

MOUNT ROGERS

OUTDOOR ASSET ANALYSIS & DEVELOPMENT PLAN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



check out the full plan



OVERVIEW

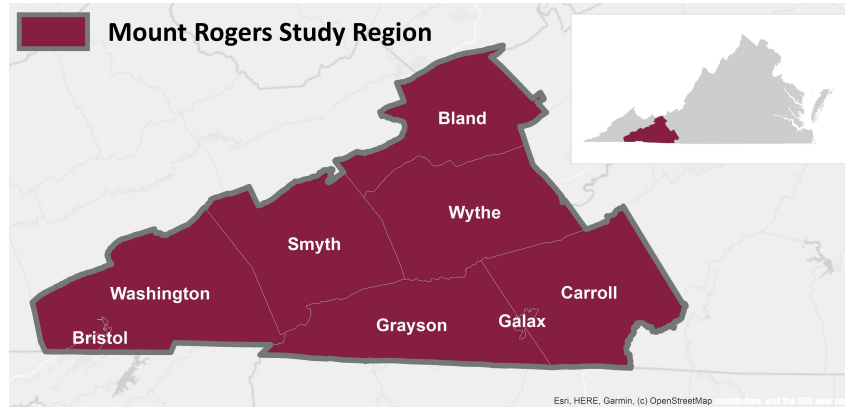
Outdoor recreation has become increasingly recognized as a tourism driver, quality of life asset, and growing economic sector. Communities in the Mount Rogers region, a hub of outdoor tourism, enlisted a research team—comprised of experts from Virginia Tech’s Center for Economic and Community Engagement, Arnett Muldrow & Associates, and Hill Studios—to develop an outdoor analysis and development plan.

Goals

- 1) Use past planning efforts to inform an actionable plan for improving access to and quality of outdoor experiences for visitors and residents. This includes the 2017 Outdoor Recreation Economic Development Framework completed by Arnett Muldrow, for a portion of the Mount Rogers region. This report serves as a foundation for this plan.
- 2) Build the collaborative capacity of regional stakeholders to uplift outdoor assets.
- 3) Provide expertise to prioritize actionable steps for developing the region’s outdoors, with guidelines for implementation.

Methods

Based on the framework of the past plan, the research team collected and analyzed secondary data, including census and market data, qualitative input from a wide variety of stakeholders, and more for a comprehensive look at the region, its outdoor assets and existing gaps, as well as an analysis of regional and national tourism markets to inform key strategies and next steps.



October 2021, Research Team Kick-Off Trip

Key Findings

1

Communities in the region have made great strides to improve assets and infrastructure.

2

Outdoor assets and tourism amenities are clustered within the region.

3

The region is in need of more outdoor tourism businesses and the workforce and support to sustain them.

4

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded opportunity for outdoor recreation and more diverse participation.

Development Recommendations

Project Organization & Tracking

A robust understanding of outdoor recreation assets, including those that need cultivation and connection, is critical to building a healthy environment for both secondary and tertiary outdoor recreation assets. The actions below focus on building a communication network to strengthen the connection between assets as well as provide ongoing inventory and user tracking.

- Maintain the Asset Inventory as a living, interactive tool for tourism professionals and visitors
- Foster a culture of continuous data monitoring, tracking, evaluating, assessing, and celebrating progress
- Advance the development of experience-based itineraries

Business Development

The previous section focuses on creating connectivity between the outdoor recreation assets and business and building data sets to track users and their impact. Meanwhile, this section outlines actions to create a thriving, supportive business environment where outdoor and visitor businesses can grow and be successful.

- Support and grow the outdoor and hospitality industry workforce
- Understand, maintain, and advance sites and buildings
- Promote business retention and expansion
- Foster entrepreneurship

Partnerships

For this plan to be successful, each stakeholder within Mount Roger's must play a role in implementation. Each partner, including state agencies, local governments, non-profit destinations, private businesses, and local entrepreneurs, has its own strengths and limitations regarding capacity and resources.

