percentage of seasonal and part-time employees in a locality like Damascus which has an outdoor recreation-based economy. Also note the income disparity within the arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services industry of Damascus; this illustrates that the industry can be profitable.

Commuting Patterns

According to the American community Survey 5-year Estimates (S0801), 8.5% of the Damascus labor force is classified as work from home; more than that of Washington County at only 6.8%, Abingdon at 7.0%, and certainly Glade Spring at 1.5% work from home. This can be expected somewhat since Damascus is more remote relative to Interstate 81. Of the four localities, only Washington County and Abingdon had workforce that walked or biked, the highest being Abingdon, showing that 2.7% walked and 0.5% bicycled to commute to work.

Mean travel time to place of employment was highest in Washington county at 24.1 minutes, followed by Glade Spring at 20.0 minutes, Damascus at 19.3 minutes, and finally Abingdon at 18.1 minutes. Less travel time to place of employment leads to healthier, more resilient communities because that time and money can be invested locally. Interestingly, Damascus' workforce had a dichotomy of vehicles available, with approximately 19.7% having 0-1 vehicles available and 36.7% having 2 vehicles and 43.6% having 3 or more vehicles. Washington County, Abingdon, and Glade Spring had almost no workforce without at least one vehicle available, though Abingdon did have by far the largest proportion (27.6%) of workforce with only 1 vehicle available. Damascus and Abingdon are both more walkable than their closest localities for comparison, but Abingdon appears to have a more diverse workforce as far as vehicle disparity is concerned.

Table 25: Employment Status (2022)

	Town of Damascus				Washington County			
	Total	Labor Force Participation Rate	Employment/ Population Ratio	Unemployment Rate	Total	Labor Force Participation Rate	Employment/ Population Ratio	Unemployment Rate
Population 16 years and over	682	47.2%	46.8%	0.9%	45,965	54.4%	52.1%	4.2%
Age 16 to 19	54	44.4%	44.4%	0.0%	2,755	42.3%	37.4%	11.5%
Age 20 to 24	83	77.1%	77.1%	0.0%	2,951	67.%	64.2%	7.9%
Age 25 to 29	37	70.3%	70.3%	0.0%	2,933	85.6%	82.9%	3.2%
Age 30 to 34	36	88.9%	88.9%	0.0%	2,844	79.1%	77.4%	2.2%
Age 35 to 44	96	49.0%	49.0%	0.0%	6,152	77.8%	74.5%	4.0%
Age 45 to 54	58	60.3%	60.3%	0.0%	7,245	73.7%	70.5%	4.4%
Age 55 to 59	19	84.2%	84.2%	0.0%	3,700	66.5%	66.2%	0.4%
Age 60 to 64	58	43.1%	43.1%	0.0%	4,449	53.2%	51.2%	3.7%
Age 65 to 74	171	25.1%	23.4%	7.0%	7,445	22.3%	21.7%	2.4%
Age 75 years and over	70	14.3%	14.3%	0.0%	5,491	7.8%	6.9%	11.6%

Source: American community Survey 5-year Estimates 2018-2022 (S2301)

Table 26: Industry by Occupation Type 2022 (Age 16 years and over)

	Total	Management, business, science, and arts	Service occupations	Sales and office occupations	Natural resources, construction, and maintenance occupations	Production, transportation, and material moving occupations
Employed (16 years and over)	319	25.7%	19.1%	16.9%	5.0%	33.2%
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, hunting, and mining	0	-	-	-	-	-
Construction	28	0.0%	0.0%	7.1%	57.1%	35.7%
Manufacturing	53	0.0%	0.0%	7.5%	0.0%	92.5%
Wholesale trade	0	-	-	-	-	-
Retail trade	55	0.0%	0.0%	38.2%	0.0%	61.8%
Transportation and warehousing, and utilities	0	-	-	-	-	-
Information	5	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Finance and insurance, and real estate and rental and leasing	14	35.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	64.3%
Professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services	19	89.5%	0.0%	10.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Educational services, and healthcare and social assistance	66	28.8%	68.2%	3.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services	64	32.8%	25.0%	35.9%	0.0%	6.3%
Public administration	6	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other services	9	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Source: American Community Survey 5-year Estimates 2022 (S2405)

Tourism

Damascus continues to be a desirable destination for thousands of hikers, cyclists, and other outdoor enthusiasts, converging on the Town during Appalachian Trail Days, Fourth of July Celebrations, and other events and concerts. Damascus serves as a crossroads for seven significant trail systems and is adjacent to Whitetop Laurel Creek, one of Virginia's premier trout streams, and Beaverdam Creek, one of the highest rated trout streams in Virginia and Tennessee. Virginia's tallest mountains, Mount Rogers and Whitetop trail heads are located within a short drive from Damascus. Damascus is bordered by both the Jefferson and Cherokee National Forests and Backbone Rock, another popular tourist site. These and other tourist 'generators' create demands in hiking, biking, horseback riding, lodging, fishing, and the personal service industry. Services have blossomed with businesses to meet the needs of visitors including outfitters, shuttle services, full-service bicycle shops, guide services, bed-and-breakfasts, and tourist houses. A diverse range of lodging opportunities are available in the Damascus area to serve visitors desiring a scenic mountain retreat and vacation.

In addition to its government webpage damascus.org, the town also manages a separate website primarily focused on visitor information at visitdamascus.org. The Town of Damascus also operates a Facebook events page (Visit Damascus, Virginia), an Instagram page (#damascusvirginia), and a YouTube channel (@VisitDamascusVirginia). The town also maintains and updates its own brand, as well as creating much of its own marketing materials in house.

As a Revenue Source

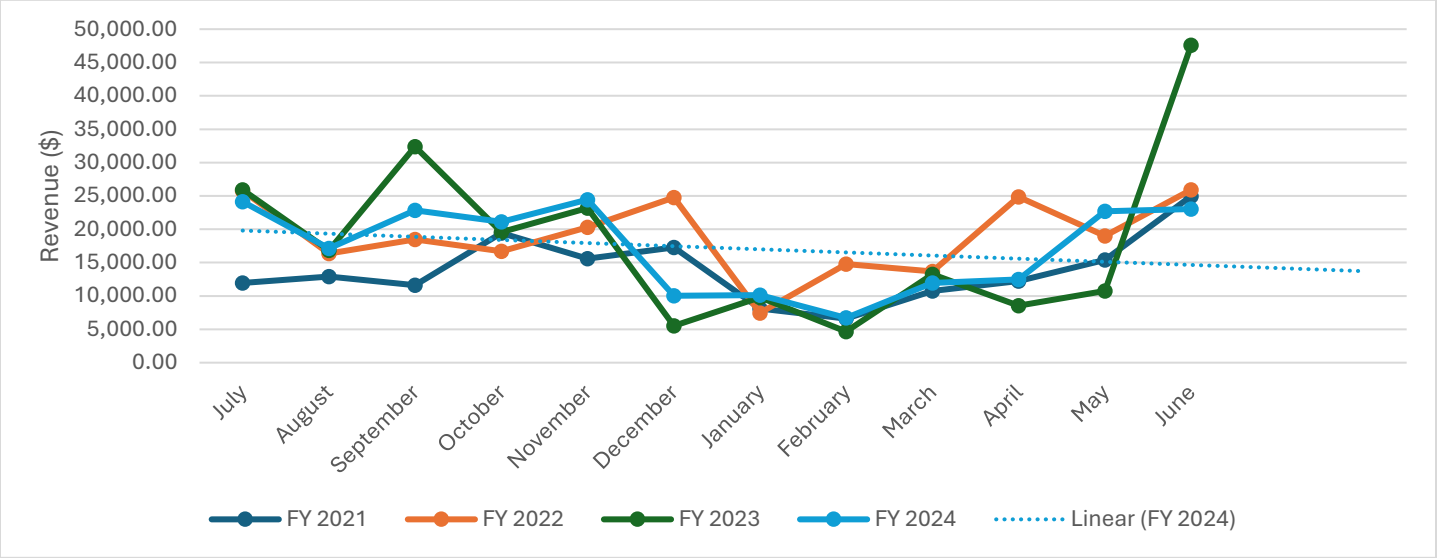
Tourism is a significant source of revenue for the Town of Damascus, employing some 21.6 percent of the labor force of the town, and significantly offsetting the tax obligations of citizens in favor of visitor revenue. The Town collects *ad valorem* excise tax revenues in the form of a meals tax at a rate of seven percent and a lodging tax also at a rate of seven percent. The Town also benefits from the Business, Professional, and Occupational License tax and/or fees associated with tourism-related businesses, many of which are directly linked to outdoor recreation, which leads to a seasonal economic model.

Originally adopted in May 1998, Damascus imposed a tax levied "on the purchaser of every meal, served, or delivered in the town by a restaurant or cater", with the rate of the tax being four percent of the amount paid for the meal. Now, the term meal has been expanded to include alcohol served, and the tax rate has been increased to seven percent. The Meal Tax is Article VI of the Code of Ordinances of Damascus. The tax levied by this article shall be collected by the seller and paid by the purchaser at the time of the charge for the meal, the tax is held in trust by the business and remitted each month to the Town in accordance with the ordinance and forms established.

Though lodging tax revenue is a significant source of income for Damascus, the meals tax revenue generated is on average nearly two times that of lodging tax revenue, which can be seen when comparing **Figure 13: Fiscal Year 2021-2024 Meals Tax by Month** and **Figure 14: Fiscal Year 2021-2024 Lodging Tax by Month**. When considering Fiscal Year[17] 2024 only, the meals tax levy contributed $206,774.00 to the Town's revenues, while the lodging tax levy contributed $150,539.47, approximately 75 percent of the meals tax revenue. When considering all the revenues within the budget, these two tax levies generate more revenue than the town's real estate tax, which is significantly outside of the norm for localities, and shows that a significant portion of the towns' activities are being funded through tourism revenues. Reviewing both of these figures, a trend line – sometimes referred to as a line of best fit – has been projected to illustrate the slight downward trend in revenue generation throughout the fiscal year by these tourism revenues, created in great part by the noticeable slump in tourism revenues generated by the outdoor recreation industry during the least hospitable months of the year, January and February, with a tapering as Fall transitions into Winter and Winter into Spring. These figures may also portray the relative volatility of the outdoor recreation tourism industry, however, the revenue generated is not inconsequential either.

[17] Fiscal years for municipalities and other types of local governments run from July 01 to June 30 of the following year, i.e. July 01, 2024, to June 30, 2025, would be fiscal year 2025. The fiscal year of Virginia runs from October 01 to September 30 of the following year. Figures 13 and 14 follow this pattern rather than starting at January and running to December like a calendar year.

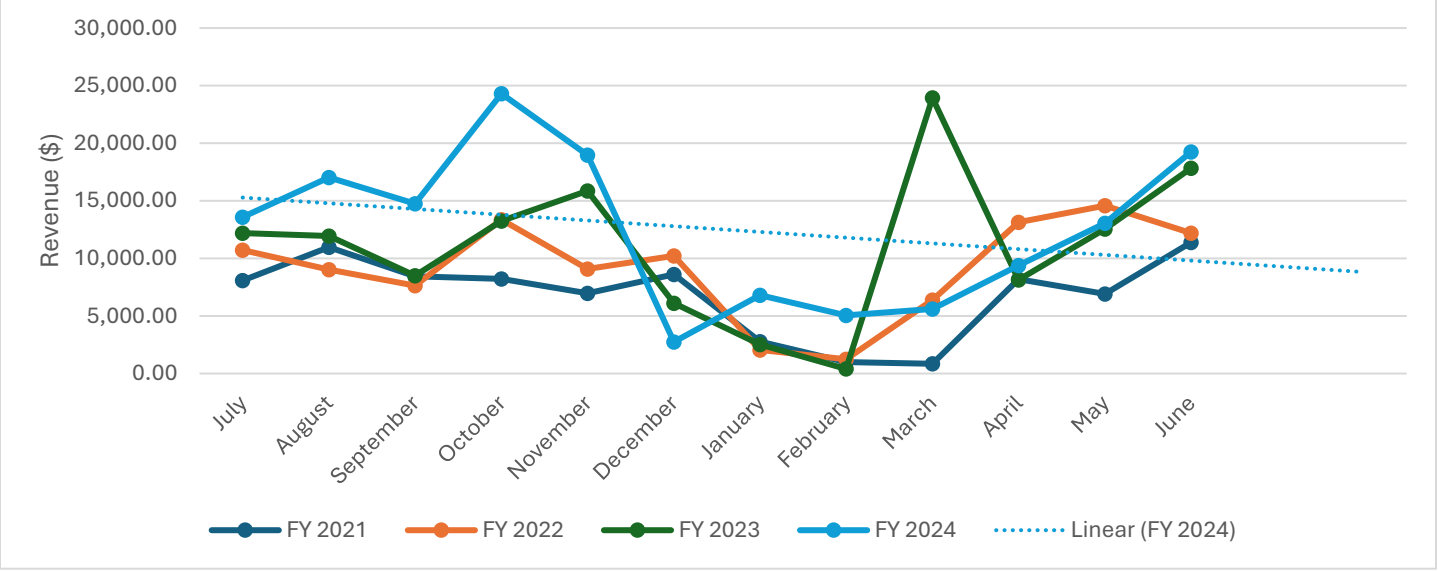
Figure 13: Fiscal Year 2021-2024 Meals Tax by Month



Source: Town of Damascus, Office of the Treasurer

Also originally adopted in May 1998, Damascus imposed a tax levied on transient room rentals to be collected "from the transient on whom such tax is levied or from the person paying for such lodging at the time payment for such lodging is made." The tax imposed and levied by the Town has since been increased from four percent to seven percent, and the tax required shall be deemed to be held in trust by the person required to collect such taxes. The Transient Occupancy tax is Article V of the Code of Ordinances of Damascus. Enacted by the General Assembly of Virginia in March 2023, the administration of the transient occupancy tax was amended to include § 58.1-3827, which made accommodations intermediaries responsible for collecting and remitting the transient occupancy taxes to the tax assessing officer of the locality imposing the tax; unfortunately, the intermediaries were not required to submit specific documentation necessary to calculate revenues attributable to a Business, Professional, or Occupational License for the purpose of taxation on profits of the business according to the license tax. This has created significant compatibility issues with the laws, policies, and practices of Damascus, as well as many other localities.

Figure 14: Fiscal Year 2021-2024 Lodging Tax by Month



Source: Town of Damascus, Office of the Treasurer

Outdoor Recreation

Outdoor recreation is a growing industry nationwide, accelerating in recent years, some of which may be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing folks out of crowded spaces and into the outdoors. Many state and national parks, including the Appalachian Trail, and also the Virginia Creeper Trail, reported record visitation in 2021, 2022, and 2023. According to the Outdoor Industry Association's most recent 2023 Outdoor Participation Trends Report, the outdoor recreation industry continues to grow from record levels as far back as 2019, with 80 percent of outdoor recreation activity categories, like camping and fishing, experiencing participation growth in 2022. Americans (age ≥6) participating in at least one outdoor recreation activity grew by 2.2 percent from 2020 to 2021 and by 2.3 percent from 2021 to 2022, which incorporates 55 percent of the U.S. population. The Report continues to assert that the recreational base has become more diverse, including a record high percentage (35%) of seniors (age 55+) participating. However, even though the participant base continues to grow, the Report also states that frequency of participant outings has declined by nearly 18 percent since 2013. This comparison between participant base and frequency of participation in outdoor recreation activities may be a key consideration when thinking about repeat visitors to outdoor recreation assets.[18]

According to the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, outdoor recreation is a $1.1 trillion-dollar industry, with many secondary benefits, such as mental and physical health, and conservation and sustainable management of public lands and waters. The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) states that the outdoor recreation economy accounted for $563.7 billion (2.2%) of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the nation in 2022. This calculation for the outdoor recreation industry includes industry shares in the retail trade (27.3%), arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation and food services (25.6%), manufacturing (13.8%), transportation and warehousing (9.8%), wholesale trade (8.2%), and in all other industries combined, 15.4 percent. Virginia had an 8.3 percent positive change in outdoor recreation employment in 2022, one of the highest states, higher than the average US percent change of 7.4 percent.

In June 2022, the General Assembly instructed the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to establish an interdepartmental State Trails Office tasked to 1) develop a State Trails Plan and State Trails Information Clearinghouse, and 2) to coordinate with the State Trails Advisory Committee (STAC) and the Department of Conservation (DCR). The to-be-developed State Trails Plan and State Trails Information Clearing House are to be developed in a manner consistent with the 2022 Report of Virginis Multi-use Trails Initiative; whereas, DCR already maintains the Virginia Outdoors Plan, *Virginia's Plan for Outdoor Recreation and Land Conservation*, most recently updated in 2018. As part of their mission of land conservation, DCR has historically also been charged with outdoor recreation and open-space planning for the state, not to mention assisting localities with the administration of the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) statewide. These actions affirm the state's dedication to outdoor recreation as an industry.

Virginia Tourism Corporation

Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC) is the state agency tasked with supporting tourism across the Commonwealth and offers many grant programs to municipalities, Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs), and private sector venues and partners to expand tourism initiatives state-wide. The Town has done an excellent job of leveraging grant funding from VTC over the previous three or more years, following the completion of recent large-scale projects.

Current grant programs include: *VTC Marketing Leverage Program*, *Virginia DMO Marketing Grants*, *Virginia Special Events and Festivals Program*, *VA250 Marketing Leverage Program*, *VTC Microbusiness Marketing Leverage Program*, *Drive Outdoor Grant Program*, *Tourism Development Financing Program (TDFP)*, and *Tourism Improvement Districts (TIDs)*.

Major Economic Engines

The Town of Damascus has several notable, major economic engines at present, following a) the decline of the regional timber industry, as a result of the establishment of the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area by the Virginia Secretary of Agriculture (Public law 89-438, 89th Congress, H.R. 140366) on May 31, 1966; and b) the decline of local and regional industrial facilities, through the mid-80s and mid-90s following the closure of the railroad and other notable environmental

[18] Outdoor Participation Trends Report: Executive Summary and Key Insights. Outdoor Industry Association, 2023.

protection acts passed in the early 1970s. The Town's new economic engines are based on outdoor recreation assets in the tourism industry.

A relatively new aspect to Damascus's tourism opportunities is motorcycle tourism.[19] Motorcycle tourism in and around Damascus is growing, and every year more motorcycle enthusiasts travel from Damascus to Shady Valley, Tennessee enjoying the area's natural beauty. More recently, the Mid-Atlantic Back Country Discovery Route (MABDR), which connects Damascus across 149 miles to Newport, VA and eventually the New York state line, was the eighth backcountry discovery route created for adventure travel by dual-sport and adventure-style motorcycles. In addition, the South East Back Country Discovery Route (SEBDR) is a 1,300 mile ride, completing the East Coast Trilogy on its path from the Gulf of Mexico in Florida to Damascus, VA. According to a recent economic impact study, the BDR creates an economic impact of over $60 million across all routes, driving an additional $9.6 million in motorcycles sales in 2022.[20] This has a significant positive impact for rural communities specifically.

Appalachian Trail

Called the "Footpath for the People" by the National Park Service, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail (AT) was conceived in 1921, built by private citizens, and completed in 1937. The AT is a 2,190+ mile trail that traverses the Appalachian Mountain range from Georgia to Maine and crosses through the heart of Damascus approximately 550 miles north bound from its southern-most terminus in Georgia. For Damascus, though the AT functions as more of a cultural engine – relative to the Virginia Creeper Trail – the AT still supports a significant percentage of the retail industry and the accommodations and food services industry, including a greater percentage of the arts and entertainment portion of the industry[21]. Many of the town's business establishments cater directly to through-hikers on the trail seeking supplies and rest along their way.

[19] According to a Comprehensive Economic Impact Study White Paper (October 31, 2023) released recently by BDR, back country discover route riders generate a significant annual economic impact on local economies, reporting an impact of over $60 million across all of BDR's routes nationwide. Additionally, the report claims that BDR riders generated $9.6 million in motorcycle sales just in 2022.

[20] Economic Impact Study: Adventure Motorcycles Making a Positive Impact on Rural Communities. Center for Business and Economic Analysis, University of Wyoming; Backcountry Discovery Routes. 2023.

[21] "Industry" here refers to the arts, entertainment, and recreation, and accommodation and food services industry, NAICS code #71, part of the leisure and hospitality sector.

Image courtesy of Town of Damascus

Appalachian Trail Days Festival®

Each Spring, the Damascus tourism industry is bolstered by the celebration of the annual Appalachian Trail Days Festival® which takes place in May, the weekend following Mother's Day weekend of each year. More than 2,000 hikers return to Damascus to celebrate, renew acquaintances, share stories, and eat, shop, and lodge in the Town as part of the festival. Trail Days brings some 25,000 additional visitors to the weekend's festivities. Trail Days represents the biggest single infusion of customer spending throughout the Spring and is an essential burst of revenue to the business community following the determinedly slow Winter season. As seen in **Table 17: Trail Days Event Revenue by Year**, for 2023, Trail Days brought in a net revenue of $77,503.13 for the Town alone through the event hosting, which doesn't include the additional tax revenues.

Damascus Trail Center

The Damascus Trail Center, an *interpretive, training,* and *visitor center* owned by the Town of Damascus and operated by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy® (ATC) represents a $1.1+ million investment by the Town, Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, Appalachian Regional Commission, and Tobacco Regional Revitalization Commission toward a market of recreational outdoor enthusiasts and stewards, as well as building stronger partnerships across the region. The Trail Center was constructed in 2021 and focuses on the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, Virginia National Recreation Trail, and Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail – designed to be a regional focus point and launching point. The facility is approximately 2,100 SF inside with an additional approximately 1,000 SF of outside programming space on 0.41 acres in downtown Damascus. The Trail Center welcomes over 10,000 visitors during Trail Days alone (though not all may be recorded) and additionally serves as a welcome center for the Virginia Creeper Trail and other popular regional attractions. The visitor impact for 2023 provided by the ATC is tabulated in **Table 27** below as reported by the ATC. This has been a major project with additional focus on strengthening the downtown marketplace and reducing seasonal stress on business operations related to the town's cyclical tourism-based economic structure.

Table 27: Visitor Impact, Damascus Trail Center, 2023

Year	Thru-hiker	Section Hiker	Cyclist	Backpacker	Day Hiker	Volunteers/ partners	Other*	Tourist	Total

2023	828	283	1,638	142	892	665	2,905	2,651	10,005

** "Other" includes Trail Days visitors, participants, volunteers, and the like, as well as programs, trainings, and bus tours.*

Source: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2023.

