



SET

2015 Civic Engagement Forum

Mount Rogers

Stronger Economies Together Tuesday, October 20, 2015

Overview of the Mount Rogers Stronger Economies Together Project

The Mount Rogers Planning District (MRPD) was chosen as one of three Virginia areas to participate in Stronger Economies Together (SET). The MRPD consists of Bland, Carroll, Grayson, Smyth, Washington, and Wythe Counties and the Cities of Bristol and Galax and, as of the most recent Census, is home to almost 200,000 people. As a leadership and planning initiative, Stronger Economies Together (SET) project will bring leaders from each of these localities together to develop and implement the region's economic development blueprint. Mount Rogers SET meetings began in the fall 2015 and will extend through spring 2016, with implementation of the SET economic development plan extending through 2016. To guide the Mount Rogers SET process through implementation, a regional leadership team has been produced.

Regional Leadership Team Members:

- Lori Hester Deel—Smyth County
- Whitney Bonham—Washington County
- Jack Morgan—Heartwood
- Elaine Holeton—Grayson County
- Kevin Spurlin—Virginia Cooperative Extension
- David Manley—Wythe Joint IDA
- Dr. Lou Fincher—Emory & Henry College
- Herb Grant—ABB
- Brenda Marrah—City of Galax
- Marty Holliday— New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Development Board
- Ken McFadyen— Blue Ridge Crossroads Economic Development Authority
- Olivia McDonald—Marion Downtown!
- Chris Pollins—Chestnut Creek School of the Arts
- Randy Rose—Virginia Tourism Corporation
- Rocky Warren—Mount Rogers Planning District Commission

Civic Forum Attendees

Stronger Economies Together Regional Team:

Dr. Martha Walker, Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE)

Douglas Jackson, Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD)

Janice Stroud-Bickes: USDA Rural Development

Anne Herring, USDA Rural Development

Craig Barbrow, USDA Rural Development

Regional Representation:

In addition to representatives from Department of Housing and Community Development, USDA-Rural Development, and Virginia Tech/Virginia Cooperative Extension, 26 individuals from throughout the region attended the Stronger Economies Together (SET) Civic Forum held on October 21 at the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission office.

- Congressman H. Morgan Griffith's Office: Michelle Jenkins and Cody Mumpower
- Virginia Cooperative Extension: Kevin Spurlin
- Wythe Community College: Dr. Dean Sprinkle and Perry Hughes
- New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Investment Board: Marty Holliday
- Bland County: Rodney Ratliff
- Grayson County/The Crossroads Institute: Brenda Sutherland
- Smyth County: Lori Hester
- Washington County: Whitney Bonham
- Wythe County: Cellell Dalton
- Wythe Joint IDA: David Manley
- City of Galax: Brenda Marrah
- Town of Marion: Bill Rush
- Town of Fries: Marie Isom
- Town of Abingdon: Kevin Costello
- Town of Wytheville: Wayne Sutherland
- Friends of SWVA/Heartwood: Jack Morgan
- Blue Ridge Discovery Center: Aaron Floyd and Brenda Bonk
- People Incorporated of Virginia: Ellen Tolton, Maggie Costello, and Traci Mitchell
- Mount Rogers Planning District Commission: Aaron Sizemore, Brian Reed, and Rocky Warren

Outline of the Civic Forum

Dr. Martha Walker and Doug Jackson facilitated the Stronger Economies Together (SET) Civic Forum. Attendees were split into groups of 4-6 individuals and these groups were asked to come up with a list of the strengths and challenges faced in the region. Throughout the day, the groups were rearranged to allow individuals to meet and work with others and to challenge attendees to come up with more innovative ideas.

Dr. Walker noted that our end goal from this process is to create a high quality plan (HQP) that is focused, realistic, and attainable. The HQP will be evidence-based and will help us guide our region toward sustainable future growth, allowing us to tap into the resources and assets of our region and strengthen and start to correct the areas that are weaknesses.

Strengths

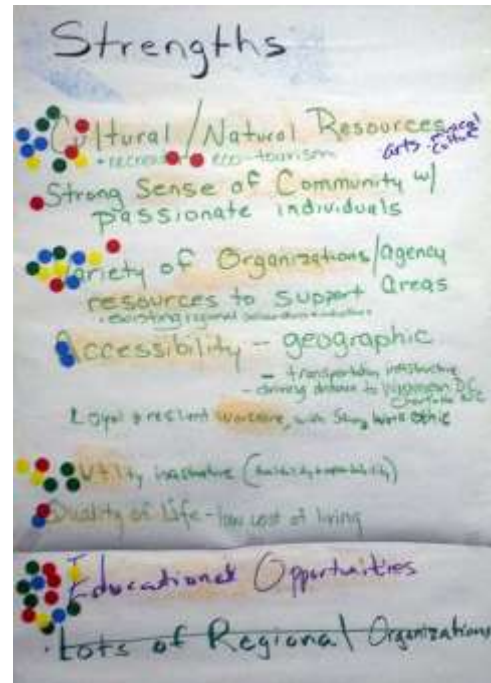
The strengths in the region were focused on our cultural and natural resources and discussion centered the ways that we can leverage those for our economic benefit.