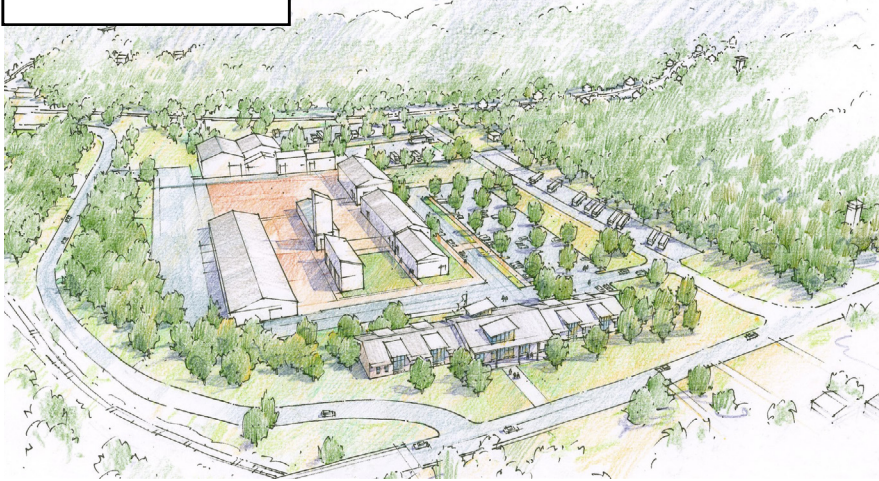
- Build capacity and share knowledge via informal associations and citizen committees
- Foster the creation and utilization of shared spaces



October 2021, Research Team Kick-Off Trip

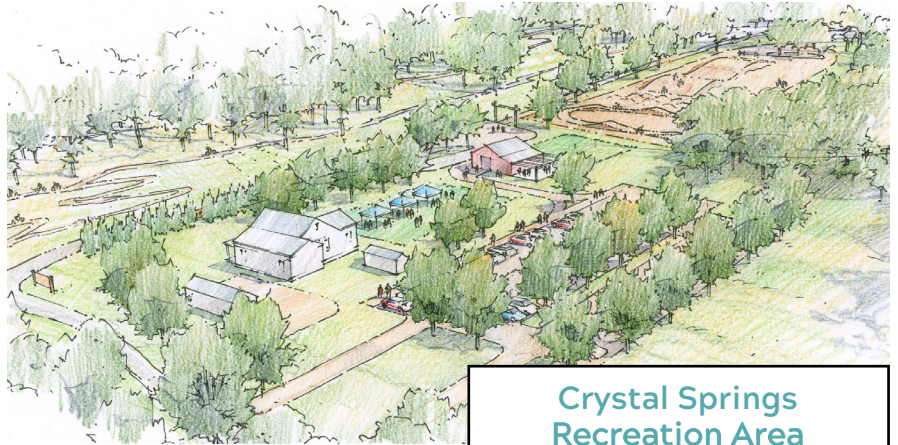
Site Development

The Brickyard

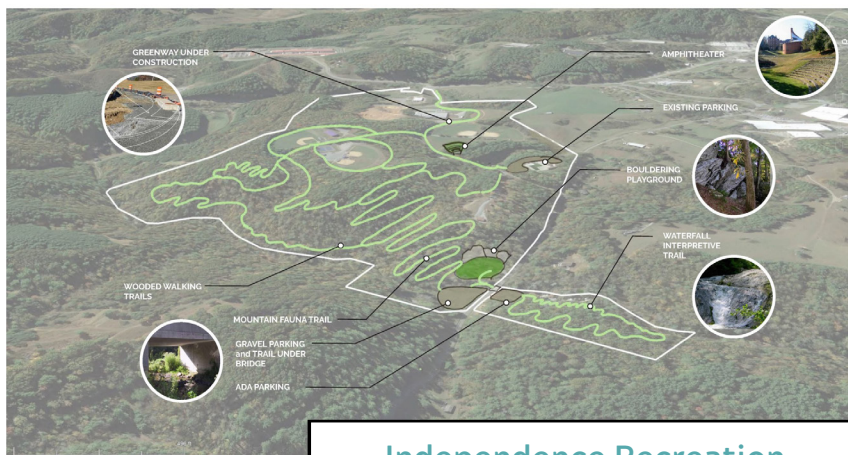


The Brickyard is a development concept proposed along interstate 81 in Smyth County at exit 54 where the world-renowned Appalachian Trail crosses on a property adjacent to the site. More than 50,000 vehicles pass by this exit daily along with thousands of hikers on the A.T. each year. The proposed concept utilizes the existing industrial site by reimagining it as a haven for hikers and a new attraction for locals and visitors alike. Some of the proposed uses include indoor and outdoor paintball courses and ATV training courses as well as R.V., yurt, and primitive camping experiences. In addition to these recreation opportunities, a new entrance facility is proposed to include an outfitter shop, small market and restaurant, event/gathering spaces, and lounge as well as necessary amenities for the A.T. hikers including package pick-up/drop-off, laundry, and showers. This multi-faceted facility is great for families and people of all ages who seek adventure.