Images courtesy of Gavin Blevins.

Virginia Creeper Trail

A 34.3-mile rail-to-recreation trail project, opened to the public in 1989 and inducted into the *Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's Hall of Fame* in 2014, the Virginia Creeper Trail (VCT) traverses through two counties from Abingdon through Damascus, and ends just past Whitetop station in the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, at the Virginia-North Carolina border. The VCT is owned by the Towns of Abingdon and Damascus, and the US Forest Service, with interests from the National Park Service related to the portion of the Appalachian Trail through Damascus that follows the same path as the VCT.

Spring and Fall – especially Fall – are the peak seasons for the Virginia Creeper Trail, which is the largest economic driver for the town's tourism industry. The Virginia Creeper Trail brings in an estimated 250,000-300,000 visitors annually, with visitors nationwide, and received a boom influx of visitors from 2019-2023, significantly fueling the outdoor recreation tourism industry. The VCT supports a network of tourism-related businesses, pivoting on the bike-rental and shuttle operations and branching off to subsequent market areas, including restaurants, lodging, and retail. The unique market created by shuttle operations to Whitetop Station, from which location recreational cyclists will ride down the mountain into Damascus, supports many of the businesses in Damascus. Were either the VCT to close, or the shuttle/bike rental market to fail, it is likely that a cascade of business failures would ensue, causing a catastrophic loss of revenue for the town's tourism-reliant economy.

Image courtesy of Julie Kroll.

"The [Virginia Creeper] Trail is our economic engine. It's the biggest one we've got. It's the thing that keeps us going."

Aaron V. Sizemore
Damascus Town Manager (Jan 2005 - Nov 2014)

There have been several studies conducted on the impacts of rail-trails, including the Virginia Creeper Trail specifically as a model and one of the leading rails-to-trails projects nation-wide. However, much of the economic impact information on the Creeper Trail detailed in studies and reports is an estimation based on existing evidence. A study from 2004 using an Individual Travel Cost Model (ITCM) estimated the aggregate net economic value for the Creeper Trail to be between $2.2 and $3.9 million, while the total economic impact was estimated at $1.6 million.[22] Using a Net Economic Value, based on a seven percent discount rate (recommended by the Office of Management and Budget) the overall asset value – the fair market value if the asset were sold – is estimated at $55 million dollars. Another study, completed in 2007, also found that the aggregate net economic value of the VCT to users was estimated at $2.3 to $3.9 million.[23] Furthermore, the study found that VCT tourists spend around $1.2 million yearly in Washington and Grayson counties, including the incorporated towns around the trail. Overnight users account for five times the economic impact of other trail users, but only account for ten percent of the trips on the trail. Additionally, forty-seven percent (47%) of trail users were local, living within 25 miles of the VCT and traveling an average of 7.8 miles to reach the trail, while the non-local users travelled on average 260 miles or 4.6 hours. Please note, these figures have not been adjusted for inflation. These case studies focused on the estimated economic impacts and asset values based on analyses of available data, but the trail's impact on individuals has also been studied.

In 2011, Virginia Tech's Economic Development Studio Team completed a study on the VCT and New River Trail (NRT) titled Building Connectivity Through Recreation Trails. This study focused on the community impacts of these rail trails by conducting surveys and stakeholder interviews in conjunction with economic analysis. The study found that over half of the businesses surveyed attributed more than 61 percent of their income to trail use, while businesses that collected a meals tax reported that an estimated 79 percent of their revenue was attributed to the VCT.[24] Unfortunately, fewer than thirty percent of visitors who responded to the survey responded that they stayed overnight. Ultimately, the study recommends continuing to connect the community to the trail.

Referring to Market Reach, including **Figure 8: Customer Origin by Zip Code (2023)** and **Table 18: Damascus Trade Areas (2023)** will provide a more recent analysis of direct visitor impacts from the VCT. Though this information does not explicitly disconnect visitor impacts from the AT, continued market research will allow the town to monitor economic impact from the trail(s). Additionally, it is key that the town understands the impact the trail(s) have on the quality of life of the community.

[22] Joshua K. Gill, The Virgini Creeper Trail: An Analysis of Net Economic Benefits and Economic Impacts of Trips (2004), pp. 95-97. This study provides valuations on multiple models to assess the economic value, economic impact, and fair market value of the asset, which is the Virginia Creeper Trail.

[23] Bowker, J. M., J.C. Bergstrom, J. Gill, 2007. Estimating the Economic Value and Impacts of Recreational Trails: A Case Study of the Virginia Creeper Rail Trail. Tourism Economics. 13(2): 241-260. This case study provided more insight into the user impacts by type.

[24] Stephen Cox, et. al. 2011. Building Connectivity Through Recreation Trails: A Closer Look at New River Trail State Park and the Virginia Creeper Trail. pp. 18-23. This study focuses on the community's connection to the recreation tourism asset, with recommendations.

Chapter VI. Land Use & Development

Introduction

The guiding principle behind comprehensive land use planning is creating a balanced community where current and future residents have a wide range of housing choices, employment opportunities, consumer opportunities, and a full range of government and semi-public services. Complementing all of those factors with hazard mitigation, transportation planning, financial planning, and environmental stewardship can create a truly resilient community. Residential areas should include housing for individuals and families throughout the various life-stages. Employment opportunities should include full and part-time work, provide entry-level positions, and exist in all major sectors of the economy, including industrial, office/service, and retail. Proper land use planning should yield a stable and resilient community; balanced development and conservation practices coupled with stable residential and commercial facilities and amenities.

Planning Principals

The "2232 Review"

Though the comprehensive plan is considered advisory, it still serves as a guide for the physical development of the territory within the locality's jurisdiction and the locality is legally accountable to the plan. According to Code of Virginia §15.2- 2232, the comprehensive plan "…shall control the general and approximate location, character, and extent of each feature shown on the plan." Thus, while the comprehensive plan itself does not directly regulate land use, the plan does have status as a fundamental instrument of land use control once it is adopted by the local governing body.

Additionally, Code of Virginia §15.2-2232 provides that "unless a feature is already shown on the adopted master plan, no street or connection to an existing street, park or other public area, public building or public structure, public utility facility or public service corporation [insert exemptions]… whether publicly or privately owned, shall be constructed, established or authorized until its location has been approved by the local planning commission as being substantially in accord with the adopted comprehensive plan, or part thereof."

Land Development Controls

Subdivision Regulations

Article 6. Land Subdivision and Development of the Code of Virginia requires that "the governing body of every locality shall adopt an ordinance to assure the orderly subdivision of land and its development." Generally, the *designated administrative agency* is the planning commission, but this may be another agent designated by the governing body. These regulations ensure adequate lot size, public access, and the availability of public services to each lot created by setting standards for streets, drainage ways, sewage disposal, water systems, and other aspects of public welfare. These regulations protect communities in many ways, including the protection of natural resources and the reduction of public expenditures by requiring that developers be responsible for the installation of basic public facilities before the recording and sale of lots.

The term *subdivision* is widely accepted to mean the "division of a lot, tract, or parcel of land into two or more lots, tracts, parcels, or other divisions of land for sale, development, or lease".[25] Depending on the locality's needs, a "subdivision" may include any alteration of lot lines or dimensions of any lots or sites shown on a plat previously approved and filed or may be classified by local regulation as either "major" or "minor", requiring unique review procedures and criteria for each class.

[25] Moskowitz, Harvey S., et al. The Complete Illustrated Book of Development Definitions. 4th ed., Routledge, 2017, pp. 535.

Zoning Regulations

Zoning divides a locality into specific districts and establishes regulations concerning the use, placement, spacing and size of land and buildings within the established districts. A locality's zoning power arises from the state's police power to protect the public's health, safety, and welfare; zoning evolved primarily from nuisance law, with the first zoning ordinance adopted by New York City in 1916. The Code of Virginia § 15.2-2200 outlines the state's objectives in planning and land use laws, §15.2-2280 identifies the police power, and §15.2-2283 more specifically lists the purposes of zoning.

Zoning regulations – in both theory and practice – must be consistent with the adopted comprehensive plan; this is a mandate in Virginia. This does not necessarily mean that a community should zone to the plan, which means to rezone property to conform to some planned future land use map. Rather, it means that the development standards pertaining to various districts and land uses should reflect the goals and policies set forth in the comprehensive plan. Zoning is a mechanism to implement the plan, not the reverse. When a property owner petitions a locality for a rezoning, the staff, planning commission and the governing body must refer to the comprehensive plan to determine if the rezoning request matches the goals, objectives, policies, and vision of the plan.

The zoning regulations of communities vary significantly from classifications like *Euclidean* or *form-based*, what districts they include, whether they include performance measurements or design regulations. According to the American Planning Association's (APA) Planning and Design Standards, Euclidean zoning ordinances are considered "exclusionary" and referred to as a "flat model" since these types of ordinances primarily separate use types into relevant zones. Form-based zoning allows more for the interweaving of uses and is thereby considered a "hierarchical model" since this concept allows for the layering of compatible uses. Form-based ordinances are more compatible with the principle of *traditional neighborhood design*[26], supported by the New Urbanism movement, and required for the establishment of an *urban development area*[27] according to VDOT.

Zoning ordinances also allow for additional regulatory concepts, either as part of the ordinance or as a separate ordinance:

Overlay Districts:

Many zoning ordinances apply *overlay districts* to allow for special regulatory provisions applicable to areas that may be part of but not all of a traditional use district or may layer over multiple use districts. Overlay districts are commonly employed as part of Euclidean zoning ordinances. Common overlay districts fall into two types generally, (i) resource protection and (ii) development guidance, and examples of such include: floodplain and floodway, airport safety, agriculture/livestock, historic/heritage, school/education, medical, greenspace, and the like.

Solar and/or Wind Ordinances

Solar facilities in Virginia may only currently be regulated through one of two processes, (i) a local zoning ordinance or (ii) the general assembly. For counties, cities, and towns, regulatory authority comes from the zoning power in accordance with the Code of Virginia § 15.2-2288.7. These regulations are becoming increasingly common – and necessary – for the regulation of "green" infrastructure nationwide. Such infrastructure can drastically change the surrounding landscape, which can be cause for concern. Many of the best solar ordinances have provisions regulating the amounts, types, and density of vegetation as part of the permitting process. These regulations often go so far as to require *native* replanting, preventing acres of invasive replanting from affecting the surrounding agricultural lands and natural ecosystem[28].

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[26] William R, Klein, Megan Lewis, & Emina Sendich. Planning and Urban Design Standards. American Planning Association. Hoboken, N.J. Wile, 2006.

[27] An urban development area is a voluntary designation made by Virginia localities within the adopted comprehensive plan through zoning authority per the Code of Virginia § 15.2-2223.1. Designation of UDAs requires projected growth patterns, incorporation of traditional neighborhood design principles, and are incorporated in VTrans for the purposes of transportation planning.

[28] Katherine Smith, Virginia Localities Solar Ordinances and Native Vegetation (Virginia DCR: Division of Natural Heritage, December 2022)

Planned Unit Developments

In localities with restrictive or exclusionary zoning ordinances, planned use development (PUD) regulations allow for larger developments, with mixed uses and higher densities; these regulations are a combination of zoning and subdivision regulations. As alluded to, the greatest benefit of PUD regulations is flexibility in addressing large, multi-use development projects where flexibility and phasing investment are key to success, both for the locality, the developer(s), and the investors(s). PUD regulations may be established and controlled through the zoning ordinance in various ways depending on the needs of the locality.

Mountain Ridge Protection

The Code of Virginia § 15.2-2295.1 authorizes counties, cities, and towns to – where applicable – "provide for the regulation of height and location of tall buildings or structures on protected mountain ridges" by ordinance. This regulation may also be adopted as an overlay zone incorporated within the zoning ordinance. This may be something to consider as part of zoning efforts within the county to preserve the viewsheds around the Creeper Trail.

Floodplain Regulations

Often implemented as *overlay zones* through local zoning ordinances, floodplains are managed through criteria contained in 44 CFR Part 60 which regulates soil erosion and sediment control in accordance with the Virginia Erosion and Sediment Control Law (§ 62.1-44.15:51. Et. Seq.). The Act[29] provides that flood insurance shall not be sold under the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) unless the community has adopted floodplain management regulations consistent with the minimum criteria. The Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) is the state agency in Virginia responsible for coordinating state floodplain programs. Floodplain regulations are incorporated into the Uniform Statewide Building Code (USBC) and – as mentioned previously – the Virginia Erosion and Sediment Control Law, which established controls on certain "land-disturbing activities".[30]

Existing Land Use

The existing land use pattern for the Town of Damascus is relatively simplistic; however, as the town continues to redevelop and thrive, more sophisticated land use controls and policies need to be deployed. Damascus has a high percentage of residential use, which was an indicator that the town had followed its historic goals from previous comprehensive plans; however, in recent years, residential use is being replaced by short-term rentals or transient habitation. Though the town had previously been fostering an environment prepared for long-term home ownership, within the past five years, the housing trend has shifted, as discussed in **Chapter IV**. Much of the currently zoned downtown and general commercial areas also include mixed housing types.

Land Use Analysis

In the past, there have been five land use surveys conducted in the Town of Damascus since the initial comprehensive plan in 1980; all conducted by the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission. The current land use breakdown has been depicted in **Table 28** below, and illustrates figures from the 2006 and 2019 studies, excluding those from 1980 and 1999. As illustrated, Damascus has a high percentage of residentially developed land, which is a strong indicator that the town has

[29] Title 44 of the Code of Federal Regulations – Emergency Management and Assistance pertains to insurance and hazard mitigation, fire prevention and control, disaster assistance, and emergency preparedness. Additionally, it covers shipping restrictions on hazardous materials.

[30] Terminology is from DEQ Erosion & Sediment Control Handbook. Department of Environmental Quality, 1992. Also reference the 1999 DEQ Stormwater Management Handbook.

followed its historical goals set forth in previous comprehensive planning documents, fostering an environment that is prepared for long-term ownership.

Roads and streams were put in a category separate from public land use. This was done so it would be easier to understand how much land there was that could not be used for other land uses. Roads and streams cover approximately 54 acres in Damascus. The amount of land that fell in this category increased only by four acres, or ten percent from the 1980 study total of 50 acres.

Table 28: Land Use

	2006		2019	
Category	*Acres*	*Percentage*	*Acres*	*Percentage*
Residential	308	87.60	252.4	47.15
Commercial	26.5	8.10	60.9	11.37
Industrial	1	1.00	0	0
Public/ Semi-public	14.1	14.10	64.2	11.99
Open/ vacant	*	*	157.8	29.49
Total Developed	351.6	100	535.3	100

** In the 2006 survey, access to the open/undeveloped land information was unavailable.*

Source: Mount Rogers Planning District Commission 2006, 2019

Current Development Controls

Subdivision Ordinance:

In accordance with Code of Virginia §15.2-2240, the Damascus Town Council adopted a subdivision ordinance on August 18, 1977, after its preparation and recommendation by the planning commission. With a few exceptions, the subdivision ordinance sets standards for the division of land into two or more parcels for the purposes of development or sale. Article 8.2 of the ordinance prohibits the subdivision of land for building purposes within the Floodway District, referenced in the Flood Study conducted by the Tennessee Valley Authority in 1957.

Zoning Ordinance:

The existing zoning ordinance for the Town of Damascus was originally adopted in 1982; a revised version of the original zoning ordinance was adopted in 2002 under the official name "2002 Damascus Zoning Ordinance". The 2002 Damascus Zoning Ordinance was codified as part of the town's last code codification from 2001 to 2003 but has since been amended in 2018 to better guide development within the town limits. This ordinance can be referenced as an appendix to the Code of Damascus, along with **Map 2: Official Zoning Map** below. The town's current zoning ordinance is classified as Euclidean and includes two overlay zones: 1) greenspace and 2) floodplain.

Floodplain Regulations

In addition to the provisions of the subdivision ordinance concerning areas subject to flooding, Code of Damascus Chapter 30 – Floods, addresses "flood damage prevention" utilizing regulations for development within the special flood hazard area. The ordinance established in 1987 was most recently repealed and replaced in 2008 with the updated Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM) and Flood Insurance Study (FIS) provided by FEMA. The Department of Conservation and Recreation periodically releases a model ordinance for localities to utilize for proper administration of floodplains.

Building Construction Regulations

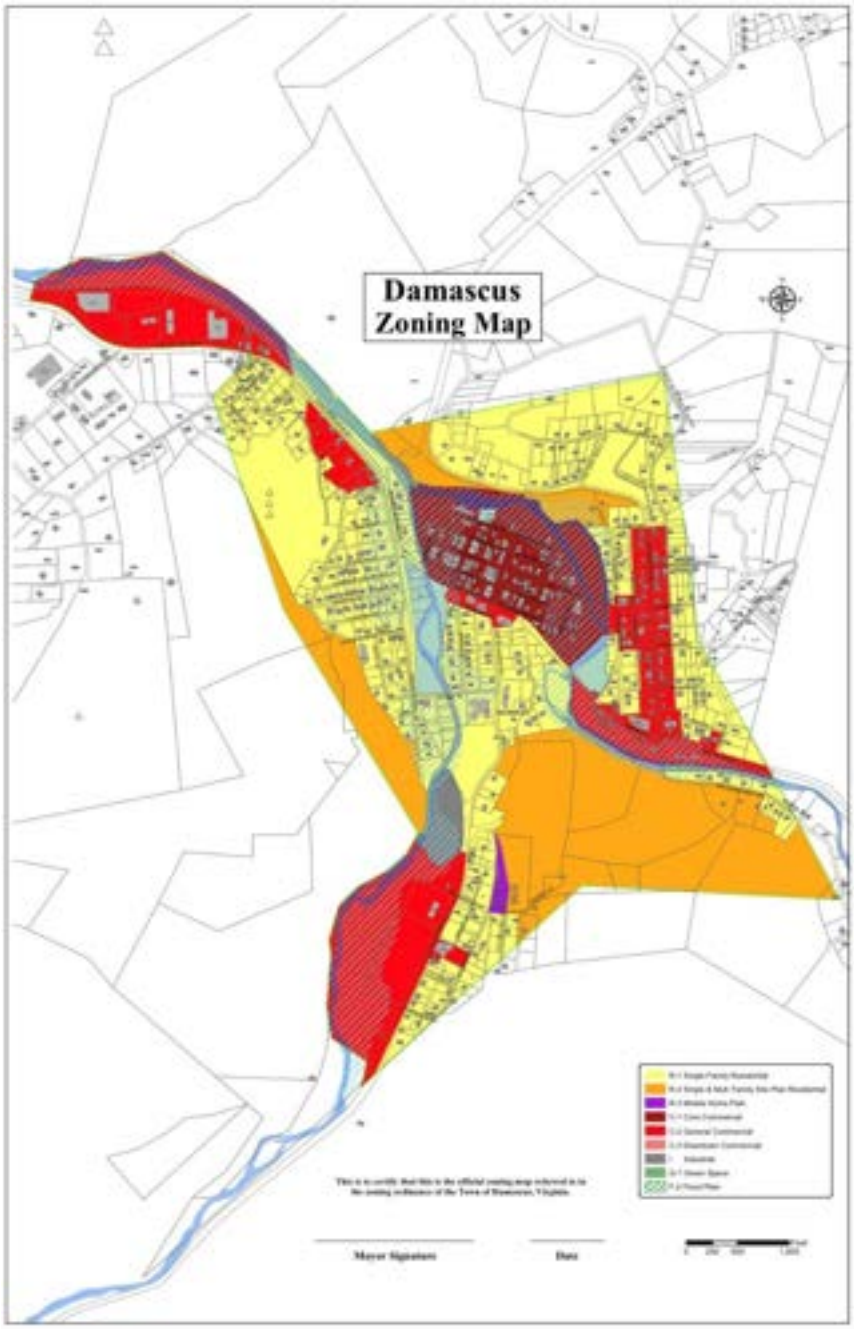
The town has not adopted the Virginia Uniform Statewide Build Code (USBC) or Maintenance Code; however, Washington County currently performs the services required under the USBC for Damascus. A formal agreement for this

relationship should be documented in accordance with the requirements of the National Flood Insurance Program and interrelated regulations. To administer the USBC and Maintenance Code regulations in Virginia, local government employees must be certified by the Department of Housing and Community Development, which would be burdensome for the Town of Damascus.

Erosion & Sediment Control Regulations

The town has not established a plan or program compliant with the Virginia Erosion and Sediment Control Program (VESCP); however, Washington County has adopted its own program, therefore the town is subject to the county's program. Considering the low level of undeveloped land within the town, there is little reason to expect that the town would need to employ or certify staff to administer erosion and sediment control or related stormwater regulation. These codes also require certified staff to administer.

Photography by Tyler Irving of Iron Mountain Media.



Map 2: Official Zoning Map (2025)
Source: Mount Rogers Planning District Commission 2025

Development Challenges

The town is served by both sanitary sewer and public water, thus soil limitations to development due to slope, soil type and location, or relation to the flood plain, are major deterrents to future growth. In total, there are nine general soil types in the Town of Damascus.

As is true with most of Southwest Virginia, geographic factors have played a significant role in the development of Town of Damascus and continues to affect land use policies. The primary factor that limits further development in Damascus is the shortage of land both available for and suitable for development. Approximately six percent of the land within the corporate limits of the Town of Damascus is unsuitable for development due to excessive slope, flooding, previous use, or any combination thereof.

There are two approaches to solving the land availability problem – one solution is through boundary adjustment. The Town of Damascus already provides a number of municipal services to areas outside the corporate limits; therefore, boundary adjustment may be financially feasible for the town and would allow room for development to occur within expanded corporate limits. A second way to increase the amount of land with developmental potential in Damascus is through more efficient use of existing land. Land that is currently available for development or becomes available in the future could be developed into condominiums or clustered housing. This type of development would allow the town to make more efficient use of its present territory. This would allow for further development through increased density of buildings (more per gross acre).

Future development is limited by flood hazards, suitable soils, and excessive slope; however, these limiting characteristics are not absolute. Land can and has been developed in these areas. In areas where soil characteristics may pose problems, specific soil analyses must be conducted to establish exact capabilities.

In the process of comprehensive planning, these restraints should be kept in mind. Land that is found unsuitable for such development can still be effectively used as parkland, open space, and agriculture. The land that is uneconomical for intense development due to excessive slope and flood hazards in the 100-year floodplain includes about 255 acres or 50 percent of the town. A good amount of the remaining land is already developed, and other portions may not be developable due to soil constraints. These factors and others to be discussed in this plan suggest that the potential for future development within the corporate limits be restricted to a small area of land.