Top Strengths:

- Cultural/natural resources related to recreation and eco-tourism including arts
- Variety of organizations and agencies offering resources to support area
- Utility infrastructure is second to none

Other Strengths:

- Quality of live with low cost of living
- Strong sense of community with passionate individuals
- Accessibility related to geographic area
- Local and resilient workforce with strong work ethic
- Educational opportunities



Data Observation: Strengths

After reviewing the data, most noted strengths were in the area of entrepreneurship.

- Growth in small business does not equal increase in sales dollars
- Growth from within is vital requiring the region to increase the support to entrepreneurship and increase the marketing skills as well as the marketing region
- Region is equal to or higher than the state data related to educational attainment for Associate Degrees—we also need to compare with national data
- Agricultural industry is growing especially around local foods systems
- Current and future jobs require technical training requiring the region to focus increasing the educational attainment of those who only hold a high school diploma

Challenges

When attendees were asked to focus on the challenges in the region, the answers were much broader than the answers for strengths. Also, due to various factors, including geographic diversity of the region, some of the challenges noted in one county may have been strengths in another (e.g. access to major roads or internet). One topic that was the focus of much discussion over the course of the day was the stigma attached to technical education and to “just” having a two-year-degree, despite the fact that many of the employers in our region need employees with technical skills and education.

Top Challenges:

- Lack of unified approach has created an overlap in planning and access to resources
- Stigma of technical education or obtaining “just” a two-year degree
- Inability to accept reality and/or change
- Poverty still exists and families are locked into it
- Talent attraction
- Wi-fi and cell services availability affects information infrastructure
- Connecting the dots (workforce and education)—> interest and skills to jobs

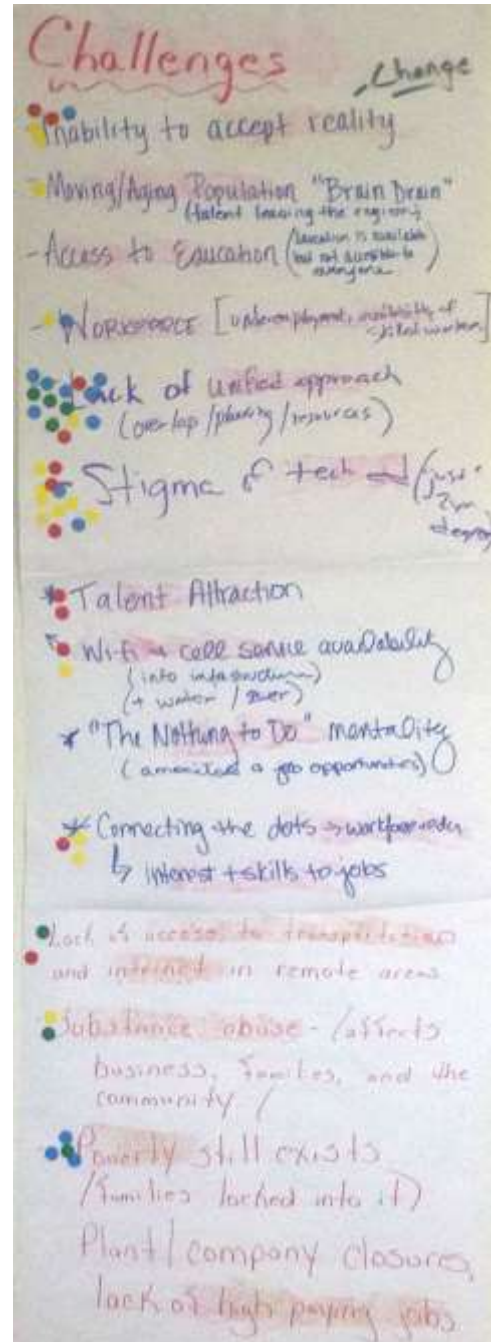
Other Challenges:

- Moving/aging populations creates a “brain drain” with talent leaving the region
- Access to education (educational opportunities are available but not accessible to everyone)
- Workforce issues including underemployment and availability of skilled workers
- Lack of access to transportation and internet in remote areas
- Substance abuse affects business, families, and the community
- Plant/company closures
- Lack of high paying jobs
- “the Nothing to do” mentality (amenities and job opportunities)

Data Observation: Challenges

After reviewing the data, one of the first things noted by the group was the absence of agricultural data. It was noted that the region’s economy has a large agricultural component and the group felt that to have an accurate assessment of the region, agricultural statistics were needed.