Crystal Springs Recreation Area is located in Wythe County, a few miles south of the Town of Wytheville. With incredible access off interstate 81, the proposed improvements will further enhance the visitor experience by offering new activities for outdoor thrill seekers. The current use of the site includes hiking and mountain biking trails which are proposed to expand to greater reaches on the property and offer more riding opportunities with various difficulty levels. In addition, the plan proposes that ziplining be offered so visitors can experience the plethora of scenic beauty as they zip through the trees and atop the canopies. The entrance of the site is also posed to receive some enhancements as a technical skills track and pump track for bikers in addition to some group retreat/event space utilizes some of the existing barn structures on the site.



Crystal Springs Recreation Area



Independence Recreation Park "The Falls"

When it come to outdoor recreation, there are few sites that match the potential that the Independence Recreation Park offers for locals and visitors. The park provides various multi-purpose ball fields, a swimming pool, playground, and connections to a greenway that link to the Town Center. In addition, there is a breathtaking waterfall along Peach Bottom Creek where a historic power turbine was once located. The proposed plans will add to this experience by creating more trails and linkages throughout the site for hikers and bikers, a rock climbing/bouldering area, and an amphitheater. The plan also proposes a parking lot across from the existing parking lot at the Falls, to provide a safer entrance as well as ADA parking with an observation deck for those who cannot traverse the steep trail to the top.

Connectivity Plan

The Connectivity Plan seeks to align local communication efforts and leverage existing regional marketing in a more cohesive strategy to promote the region as a unit. There has been successful regional marketing of tourism and outdoor recreation assets within the area, but many localities have lacked the capacity to effectively implement their own messaging. This plan identifies strategies for “bottom-up” marketing with guidance on the implementation of localized branding that can tap into the regional marketing efforts.

Brand Alignment

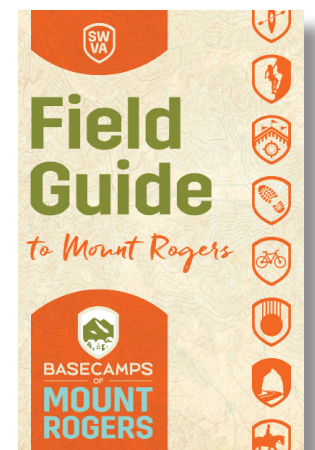
The plan creates graphic marketing strategies and brand extension based on the economic recommendations of this plan, building off the unique SWVA, Mount Rogers, and local community identities. It does not create new branding, but rather aligns the regional hierarchy of branding into localized communication roles and tactics.

Strategies begin with crafting a collective message for the Mount Rogers Experience targeting outdoor enthusiasts, extreme adventurers, heritage tourists and agritourists. This is promoted through the “Basecamps of Mount Rogers” tying each community to the outdoor recreation assets and each other. Other key strategies include a “Field Guide to Mount Rogers” brochure, merchandising, ads, and initiatives for a highlighting local ambassadors and developing non-traditional lodging.

