



# The Southwest Regional Recreation Authority Strategic Plan: Vision 2030

June 13, 2024

Produced collaboratively by the Virginia Center for Economic and Community Engagement, ConsultEcon, Inc., Aspire Marketing\*, and Dr. Jeff Marion, VT Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation

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# Introduction

The Southwest Regional Recreation Authority (SRRA) operates Spearhead Trails, a system of over 400 miles of motorized and non-motorized trails across the seven county, one city region in Southwest Virginia (SWVA) – Heart of Appalachia. Spearhead Trails is an outdoor recreation and tourism asset with the potential to improve the quality of life for residents, having downstream benefit on residents' mental and physical health, improving pride of place, community vibrancy, and economic development. SRRA was created through enabling legislation in 2008 and opened the Spearhead System in 2012. SRRA also operates Dixon Shooting Range, adding clays and archery and other shooting sports to their outdoor recreation offerings. Prior to 2012, regional residents have used these trails for recreation and outdoor adventure for over 40 years. Similar motorized trail systems built on legacy coal mining and logging alignments can be found throughout Appalachia, especially in West Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky.

The period from 2012 to 2021 saw substantial growth for SRRA and Spearhead Trails, thanks to considerable investments from both public and private sectors. These funds fueled expansions, amenities, and the establishment of activity centers such as Spearhead Headquarters (HQ) and the Dixon Shooting Range. However, between 2020 and 2022, SRRA faced local environmental controversies, coinciding with turnover in staff and executive leadership, fostering uncertainty about the organization's future trajectory.

In 2023, Col. Steve Pike assumed the role of interim executive director, tasked with revitalizing SRRA into a professional, high-functioning entity. By January 2024, Col. Pike transitioned to a new role as government affairs director, paving the way for Mr. Darrell Ely to step in as the new SRRA Executive Director. Mr. Ely has background in regional athletics and a strong community connection. With these changes, SRRA is primed toward a transformative vision for 2030.