Excessive Slope

Slope[31] (illustrated in contours shown on **Map 3**) continues to be one of the major constraints of development in and around the Town of Damascus. A large portion of the land in Damascus has a slope in excess of 20 percent. Although all slopes of 20 percent and greater do not exclude development, it would be more difficult and more costly – steeply sloped land still has the potential to be developed successfully, however, clearing, grading, and development of steep slopes can result in extensive erosion and encourage landslides or sloughing of soil and rock, excessive stormwater runoff, increased siltation and sedimentation, and the degradation of aesthetic value. The town encourages residential neighborhoods as one such development option for sloped areas. These residential areas can be planned to preserve the aesthetic qualities of the land and avoid many unnecessary engineering problems associated with the effects of stormwater run-off from developed slopes.

[31] According to HUD Exchange, related to environmental assessment factors for housing programs, "[s]lope refers to changes in the physical features of the land: its elevation, orientation, and topography". This takes into consideration erosion and stormwater concerns, and necessary mitigation factors.

Floodplain

Within the corporate boundaries of the Town of Damascus, the 100-year (1% chance) floodplain occupies approximately 113 acres – this accounts for nearly 21 percent of the total land area. The "100-year floodplain", regulated as the *special flood hazard area (SFHA)*, is defined as the area that has a one percent chance of being flooded in any single year. The current SFHA is rendered on **Map 4: Special Flood Hazard Area**.

The 100-year flood threat is a limitation to development for three primary reasons. The first and most apparent reason is that a 100-year flood would reach, and thereby damage, any structure placed in the floodplain. Secondly, any development in the floodplain, or in the watershed area, would replace existing ground cover. A change in ground cover from forestland, or another natural ground cover, to non-porous materials like buildings or asphalt will greatly increase surface runoff, increasing the impact of riverine flooding. The third factor is that a building inundated by water will displace a specific amount of water and will raise the flood level proportional to the amount of water displaced. Thus, as development takes place in a flood prone area, the threat of flood damage increases and the cost of mitigating the increase flooding potential must be factored into new developments or redevelopments.

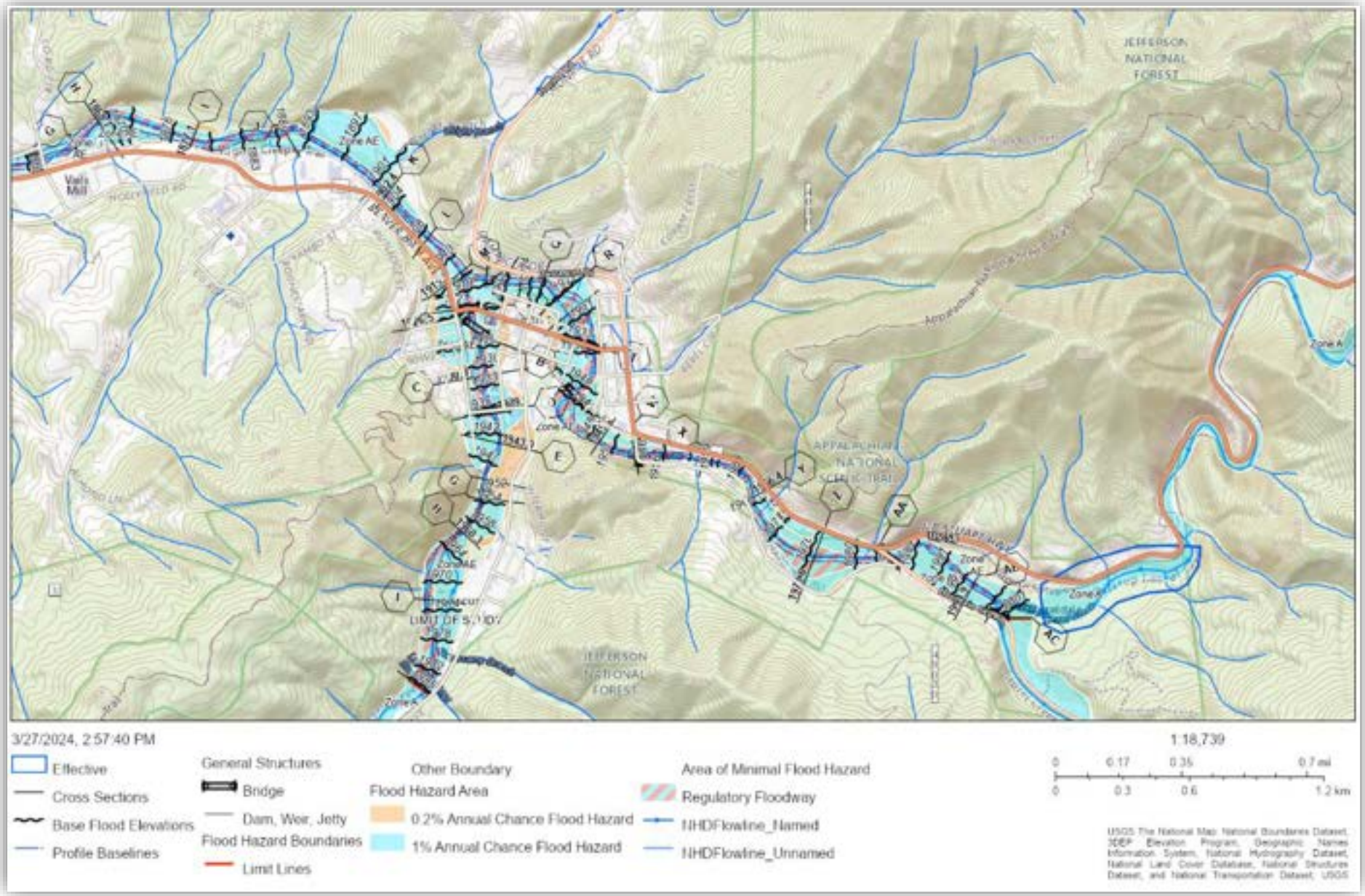
Soil Type

Soil characteristics are another impediment to building. Some soils are too elastic or clay-like to support the weight of a structure. The Frederick series is such a soil and is found in Damascus. These soils are generally 70 to 80 inches deep and would require specialized construction methods. A conventional foundation would not be stable, and basements have a tendency to crack or buckle. Soil may also be shallow or contain large stones that would require that foundations be set in hard rock thus increasing the expense of construction as drilling and blasting are needed. Examples of these soils found in Damascus are the Elliber, Ramsey, Weikert, and Gilpin series.

The most prominent soil type is the Allegheny series that comprises 43.1 percent of the Town. The *Allegheny series* includes deep well-drained soils made of material deposited by Beaverdam and Laurel Creeks. Soil mapping[32] shows, these soils comprise most of the flat land and developed areas in Damascus. This soil type makes for good agricultural land and is well suited for all types of development. The *Jefferson series* soil type underlies 21.2 percent of the town, but its capabilities decline quickly with the steepness of slope. The *Braddock series* soil (13.9%), which is made up of material carried by the creeks and washed down from higher elevations, while productive for agriculture, is unstable for building purposes due to its elasticity. The *Ramsey series* (11.1%) is found on the hills surrounding Damascus is poor for agriculture and poses problems to building because the slopes are generally too steep and hard rock is usually encountered within seven to 20 inches of the surface. The *Weikert series* (4.6%) and the Gilpin series (2.5%) have similar characteristics. The remaining soil types in Damascus are *Frederick* (2.5%), *Elliber* (0.7%), and the *Whelling* series (0.4%) – these also pose minor development challenges.

[32] Soil mapping here refers to the information in the Soil Survey of Washington County, Virginia, 1945, and Soil Survey Interpretations, by U.S. Soil Conservation Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Map 3: Special Flood Hazard Area + Contours



Source: DCR, [Virginia Flood Risk Information System]

Map 4: Special Flood Hazard Area

Source: DCR, Virginia Flood Risk Information System

Future Land Use

In a comprehensive plan, development restraints should be kept in mind. Land that is found unsuitable for such development can still be effectively used as park land, open space, and agriculture. The land that is uneconomical for intense development due to excessive slope and flood hazards in the 100-year floodplain includes about 255 acres or 50 percent of the town. A good amount of the remaining land is already developed, and other portions may not be developable due to soil constraints. These factors and others to be discussed in this plan suggest that the potential for future development within the corporate limits be restricted to a small area of land. As such, careful regulation of existing land and natural resources is critical to maintaining a balanced community.

The Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) is the state's leading natural resource conservation agency. DCR protects what Virginians care about - natural habitat, parks, clean water, dams, open space, and access to the outdoors. DCR enables and encourages people to enjoy and benefit from Virginia's natural and cultural resources. DCR is in charge of developing the Virginia Outdoors Plan, and values the diversity of nature, culture, and communities to ensure a sustainable and equitable future for recreational access and a healthy environment for all Virginians to enjoy.

Threats & Opportunities

As a *Dillon Rule* state, the Commonwealth establishes the authority that localities shall and/or may wield, often dictating the ways to which many localities are able to operate – be it to their benefit or detriment. Federal regulations also affect the capabilities and responsibilities of municipalities like Damascus to perform various functions. This can often be a challenge, since what's good for the federal government or state governments may not always be so for the localities; however, there is general guidance and support for the authorities and mandates applied to localities.

Solar and/or Wind

Though Damascus has a relatively low percentage of undeveloped land, solar and wind energy generation and/or storage facilities may still pose an imminent threat. These facilities may occupy land that would otherwise be developed to a higher and better use in an urban environment like Damascus, served by water and sewer and other utilities necessary for high-density commercial and residential uses.

Though there is little threat of wind facilities in the incorporated Damascus, threats may loom along the VA Creeper Trail corridor within Washington County; this is also a concern for solar facilities, though solar facilities pose a greater risk within the corporate boundaries. Solar facilities, if not properly regulated, may create undue burden on the town's housing quality and quantity through potential displacement or creation of additional looming capital maintenance obligations/liabilities.

Floodplain

Maintaining compliance with floodplain management regulations should always be a priority for a town like Damascus, with so much developed land located within the mapped floodplain – improper administration of floodplain regulations can significantly jeopardize the community. In 2018, Governor Northam's Executive Order 24 set new priorities for increasing Virginia's resilience to sea level rise and other natural hazards; though political priorities shift, climate change reliance remains a high priority nationwide.

Damascus should anticipate increasingly rigid floodplain regulations in the future, including, but not limited to, a mandated two-foot freeboard and regulation of the 500-year (0.01% chance) floodplain. Though this can create a significant burden for the community, it is anticipated that these additional regulatory requirements will increase resiliency. Additionally, Damascus should anticipate new regulatory maps for the NFIP based on 2021 LiDaR (Light Detecting and Ranging) data, and with significant changes due to transitioning from a one-dimensional (1D) modeling approach to a 2D modelling approach to mapping the floodplain. Though the new maps should be much more accurate relative to the original 1988 map/study, they will also more accurately reflect man-made developments, for better or worse. New flood maps may be anticipated for areas of Southwest Virginia as early as 2026.

Floodplain regulation practices are slowly changing following FEMA's transition of the existing flood insurance rating system to what is known as Risk Rating 2.0. Though the effects of *Risk Rating 2.0* – implemented in phases starting in 2021 but fully implemented as of April 01, 2023 – have yet to be fully analyzed in rural America at the time of the writing of this plan, this change to the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP) may significantly affect investment patterns within the floodplain.

Open Space

As the nation and Commonwealth begin to increase investment in climate change resilience, planning open spaces appropriately and regulating development within key areas can greatly increase the community's resilience to riverine and storm flooding. Additionally, more resources[33] are becoming available to assist localities in planning for climate change resilience. By continuing to plan for maintenance of native vegetation and open spaces, communities can maintain riverine buffers, plan for invasive pests, and incorporate open space and beneficial vegetation for the quality of life of residents and visitors. This could be considered protection of critical and sensitive areas as well as passive hazard mitigation strategies, all of which would increase the town's resilience to man-made or natural disasters.

> *We have been the most prodigal of people with land, and for years we wasted it with impunity. There was so much of it, and no matter how we fouled it, there was always more over the next hill, or so it seemed.*
>
> *William H. Whyte*[34]

Planned Unit Developments

Due to the town's current development patterns, and the need for affordable housing, higher density residential developments and mixed-use developments may provide a solution to the future needs of the town. In order to meet more modern planning and design principles such as traditional neighborhood design, Damascus's current land use regulations will need to be amended. Adding the flexibility of planned unit development regulations may give developers the ability to adapt dilapidated and underutilized spaces, such as the old industrial sites, As the Town redevelops, adaptive reuse of the vacant industrial sites may become necessary; though sprawl[35] is not a cost effective choice, the town has very few options in regard to creation of new land, therefore creating a better urban environment is critical. These more adaptive land use regulations help communities maintain solvency or at least become more resilient through more efficient use of land, which is a finite resource.

Cluster Development/Zoning

Cluster development can also be utilized to encourage open space in subdivisions or PUDs by allowing for high density development on a portion of the site in return for a mandatory dedication of open space. This generally allows for the same return on investment for developers but condenses development to mitigate environmental impacts. This may also require donation of a conservation easement.

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[33] The Department of Conservation and Recreation now offers funding administered through the Virginia Resources Commission to fund Resilience Plans, train certified floodplain managers, and provide other resources.

[34] The Last Landscape (ed. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012) - ISBN: 9780812208504. William H, Whyte was an American sociologist who focused on the effects of places on people and people on places.

[35] Sprawl, also referred to as urban sprawl or suburban sprawl by planners, is the development of land, usually at a relatively low density, moving away from urban centers, thereby creating increased cost to the local government to provide services such as water, sewer, trash pickup, streets, sidewalks, and other utilities.

Chapter VII. Services & Facilities

Community facilities and public services play an important role in the vitality of a town. For the comprehensive plan, community facilities will include a brief description of the following: education, libraries, health care, social services, recreation, public utilities, fire, police, public water supply, wastewater treatment, and solid waste collection and disposal. The Town of Damascus, Washington County, the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Federal Government, and private corporations provide a broad array of public services. This chapter will also include a discussion of the town's needs in these areas as well as recommendations for long-term and continued improvement of these services. The benefits of effective public services and community facilities are essential for attracting new businesses, residents, tourists, and industries while improving the overall quality of life for the Town's inhabitants.

Education

The Washington County Public School System provides most of the educational facilities and services for the town's residents and surrounding communities. Rhea Valley Elementary School, Damascus Middle School, and Holston High School teach students from kindergarten through twelfth grade. The public schools each provide a library, computers, a gymnasium, and athletic fields. High school students have access to vocational training through the Neff Center in Abingdon. Maintaining community schools is a high priority for the town.

Though there are no institutions of higher education in Damascus, the County is part of a service area of Virginia Highlands Community College, a two-year multi-purpose institution located in Abingdon, Virginia.

Library System

Originally established in October 1984, the Damascus Branch of the Washington County Public Library was located on Laurel Avenue near the center of downtown. Now, a relatively new 6,500 SF branch of the Washington County Library serves Damascus residents. The new Library, which opened in August of 2012, includes a 500 SF visitor center with restrooms. The library is open to the public for 44 hours per week; and has Internet access on 10 computers along with Wi-Fi for public use. There is a large Community Room for meetings and library programs as well as a study room for Tutoring and Adult Education opportunities. The library offers more than books for its patrons, there are DVD's, audio books, and CD's as well as eBooks. In addition, for reference purposes, Damascus residents can access the local public-school libraries and the libraries of the region's colleges and universities.

The library is located at 310 Water Street, and through a partnership between the town and county, incorporates an attached visitor's center and a paved portion of the Beaverdam Creek Trail, a multi-use bicycle and pedestrian trail connecting the Virginia Creeper Trail to the Washington County Ballfields traverses across the front lawn. The visitor's center serves mostly through-hikers on the Appalachian Trail due to the location of the library, which sits within the trail corridor. Parking for the library is located to the left of the building, while one of the Town's long-term public parking lots, referred to as the Wilson Street Lot, is just across the street.

Health Care

The primary health care provider in the Town of Damascus is the Holston Family Health Center. The center is managed by Stone Mountain Health Services of Pennington Gap, VA. One family practitioner, one nurse practitioner, a lab and a limited license x-ray technician, and support personnel staff in the office. Medical services are provided for 35 or more patients per day. Health care services for Damascus are adequate to meet present and future needs.

Town residents have easy access to the Johnston Memorial Hospital, a not-for-profit, operated by Ballad Health, in Abingdon. The hospital is licensed to operate 116 acute care beds with a staff of more than 900 people that provide a broad range of inpatient and outpatient services. Residents also have access to a new Urgent Care Facility located within one half mile of

Johnston Memorial Hospital. The Washington County Department of Health also offers services to all eligible residents including family planning, immunization and well-child check-ups and the WIC (Supplemental Nutrition for Women, Infant and Children) Nutritional Program.

Human Services

The Washington County Department of Social Services, located near Bristol, provides a wide range of human services to Damascus residents. People Inc. provides skills training, financing, and marketing for potential entrepreneurs, summer jobs and training for area students, a home ownership program, low-income housing assistance, housing rehabilitation services and a weatherization program as well as senior citizen services and a variety of projects designed to help low-income residents become more self-sufficient. District 3 Governmental Cooperative provides nutritional support, transportation services (marketed to the public as *Mountain Lynx*), meeting facilities, and other related services for Damascus' senior citizens.

Fire Department

Damascus is served by a volunteer fire department – designated as Station 1440. The fire department responds to calls from areas both inside and outside the immediate Damascus area, and even staffs another remote location, Green Cove Station, with facilities built in 2023.

Their equipment includes two large pumpers, one small light-duty pumper, a fully equipped light and air truck, a small light-duty rescue truck, a four-wheel off-road rescue vehicle and a large utility truck. The department responds to approximately 140 calls per year. Seventy percent of those calls are for automobile accidents. Washington County provides dispatch service for the fire, police, and rescue departments.

Rescue Squad

The Damascus Volunteer Rescue Squad (DVRS) is located at 32094 Government Road, across from Damascus Middle School. The DVRS is a mostly volunteer agency, however, it does have several paid members and does soft billing for services rendered. Washington County provides some funding and support for facilities and equipped vehicles.

Law Enforcement

The Damascus Police Department has a reciprocal agreement with Washington County that frequently requests their services outside the town's corporate limits. The police department staff consists of the police chief, one detective, two patrolmen, and five auxiliary officers. The officers each have an equipped vehicle assigned to them, plus one spare for the department. The Virginia State Police, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and Jefferson National Forest Law Enforcement also provide policing services to the town and Washington County. The offices of the Damascus Police Department are in the Town Hall building where space is limited.

Water & Wastewater Treatment

The Town of Damascus does not own or operate a sanitary sewer or public water system.

Water Supply Treatment

The Washington County Service Authority, located in Abingdon, supplies treated water to the Town of Damascus. The Service Authority provides a sufficient supply of water to meet the present and future needs of the town, with many of the residential and commercial lines having been replaced in 2022 and 2023.

Wastewater Transportation and Treatment

Since 1976, the Town of Damascus owned and operated its own sewer system, but in 2012 the town transferred ownership to the Washington County Service Authority. The treatment plant is located on U.S. Route 58 just three miles west of town. Historically, the Town's gravity flow sewer system has been plagued by excessive infiltration and inflow (I/I) compounded by frequent flooding of the Beaverdam and Laurel Creeks, high groundwater levels in general, and the mountainous terrain. Excessive amounts of I/I have historically caused hydraulic overloading of the wastewater treatment plant resulting in untreated wastewater and raw sewage bypassing the treatment plant to the South Fork of the Holston River and eventually into the Tennessee-Big Sandy River Basin.

Solid Waste

Residential solid waste pick-up is available to citizens of the town by private contract. Washington County operates self-serve convenience stations throughout the county, with the nearest convenience station located just two miles outside of downtown Damascus. Industrial and commercial solid waste collection is open to free market competition.

Power & connectivity

Electric service is provided by American Electric Power (AEP) and adequate electric power is available for future growth. Brightspeed provides long-distance and local telephone and internet, maintaining a service facility within the downtown. A relatively new Verizon cell tower was installed just north of Damascus corporate boundaries around 2010. Telephone service is reliable and adequate, and cell phone coverage is provided through Verizon, AT&T, and T-Mobile, as well as other carriers utilizing the local infrastructure. Cable television is available to citizens by private contract through Xfinity. Internet is available through Brightspeed, Xfinity, and PointBroadband, or via satellite providers.

Connectivity concerns for the Town relate to the Virginia Creeper Trail and emergency services. The surrounding national forest territory has very limited access to phone signal or internet connectivity, but Washington County has received funding from the Appalachian Regional Commission to study the issues and implement a solution.

Public Wi-Fi

The town maintains a limited public Wi-Fi network, which is on its second iteration, including a major overall in 2024 upgrading the wireless bridges and reconfiguring the access point locations for better reception. These upgrades more thoroughly connect the town's public spaces to a localized digital network and the town's websites, social media, and digital place-making resources.

Recreation

The close proximity of the Jefferson National Forest and the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area to the town provides an excellent opportunity for a wide range of outdoor activities. The Beaverdam and Laurel Creeks provide some of the best trout fishing opportunities in the state.

Parks

Since the town no longer provides water and wastewater, or other utility facilities, or trash pick-up services, the development and maintenance of a variety of recreational facilities to both encourage tourism and provide for the quality of life of residents is considered a priority. These facilities also encourage a healthier community, protect open spaces and sensitive areas, and regulate land use patterns to promote community resilience.

Damascus Town Park

The Town Park has accessible restroom facilities – renovated in 2024 – including two stalls on each side, picnic tables, benches, a playground, and a gazebo for everyday use and for the seasonal festivals that occur in the spring and summer

months. Water and electrical service with multiple hook-ups is available for festivals and vendor booths. The gazebo serves admirably as a pavilion and stage.

The town established its Damascus Town Park after intervention by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) following repetitive flooding losses and a major relocation project in the 1980s. Following the relocation of residential and commercial structures along Beaverdam Creek, the town was gifted the property to hold for public use, restricted from residential or commercial use for the future.

The gazebo – with its eventual addition, playground, bathrooms, and Veteran's Memorial were built in the following years. The park, once much of the only open space given attention by the citizen's and local officials has become somewhat busy with memorials, informational signs, electrical boxes and poles, benches, and other such structures, which has been acknowledged by current town leadership.

Photography by Matthew Holman.

Laurel Creek Park

Part of the *Damascus Waterfront [Re]development Initiative* from 2016-2021, the town received nearly $500,000 from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) to create a "riverwalk" and a greenspace, and to construct an "amphitheater", all of which would complement the ongoing downtown revitalization project, connect the Virginia Creeper Trail, Appalachian Trail, downtown, and Laurel Creek riverfront together, and create infrastructure key to the campus of the Damascus Trail Center.