Wayfinding

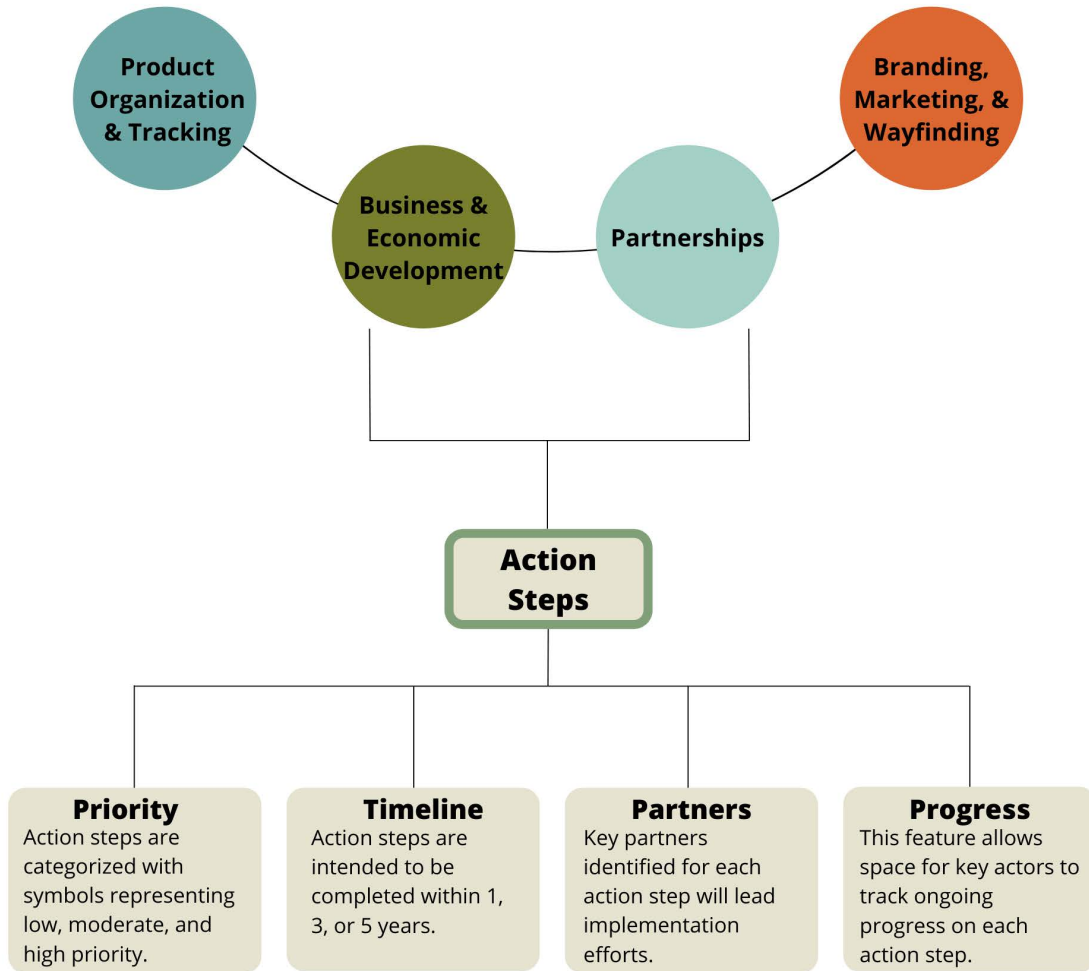
The wayfinding strategy establishes a regional wayfinding typology that is adaptable to local resources and the established brands of individual communities. Some towns have fully implemented their brand systems including wayfinding. Others have established solid brand strategies but have yet to create signage that directs visitors and locals to key cultural and recreation assets. A few have no established brand identity.

The wayfinding strategy creates a platform for all to be part of a regional network. The system includes sign designs for high and low speed directional signage, gateways, district gateways, pedestrian and trail signage. It continues with implementation guidance on destination ranking, sign locating, phasing, and management.



Implementation

The research team laid out an implementation framework for Mount Rogers outdoor tourism and recreation actors to accomplish the action steps supporting the 5 key strategy areas: product organization and tracking; business and economic development; partnerships; site development; and branding and wayfinding. Each action step is accompanied with prioritization and a timeline for implementation. The framework also sets out to identify key partners for each action step who may have the capacity or connectivity to lead implementation efforts. Finally, the framework leaves space for users of this plan to fill in ongoing progress for each action step.



Steering Committee Members

Mandy Archer, Blue Ridge Crossroads Small Business Development Center;
Tracy Cornett, Grayson County Tourism;
Nichole Hair, Blue Ridge Crossroads Economic Development Authority;
Mount Rogers Regional Partnership;
Amanda Livingston, Smyth County Tourism;
Dirk Moore, Emory and Henry College;
Beck Nave, Virginia Tourism Corporation;
Idalina Walker, Friends of Southwest Virginia;
Todd Wolford, Downtown Wytheville