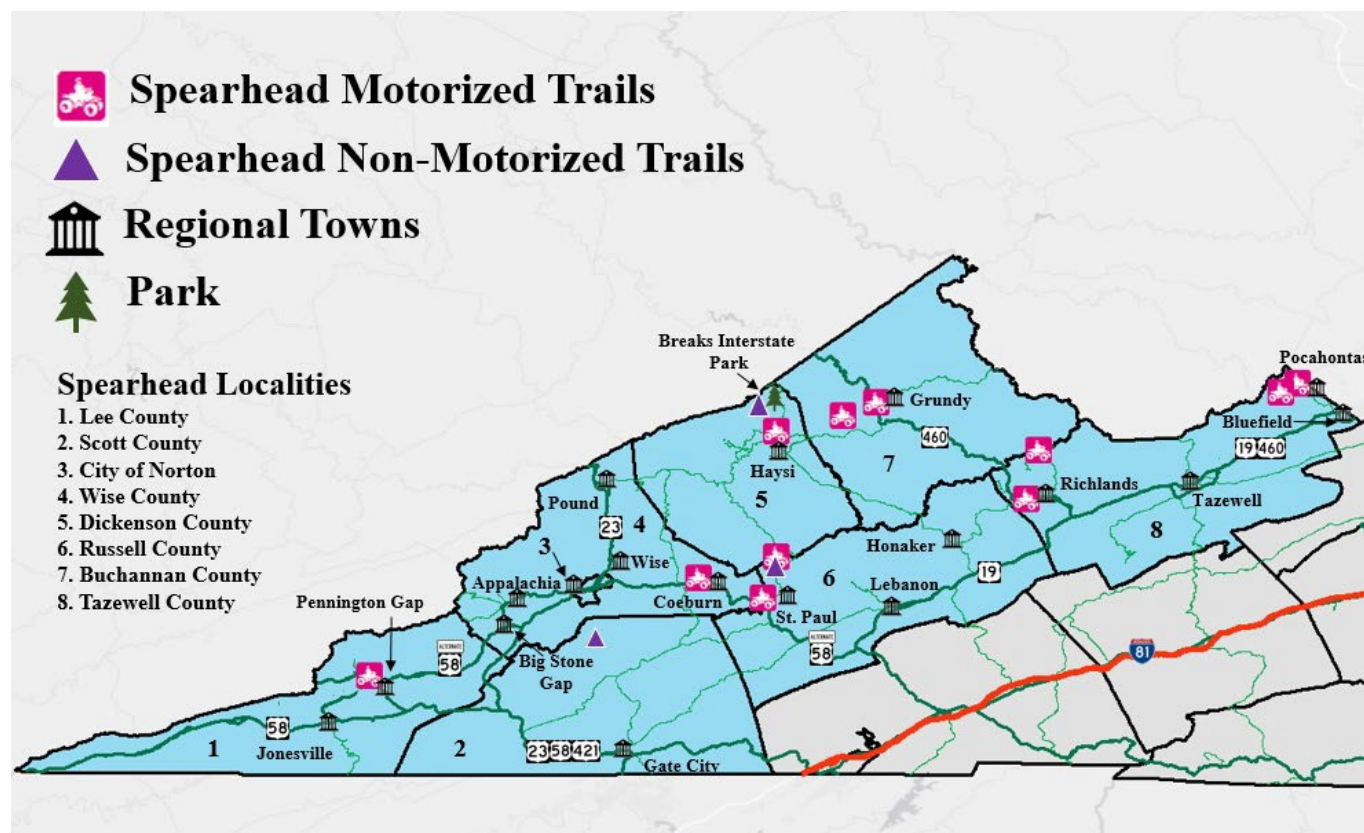
In July 2023, SRRA partnered with Friends of Southwest Virginia to initiate a Business and Strategic Planning process for Spearhead Trails. A project that was funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission. After overseeing a competitive bid process, a committee consisting of representatives from Friends, the SRRA board, SRRA executive staff, and VTC selected The Virginia Tech Center for Economic and Community Engagement (CECE) in December 2023 to serve as a consultant. The goal of the project was to enhance SRRA's capacity in serving the people and economy of Southwest Virginia (SWVA) through a strategic plan and implementation guide for SRRA and the Spearhead Trails System. CECE collaborated with Aspire Marketing, ConsultEcon, and Dr. Jeffrey Marion, a Recreation Ecologist and adjunct professor at Virginia Tech in the Department of Forestry, to accomplish this task.

Planning involved extensive regional travel, a review of current operations and processes, gathering stakeholder feedback, and researching best practices from similar motorized trail systems. The plan is organized into the following sections: first, the region is discussed, presenting regional demographic trends, tourism, hospitality and travel, and an overview of regional outdoor recreation. Next, the planning process is described, including how secondary economic data was combined with extensive stakeholder engagement and site visits. From there, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and



threats assessment is presented. Finally, the recommendations are presented according to the six strategic areas, plus a bonus seventh area for data management: diversify revenue streams, enhance and expand the trail system, improve marketing efforts, incorporate best practices in sustainability, find new opportunities for collaboration, and increase community engagement with the organization. Each area has a corresponding section in the implementation guide to provide structure and accountability for adopting the recommendations.

*Figure 1: SRRA Region, Localities, Towns, and Trails*



## The SRRA Region:

This section outlines key data trends in the SRRA region, covering communities with direct trail access or significant assets for trail activities. These include Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell, Wise counties, and the independent city of Norton. CECE analyzed demographic, economic, and industry data trends in the region, its localities, and the state to better understand how they influence today's outdoor recreation and tourism industries.