The park – after several redesigns – eventually replaced a gravel parking lot, which was a mobile home park prior to flood relocation. The park includes a timber frame music stage, a timber frame pavilion, two grass lawns, a renovated bathroom facility with murals and a stone façade, a large stump carving known as the "stewardship stump", and a simply massive concrete groundwork in the shape of a customized and color-tinted compass rose, all with landscaping, banners, custom lighting, and encircled by the Laurel Creek Trail. The park currently hosts a revived Damascus Farmer's Market, and was designed by and for the community to feel more engaging and intimate as compared to the much more significant real estate of the Damascus Town Park, which is mostly open space.

In 2021, Laurel Creek Park was dedicated to John Preston Seymore, III, a local restaurateur who sadly passed away in 2020. The town dedicated the new park in honor of loving mother and Councilwoman Susan Seymore, who had been instrumental in the development of the park, as a management team member from start to finish. The community was dearly moved by the event and creation of the park.

Photography by Matthew Holman.

Roy Wright Park

Gifted to the Town of Damascus in 1986 by Lissetta Wright, the property was meant to be dedicated as Roy Wright Park in memory of her late husband. This was gifted to the Town in collaboration with the flood relocation project going on in the 1980s that created the Damascus Town Park – which it connects to – and includes frontage along Beaverdam Creek opposite the Damascus Town Park.

Nearly 37 years later, through the efforts of local officials and community stakeholders, the town established Roy Wright Park as a pocket park located adjacent to the Virginia Creeper Trail, Beaverdam Creek, and adjoining residential

neighborhood. The property has been cleared and scheduled for ongoing maintenance; the land is being included in ongoing urban forestry planning efforts, and the memorial is pending dedication. The town should continue efforts to complete this pocket park with elements that differentiate it from the other parks of Damascus.

Josie's Nature Playground

Nestled within Roy Wright Park, Josie's Nature Playground is the realized wish of a brave young girl named Josie, who truly understands the value of community. Five-year-old cancer survivor, Josie's wish was to "make five new friends". The community came together with the Make-a-Wish Foundation to create a nature playground, where Josie and other children could play and make new friends in the community for years to come. Josie's playground was opened in Fall 2023, nestled within a pocket park, and framed by trestle 16 of the Virginia Creeper Trail, and Beaverdam Creek, with the Damascus Town Park on the other side. There is pedestrian access from the Virginia Creeker Trail and vehicular access from the residential neighborhood on the other side.

This wish could not have been made a reality without the town council and staff, volunteer fire department, Make-a-Wish Foundation, and the many dedicated community volunteers.

Backer Park

Backer Park has two baseball fields, one concession stand, and a batting cage. The park is located between South Shady Avenue, the historic Rock School, and Beaverdam Creek, and adjoins the Beaverdam Creek Trail for quick access. Originally, the athletic fields were part of the Rock School, the land was donated, and the school and fields were built through the efforts of C.G. Backer who worked as the treasurer for the Smithport Extract Company. The athletic fields are still in use today by the Damascus Little League and Holston High School.

Beaverdam Creek Park

Beaverdam Creek Park is a recreation facility located on a portion of the old Bayer Corporation property, created through a partnership between the Town of Damascus and Washington County. Through a petition by citizens of Damascus and the County, the Park was developed on land owned by the town and leased to the County. It includes a Tee-ball field, two little league baseball fields and a multi-use field, with concessions stand and restroom facility.

Trails

The Town is the local access point for many highly popular recreational trails. The Virginia Creeper Trail, the Appalachian Trail, the Iron Mountain Trail, the Virginia Wildlife Trail and the Transamerica 76 National Bicycle Route transect Damascus, as do the driving routes of the Daniel Boone Heritage Trail and Crooked Road Music Heritage Trail. There are seven trails that cross at a single point, with more than fifteen other local, regional, state, or national trails. Though not all trails in the town are owned and/or maintained by Damascus, the town has an arts trail and a history trail, and actively markets each, as well as the more infrastructure-heavy Beaverdam Creek Trail. The town also owns the Laurel Creek Trail and has partial ownership of the Virginia Creeper Trail.

Appalachian Trail

The **Appalachian National Scenic Trail (AT)** is a hiking trail of national significance that traverses the Appalachian Mountains from Georgia to Maine, passing through Damascus. Technically a national park, the National Park Service describes the AT as a "2,190+ mile long public footpath that traverses the scenic, wooded, pastoral, wild, and culturally resonant lands of the Appalachian Mountains." Conceived of in 1921, the AT was completed in 1937[36] by private citizens, and is now managed, maintained, and protected by the National Park Service, US Forest Service, Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), and other state agencies and volunteer groups along the trail corridor. The Mount Rogers Appalachian Trail Club currently maintains the trail around Damascus as part of its farther-reaching jurisdiction.

[36] The first Appalachian Trail Days event held in1987 was to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Appalachian Trail.

Damascus is approximately 550 miles northbound along the AT, and the Trail Days festival is generally timed according to when many through-hikers would make it to Damascus, though the schedule has been starting earlier. The trail corridor in Damascus legally exists within the same footprint as the Virginia Creeper Trail through much of the downtown; however, the community has perceptibly rerouted the trail corridor along the main street (Laurel Avenue). The AT enters Damascus from the west above Appalachian Trail Drive, where it enters the Town Park before converging with the VCT. The National Park Service and ATC maintain authority to restrict certain developments within 100 feet of this corridor, which makes partnership crucial.

Images courtesy of Town of Damascus.

Beaverdam Creek Trail

The Beaverdam Creek Trail was the seventh trail dedicated within the Town of Damascus and further establishes the town's position as a friendly place to walk, bike, and be connected – with safety in mind. The Beaverdam Creek Trail is a rail-to-trail conversion which follows the now retired Virginia-Carolina Railroad bed and spur lines that once connected to the depot once located in the Damascus Town Park and model for the architecture of the new public library.

The Beaverdam Creek Trail is mostly a Virginia DOT Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP)-funded project initiated by the Town of Damascus, in partnership with Washington County, and locally administered by the Town. The cost of *Phase I* and *Phase II* of the project was approximately $500,250 and was funded by a TAP matching grant from VDOT by which the Town fronts 20% of the total project cost and the other 80% is grant-funded. *Phase III* was funded by a subrecipient award (approx. $57,000) through Washington County from the Virginia Tourism Corporation (VTC).

Phase I technically began with the construction of the new Damascus Public Library and the original sign for the trail and beginning section of the trail (paved section) was completed with the library in 2012. This section is paved with asphalt and connects Beaver Dam Avenue at the intersection of the Appalachian Trail with Beaverdam Creek, crossing the front lawn of the library.

Phase II was the most extensive and includes a bridge across Beaverdam Creek, directly connecting the library with the recreation ball fields on the other side (Backer Park). The trail and bridge are open to pedestrian and bicycle use, with the bridge spanning 14 LF by 90 LF across Beaverdam Creek, excluding the wooden deck approaches – construction was completed on September 28th of 2018. This span bridge will require period inspections and maintaince, but the approaches are expected to be the first compoenents to need maintenance.

Images courtesy of Gavin Blevins.

Phase III was completed in 2023 and connects Backer Park to the area known as *Extract,* and the Washington County Recreation Park, which is the staging ground for the town's Fourth of July fireworks show and Tent City during Trail Days. This phase also included much-needed landscaping and tree-planting efforts along South Shady Avenue to which the trail runs parallel from Backer Park to the Washington County Recreation Park.

Blue Ridge Snorkel Trail

The Blue Ridge Snorkel Trail is made up of publicly accessible river and stream locations in Virginia and North Carolina where people can safely snorkel and experience the underwater world. Each site is unique and offers a different set of habitats and species to observe. This Trail is located at the Laurel Creek confluence in the Damascus Town Park.

Images courtesy of Julie Kroll.

Daniel Boone Heritage Trail

The *Daniel Boone Heritage Trail* is a regional "highway" established in the early 1920s and 30s to follow the route Daniel Boone took on his first journey to Kentucky. The highway travels Route 91 from Mountain City, Tennessee, to Damascus, where the trail joins Route 58, where it remains throughout the State of Virginia.

Laurel Creek Trail

Built as part of the *Damascus Downtown Revitalization* and *Damascus Waterfront [Re]Development Initiative* projects completed in early 2021, the Laurel Creek Trail was designed to connect major economic engines and assets of the town, focused within the downtown area. The total length of the asphalt greenway is less than a half mile, however, it connects the Virginia Creeper Trail, Appalachian Trail, downtown, Laurel Creek Park, post office, and Damascus Trail Center. The greenway[37] includes wayfinding signage and forms a loop with the Creeper Trail/Appalachian Trail. It also secured a portion of the Laurel Creek waterfront as an open space for floodplain protection. The centerpiece of the greenway is Laurel Creek Park, creating a visual gear in a chain around downtown. The greenway is open to pedestrians and bicycles.

Photography by Destination by Design.

[37] Moskowitz, Harvey S., et al. The Complete Illustrated Book of Development Definitions. 4th ed., Routledge, 2017. Describes the loose and varied considerations by which greenways are defined

Virginia Creeper Trail

The **Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail** (VCT) – or *Virginia Creeper Trail* – is a non-motorized 34.3-mile converted Norfolk and Western railbed, which runs from Abingdon through Damascus and the Jefferson National Forest to the North Carolina border. This combination of hiking, biking, and horse trails attracts more than 250,000 annual visitors. Beginning the conversion process to a recreation trail in 1984, the trail was dedicated by Congress as a National Recreation Trail in 1987 and officially opened to the public in 1989. In 2014, it was inducted into the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's Hall of Fame, and remains to this day a model for rail-to-trail projects worldwide.

The ownership and management of the VCT is complicated. There are 47 bridges and trestles along the trail from Whitetop to Abingdon, under the ownership of either the US Forest Service, National Park Service, or the Town of Abingdon – Damascus owns none of the trestles. Though the bridges and trestles are owned fee simple, the corridor of the abandoned rail bed is a mix of deed, easement, and right-of-way, with Abingdon and Damascus jointly owning the section from Abingdon to Drowning Ford, which is all right-of-way and easement, and the Town of Damascus owning fee simple the section from Drowning Ford to the Town Park. The National Park service owns from the Damascus Town Park to the boundary of the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, including trestle 16 and 17, due to the confluence of the Appalachian Trail within the same corridor; the USFS, however, maintains this section of trail along with everything else up to Whitetop.

The VCT brings in an estimated 250,000-300,000 visitors annually, with visitors nationwide, and received a boom number of visitors from 2019-2023; however, the cost to maintain the trail is not inconsequential. Once maintained through the corporate efforts of the railroads, trail tread aside, the 47 bridges and trestles alone have lifespans and significant maintenance and replacement costs. Unfortunately, the foresight required to plan 50 years in the future in accordance with an estimated lifespan of the trestles has been a challenge for the governing bodies that cumulatively own the trail. To make matters more difficult, as the trestles enter the later stages of life, deterioration accelerates[38]. Allegedly, at the time that the USFS acquired its portion of the trail, the annual maintenance costs were estimated to be around $1 million – that was 50 years ago.

Planning for a comprehensive approach and implementing policies to assure the long-term sustainability of the trail is critical for the future of Damascus and the region. Partnering with fellow trail managing agencies and regional partners is critical for the repairs and reconstruction of the trail necessary from decades of deferred maintenance and the natural disaster of Hurricane Helene on September 27, 2024. The adoption of a trail master plan, funding strategies and investment plans, and formal documentation of partner roles is necessary for long-term sustainability.

Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy

Established as non-profit in 1997, the Creeper Trail Club became the Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy (Conservancy) around 2019, beginning a strategic master planning process in 2022 to redefine its mission from primarily a volunteer coordinating agency to a true conservancy. In the early years after becoming a conservancy, the Conservancy began to transition from just organizing the Creeper Trail Advisory Board, volunteers, and donations, to facilitating stakeholders, trail owners, and discussions with funding agencies. Furthermore, the Conservancy now administers funding and coordinates engineering services for the trail. In this crucial period for the trail, the Conservancy has become a crucial partner in the long-term sustainability of the Virginia Creeper Trail. The Creeper Trail Master Plan (2022)[39] functions as a strategic operations and organization plan for the Conservancy, as well as a trail management and conservation plan for the trail managers and stakeholders.

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[38] Accelerated degradation of bridge or trestle components is related to multiple factors according to Prosim Engineering, including: rot, age, weight of material, pests, rust/corrosion of connectors, temperature and moisture cycles, earth pressures, flood debris, live loading, and other stresses created by breakdown of other components.

[39] The Virginia Creeper Trail: A Master Plan to Guide and Sustain Our Trail. EQUINOX, Don Owens, and Melissa Weddell, 2022.

The Conservancy is currently facilitating discussions between the stakeholders and managing partners, managing engineering contracts trail-wide to coordinate crucial repairs to the Creeper Trail and its trestles and bridges. Additionally, the Conservancy is working in formal partnership with USFS to expedite administrative processes and secure funding for the trail.

Image courtesy of Julie Kroll.

Facilities

Beyond the infrastructure, complementary and accessory to the parks and open spaces, the town also owns, manages, and or leases other facilities conducive to daily operations and accomplishing the town's mission. The long-term maintenance obligations of these facilities should be considered carefully during budget and capital improvements planning processes. Infrastructure assets are considered liabilities for a local government, which are meant to operate indefinitely.

Considerations for financing new facilities, capital improvements, and general financial management of operations and assets are discussed more in-depth in **Chapter IX: Government & Finance**.

Damascus Trail Center

As part of an Appalachian Regional Commission POWER grant awarded in the fall of 2016 to the Friends of Southwest Virginia, in partnership with the Town of Damascus and Mount Rogers PDC, the town managed the construction of the Damascus Trail Center at 209 West Laurel Ave – just across from the Town Hall. The town owns the facility and has partnered with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) as the primary tenant for the new trail center. The property is leased to the ATC for a period of two years, with two potential renewals of five years each, for a total of 20 years. The deed covenant on the property requires it to function as a "trail center" for 20 years.

The trail center hosts visitor information, exhibits on the neighboring trails and assets, and training seminars, and has become a highly utilized conference location for regional partners. The trail center also serves as the anchor piece for downtown businesses and recreational assets such as the Appalachian Trail, Virginia Creeper Trail, Laurel Creek Trail & Park, and the town's other amenities. Through this project, Damascus has further secured its namesake as "Trail Town USA".[40]

Design illustration by McCarty Holsaple McCarty Architects, Inc.

While Friends of SWVA was awarded the bulk of the project funding, the Town of Damascus secured additional funding from the Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission and provided the site; the final construction costs for the trail center came in around $790,000. The selected architectural firm for the project was McCarty Holsaple McCarty Architects, Inc. out of Knoxville, TN, and design began in November 2017; sub-consultant firms included Prosim Engineering, Gay & Neel, Inc.,

[40] The Damascus Trail Center (DTC) project was featured in an article in the Fall 2017 issue of the AT Journeys magazine titled VISITOR CENTER COMING TO TRAIL TOWN USA, by Catherine Van Noy, as well as the Fall 2022 issue titled A Model for Visitors Centers.

Holston Engineering, and Quinn Craughwell. Wallberg Construction had the project substantially complete in early 2021, with a soft opening in August 2021 and the grand opening on August 26, 2022.

The facility is located partially in the floodplain, elevated, with most of the greenspace in the floodplain and the facility outside of the special flood hazard area. The site was previously entirely impervious pavement; therefore, the town partially returned the site to a pervious material. The landscaping is native by principle. The facility is approximately 2,100 square feet, with an additional ~1,000 square feet of covered deck space and includes a reclaimed two-car garage on site for storage of equipment and indoor training space that wouldn't be suitable to be held inside the trail center. The facility has a robust HVAC system and lighting package and will remain an asset to the town if properly maintained and leveraged in its future endeavors.

Pool

The Town of Damascus owns and operates a junior Olympic-sized pool near the Creeper and Appalachian Trails, located at 399 Trestle Street. The pool forms an "L" shape generally, with a length of 80 feet by 45 feet wide and a depth of 3 feet gradually descending to 5 feet, for the main section, while the foot of the "L" is 35 feet wide by 30 feet long with a 12-foot depth for diving. Additionally, there is a kiddie pool of approximately 12 feet by 14 feet with a depth of only 12 inches. The facility has restrooms, shower rooms, concessions stand, diving board, and sprinklers for the kiddie pool.

Built in the early 1980s, the facility needs considerable maintenance and updates and is a significant liability to the town. The operations alone generally run a net negative revenue for the town, while the necessary capital improvements, safety improvements, and accessibility improvements would be a significant burden on the town's finances. The town should carefully consider the needs of the pool in coming years and determine the best steps forward. In regard to increasing the income of the pool, potential advancements could include consideration towards utilizing this asset for purposes outside of its standard use, considering potential funding options through grants or reserves.

Town Hall

The Damascus Town Hall is located on Laurel Avenue (main street), across from the Damascus Trail Center, and hosts the town's administrative staff as well as the police department and volunteer fire department. The truck bays for the fire department are built onto the side of the town hall, and the police department on the other side. The building is in need of roofing repairs and accessibility updates internally, as well as generally remodeling; however, many of these updates are underway at the time of the writing of this plan. Office space is currently at capacity with very little potential for expansion. Various departments are competing for existing space, though there remains an excellent working relationship. These facilities have been flooded previously, and are below the special flood hazard area, but are built to withstand flooding without significant damage.

Public Works

The town built a new maintenance shop on Shady Avenue, away from downtown and other competing land uses, in 2015 after renting a small space in the back of a building downtown for many years. The construction of this new facility was a wise financial decision for the town, removed an incompatible use from the downtown area, and created more space for the town to store necessary equipment, supplies, and materials. The facility is expected to be low maintenance based on its construction materials; however, the town should not dismiss landscaping efforts around the facilities to mitigate environmental and social impact to neighborhoods in the vicinity.

Chapter VIII. Transportation

Because how we get there matters... transportation planning is crucial for every community and should be considered carefully as part of every planning process. Transportation systems are perhaps a locality's most expensive infrastructure investment, and one of its most basic functions. Transportation systems must efficiently allow for the movement of people, services, and merchandise within and between the locality and other areas. Transportation planning additionally influences economic activity and patterns of growth by providing access to land. This must be coordinated with land use regulations and existing land capabilities. Planning of this type must consider access to and from major collector streets and arterial roadways at a minimum.

Transportation Planning

According to the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT)... "[i]n Virginia, land use is the prerogative of local governments, while transportation decisions are generally made at the state level." Localities are required by the commonwealth to develop a comprehensive plan in accordance, with Code of Virginia § 15.2-2223, which requires certain elements to be included – most specifically transportation – in order to most appropriately plan for future land use. The Virginia Department of Transportation shall, upon request, provide localities with technical assistance in preparing such a transportation plan. VDOT assists localities with access management standards, land use permitting, traffic impact analyses, as well as transportation-efficient land use and design[41].

Much of the district's transportation planning is completed through the Rural Technical Committee (RTC), hosted by the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission, and responsible for producing the Regional Long Range Transportation Plan (RLRTP). RLRTP is a formalized effort on behalf of the state to improve communication with local officials in small urbanized and rural areas (areas with less than 50,000 people), giving them a stronger voice in transportation decision making and programming, including the VDOT Six Year Improvement Program (SYIP). The format resembles that of the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), which coordinates transportation planning and programming in Virginia's urbanized areas as mandated by federal law. The benefits of involving local stakeholders in rural transportation planning include increased trust in government, better plans and programs, stronger support for actual implementation and improved performance of transportation systems. The current RLRTP is the 2045 Rural Long Range Transportation Plan, adopted in Spring 2024.

Important concepts in transportation planning include consideration of linkage and access management related to land use, wayfinding, accessibility, and streetscape design. Access management in Damascus is generally coordinated through VDOT, however the town does have its own local streets and the authority to create new public access ways through subdivisions or development of previously undeveloped rights-of-way. Spacing, location, design, and necessity play crucial roles in the decision-making process due to considerations for safety and long-term liability. Linkage of the transportation network to assets, neighborhoods, and amenities – including wayfinding signage – is key to successful economic development initiatives. Perhaps most critical is the design of the transportation network, which must safely and intuitively serve the citizens of the town while also functioning in a sustainable manner. The solvency of the locality may depend on the flexibility and efficiency of its transportation network.

Complete Streets

Complete Streets[42], *context sensitive design*, and *green streets* are similar concepts that promote a more comprehensive approach to the design and function of roadways. The key premise is that roadways should be designed and operated to enable safe access for all users, including pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and bus riders of all ages and abilities. Streets

[41] VDOT provides on-going technical assistance and guidance related to land use and development: https://www.vdot.virginia.gov/doing-business/technical-guidance-and-support/land-use-and-development/

[42] Complete Streets is a term defined by the Federal Highway Safety Administration (FHSA) and the FHSA is focused on supporting agencies to plan, develop, and operate safe and safe-feeling streets for all users – equitable streets and networks that prioritize safety, comfort, and connectivity.

should be engineered to meet the demands placed on the roadway and should be done so in a way that minimizes negative impacts and recognizes the character and function of the surrounding area. For instance, even though a downtown street may be heavily travelled, it should not be designed to function like a high-speed arterial.

Building upon the importance of transportation planning and functional design, studies are finding measurable economic benefits to complete streets beyond their known benefits of traffic calming, bike and pedestrian safety, and pleasing design language.[43] Research published by Arthur C. Nelson and Richard Hibberd studied 25 complete streets in 16 places and identified economic benefits including, but not necessarily limited to, creation of 44,000 new jobs, $2.6 billion in wages, 16,000 new households, and $6 billion in new development.[44] Planners and communities are learning to appreciate the values of complete streets beyond transportation planning, including safety, efficiency, accessibility, equity, and inclusion. Additionally, complete streets lead to healthier communities.

Department of Transportation (VDOT)

Most of the Town's roads are managed and funded by VDOT and fall into the jurisdiction of VDOT's Bristol District, though there are some small streets and alleys owned and managed by the Town. Generally, streets with a high enough traffic count to justify sidewalks are under the control of VDOT.

The Town is rural in nature, though relatively compact due to the surrounding geographic features; as such, Damascus has not yet identified any Urban Development Areas (UDA) in accordance with Code of Virginia § 15.2-2223.1. Urban development areas are characterized as areas suitable for higher density development and can be designated by localities to meet projected residential and commercial growth for a period of 10-20 years. The boundaries and size of these areas must be reviewed every five years in conjunction with the comprehensive plan.