- Aging population impacts the need for health care workers
- Absence of agriculture data (need to understand the region’s agriculture industry’s influence on the type of work people want to do and its impact on the work ethic of the workforce)
- Lack of inventory on regional groups working on economic growth
- Lack of diversity of population impacts the development of a robust economy (region must become more inclusive and welcoming)
- Higher education attainment is low—can we work with small business to grow the degrees
- We do not know if in-commuters/out-commuters impact the number/percentage of education data—this could impact the quality of the workforce



Opportunities

The participants were asked what opportunities could help make the Mount Rogers region more vibrant. The group placed the opportunities into six major categories, which were communication/network, workforce/education, awareness/education, entrepreneurship, economic strategies, and rebranding region.

Communication/Network

- Increase coordination between agencies—like SET
- Increase dialog among stakeholders
- Workforce Development and economic development entities work collaboratively and meet quarterly
- Leadership/facilitation—>enhance ways to work together
- Models of cooperation
- 2020 Summit—Collective Impact—Strive to work together

Workforce/Education

- Upcoming Sector Strategy Initiative
- Changing perception of technical education
- Develop workforce to meet current and emerging careers
- Match education with current and future vocational employment needs
- Connect K-12 education system with workforce pipeline
- Get offenders/drug addicts a change—help them instead of punishing them

Awareness/Education

- Educate K-12 students about region and opportunities
- Educate parents and teachers to funnel students in the right direction
- Mentoring poverty stricken families
- \$300 million from Tobacco Commission and invest it in students and youth

Entrepreneurship

- Strong correlation between technical skills and entrepreneurship

Economic Strategies

- Reclaim coal mines and use methane gases to grow herbs such as Grow Chinese medicinal herbs (Ginseng, etc.) and export to China
- Double down on agriculture—keep locally grown products local
- Manufacture outdoor recreation products for outfitters

Rebrand Region

- Opportunity to rebrand and correct the stereotypes both internally and externally associated with Appalachia

Where our decision makers would invest:

At the end of the session, participants were instructed to select one of the categories of “opportunities” that should be a priority. The overwhelming choice of this exercise, with over half of the participants choosing it, was the workforce/education category.

1. Workforce/Education
2. Awareness Education
3. (tie) Entrepreneurship
3. (tie) Rebrand region

Though the group stated that communication and developing a network of coordination is a very important focus for the region, funders probably would not invest in this type of process. It was noted that this is likely because it is difficult to see more immediate physical results from creating a process of coordinated communication. Investors want to be able to see tangible results and changes, therefore, the region will support a coordinated communication process as part of its SET planning infrastructure, involving the regional leadership team and all SET session participants.

Takeaways

- Do we need more decision makers in the room—engage for December 8 meeting
- Do we need more business leaders? K-12? Citizens?
- Is this seen as more diverse? Adding and building on traditional strategies
- We want the same thing
- Small business impact
- Technical skills emphasis as path to success
- Family structure (positives and negatives)—how we can focus on bright spots
- Our strategies have to include families
- Our approach has to also include helping those unable to come out of poverty
- The inventory—what’s happening? How do we adjust and infill?

One of the main takeaways from today’s forum was that regardless of our different agencies or missions, we all generally want the same thing and are working toward the same type of goals. We may have a slightly different focus, but our outcomes are interconnected. While one area/agency may have good short-term outcomes, in order for us to succeed in the long-term, we must work together to create solutions. While we highlight that many of our greatest strengths revolve around our region’s attractiveness regarding natural/cultural assets and our way of life, we know that we cannot rely on tourism as our main industry.

Assignment

There was a general consensus within the group that we needed to engage more individuals and agencies throughout the region. Each person was asked to speak with five individuals regarding economic growth in the region and to report back to the group with their findings at the next meeting.

Next Meeting

The next Stronger Economies Together (SET) meeting will occur on Tuesday, December 8, 2015, and its focus will be “Examining Economic Data for the Region.” To RSVP for the meeting, please contact Stephanie Patton at spatton@mrpdc.org or (276) 783-5103 ext.0.

Website

Please visit <http://www.mrpdc.org/set.htm> for more information about the Mount Rogers SET project.