## Regional Demographics

The population for the SRRA region is 180,834 people as of 2023. Table 1 illustrates Tazewell and Wise counties account for 42% of the region's population. Much like other rural and former coal regions, there has been a significant population decline. On average, the region has seen a population decline of

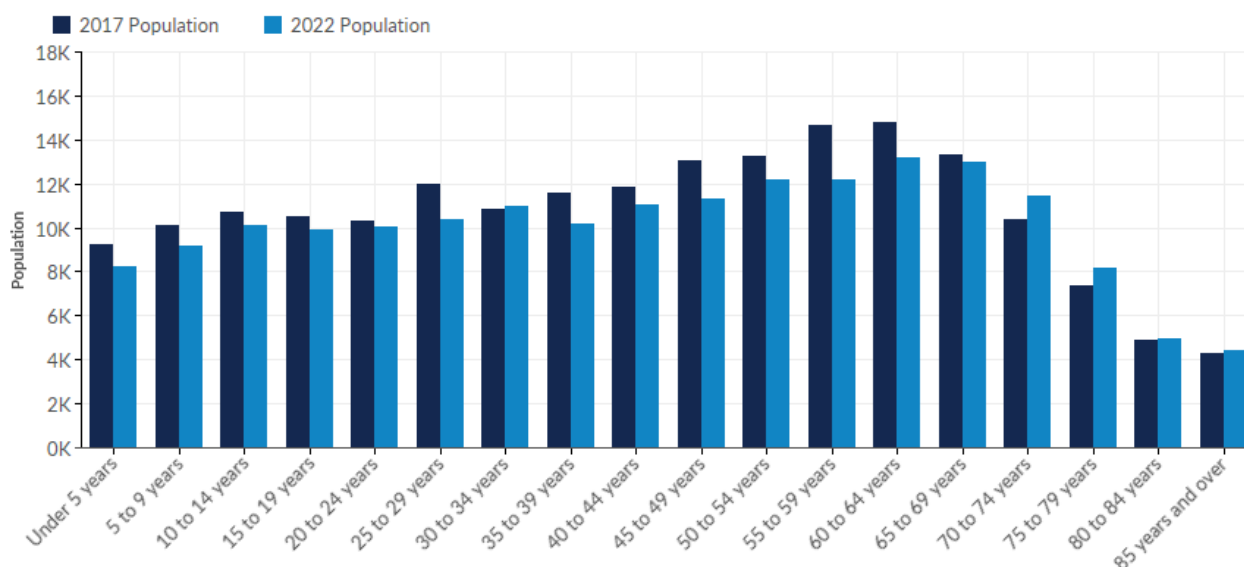
6.4% over the past five years, which translates to a decrease of 12,283 residents. Population decline is expected to continue over the next five years, with projections estimating an additional 11,596 residents will leave between 2022 and 2027. Outmigration is most pronounced among individuals aged 25 to 60, resulting in a higher concentration of individuals in the region approaching retirement. While a region of this size would typically expect 54,193 people in the “retiring soon” category, there are currently 67,354 people fitting this description. The combination of an aging population and the departure of younger residents may pose challenges for local businesses in recruiting enough employees. Figure 2 illustrates detailed trends regarding age distribution.

Table 1: Region Population & Change

Location	Population	Percent change (2017-2022)
Buchanan County	19,352	-10.5%
Dickenson County	13,725	-6.8%
Lee County	21,982	-8.2%
Russell County	25,448	-5.9%
Scott County	21,476	-1.9%
Tazewell County	39,821	-3.7%
Wise County	35,421	-8.2%
City of Norton	3,609	-8.1%
<b>Region</b>	<b>180,834</b>	<b>-6.4%</b>
State	8,683,619	+2.5%
Country	333,287,557	+2.5%

Source: Lightcast (2022). Population Demographics Report. <http://www.lightcast.io>.

Figure 2: Age Class Distributions of SRRA Region



Source: Lightcast (2022). Economy Overview. <http://www.lightcast.io>.

Educational attainment levels in the region fall below national and state averages, with only 8.9% of residents having attained a bachelor's degree, marking an 11.9% deficit compared to the national average. Conversely, the number of individuals holding an associate's degree slightly surpasses the national average, with 10% of residents earning this qualification.

### Income

In 2022, the SRRA region reported average earnings of \$54,600, which is \$26,200 below the national average. The disparity in income levels might be attributed to the notably lower cost of living in this region compared to the state average. The cost of living in the Spearhead Trail region is more affordable than the state and nation. Examining a cost-of-living index, the national cost of living is always 1.00; if cost of living is lower, than the typical dollar will go further in that community. In the Spearhead Trail region, cost of living is 93.4, meaning a dollar goes relatively further than the state cost of living average of 102.2.