Virginia Transportation Plan (VTrans)

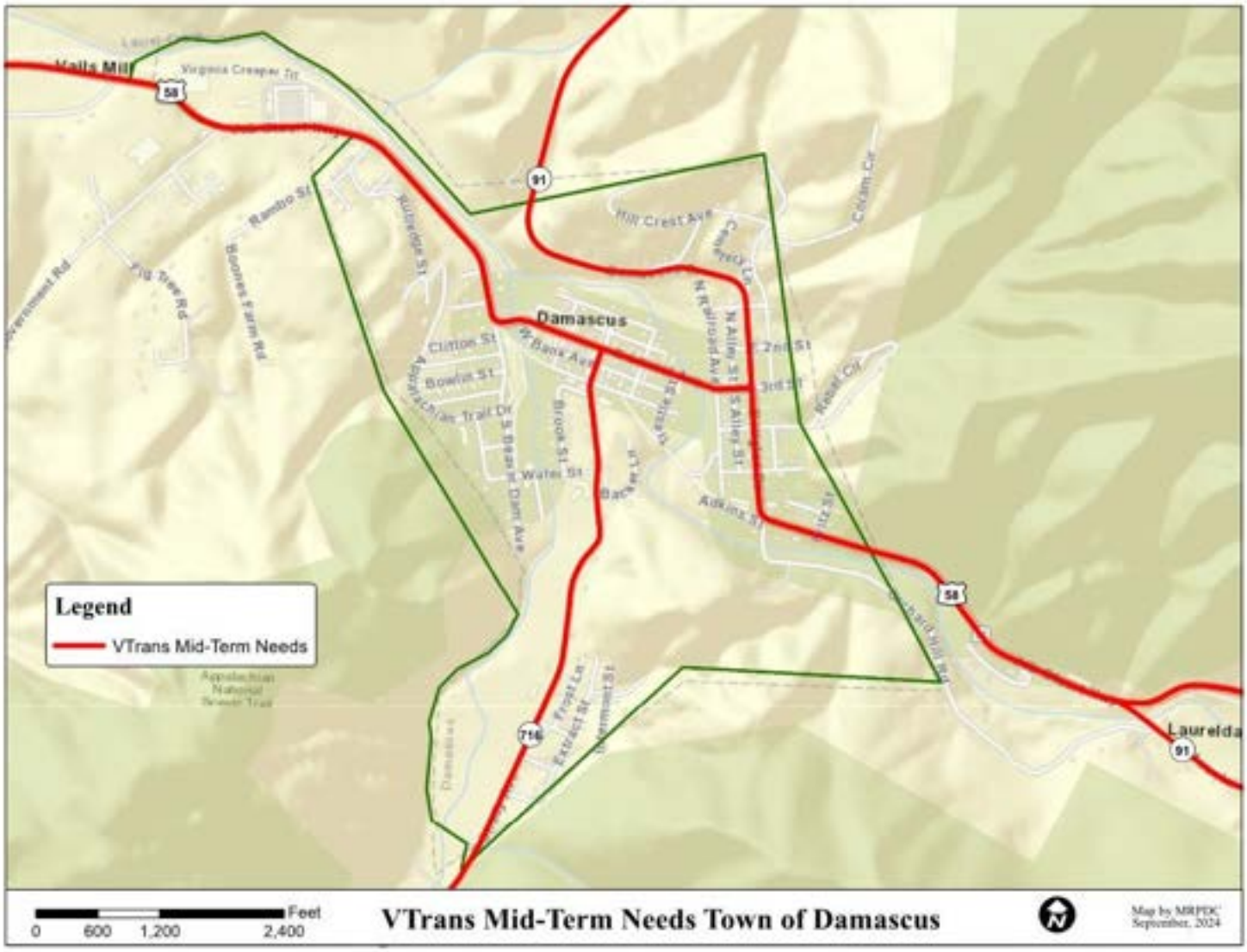
Virginia has the nation's third largest system of state-maintained highways, totaling approximately 58,000 miles of arterial, collector, and local roads, including around 20,000 bridges and structures – this does not include independent cities and towns, and counties authorized by special legislation to maintain their own local transportation systems, receiving funds from VDOT to do so according to accepted standards.

The transportation network is managed by VDOT in accordance with Virginia's Transportation Plan (*VTrans*), which has four focus areas: vision, mid-term planning, long-term planning, and strategic actions. Additionally, this plan develops a long-term risk and opportunity register to prepare for *Megatrends* including climate change, technological advancements, consumption patterns, and socio-demographic patterns. The current version of the state's transportation plan is titled the **VTrans 2040 Multimodal Transportation Plan.** VTrans identifies and prioritizes transportation needs in 10-year increments, which it refers to as "Mid-terms Needs". These listed needs can be utilized to leverage funding from VDOT and Federal Highway Safety Administration programs. **Map 5** illustrates mid-term needs related to Damascus, revealing that all the arterial highways in Damascus are listed.

[43] Featured in the APA's Planning Magazine, an article titled Complete Streets Drive Housing, Jobs and Retail Gains by Arthur C. Nelson, FAIP, published in American Planning Association's Planning Magazine on August 01, 2024.

[44] Arthur C. Nelson and Robert Hibberd, Complete Streets as a Redevelopment Strategy. Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research; Volume 26, Number 2, 2024. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research.

Map 5: VTrans Mid-term Needs, Damascus, 2024



Source: VTrans; Mount Rogers Planning District Commission

Commonwealth Transportation Board

The Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) creates and maintains the transportation system in Virginia. The CTB uses a Six-Year Improvement Program to allocate funds for transportation projects proposed for development, construction, or study in the next six years. The program is updated on an annual basis. The Six-Year Improvement Program is discussed in further detail later in this chapter. Under the general supervision of the CTB, the Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) is responsible for the administration of programs related to public transportation and rail (including public and freight) functions.

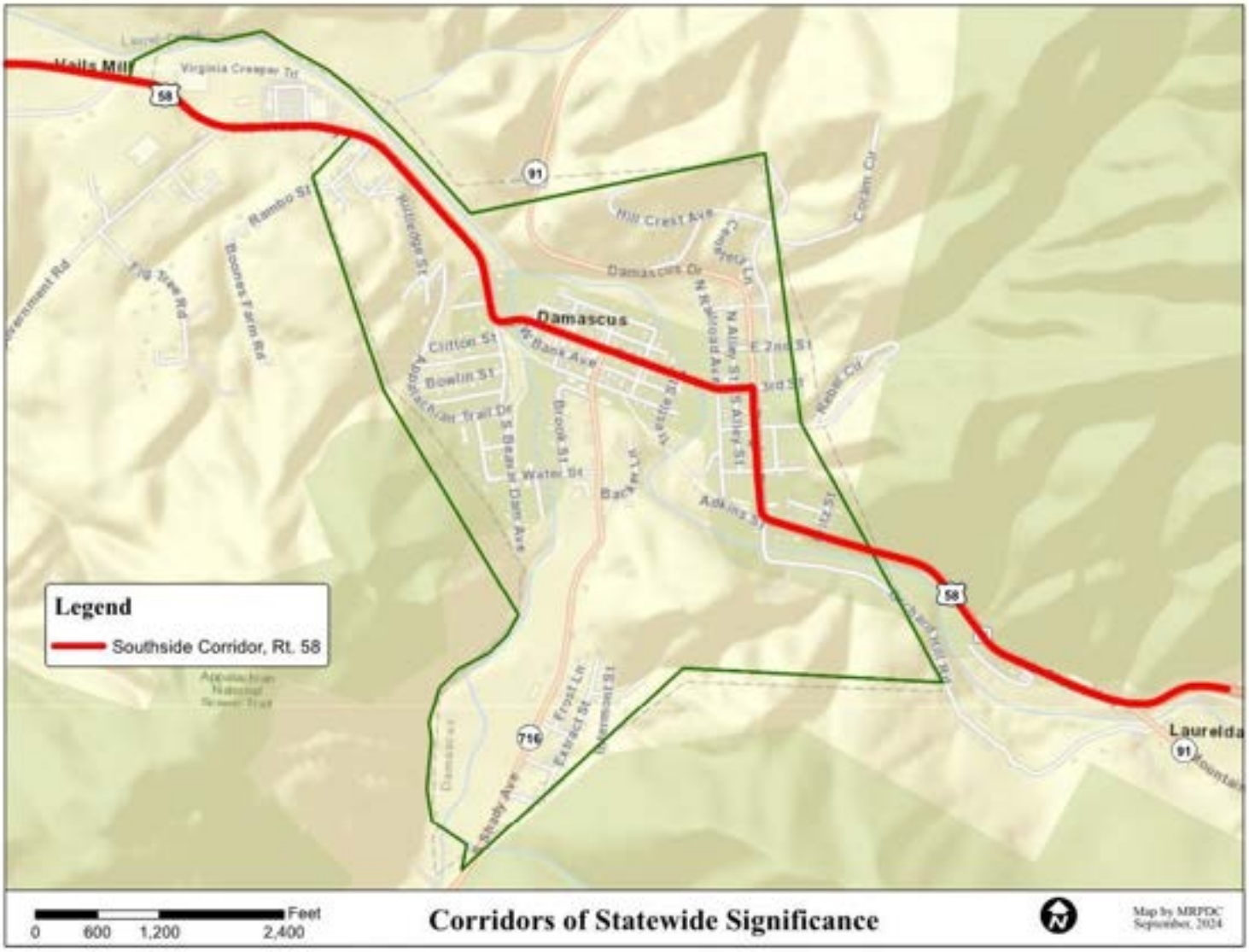
Office of Intermodal Transportation

The Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment (OIPI) – within the Office of the Secretary of Transportation – was created in 2002 to support and advise the Secretary in their role as the Chairman of the Commonwealth Transportation Board. The OIPI takes on a leadership role within the performance-based planning and programming process: planning, development of solutions and programs, investment strategies, and monitoring and evaluating the performance of investments. The OIPI also administers the Growth & Accessibility Planning (GAP) Technical Assistance (or GAP-TA) program in accordance with VTrans.

Corridors of Statewide Significance

Corridors of Statewide Significance (CoSS) as defined in VTrans2035 are *"An integrated, multimodal network of transportation facilities that connect major centers of activity within and through the Commonwealth and promote the movement of people and goods essential to the economic prosperity of the state."* All CoSS have some common components, such as rail travel, but there are also common strategies for improvements – including the goals of safety and security, system preservation and maintenance, and/or mobility, connectivity, and accessibility. Shown on **Map 6**, the only CoSS in Damascus is U.S. Route 58, known as the Southside Corridor.

Map 6: Corridors of Statewide Significance, Damascus



Source: Mount Rogers Planning District Commission, 2024

VDOT Six-Year Improvement Program

As required by the Code of Virginia §33.2-214, the Commonwealth Transportation Board (CTB) allocates public funds to transportation projects over six fiscal years, comprising the Six-Year Improvement Program (SYIP). State law authorizes the CTB with power and duty to coordinate planning for financing transportation needs, including needs for highways railways, seaports, airports, and public transportation and set aside funds, among other things.

From the Commonwealth Transportation Board's website, the CTB updates the SYIP each fiscal year (starting July 1). As revenue estimates are updated, new priorities are identified, and existing projects advance. Every Fall, public meetings are held across the state on project priorities and the SYIP. Through this process, public input is taken into consideration as the next update of the SYIP is drafted and presented to the CTB in the Spring, whereafter, public meetings are held considering the draft SYIP prior to adoption of the final program in June.

The CTB allocates project funds using the following priorities, in no particular order, as guidance:

- Fund deficits in current project phases.
- Maximize use of federal funds to meet federal strategy.
- Fund project phases underway, as well as project phases that start in the current federal fiscal year (Oct 01).
- Fund deficit bridges and paving projects.
- Fund Appalachian Development Highway System planned projects with an average of 4% of total federal maintenance and construction funds over the six years.
- Fund deficit bridges with an average of 13% of total federal maintenance and construction funds over the six years.
- Increase funding for preliminary engineering.
- Support development of private-public partnerships (Code of Virginia, §33.2-214(D)).
- Allocate funds in a way consistent with planned obligations and expenditures.
- Redirect inactive balances on projects.

According to VDOT, "[t]he SYIP contains both linear projects data as well as a point layer representing the summary of both point and line projects. In the summary layer, linear projects are converted to points based on the centroid of the line and are combined with the normal point projects into a single dataset. Spatial data is intended to highlight mappable projects in the SYIP but may not include all records due to unique business circumstances. Data included in this layer is produced, owned, and managed by VDOT Infrastructure Investment Division (VIID)." This data is available through VDOT's Open Data Portal, Virginia Roads.

Table 29: VDOT Six Year Improvement Projects, Zip Code 24236

UPC #	Description	Route	District	Road System	Jurisdiction	Estimate	FY25	FY26-30
16382	Parallel Ln-Corridor Dev (Rhea Vally)	58	Bristol	Primary	Washington County	$55,716,000	0	0

Source: VDOT Six Year Improvements Program

Modes of Transportation

Roads & Highways

The main transportation infrastructure in Damascus is the road and highway system which includes all public roadways ranging from primary to secondary state roads. The quality of such a network is vital to the safe and efficient movement of people and goods. The following sections provide background data, traffic volumes and trends, pertinent Six-Year Plan elements and finally, a summary of problems and opportunities.

Functional Classifications

Interstate

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) defines an *Interstate Highway* as "[l]imited access roads designed for high-speed travel. They have a minimum of four lanes and are divided by a median strip."

The nearest interstate highway is Interstate 81 (I-81), which extends from Interstate 40 east of Knoxville, Tennessee, to Canada. I-81 passes through Bristol, Abingdon, Glade Spring, Marion, and Wytheville in the Mount Rogers Planning District. At Wytheville, I-81 intersects with Interstate 77, which links Columbia, South Carolina, and Cleveland, Ohio. Travelers from Damascus to points south can reach I-81 via U.S. Route 58 to Abingdon in approximately 12 minutes – though, with each completed four-lane section of Rte. 58, this time is being reduced. For northward travel, the interstate can be reached via Route 91 at Glade Spring in approximately the same amount of time.

Arterial Highway

VDOT defines a *Rural Arterial Highway* as "[r]oads which range from two-lane to multilane, divided highways with controlled access, designed to move high volume traffic at high speeds between rural and urban areas of concentrated activity."

At full design, rural arterials include the Interstate System and most rural freeways. The primary arterial route serving Damascus is U.S. Route 58, which is the main east-to-west corridor for through traffic. Route 58 runs northwest to I-81 near Abingdon, which is 10.87 miles in length; and east to Volney which is 33.74 miles in length. In the easterly direction Route 58 connects Damascus with Mount Rogers National Recreation Area and the communities of Konnarock and Whitetop.

Major Collectors

VDOT defines a *Major Collector* as "[r]oads having two to four lanes and usually undivided." They are intended to link neighborhoods or areas of homogeneous land use with arterial streets. It is usually a public highway serving moderate traffic volumes. Collectors serve dual functions: collecting traffic between local roads and arterial streets and providing access to abutting properties.

Route 91 is the only major collector in Damascus. The route runs north to I-81 at Glade Spring, which is 13.08 miles in length, and south to the Tennessee line, which is 1.62 miles in length. In the southerly direction, Route 91 connects Damascus with the Wildlife Management Area of the Cherokee National Forest, the communities of Taylor's Valley, Virginia, and Laurel Bloomery and Mountain City in Tennessee.

Minor Collectors

VDOT defines a *Minor Collector* as "a two-lane road that serves to collect low density local traffic and carry it to local centers or to traffic distributors of a higher order." The collector road or street should allow access to abutting properties consistent with the level of service desired.

A minor collector that serves Damascus is Virginia Route 716 (Shady Avenue). Route 716 runs south from Damascus toward Shady Valley, Tennessee; it becomes Tennessee Route 133 at the state line. This route connects Damascus with the Backbone Rock Recreation Area and the Wildlife Management Area of the Cherokee National Forest.

Scenic Highways

The closest designated Scenic Parkway is the Blue Ridge Parkway at the southeastern tip of Grayson County. The section of Route 91 from Glade Spring to the Tennessee line is designated as a Virginia Scenic Byway. Route 58/603 from Damascus to Konnarock is also designated as a Scenic Byway, and Route 58 from Damascus to Volney is designated as a Scenic Road. These designations are decided by the Virginia Department of Transportation. The Scenic Roads Map for the Commonwealth states "[t]his road meet(s) the agencies' standards of high aesthetic or cultural value and lead to or (is) within areas of historical, natural, or recreational significance. The designations are made in cooperation with local governments."

Local Roads

The local road system serves primarily to provide direct access to adjacent land parcels. These roads should be designed for low travel speeds.

Bike & Pedestrian

The existing bikeway and pedestrian system in the Town of Damascus has developed over the last 50 to 75 years. Bicycle and horse paths and hiking trails exist throughout the Mount Rogers region traversing some of the most beautiful scenery in Virginia. Damascus's centrality to the recreational trails and many outdoor amenities, as well as its close proximity to the National Recreation Area, make planned pedestrian and bicycle facilities a necessity. The purpose of this section is to present the town's existing pedestrian and bicycle transportation corridors and facilities in a format that focuses upon the future of that transportation network. One of the goals of this plan is to connect outlying residential areas with Laurel Avenue and downtown, the Town Park, Laurel Creek Park, Beaverdam Creek Park, Backer Park, and regional hiking and biking trails through an established sidewalk and bicycle network.

The on- and off-road bike paths, horse, and pedestrian trails are a unique and integral part of Damascus's transportation system. The Virginia Creeper Trail, the Appalachian Trail, the Iron Mountain Trail, the Bike 76 Route, and the Beaverdam Creek Trail all interconnect and pass within the corporate limits of the town.

There has been a tremendous increase in usage on pedestrian, bicycle, and horse paths and these systems are recognized as the backbone of the local economy. Paramount to the planned development of tourism, it is important that these facilities be identified, and that future development or construction maintain or improve the visual and structural integrity of these systems. The development of complimentary facilities, information centers, and rest areas should be encouraged.

Airports

Commercial air passenger service is provided by Tri-Cities Airport, located near Blountville, Tennessee. Tri-Cities Airport is served by ASA and Comair Delta flights, USAir, and United Express, which provide service to airports throughout the country. Also available at Tri-Cities Airport are air freight and charter services.

Virginia Highlands Airport, located three miles southwest of Abingdon, is the nearest general aviation facility to Damascus. Airport facilities include a 75-foot wide, 4,470-foot-long paved runway, dusk-to-dawn lighting, hangar space, and fuel.

Rail Service

Rail service to and from Damascus was discontinued in April of 1976. Prior to this time, rail service was provided by the Norfolk and Western Railway, formerly the Virginia-Carolina Railway. The railroad tracks have since been removed and the main railroad bed has been converted to the Virginia Creeper Trail, a non-motorized shared-use trail.

The nearest rail service is the Norfolk and Southern Railway terminal in Bristol, which provides freight connections throughout the country; however, there is no passenger rail service in Washington County. A feasibility study for instituting passenger rail service connecting Bristol, Richmond and Washington, D.C. was completed by the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation in 1996. In recent years, passenger rail service has been extended as far as Roanoke and Blacksburg, with potential to connect to Bristol. More recently, there have been discussions of an inland port to be sited somewhere in Washington County – this could significantly affect the surrounding region.

Public Transit

Though there are several very good shuttle operations in the Town of Damascus which provide transportation to hikers and bikers to and from various trail heads, as well as to Abingdon, the Mountain Lynx operated by District Three Government Cooperative, provides public transportation throughout Bland, Carroll, Grayson, Smyth, Washington, and Wythe counties, as well as the City of Galax. Mountain Lynx provides fixed-route loops and demand-response routes serving Abingdon, Marion, Wytheville, and Galax, with weekly routes throughout the counties.

Photography by Matthew Holman.

Bike & Pedestrian Transportation

For more than two decades, the Town has been shifting focus to redeveloping how it envisions and implements the local transportation network following the establishment of the Virginia Creeper Trail in 1987. The Creeper Trail converted a vacated railroad bed to a multi-use bicycle and pedestrian corridor that not only stretched from Abingdon to Whitetop but also traversed 3 of 5 identified sectors of the town: west ("Punkin'ville"), central (downtown), and southeast, excluding south ("Extract"), and northeast ("Red Hill"). With the addition of significant bicycle traffic to the existing hiker traffic along the Appalachian Trail, demand increased for non-motorized transportation planning. The development of the *Beaverdam Creek Trail*, completed in September 2018, connected the Creeper Trail, Town Park, Damascus Public Library, Beaverdam Ballfields, and Backer Park to the south ("Extract") sector.

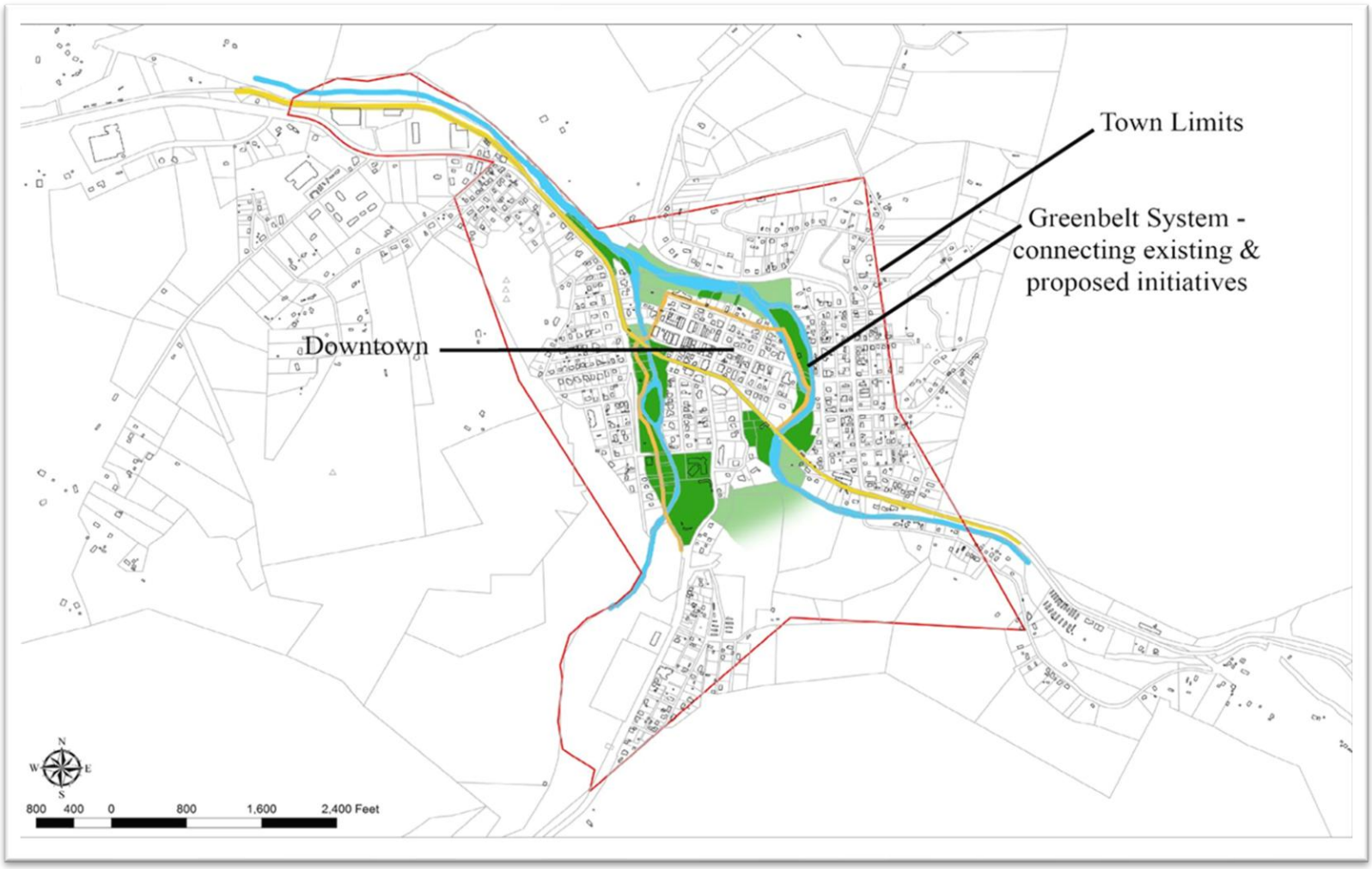
The best thing we can do for the safety of our children is to get them out of the car by building mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods. The safest trip is the one not taken.

Charles L. Marohn Jr.
Thoughts on Building Strong Towns, Volume 1

Following the 2007 Damascus Comprehensive Plan update, under the guidance of the Town of Damascus, the Mount Rogers Planning District commission, and the Virginia Department of Transportation, the Damascus Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan was developed and finalized in July of 2009. Though many of the plan recommendations were not completed due to the capacity of the Town, the vision continued into the Downtown Revitalization and Improvement Master Plan developed and finalized in March 2015 – this Plan adapted the proposed downtown loop into the *Laurel Creek Trail* with the addition of the *Laurel Creek Park* along the way. This 2015 master plan also included the concept of a greenbelt system of trails, weaving in and out of a prominently public, open, green-space-dominated ring around the downtown area, aligning with Laurel and Beaverdam creeks. This system would create a natural separation between principally commercial and residential uses, while also creating a corridor for connecting trails. **Figure 15: Greenbelt System Concept Map** illustrates this concept.

Image courtesy of Gavin Blevins.

Figure 15: Greenbelt System Concept Map



Source: Downtown Revitalization and Improvements Master Plan, Hill Studio, 2015 (p. 9)

Creation of a greenbelt system as shown would require consistent effort by the town toward conservation of these sensitive areas through the use of various land regulation mechanisms and policies. This system could provide floodplain protection, allow for the development and maintenance of an urban forest, naturally enhance protections for neighborhoods from noise, pollution, and the like, increase the quality of life for residents, increase neighboring property values, and more. Much of the existing land is already owned by the town, with some portions owned by other public entities. The remaining land could be acquired fee simple or through easements. The town can also use overlay districts and cluster zoning to reduce development in and around these areas, while increasing development in more suitable locations. This system builds upon the town's natural characteristics to create something unique and resilient for few residents and entrepreneurs.

Chapter IX. Government & Finance

The Town of Damascus is a municipality, incorporated from within the jurisdictional boundary of Washington County, a locality or local government of the Commonwealth of Virginia. As a *Dillon's Rule* state, Virginia localities and municipalities are limited and may only wield the powers (1) expressly granted to them, (2) powers necessarily or fairly implied, or (3) powers crucial to their existence. The Code of Virginia Title 15.2. Counties, Cities, and Towns sets out many of the specific authorities and powers granted – not affected by a locality or municipality's charter.

Government

The government in the Town of Damascus is a *mayor-council form of government* composed of a mayor – elected every two years – and six town council members who are elected in November every four years; the terms of these offices are staggered. If there is a vacancy on the council between elections, a successor is appointed by a majority vote of the council until the next election, or until a special election may be scheduled, whichever is sooner. The council elects a chairman who serves as the vice-mayor. In the case of a tie vote of the town council, it is the responsibility of the mayor to break the tie. The mayor is by charter the administrative and executive head of the town government. The town council is responsible for appointing a planning commission to advise them on matters affecting land use within the jurisdiction. One member of the town council also serves on the planning commission.

The Damascus Town Council appoints a clerk, a treasurer, and a police chief in accordance with its charter and code of ordinances. These individuals are responsible for their departments and employees of the town under those departments. The position of town manager is not called out in the charter or code; however, the town was a participant in the circuit rider town manager program through the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission from 1978 until 2024. Beginning in 2024, the Town of Damascus hired a full-time Town Manager to oversee day-to-day operations, assist in formulating the annual budget, enforcing local codes and ordinances, and coordinating long-term strategic planning for the community. Through these offices, the mayor and the town council ensure the provision of the following services to the residents of Damascus: police protection, fire protection, maintenance and lighting of streets, land use controls, programming and marketing, and the provision of recreation facilities and trails.

Prior to the sale of the sewer plant, public services including maintenance and trash pickup and disposal were previously provided by the private sector via procurement and competitive negotiation. Now, those services are provided through the Public Works Department.

Mission Statement:

The mission of the Town of Damascus is to steward a people-friendly, beautiful, environmentally friendly, resilient, and sustainable community that supports outdoor recreation, and a thriving downtown built on small business.

Intergovernmental Cooperation

For the provision of public services, Damascus has working agreements with the Washington County Sheriff's Office, Volunteer Fire Department, Rescue Squad, Parks and Recreation Department, School Board, and Public Service Authority. One member of the Damascus Town Council is appointed by the Washington County Board of Supervisors to serve on the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission (MRPDC). The Town of Damascus has also contracted with the MRPDC for professional town management services from 1978-2024.

Close cooperation also exists between Damascus and Washington County, the Industrial Development Authority, the First Tennessee Development District, the Virginia Department of Transportation, the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the Virginia Health Department, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, Virginia Highlands Community College, People, Inc., District Three Governmental Cooperative, the Mount Rogers Regional Partnership, Virginia Tourism Corporation, and the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission. The population of Damascus accounts for a large part of the Taylor District of Washington County; thus, residents of Damascus often represent the District in County affairs.

Because of the ownership of the Virginia Creeper Trail, the town also must and should strive to operate with a high-level of cooperation with the Town of Abingdon, Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy and US Forest Service. Though the conservancy is not an owner, this organization is also important to the long-term sustainability of the trail. The Appalachian Trail runs through Damascus as well, which makes the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and National Park Service vital partners in community projects, outreach, and planning. With both trails, VDOT has also become an invaluable partner for planning and problem-solving.

Local Government Services

The mayor and the town council ensure the provision of the following services to the residents of Damascus: police protection, fire protection, the maintenance and lighting of streets, land use controls, and the provision of recreation facilities. Following the sale of the sewer treatment plant to the Washington County Public Service Authority (PSA) in 2010, and the subsequent discontinuance of solid waste removal services, the town has increasingly transitioned toward focusing on the mission of providing streets, sidewalks, trails, parks and other recreation facilities, marketing, recreation programming, and most recently, community landscaping and forestry.

The Mission

Even in the public sector, local governments have a key mission, which often gets set aside in the day-to-day activities of those within the organization during the pursuit of daily duties. It is pertinent for local governments not to lose sight of the mission, and even more importantly, to fully understand the mission. This is evidence for why the establishment of a clear mission and excellent leadership is so necessary. Everyone in the organization must be accountable and there must be clear thresholds for achievement of goals toward furthering the mission – this will keep people energized and engaged.

The urgent priorities of the moment may not actually further the goal; the best leaders will understand this.

Governmental Challenges & Opportunities

Mayor-Council Form

The government of Damascus serves its residents in an efficient manner with the terms of the town council staggered for four-year terms with the mayor elected every two years – this prevents a complete turnover of elected officials. The effective government of a town is a delicate task requiring some skills which can only be acquired by experience; thus, the overlap between terms of council members allows the council to be more effective in maintaining and improving services to the citizens. Since the town does not employ a mayor-manager form of government, with authorities granted to a town manager by the charter and code of ordinances, continuity and leadership can threaten efficient operations. As the town organization continues to grow and become more complex, the limitations of this form of government will increasingly become more apparent.

Leadership, Management, & Human Capital

Perhaps one of the most overlooked aspects of success in local government is creating an environment in the workplace that lends itself toward encouraging leaders and teams accomplishing a purposeful mission[45]. In many ways, the private sector and public sector aren't that different when it comes to achieving success. To make a difference in local government, the people in the organization need to be fully engaged, with a clear mission and the passion to achieve it. Without clear leadership and vision, the organization will fail to achieve its purpose. Most managers are not good leaders, but when it comes to planning efforts, it is the leaders with vision that will see the value and be able to effectively work with the community to achieve shared goals.

The people that make up an organization are the same people that interact with the customers/clients/consumers of the organization, and those same people must sell the purpose of its existence.[46] By building a base of high-quality, driven staff that feel appreciated and motivated towards clear goals, the organization – in this case, the local government – can establish a presence of purpose. Often the employees transition through numerous regimes of elected officials, making their dedication and understanding of purpose critical to the long-term success of the locality.

Legislative Requirements

As a *Dillon's Rule* state, Virginia not only limits the authorities that the localities have but also sets mandatory requirements for localities. There are exceptions to certain mandatory requirements for localities with a population of less than 3,500, but these exemptions are minimal and often superseded if the locality accepts state or federal funding. For example, elected officials in Damascus do not have to file annual disclosure forms under the Conflict of Interest Act (COIA), and the town does not have to follow the strictest requirements of the Virginia Public Procurement Act. In general, however, the town suffers from many of the same burdens as a much larger jurisdiction. The issue with authority is that often, the state passes legislation that would burden a locality, or has not passed legislation authorizing a locality to wield a necessary power to solve a localized issue. Additionally, in many cases, state legislation may only address a portion of a topic, leaving the localities to attempt to resolve any resulting issues with existing powers.

Information Technology

Local governments are now involved in many network-based services; some are prescribed through the general assembly, while others are required by the citizens of the locality. Damascus has more obligations in this segment than many similarly sized localities due to its dependence on tourism. The town manages social media accounts (Facebook (x6), Instagram (x2), two websites – one focused toward tourists and the other toward residents – as well as the email and domain hosting. The investment in these activities is valuble to the general operations of the town.

Data management, however, is becoming an even more critical and regulated obligation. The Virginia Public Records Retention Act now allows records to be retained in digital medium, which is a blessing when it comes to dealing with physical storage space, disposition of records according to schedule, and records searches, however, digital medium has its own risks. Redundancy is required, which should be part of a **Disaster Recovery Plan**, but management and testing of data backups is also critical. Cloud storage solutions, though often costly, provide one mechanism for data storage, but localized network storage solutions are also necessary. Localized network storage can also be easier to secure.

Cybersecurity

Though there is a growing collective of state and federal agencies devoted to cybersecurity, cyber threats against local governments continue to grow. Phishing events are one of the most common vectors for cyber-attacks, so leaders in

[45] Leddin, Patrick R., and Shawn D. Moon. Building a Winning Culture in Government: A Blueprint for Delivering Success in the Public Sector. FranklinCovey, Co, 2018.

[46] In their book *Building a Winning Culture in Government* (2018), Leddin and Moon heavily discuss the importance of leadership and human capital; furthermore, their book discusses public and private sector values regarding the achievement of concise missions.

local governments should encourage a stronger culture of cybersecurity within the organization[47]. For smaller localities, cybersecurity can be a tricky proposition; either a lack of training or a lack of funding often leaves critical vulnerabilities open for exploitation.

Network Infrastructure

Additionally, modern obligations to maintain and operate internal assets/liabilities continue to increase costs of operations. Technology moves quickly, and even though replacement costs are more reasonable than ever, the assets depreciate astonishingly fast. The Town is responsible for maintaining approximately 14 computers across the organization, plus the server and network gear. The town also manages a public wi-fi network at all the major public locations. Network infrastructure and data management can be a significant ongoing obligation without proper provision of resources.

Photography by Destination by Design.

[47] Research and guidance from the International City Management Association (ICMA) impresses upon local government officials that cybersecurity is everyone's responsibility.

Finance

The Town of Damascus fiscal year runs from July 01 to June 30, as is common for municipalities; while the state's fiscal year also follows this schedule, the federal fiscal year begins October 01 and ends on September 30. This is important to consider for various federal funding sources that are received directly through a federal agency, though they are generally exempt from the requirements of annual financial audits.

Revenue Sources

Finances to provide governmental services in order of size come from real estate and personal property taxes, merchant (business, professional, and occupational) licenses, food and lodging taxes, Washington County sales tax, cigarette tax, bank franchise tax, automobile taxes, miscellaneous income, interest, and ABC profits.

Expenditures by Type

The primary expenditures of the town through the general fund can be grouped in the following rank order: administration; public safety; public works; and parks and recreation. Note that most of the town's state and federal grant programs run through the administration department, including tourism and marketing expenses. These programs account for a significant portion of the town's annual expenditure, though those funds are significantly non-local in origin. Most expenditures of funds generated from local taxes and fees are in public safety and public works.

Table 30: Budget History documents the adopted budget of the Town of Damascus across a 10-year period, including the current fiscal year transition from FY2024 to FY2025.

Table 30: Budget History

BUDGET	FY 2016	FY 2017	FY 2018	FY 2019	* FY 2020A	** FY 2021A	^ FY 2022A	FY 2023	FY 2024	FY 2025
Actual ($)	1,111,400	1,169,500	2,244,094	3,103,110	3,011,018	2,573,109	2,507,929	2,950,815	2,549,733	---
Estimated ($)	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	2,674,290

* The column labelled FY20A shows a budget amendment for FY20 as of February 2020.
** The column labelled FY21A shows a budget amendment for FY21 as of October 2020.
^ The column labelled FY22A shows a budget amendment for FY22 as of February 2022.

The town has a calculated operating fund balance of $200,492 which is approximately two months of operating expenses (FY2025). The town should strive to attain at least one year of operating fund balance. This would allow the town council to aggressively pursue growth opportunities without having to wait for revenues from tax increases. A more detailed report on expenditure and revenue for the town can be found in the budget available from the treasurer's office in the Damascus Town Hall.

Capital Improvements Plan

Introduction

The Damascus **Capital Improvement Plan (CIP)** represents a multi-year forecast for the town's capital needs. The CIP not only identifies capital projects but also financing required for the projects and their impact on the operating budget. Capital projects are separate from annual operating expenses due to their scale and financial burden, often requiring special financing, occurring at irregular intervals, and involving development of assets, such development extending several years.

The Town of Damascus prepares a five-year CIP to function as a planning tool for capital improvement projects. Only the current fiscal year schedule, when adopted by the Town Council, will become part of the operating budget for that fiscal year.

The CIP schedule beyond the current fiscal year is subject to adjustments upon annual review by staff, the finance committee, and Town Council. Future forecasts in the CIP serve the town by helping to plan for capital repairs, replacements, acquisitions, and other similar activities, which aid in financial planning to ensure the town's credit and financial health.

This CIP also contains a valuable financial analysis which may be utilized in sustainable planning related to financing and prioritizing capital improvements projects.

Purpose & Financing

The CIP is designed to help the town manage capital expenditures to meet the following goals:

1. Promote economic development.
2. Maintain financial stability.
3. Eliminate hazards and risks to public health.
4. Improve service effectiveness and efficiency.

To achieve these goals, the following policies and finance strategies guide town staff in CIP development:

- *A capital project is identified as a physical asset with an initial cost greater than $10,000 and projected useful life greater than 5 years, or a non-recurring operating expenditure greater than $10,000 directly related to service delivery.* Capital assets may include infrastructure, buildings, vehicles, or information technology and software. Planning and design costs associated with the request should be included in the projected costs when applicable.
- Similar projects costing less than $10,000 should not be lumped together to form a single project greater than $10,000. Such smaller projects should be included within the upcoming operating budget. Although, given the size of the locality, and to assist with proper planning, smaller projects have been included for transparency purposes.
- The term of any debt issue *should not* exceed the useful life of the asset for which the debt is issued.
- The capital program will recognize the borrowing capacity of the Town to maintain fiscal stability.
- The town will research all possible outside funding sources for CIP projects to help offset the financial burden of the town, including grants, private partnerships, cost-sharing arrangements, and intergovernmental agreements.
- The Town will attempt to use pay-as-go financing options, when possible, particularly for capital assets with costs less than $30,000.

The following is a list of financing options for the town to consider when debt financing is required for a capital project:

Designated Capital Funds. Designated capital funds represent money set aside each fiscal year for capital projects. The town's goal for fund balance is to provide designated capital funds by designating money for capital projects from the town's fund balance in excess of 20%. Designated capital funds are typically used for project contingency and smaller projects.

General Fund/Capital Outlay. This funding is similar to capital reserve funding except it is money allocated out of the general fund from the operating budget. There is no debt associated with this funding. This represents the majority of the town's pay-as-go financing.

General Obligation Bonds. GO Bonds require voter approval because the debt is secured by the taxing power of the local government, however, GO Bonds typically have the lowest interest rates and twenty-year terms. The town will not consider GO Bonds for projects less than $2 million.

Installment Purchase Agreements. Installment purchase financing can be either short-term or long-term. This type of financing is usually used for items such as vehicles and equipment. Installment purchasing presents the best option for many of a town's capital needs.

Line of Credit/Revolving Accounts. Either secured or unsecured, these funds are available to be spent, repaid, and spent again, in a virtually never-ending, revolving cycle (up to the maximum loan amount). Interest is only paid on the amount of funds loaned out, not on the total amount available.

Miscellaneous. Other funding sources include grants or private donations. These funding sources are often utilized, attributed, or restricted to a specific project.

Special Assessments. Special assessments are an option if citizens petition for a specific capital project. The government can issue debt to finance the project, while the citizens agree to pay part of the project costs through special taxes for a set number of years.

Planning Process

The planning commission, with the aid of town staff reviews the CIP annually in coordination with the regular budget process (Code of VA § 15.2-2239). Preparation for the CIP begins at the beginning of the calendar year, at which time the staff meets to review capital needs. The town manager, clerk, treasurer, chief of police, and recreation programs director provide a preliminary needs assessment of potential capital projects.

Town staff perform a financial analysis to estimate the impact of proposed capital projects on the operating budget, debt tolerance, and borrowing capacity of the town – the financial analysis helps determine which projects to fund each year. Expected or potential budget surpluses and deficits are considered when calculating the financial impact of the CIP. The preliminary CIP is prepared by mid-February to present to the finance committee and town council to discuss budget priorities and necessary changes to the CIP. The final CIP is adjusted based on recommendations and presented to the town council for public approval in addition to the annual budget document.

Project recommendations are based on many factors, including, but not limited to economic growth, the condition of existing infrastructure, specific need areas, cost-vs-benefit, public safety, goals identified through strategic planning processes, and the like.

Financial Analysis

A key element of the CIP is the financial impact analysis that discusses the effects of capital spending on a city's operation costs, debt capacity, and other debt ratios. It is important to understand how capital spending affects these indicators because bond rating agencies use them to evaluate a city's financial condition and to issue ratings. Smaller communities like Damascus have not taken out large bond debt, with which a Bond Rating would be given; that aside, the town will maintain an eye on debt levels within the yearly budget.

Projections & Estimates

Proper financial planning requires projections and estimates for expenditures, revenues, and other financial indicators. Expenditure and revenue estimates require forecasts for changes in population, assessed property value, and other factors such as changes in the economy. It is recommended that these analyses use an inflation factor of up to 3% for growth in expenditures and recurring project costs – as the economy improves or struggles, this percentage may fluctuate accordingly. Estimated growth in assessed property value is based on a 0.7% annual increase, *though the post-COVID-19 global pandemic environment exceeds established norms*.

Debt Ratios

Net Debt Per Capita does not indicate debt capacity; however, it is widely used as a comparison between jurisdictions when assessing debt burden. This ratio divides the town's net debt by its permanent population. The net debt per capita was $101.53 for end of FY2020 (total debt $82,646.61) and $92.11 for mid-FY2021 (total debt $74,978.01). *For the end of FY2024, the net debt per capita was less than $39.00*.

Net Debt Per Assessed Valuation relates debt to one of the Town's primary sources of revenue. This is a measure of debt capacity as well as debt burden. This ratio divides the town's new debt by its total assessed value. Higher assessed valuations help local governments generate revenue that may be used to pay down debt. Damascus had a calculated debt-to-assessed valuation ratio (at $0.46 for $100) for the end of FY 2020 of 36%. As of mid-FY2021, this debt to assessed valuation ratio dropped 32%. No new debt has been taken on by the town, so the ration will continue to drop, and an accelerated growth rate in Damascus should reduce this amount as any new debt obligations are absorbed by the town.

Debt Ratios as a Percentage of Total Expenditures measures annual debt service payments of non-self-supporting projects as a portion of the town's general fund expenditures. Debt service payments can become a large portion of a town's general fund expenditures and should be monitored to ensure acceptable levels. A ratio below 5% indicates significant capacity for new debt; the Town will strive to maintain a debt service ratio below 10%. For FY 2020, Damascus's debt service ratio was 8.3%; as of mid-FY 2021, that debt service ratio is 7.5% (excluding pass-through funds). *For the end of FY2024, the debt service ratio was less than 1%.*

Pay-As-Go Financing can help keep key debt ratios in an acceptable range by eliminating new debt obligations and annual debt service payments. If debt ratios begin to approach unacceptable ranges, delaying projects or using pay-as-go financing should be considered.

Value of a Penny

The most recent county-wide property reassessment, completed in 2025 and completed every four years, listed the total valuation of real property within the Town of Damascus at $78,204,000. At $0.33 per $100 of assessed value, the value to the town's operating budget is $258,073 – billed at 50% twice annually. Based on this, *the value of a penny against the operating budget of the town is equal to $7,820.*

Chapter X. Implementation

The findings of the comprehensive plan are based on two considerations. First, the existing conditions are described and evaluated (in the following chapters). Next, the results of these evaluations are compared with the goals and objectives of the town, created as part of the strategic planning efforts included in this chapter. The comparison of future goals and past accomplishments then indicates the prioritized needs of the town.