Despite the lower cost of living, the region faces elevated poverty levels, standing at 21.2%, surpassing both the national and state figures of 11.5% and 10.6%, respectively, as indicated in Table 2. This discrepancy highlights a persistent challenge linked to the economic repercussions of the coal industry's decline over the past few decades. Consequently, the region grapples with limited employment opportunities, exacerbating its economic hardships.

Table 2: Median Household Income and Poverty

Location	Median Household Income	Poverty Rate	Labor Force Participation Rate	Unemployment
Buchanan County	\$39,591	26.9%	36.7%	2.2%
Dickenson County	\$40,143	23.4%	39.6%	1.4%
Lee County	\$41,619	24.4%	41.9%	3.4%
Russell County	\$44,088	18.4%	43.4%	2.6%
Scott County	\$44,535	19.5%	45.4%	1.5%
Tazewell County	\$46,508	17.6%	45.6%	2.6%
Wise County	\$47,541	22.2%	46.4%	4.2%
City of Norton	\$36,974	20.3%	51.8%	3.8%
<b>Region</b>	<b>\$44,128</b>	<b>21.2%</b>	<b>43.7%</b>	<b>2.8%</b>
State	\$87,249	10.6%	65.3%	2.3%
Country	\$75,149	11.5%	63.5%	2.7%

Source: Lightcast (2022) Economy Overview. <http://www.lightcast.io>. 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates Data.census.gov.

### Workforce and Labor Market

From 2017 to 2022, the number of jobs in the region declined by 6%, from 61,686 to 57,956. This disparity resulted in the region falling short of the national job growth rate of 3.8% (9.8% difference). Despite the decrease in jobs over the past five years, projections for the next five years anticipate growth of about 1,751 jobs.

The SRRA regional employment profile is common among rural regions around the country. The largest employment industries in the region are education and hospitals, local government (excluding education



and hospitals), and restaurants and other eating places. Notably, the five largest employers in the region are the Commonwealth of Virginia, Tazewell County Public Schools, University of Virginia's College at Wise, Walmart, and Sykes. While there are a handful of large employers in this region, the vast majority are considered small businesses, employing between 1 and 49 people. Small businesses account for 96.4% of business in the Spearhead Region.

The labor force is comprised of 71,555 individuals, with 68,746 individuals employed. The unemployment rate, which measures the percent of people actively seeking work but without employment, remains around 4%, which is slightly higher than the national and state unemployment levels of 3.7% and 2.9%, respectively. The high poverty rate reflects an overall low labor force participation rate, which is the percent of the working-age population that is actively engaged in the workforce. Overall the regional labor force participation rate is 43.7%, significantly lower than the state average of 65.3%.

The SRRA region exhibits commuting trends that suggest many pockets within the region function as bedroom communities. A significant number of residents leave the region to work daily. This trend has remained consistent over the past five years, even amidst pandemic restrictions. On average, 8,445 individuals leave the region daily for work. The primary destinations are Sullivan County, Tennessee, with a net difference of 1,856 commuters) and Washington County, Virginia, with a (net difference of 715 commuters).

## **Tourism, Hospitality, and Travel Overview**

Tourism, hospitality, and travel activities are prevalent in many rural and mountainous regions due to their abundance of natural resources. Natural resources have always been a draw that drives regional tourism as they offer a unique environment and a chance to relax and enjoy scenic views. Over the past few years, changing population distributions have led to increasing density in urban and suburban centers. Often, this means that individuals have less immediate access to outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism, creating a large market of individuals who will travel to access outdoor amenities. The growing recognition of the benefits of outdoor recreation and being active and outdoors is at an all-time high, causing more people to seek unique and adventurous opportunities<sup>12</sup>.