The comprehensive plan is a policy guide – while it does not regulate land use itself, development and performance standards are the primary mechanism by which a community achieves the goals, policies and strategies necessary to implement its vision. The Plan should be dynamic, subject to periodic amendment as conditions and trends change significantly. Once adopted, the community's subdivision and zoning regulations need to be in general compliance with the Plan – this is achieved through the "2232 Review" process.

The comprehensive plan must be implemented in a timely fashion in order to effectively ensure the community's vision. Implementation is a community-wide effort, achievable only through collaborative action by the mayor and town council, planning commission and other boards, town manager and other staff, as well as the residents.

Planning Process

The planning commission of the Town of Damascus, with assistance by the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission, began a re-write of the Comprehensive Plan, adopted in 2013, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Though this process began in 2019-2020 timeframe, the pandemic and its affected market segments, changing trends, and local elections delayed the completion of the new comprehensive plan.

During the initial planning process beginning in 2019, the planning commission underwent a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis, plus a follow-up session to discuss and establish goals, objectives, and strategies. In 2024, the town began the comprehensive planning process again, and through the budgeting process, completed a strategic planning process that also included a SWOT analysis.

Strategic Planning

For efficient implantation, the town should seek to organize on-going strategic planning efforts as part of the annual budget development process or otherwise. As leadership positions change, and new strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges present themselves, on-going planning efforts will ensure the town remains resilient and proactive. Maintaining a *Strategic Plan* may also help ensure that the elected officials, staff, and public are progressing toward the same shared goals.

The strategic planning session was conducted in March 2024 as part of the comprehensive planning and budget process. The 2020 SWOT analysis and 2024 Strategic Planning Report are included as appendices to the plan.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths and Weaknesses are internal to the organization, whereas Threats and Opportunities are generally external to the operations of the organization.

A Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis should be completed periodically and is typically completed as a part of strategic plans and comprehensive plans. In these cases, the analysis may focus more on the organization/agency in the case of strategic planning and more on the community as a part of the comprehensive plan process – this is also useful for setting budget priorities.

Key Tools

The plan identifies a number of tools available to the community that may be employed to bring the goals, objectives and strategies of the plan to life, achieving the 2050 vision of Damascus. These implementation tools are interrelated and work together providing continuity and breadth to the implementation program.

Capital Improvements Plan

For smaller communities, like Damascus, short-range capital improvements plans (CIPs) are important planning tools to help the community achieve its vision through responsible fiscal planning and as implemented as part of its annual budget process. The local planning commission created a CIP for fiscal year 2017 and maintained the CIP through fiscal year 2021, around the advent of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The community's CIP is generally regarded as excellent given the human and capital resources of the town and should be updated and maintained. The CIP is discussed more in depth in **Chapter IX. Government & Finance**.

Development Regulations

Discussed more in depth in following chapters, the Plan may be implemented through legislative authorities of local governments – towns, counties, and cities of the Commonwealth. Since Virginia is a Dillon Rule state, local governments may only exercise powers (i) expressly granted by the state legislature, or (ii) powers necessarily or fairly implied, or (iii) powers crucial to the existence of the local government. Towns in Virginia may regulate land and development through numerous mechanisms, most of which are attached to subdivision and zoning regulations.

Implementation Matrix

The Implementation Matrix incorporated and defined below in depth displays the goals, objectives, and strategies of the community with specific action steps, responsible parties, timelines, and other properties deemed reasonable for implementation of the Plan. If monitored, maintained, and amended periodically as part of the Plan, the Implementation Matrix may be the single most important mechanism for monitoring the progress of the locality in implementing its mission toward achieving its vision.

Amendment

The planning commission of the community is required by the Code of Virginia §15.2-2230 to review and/or update the comprehensive plan at least once every five years. Such a review, though not legally required to be reported to the local governing body or the Commonwealth, should be recorded in the minutes of the local planning commission and in the commission's annual report. If an amendment is deemed necessary, the commission may then request funding from the governing body to complete the comprehensive planning process, data collection, and other related work. The Mount Rogers Planning District Commission may be contracted to complete such services without requiring procurement in accordance with the Virginia Public Procurement Act. *NOTE*: Due to the population size of the Town of Damascus, the community's

adopted small purchase procedures comply with the VPPA, unless otherwise required by a state, federal, or other funding source.

Implementation Matrix

Definitions

Goals, objectives, and strategies describe how Damascus will meet the challenge of managing future growth and community development. Each element contains related goals and objectives. Strategies are designed to achieve goals and objectives and are included in this chapter.

Goal: Description of a desired state of affairs for the community in the future. Goals are the broad, public purposes toward which policies and programs are directed. Goals are phrased to express the desired results of the Comprehensive Plan.

Objective: Statements of government intent against which individual actions and decisions are evaluated; these must be specific and attainable in some measurable fashion.

Strategy: Individual regulations and actions which, taken together, will enable the community to achieve Goals and Objectives. Strategies are the basis for implementation of the Plan by identifying and recommending specific courses of action. Strategies are included in this chapter.

Goals

A goal is the general direction toward which future actions are directed. Goals are general, long-term statements of purpose which provide a target toward which the development of the town can be directed. Generally, goals are not easily measurable nor are they attainable in the near future. For the purpose of this plan, goals listed shall be concise and focused according to the chapters within the plan.

Objectives

Objectives in the plan serve as specific, measurable steps that translate broad goals into actionable targets. They articulate what the community intends to achieve in concrete terms and establish a clear direction for decision-making and performance evaluation. Each objective must be realistic, attainable, and framed in a manner that allows progress to be assessed over time.

Strategies

Strategies, in turn, are the practical actions, initiatives, ordinances, or programs undertaken to realize each objective. They provide a roadmap of recommended measures—ranging from policy changes and infrastructure investments to community engagement efforts—intended to move the town steadily toward its envisioned future. By clearly linking each strategy to relevant objectives and designating responsible parties, timelines, and required resources, the comprehensive plan ensures that vision is translated into effective, coordinated action.

Terms and Symbols

Priority - A priority ranking of "HIGH", "MEDIUM", or "LOW" is assigned to each strategy to help guide the allocation of funding and other resources. As the town's needs or interests change and/or funding availability ebbs and flows, the priority of some strategies may also change.

Funding – An indication of the financial resources deemed necessary to implement each strategy, using the "$" symbol to represent the relative cost of implementation.

$	≤$25,000
$$	$25,000-$100,000
$$$	$100,000-$500,000
$$$$	>$500,000

Timeline – An indication of the amount of time it may take to accomplish each strategic action.

Short-Term	1-2 Years
Intermediate	2-5 Years
Long-Term	5+ Years
Ongoing	Regular on-going efforts required.

Responsible Parties – An indication of responsible parties and/or key partners that are necessary to accomplish each strategy; this is labelled with the agency or responsible party's initials.

TC	Town Council
PC	Planning Commission
TS	Town Staff
CG	Citizen Groups
PS	Private Sector
DBG	Damascus Business Group
IDA	Industrial Development Authority
PDC	Mount Rogers Planning District Commission
VDOT	Virginia Dept. of Transportation
DOF	Department of Forestry
DCR	Department of Conservation and Recreation
VMR	Virginia Marine Resources
VTC	Virginia Tourism Corporation
VCTC	Virginia Creeper Trail Conservancy
USFS	US Forest Service
ATC	Appalachian Trail Conservancy
NPS	National Park Service
VH	Virginia Housing
ACE	Army Corps of Engineers

Photography by Matthew Holman.

Community & Environment

Become a town within a park, rather than a town with parks – an urbanized community within the context of a natural environment following the principles of the *Garden City* movement – while retaining and framing the scenic beauty of the region.

Objective 1: *Coordinate and refine the town's policies to align with the policies of surrounding recreation areas, and national parks.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
1.1 – Align trail managements standards with those of the Virginia Creeper Trail Master Plan, standardized by the Creeper Trail Conservancy and US forest Service, and ATC.	Low	$	Short-term	TC, TS, VCTC, USFS, ATC, NPS
1.2 – Create a comprehensive property inventory and management guide to assure property improvements and developments do not violate rights-of-way, clear zones, policies, or other land rights.	Medium	$	Ongoing	TS, USFS, ATC, NPS
1.3 – Encourage landscaping practices to prevent and remove invasives to avoid spread to sensitive areas by aligning polices to match USFS and DOF.	Low	$	Short-term	TC, PC, USFS, VOF
Objective 2: *Preserve historic and cultural sites, sensitive areas, and other unique places and characteristics of the town.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
2.1 – Enforce removal of encroachments along the VA Creeper Trail corridor.	High	$	Short-term	TC, TS
2.2 – Beautify and create impediments to damage or encroachment for sensitive or threatened areas, trails, or landmarks.	Medium	$	Ongoing	TC, PC, TS
2.3 – Develop policies and regulations to create separation between sensitive areas and landmarks and private development, i.e. overlay zones, cluster zoning, PUDs, conservation easements, etc.	High	$	Intermediate	TC, PC, TS
Objective 3: *Protect, tend, and maintain a native urban forest environment connecting parks, trails, opens spaces, flood prone areas, and other sensitive areas.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
3.1 – Develop and maintain an urban forestry master plan with clear guidelines and long-term obligations.	High	$$	Ongoing	TC, PC, TS, VOF, DCR, CG
3.2 – Retain consulting services from a licensed arborist and landscaping company.	Low	$	Short-term	TC, TS
3.3 – Fund on-going planting, trimming, and landscaping needs, including removal of invasive plant species.	Medium	$	Long-term	TC, TS
3.4 – Create a local incentive program to encourage private investments toward the mission and compliance with the master plan.	Low	$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS, CG

People & Population Trends

Plan and prepare for the needs of an aging population.

Objective 4: *Provide for the projected future mobility and accessibility needs of the community.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
4.1 – Develop an infrastructure condition and needs assessment plan and tool to address accessibility.	High	$$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS, VDOT
4.2 – Update aging facilities and infrastructure to comply with ADA standards.	Medium	$$	Ongoing	TC, TS, PDC, VDOT
4.3 – Reconstruct, decommission, or repair sidewalks, curb ramps, trail heads, and parking areas to comply with ADA standards.	High	$$$	Ongoing	TC, PC, TS, VDOT
4.4 – Avoid vacating or otherwise encumbering property (including improved or unimproved streets, roads, alleys) that might be necessary for the town's future developments.	High	$	Ongoing	TC, PC

Strive to stabilize the current population against population decline and encourage controlled population growth in key demographics to ensure the solvency of the town for future residents.

Objective 5: *Support community efforts to provide opportunities for younger generations, incentivize in-migration to the town, and retain citizens of all demographics.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
5.1 – Market Damascus as an area with opportunity to work, live, raise a family, and adventure.	High	$	Ongoing	TC, PC, TS, VTC
5.2 – Pursue objectives that increase quality of life for residents, such as increasing opportunities in employment, entrepreneurship, education and training, and increases recreation, dining, and shopping amenities.	High	$	Ongoing	TC, TS, IDA, PS, DBG
5.3 – Develop programs and amenities for senior citizens and youth.	Medium	$	Short-term	TC, TS, CG

Housing

Ensure diverse and quality housing opportunities for all, regardless of demographic or socioeconomic status.

Objective 6: *Encourage availability of high-quality, affordable housing.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
6.1 – Continue housing rehabilitation programs through available grant programs, such as Community Development Block Grants, Rural Development, and Virginia Housing.	High	$$$	Ongoing	TC, TS, DHCD, PDC

6.2 – Promote the development of high-density housing creation projects.	Low	$	Intermediate	TC, PC, TS, PS, PDC, VH
6.3 – Develop policies, programs, and regulations to encourage home and property maintenance.	Medium	$$	Intermediate	TC, PC, TS, DHCD
6.4 – Regulate commercial/investor-owned and home-owner interests in the housing stock through policy and incentive programs,	High	$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS
6.5 – Ensure that new housing, substantial housing improvements, and other developments conform to current and predicted NFIP regulations.	High	$$	Ongoing	TC, PC, TS, DCR, FEMA
6.6 - Ensure (i) the preservation of existing manufactured housing communities, (ii) the creation of new manufactured home communities, and (iii) the creation of new manufactured home subdivisions (Code of VA § 15.2-2223.5.).	Medium	$	Ongoing	TC, PC, TS, PS, PDC, DHCD, VH

Economy

Strengthen the town's economic base by diversifying entrepreneurship and employment opportunities.

Objective 7: *Facilitate new business and existing business expansion to provide for a healthy and diversified economic base.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
7.1 – Develop policies and incentives for business start-up and expansion.	High	$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS, PDC
7.2 – Coordinate efforts and programming with the local business group to increase business success.	Medium	$	Ongoing	TC, TS, DBG, PS, VTC
7.3 – Increase availability of technological connectivity, amenities, and programs to encourage and incentivize remote workers.	High	$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS, PS, IDA
7.4 – Create a small business loan program to encourage investments within the downtown.	Low	$$	Short-term	TC, TS, DHCD
7.5 – Ensure the compatible redevelopment of the old IDA/VFW property located along the Creeper Trail corridor outside of town.	High	$$	Intermediate	TC, PC, TS, PS, PDC, IDA
Objective 8: *Promote Damascus as a destination location for visitors, and home for new residents.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
8.1 – Continue to support tourism, in conjunction with local businesses, on a regional scale.	Low	$	Ongoing	TC, TS, VTC
8.2 – Support efforts to continuously adapt and reinforce the reputation of the town to ensure the town's relevancy.	Medium	$	Ongoing	TC, PC, TS, CG, DBG

Land Use

Guide the development of all sectors of Damascus in order to implement an approved plan of development to create greater resistance to natural hazards and climate change.

Objective 9: *Develop an updated plan for future development that aligns with the priorities of the town.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
9.1 – Develop a resilience plan, including surveying, asset and hazard mapping	High	$$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS, PDC, DCR
9.2 – Develop a future land use plan for the town to determine development and infrastructure priorities.	High	$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS, PDC
9.3 – Develop stormwater infrastructure where necessary.	High	$$$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS
9.4 – Incentivize developments in identified growth areas and heavily regulate development in sensitive areas.	Medium	$$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS
Objective 10: *Protect the town from flooding.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
10.1 – Complete amendments to the towns floodplain regulations, policies, standards of practice, and outreach efforts to implement compliance with highest recommended standards of the NFIP.	High	$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS, PDC, DCR, FEMA
10.2 – Assess and complete surveying and floodplain mapping in conjunction with development regulations and other planning efforts.	High	$$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS, PDC, ACE, DCR, VDEM, FEMA
10.3 – Plan and complete flood mitigation efforts as identified, including relocation, creation of open spaces, conservation easements, transfer of development rights, etc.	Medium	$$$	Intermediate	TC, PC, TS, PDC, DCR, FEMA, ACE
Objective 11: *Redevelop large property through comprehensive planning efforts consistent with the town's priorities, needs, and planned development patterns.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
11.1 – Finalize the gap analysis and feasibility study for redevelopment of old IDA/VFW property.	High	$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS, IDA
11.2 – Create a development plan for the IDA/VFW property that aligns with development patterns and priorities of the town.	High	$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS, PDC
11.3 – Assess the need for a corridor plan connecting the downtown, eastern business hub of the commercial district, and IDA/VFW property along Rte. 58.	Low	$$	Intermediate	TC, PC, TS, PDC, VDOT
11.4 – Assist with the redevelopment of the old furniture factory through grants and amendment of development regulations (i.e. cluster zoning).	Medium	$	Intermediate	TC, PC, TS, PDC

Transportation

Advance existing transportation systems to promote safety and efficiency within the city while ensuring the most effective use of city resources.

Objective 12: *Ensure that roadways are repaired or redesigned to balance the mixed needs of the community; serve motor vehicles, bicycles, pedestrians, and are environmentally compatible with surroundings.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
12.1 – Work with the Virginia Department of Transportation to monitor the traffic flow and safety conditions of the road system and maintain a list for system improvements.	High	$	Ongoing	TC, PC, TS, PDC, VDOT
12.2 – Work with VDOT to address stormwater issues along Laurel Avenue and throughout the downtown.	High	$$$$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS, PDC, VDOT
12.3 – Develop stormwater infrastructure where necessary, opting for green infrastructure whenever possible.	High	$$	Intermediate	TC, PC, TS, PDC, VDOT
12.4 – Develop a maintenance plan, maintenance program, and capital funding plan for local roads in the system.	Medium	$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS, PDC, VDOT
Objective 13: *Ensure that sidewalks and trails meet ADA standards, are accessible, and meet the connectivity needs of visitors and residents.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
13.1 – Assess existing sidewalk and trail conditions and develop a strategic implementation plan.	Medium	$	Short-term	TC, TS, PDC
13.2 – Decommission any existing sidewalks that cannot meet ADA standards, are non-functioning, can be functionally replaced by other means, or cannot be funded and maintained in the system.	Low	$	Long-term	TC, PC, TS
13.3 – Repair, redesign, and rebuild the pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure.	High	$$$	Ongoing	TC, PC, TS

Services & facilities

Provide adequate recreation management and programming services, landscaping and maintenance services, and community coordination and event programming services.

Objective 14: *Provide for the projected future mobility and accessibility needs of the community.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
14.1 – Develop a schedule of duties and needs for the Parks & Recreation and Public Works Departments to streamline operations.	High	$	Short-term	TC, TS
14.2 – Create a plan for programming and event priorities and needs each year to enhance staff efficiency.	High	$	Ongoing	TC, TS, PS, DBG

Ensure the renovation and reconstruction of facilities is completed with hazard mitigation, cost, and code compliance in mind; prioritize existing facilities and discourage construction of new facilities.

Objective 15: *Ensure the maintenance, repairs, redesign, and reconstruction of existing assets and facilities.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
15.1 – Establish an annual inspection plan for the Beaverdam Creek Trail bridge utilizing a retainer agreement for ongoing inspections.	Medium	$	Ongoing	TC, TS
15.2 – Complete renovations to the town park gazebo, including replacement of decking, repair/installation of ADA accessible stairs and ramps, and site work.	Medium	$$	Short-term	TC, TS
15.3 – Complete renovation of the town hall to add office space and ADA accessibility.	Medium	$$$	Short-term	TC, TS
15.4 – Complete a PER for streambank restoration along Beaverdam Creek from T16 upstream to Tent City.	High	$$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS, PDC
15.5 – Replace existing gabion baskets along Beaverdam Creek with low-impact rock veins and vegetation, or other similar environmentally friendly and long-term solution to implement streambank stabilization.	High	$$$$	Intermediate	TC, PC, TS, PDC, DCR, TVA, ACE, VMR, FEMA
15.6 – Establish a cleaning, painting, staining, and sealing schedule for recreation and government facilities.	Low	$	Intermediate	TC, TS
15.7 – Design green infrastructure into sidewalks, trails, and parking areas.	Medium	$	Ongoing	TC, PC, TS
15.8 – Clear, brush, and trim trees from the Creeper Trail corridor from Drowning Ford to the eastern corporate boundaries.	Medium	$	Ongoing	TC, TS, VCTC, USFS
15.9 – Remove encroachments from the VA Creeper Trail corridor.	High	$$	Short-term	TC, TS, USFS, VCTC
15.10 – Coordinate with regional partners to reconstruct the Creeper Trail tread and trestles from Damascus to Whitetop Station.	High	$$$$	Short-term	TC, TS, PDC, USFS, VCTC, PS, IDA
15.11 – Redesign and reconstruct sections of Laurel Creek Trail through the downtown and along the creek side, including streambank stabilization near the Old Mill.	High	$$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS, PS, DCR, VMR, FEMA

Government & finance

Provide efficient, transparent, and financially responsible administrative, recreation, maintenance, and public safety services throughout the reconstruction and growth phases of the town.

Objective 16: *Increase the efficiency and functionality of the elected and appointed officials and town staff.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
16.1 – Develop a schedule of duties and needs for the Parks & Recreation and Public Works Departments to streamline operations.	High	$	Short-term	TC, TS
16.2 – Create a plan for programming and event priorities and needs each year to enhance staff efficiency.	High	$	Ongoing	TC, TS, PS, DBG
16.3 – Ensure local officials and staff are offered and take advantage of educational opportunities (training & conferences). Ensure staff are trained and certified as required.	Medium	$	Ongoing	TC, PC, TS
16.4 – Continue extending pay increases, paid time off, and insurance plan benefits to retain and attract high-quality employees.	Medium	$$	Ongoing	TC, TS
16.5 – Create internal SOPs, training guides, redundancy plans, schedules, policy updates, template documents, and other documentation; publish schedules and policies on official website(s).	High	$	Short-term	TC, PC, TS
16.6 – Finalize the recodification of ordinances and ensure publishing of amendments.	High	$	Short-term	TC, TS
16.7 – Increase partnerships with local and regional entities through formal adoption of joint procedures, memorandums of understanding, and agreements for cost-sharing and joint services.	Medium	$	Intermediate	TC, PC, TS
Objective 17: *Ensure that the financial management policies and practices of the town maintain the towns solvency through planning, resilience against economic crisis, and mitigation against natural disaster.*				
Strategy	**Priority**	**Funding**	**Timeline**	**Parties**
17.1 – Ensure that the capital improvements plan and program are updated annually.	Low	$	Ongoing	TC, PC, TS
17.2 – Complete annual strategic planning sessions as part of the budget preparation process.	Low	$	Ongoing	TC, PC, TS, PDC
17.3 – Develop a procedure, schedule, and investment fund for departmental reassignment and replacement of public service vehicles**.**	Medium	$	Short-term	TC, TS
17.4 – Create an investment strategy for long-term capital improvements; maintain investment commitments.	Medium	$$	Ongoing	TC, TS

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Appendix A:

Strategic Plan Report – March 2024

DAMASCUS

"The Strength of a Town Lies in the Confidence and Cooperation of Its People."

Vision Statement

The town of Damascus is A welcoming community that sets a course for adventure & Entrepreneurship.

Mission Statement

The mission of the Town of Damascus is to steward a people-friendly, beautiful, environmentally friendly, resilient, and sustainable community that supports outdoor recreation, and a thriving downtown built of small businesses.

Organizational Goals:

Short-term:

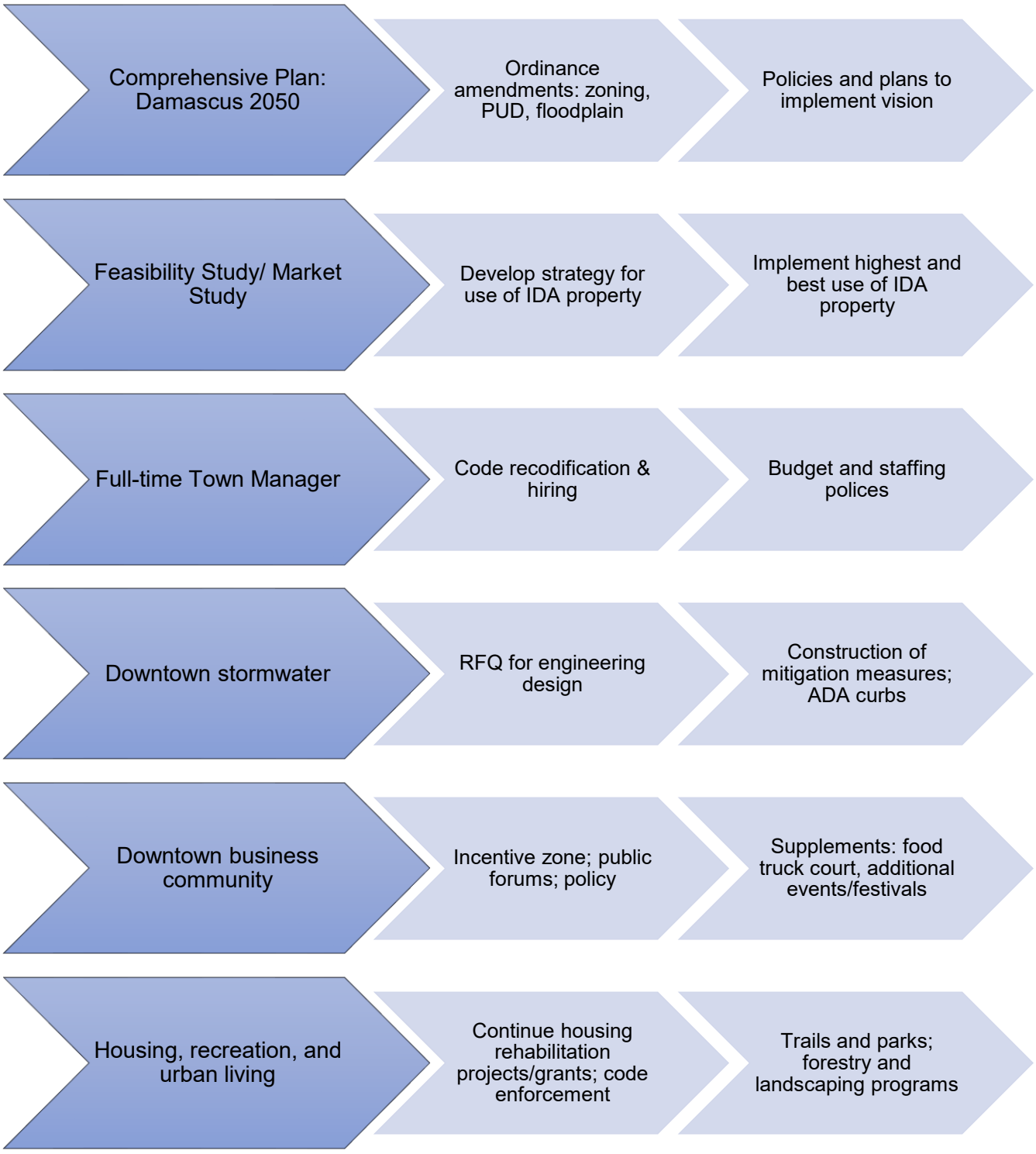
1. Address stormwater issues downtown, specifically along E Laurel Avenue.
2. Create a plan for adaptive reuse of the IDA property next to the VFW.
3. Implement a funding mechanism for long-term conservation of the Virginia Creeper Trail.
4. Develop an incentive zone and/or policies of downtown business incentives.
5. Create plans for adaptive reuse of strategic sites around the community.

Long-term:

1. Clean up vacant and/or blighted properties in the community.
2. Develop the IDA property next to the VFW into a use compliant with the community vision.
3. Develop a plan for long-term sustainability of the Virginia Creeper Trail, including funding, maintenance plans, and necessary policies.
4. Achieve an economic restructuring to develop a "year around economy" built on more than outdoor recreation but supporting the existing outdoor recreation economy framework.
5. Implement and maintain a stable urban forest environment supporting the traditional neighborhood design and walkable, bike-able philosophy of the community.

Action Plan

The following graphic illustrates action steps toward accomplishing key goals established as part of the strategic planning process conducted in March 2024 with the Town Council:



SWOT analysis

A Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) Analysis should be completed periodically and is typically completed as a part of strategic plans and comprehensive plans. In these cases, the analysis may focus more on the organization/agency in the case of strategic planning and more on the community as a part of the comprehensive plan process – this is also useful for setting budget priorities.

Strengths and Weaknesses are internal to the organization, whereas Threats and Opportunities are generally external to the operations of the organization.

Strengths: What are the current strengths of the organization and community – what makes Damascus strong and resilient? How do you see this changing in the future?

- Outdoors and community
- Outdoor recreation/ adventure
- Interstate 81 access
- Food City anchor
- Friendly (including dog-friendly)
- Trail Days festival
- Identity: “Trail Town USA”
- Parks
- Temperate climate
- Walkable
- Safe
- Clean water and air
- Low cost of living
- Parks, swimming pool, post office, public library
- Successful receiving/ administering grants
- Bike shops

Weaknesses: In what areas does Damascus fall behind in relation to other communities? What are the most important weaknesses to overcome first?

- Available and/or affordable housing
- Small population/ lack of active population
- Part-time town manager
- No winter economy
- Business hours/ night-time activity
- Floodplain
- Homeless transients
- Drug abuse
- Through traffic on Rte. 58/ noise
- Empty commercial spaces/ lack of restaurants
- Old and narrow local roads
- Outdated ordinances and policies w/ lack of enforcement
- Apathy and littering

Opportunities: With ongoing, recent accomplishments, and changes on the horizon, where can the community or organization grow? What new segments could you enter in the future? What partnerships can be developed?

- Development of the IDA/ VFW property
- Downtown business support/ development/ anchors
- Creation of additional major festivals
- Creation of pickleball facilities, basketball courts, and bike park
- Leverage available creeks for fishing programs/ businesses
- More local restaurants
- Develop a trailhead for the Iron Mountain Trail

Threats: What external factors could put pressure on the organization and community? Which of these threats can you control? Which ones can't you control?

- Floods and other natural disasters (wildfires, etc.)
- VDOT/ Rte. 58 bypass
- E-bikes
- Drug abuse and homelessness
- USFS (slow to act and underfunded)
- Emergency services (falling volunteerism)
- Lack of workforce
- Elevated housing costs
- Weather (rain during recreation season)
- Aging facilities/ infrastructure
- Section 8 housing
- Apathy/ low community pride

Summary:

From the SWOT analysis, following development of a future vision for the community and what the mission of the community is – relative to that vision – items of note or concern begin to come into the open. The strategic planning session was conducted in a "top of mind" fashion, that is to say, the Town Council members participating were requested to provide answers without pre-meditation. Participants were advised that their responses did not require defense or elaboration. The session was conducted in approximately 2.5 hours – very quickly.

Through the strategic planning process, the vision and mission of the Town Council became apparent – this vision and mission was very much in line with what was expected, using prior plans and other similar small towns as a reference.

Short-term and long-term goals match up with the statements of mission and seem reasonably achievable given the resources of the community. Action steps discussed match up reasonably with what the representative body of the community hopes to accomplish related to its vision of the community in 2050 – this is a 50-year vision. The vision aligns with the previous 10 years of planning and staff activity.

Key observations:

- The Virginia Creeper Trail, the largest asset/liability of the town, was mentioned very infrequently as part of the strategic planning process, even though significant funds had recently been appropriated

toward significant infrastructure concerns related to the trestles owned by the USFS. The USFS was mentioned, however, as a threat to the town.

- Housing was of significant concern related to affordability and availability and was identified at several points throughout the planning session. A lack of work force and restaurants can also be correlated to housing availability and affordability.
- Concerns related to the long-term sustainability of the swimming pool were not mentioned, though it was identified as a strength of the community and is objectively an asset not shared by many communities the size of Damascus.
- The only staff capacity-related item discussed was the need for a full-time town manager; however, this has been previously discussed. Though the capacity of other staff/departments was not discussed, it is important to note that the achievement of the 2050 vision may rely heavily upon additional staff capacity.
- The new Damascus Trail Center, constructed and owned by the town (2021), though leased to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, was not discussed during the session. This facility is a considerable asset and liability and should be considered such going forward.
- The Appalachian Trail was not specifically identified or discussed during the planning session, and though this asset does not impact the budget significantly, it is significant that this asset was not identified as a weakness or threat or an opportunity.
- Environmental conservation was mentioned multiple times, setting a high priority for the community, adjacent to national forest.

Turning the Curve

Good budgeting starts with good planning, and only through good planning practices are communities able to budget according to a problem-solving mentality. What is the issue and what resources would the community need to resolve the subject issue. The issue may also not be resolved without addressing other issues in sequence – not all challenges can be overcome simply.

What does the data say? Quantitatively explain the issues and opportunities based on defensible metrics.

What is the story behind the curve? How is the community driven to resolve the challenge? Or is it driven to resolve the challenge? Is it a matter of apathy? Priority? Politics?

Who are the partners? Can the community partner with a non-profit or private sector to reduce costs and/or create higher efficiency in service delivery? Is there a way to cooperate with other government-sector organizations?

What will change the issue? Does the community need additional staff? Staff training? Policy and/or plan updates? Facilities improvements?

What is the action plan? How does the community plan to overcome these challenges and sustain the investments necessary to avoid backsliding? Can the resolution be budgeted in one or two fiscal years? Is it a capital improvements project? Does it require outside funding? Is it sustainable or does it create a long-term liability?

Budgeting responsibly is a process beyond a single year. Working with the locality's planning commission, through the comprehensive plan, capital improvements plan, and in accordance with policies, specific plans (resilience plans, facilities plans, downtown master plans, economic restructuring plans, market analyses, etc.) and regulatory ordinances may more effectively allow the community to plan ahead for future expenditures and revenue sources.

The appropriation of funds and the establishment or setting of taxes and fees should align with the community's mission and vision – these are defensible expenditures and revenues. Budgetary items that "turn the curve" should match the community's mission and vision and therefore also be considered a responsible use of taxpayer dollars.

Local governing bodies that follow "turn the curve" practices may be viewed as more successful and more engaged with their constituents.

Appendix B:

SWOT Analysis w/ Planning Commission (2020)

Town of Damascus

Results of S.W.O.T. Analysis (2020)

Strengths

- Recreational opportunities
- Natural beauty
- Location
- Small enough to be welcoming
- People
- Safety
- Affordable amenities/ Cost of living
- Well maintained/clean
- Family oriented
- Food options
- Core
    - Good gathering place/fireworks
    - Focus on community events
- Rural but not isolated
- Historical building/homes
- Creek runs through town
- Diverse population (Age)
- Walkability
- Decent grocery options
- Not overrun by fast-food

Weaknesses

- Empty storefronts
    - Perception of nothing to do
- Not capturing I-81 to Boone traffic
- Signage
- Significant lower income
- Seasonal business
    - Down season from November to April
- Visitor parking
- Broadband
- Non-retail jobs
- Local capacity/staffing
- Transportation
    - Buses/shuttles
- Lack of active business support groups

- Downtown being in a floodplain
- Downtown flooding
- Aesthetics of downtown
- Lack of developable land for businesses and homes
- Lack of diversity in businesses

Opportunities

- New businesses
    - Identify needs
    - Fill storefronts
- Small business support
    - Especially during the winter months
- Enhance resources for people who work from home
- ATC
- Upgrade parking
- Light manufacturing
- Youth mentorships
- Regional Tourism initiative
- Increase tourism traffic
    - Crooked road
- Increase winter business
    - Town wide events to drum up business during the winter months
    - Targeted marketing for winter activities
- Drive local/regional tourism
    - “Play where you live”
- Winter kayaking/fishing
- Classes – “Hobby Hub”
- Art council
- New resident recruitment
- Maintaining small town feel/charm
- Music

Threats

- Regional Tourism (More Competition)
- Natural disaster (Losing natural resources)
    - Surrounded by forest service
- Lack of trail maintenance
    - EMS
    - Broadband
- Air B&B situation
    - Allowing transient housing situations in residential areas
- Lack of properties for potential residents to purchase

- Homelessness
- Drug issues
- Population decline
- Lack of opportunities for youth
- Brain drain

Appendix C:

Hurricane Helene

On September 27th, 2024, the Town of Damascus was hit by the brutal devastation of Hurricane Helene floodwaters from the Laurel Creek. The combination of intense, multi-day rain and downdrafts from powerful wind shears caused over 18 feet of debris-filled water to descend from Whitetop, through Taylor's Valley, and into the downtown corridor of Damascus. Emergency services were deployed to all accessible points of Town: The East side at the Hwy 58 Laurel Creek Bridge, the West side at the Hwy 58 Beaver Dam Creek Bridge, and the South side along the Virginia Creeper Trail. As the debris from broken Virginia Creeper Trail trestles, destroyed homes, floating vehicles, and fallen trees cascaded down to Damascus, the Hwy 58 Laurel Creek Bridge became obstructed, forcing the creek to reroute down Bank Avenue and Laurel Avenue into the commercial and residential areas of the downtown corridor.

Though Damascus was fortunate to have emerged with no fatalities, approximately 140 structures were damaged and an estimated loss of $10-$12 million was sustained across residents, businesses, and public infrastructure. Flood maps are expected to be redrawn as there is a potential for additional flooding to occur due to the topographical degradation of the riverbeds and stream banks. Any future zoning changes and/or property development in Damascus must bear in mind the threat of another disaster of this size.

Lessons Learned from the Hurricane Helene Flood Event

The flash flood highlighted the need for a comprehensive review of the town's preparedness, infrastructure, and long-term planning. While the community's response was commendable, this event provides an opportunity to identify key lessons and implement strategies that will build a more resilient Damascus.

Here are the primary lessons learned from the flood and its aftermath.

Emergency Preparedness & Communication

Key Lessons:

- **Speed of Onset**: The most significant lesson was the rapid onset of the flash flood. Traditional warning methods, such as public service announcements or door-to-door notifications, are often too slow to be effective. The time between a perceptible threat and the peak of the event was a matter of minutes, not hours.
- **Communication Failures**: While emergency services performed heroically, a single point of failure in communication was identified: reliance on cell service. Service became intermittent or non-existent in critical areas during the storm, preventing the dissemination of real-time warnings.
- **Communication with Residents:** Real-time updates were difficult to manage as the event unfolded. The town must have a robust plan to get critical information out to residents quickly and efficiently.
- **Lack of Formal Evacuation Plan**: The town's response was largely reactive. Residents were not provided with clear, pre-determined evacuation routes or safe zones. This led to confusion and, in some cases, people moving towards, rather than away from, danger.

Recommendations for Improvement:

- **Establish a Tiered Warning System**: Implement a system with multiple levels of alerts based on the severity of the threat.
    - Level 1 (Flood Watch): Publicly share information about rising water levels and potential hazards through social media, the town website, and a new town-wide text alert system.
    - Level 2 (Flood Warning): Use a more aggressive communication approach. Activate an emergency siren or loud speaker system in downtown areas to ensure residents without power or cell service are notified.
    - Level 3 (Mandatory Evacuation): When the threat is imminent, use all available channels—sirens, text alerts, and reverse 911 calls to landlines—to issue mandatory evacuation orders.
- **Develop Formal Evacuation Routes & Shelters & Distribution Points**: The town should create and widely publicize a formal evacuation plan that includes designated routes and verified safe zones or shelters, along with designated water and food distribution hubs. This information should be distributed in hard copy, posted on town notice boards, and made available online.
- **Conduct Regular Drills**: To ensure residents are familiar with the new plan, the town should conduct yearly flood drills with community participation, mimicking a real emergency scenario.
- **Redundant Communication Channels**: Invest in redundant communication technologies. This could include a satellite phone for the Town Manager's office or designated locations to ensure a communication link is always available.
- **Communication Plan:** Establish a multi-channel emergency communication system that includes text alerts, social media, and an updated town website. Clearly define roles and responsibilities for communication during a crisis.
- **Community Partnerships:** Strengthen and formalize partnerships with key organizations such as Washington County EM, VDEM, USFS, United Way, Trails to Recovery, etc. to ensure a quick and coordinated response during future emergencies. This includes coordinating on fundraising efforts, volunteer coordination, and logistics.

Infrastructure & Flood Management

Key Lessons:

- **Vulnerable Culverts and Drainage:** The flood revealed that certain culverts and drainage systems are not equipped to handle the volume of water from a major storm. Debris accumulation quickly blocked these systems, contributing to significant localized flooding.
- **Immediate Debris Sorting is Crucial**: The initial confusion and urgency resulted in a mixed-up pile of debris, including household items, vegetative matter, and construction materials. This made processing difficult, slowed down removal, and led to additional costs.
- **Lack of Designated Staging Areas**: The absence of clearly marked and pre-approved staging areas forced residents and volunteers to place debris wherever they could, often in roadways or on public property. This created safety hazards and complicated the next steps of the removal process.
- **Development in Flood-Prone Areas:** The event demonstrated the risks of development located in floodplains and adjacent to Laurel Creek.
- **Dependency on WCSA:** With the exception of storm drains, the town is highly dependent on WCSA for properly designing, managing, and maintaining our water and sewage infrastructure. The system was severely compromised with the network of pipelines that traverse across Damascus creeks.

Recommendations for Improvement:

- **Surveying:** Conduct a town-wide survey and assessment of all culverts, with a focus on areas prone to debris and bottlenecks. Develop and implement a proactive maintenance plan, including a pre-storm inspection checklist, to ensure clear drainage pathways.
- **Engineering:** Consult with stormwater experts on designs and cost estimates to better fortify the town's stormwater drainage systems and solutions.
- **Establish a Debris Management Plan**: Create a formal plan that outlines the town's response from day one. This plan should include pre-identified staging and consolidation areas for debris collection.
- **Implement a Debris Separation Guide**: Develop a simple, visual guide for residents and volunteers to follow. The guide should clearly illustrate how to separate debris into three main categories:
    - Hazardous: (refrigerators, propane tanks, paint, gasoline, etc.)
    - Construction and Demolition (C&D) Waste: Lumber, shingles, concrete, etc.
    - Vegetative Debris: Tree limbs, brush, and other organic matter.
- **Floodplain Management**: Re-evaluate and strengthen the town's zoning ordinances to better regulate development in high-risk areas. Incorporate flood resilience standards into future building codes for structures near waterways.
- **Build Community Partnerships:** Formalize agreements with local contractors, waste management companies, and neighboring towns to secure equipment and resources for debris removal in advance.
- **WCSA Involvement:** Regularly meet with representatives from the water authority to discuss, review, and inspect water lines, sewage, and maintenance of this infrastructure.

Citizen Accessibility

Key Lessons

- **Incoming and Outgoing Mail:** The United States Postal Service building was closed for six months, resulting in residents being forced to commute to Abingdon, VA in order to receive or deposit their mail.
- **Disaster Resources:** Getting individual disaster assistance from FEMA was difficult for many people. For residents in this rural area, was especially challenging to access to Disaster Recovery Center (DRC) because many didn't have cars, reliable cell service, or access to technology. As a result, many who were eligible for aid never applied because they couldn't get to the center, didn't understand the process, or couldn't provide the required documents.
- **Bathrooms, Showers, & Laundry Services:** Immediately following the flood, residents lost access to water and sewer throughout town, some for more than two weeks. Emergency management organizations deployed bathrooms and showers on a delayed timeline. The locations of these temporary stations were inaccessible to some residents.

Recommendations for Improvement

- **Alternative Temporary Locations:** An alternative method of access or temporary USPS should be considered for any future emergencies.
- **Inclusive Information Distribution:** State and Federal emergency management teams should be made aware of these issues for any potential future disasters. Any temporary Disaster Resource Centers should plan for more consolidated and involved support.
- **Pre-Disaster Planning:** A plan should be created that lists a variety of locations for needed emergency/portable bathrooms and showers based on differing disaster scenarios.

Insurance & Financial Preparedness

Key Lessons

- **Flood Insurance Coverage:** The Town received over $250k in funding for both the mitigation and the repair of Town buildings and contents in flood insurance coverage. Following Hurricane Helene, in FY24-25, leaders in the Town elected not to renew this coverage and instead implemented a self-insured fund. The Town utilized the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA's) Public Assistance Program to help with the financial aspect of rebuilding and repairing Town infrastructure. In order to be eligible for future funding from the FEMA PA Program, the Town must obtain and maintain insurance to protect our facilities against future loss. Without flood insurance coverage, if the Town were to receive PA funding for a facility damaged by the same hazard in a subsequent disaster, FEMA would reduce the funding in the subsequent disaster by the amount of insurance required from the previous disaster. The applicant is allowed to request that FEMA modify this insurance requirement if the Town's "alternative to the insurance requirement provides adequate protection against future loss to the property". FEMA, however, is not obligated to approve this request. **add citation*

Recommendations for Improvement

- **Flood Insurance Coverage:** Reestablishing flood insurance coverage of Town assets or adequately funding the self-insured program could be critical to a timely recovery post-disaster.

Tourism Asset Diversification and the Loss of Business on the Virginia Creeper Trail

Key Lessons

- **Virginia Creeper Trail Reliance:** The Town will experience an estimated $4M-$7M revenue loss in the first year following Hurricane Helene due to its disproportionate reliance on tourism attached to the Virginia Creeper Trail. The VCT from Whitetop, VA to Damascus, VA was severely impacted by the flooding of Hurricane Helene. 31 trestles along this section of the trail were damaged or destroyed and access has been prohibited since Fall of 2024. Construction is expected to begin in October of 2025. As the primary driver of tourism in Damascus, many businesses, such as bicycle rental and shuttle services, have seen a loss of approximately 70% of business since the closure of this portion of the trail.

Recommendations for Improvement

- **Diversification:** Expand the tourism industry to other assets within the area such as fishing, hiking, and adventure-biking. Promote new events within these areas of interest in order to encourage a broader range of business and customer base in town. Relying on solely the Virginia Creeper Trail is not sustainable with the potential for future disasters to occur.

Photos post Hurricane Helene