For regions like SRRA, this creates an opportunity to attract travelers to the region. The SRRA region features a plethora of ATV, equestrian, and hiking trails, as well as hunting and camping areas and a shooting range. Industries that support travelers and tourism typically include restaurants and other eating places, grocery stores, and traveler accommodations. The Spearhead Trail network requires a high degree of upkeep to maintain safety and utility for its motorized vehicle users. In turn, additional support industries have been considered for this report such as outpatient care facilities and automotive shops.

Most of the support jobs fall within the restaurant and retail service sectors, as seen in Table 3. Industries such as restaurants and supercenters are the largest financial drivers in the region and garner the most business from visitors to the area. This is to be expected as they are a brand with wide recognition and people have a full understanding of the products they offer. Moreover, these

establishments frequently stand as the sole option in the region, offering both convenient access and essential accommodations.

*Table 3: Tourism, Hospitality, and Travel Industry that Support Spearhead Trails*

NAICS	Description	2022 Jobs	2017- 2022 % Change in Jobs	2022 GRP	Avg. Earnings per Job
7225	Restaurants and other Eating Places	3,680	4%	\$78,048,273	\$22,849
4552	Warehouse Clubs, Supercenters, and other general merchandise retailers	2,346	6%	\$82,398,800	\$34,761
4451	Grocery Stores	1,951	2%	\$51,670,840	\$26,963
4591	Sporting Goods, Hobby, and Musical Retailers	63	48%	\$5,113,752	\$26,626
4571	Gasoline Stations	1,004	11%	\$83,889,770	\$30,295
4413	Automotive Parts, Accessories, Tire Retailers	356	19%	\$27,232,056	\$36,768
7212	RV (Recreational Vehicle) Parks and Recreation Camps	42	Insf. Data	\$1,728,885	\$22,446
7211	Traveler Accommodation	188	30%	\$11,022,468	\$25,202
7121	Museums, Historical Sites, and Similar Institutions	48	118%	\$12,755,119	\$163,857
6214	Outpatient Care Centers	439	20%	\$41,991,822	\$61,331

Source: Lightcast (2022) Industry Table. <http://www.lightcast.io>.

Table 4 contains a breakdown of jobs by county, the changes that can be seen in the past five years, and the average earnings one can expect to earn. The highest concentration of tourism-related jobs is in Tazewell and Wise counties; these two counties account for over half (51%) of jobs.

*Table 4: Tourism, Hospitality, and Travel Jobs: Average Earnings & 2022 Jobs Number by County*

Location	Earnings	2022 Jobs
Buchanan County	\$24,763	525
Dickenson County	\$28,513	420
Lee County	\$23,171	578
Russell County	\$27,409	765
Scott County	\$23,968	782
Tazewell County	\$24,296	1,893
Wise County	\$25,089	1,659
City of Norton	\$22,612	333
Region	<b>\$24,907</b>	<b>6,953</b>
State	\$33,564	439,740
Country	\$34,645	

Source: Lightcast (2022) Industry Table. <http://www.lightcast.io>.

An ecosystem of support industries surrounding outdoor activities helps create a holistic and positive experience for enthusiasts, contributing to the overall success and enjoyment of outdoor pursuits.

The tourism, hospitality, and travel industries confront a range of challenges, including the cyclical nature of the sector, seasonal employment fluctuations, and vulnerability to external factors such as economic downturns and global crises. High turnover rates, often attributed to long working hours and low wages, contribute to recruitment and training challenges. Of the top-employed occupations, half have experienced a significant decline in employment over the past five years. Occupations such as cashiers, retail salespersons, fast food counter workers, and waiters/waitresses have some of the largest declines. These trends highlight the evolving nature of employment in these service-oriented roles, potentially influenced by factors such as automation, and changing consumer habits.

Table 5 illustrates the top ten occupations found in supporting industries of tourism, hospitality, and travel.

*Table 5: Tourism, Hospitality, and Travel Staffing Patterns, Select Occupations*

<i>Description</i>	<i>Employed in Industry Group (2017)</i>	<i>Employed in Industry Group (2022)</i>	<i>Change (2017-2022)</i>	<i>% Change (2017-2022)</i>	<i>Median Hourly Earnings</i>
<i>Cashier</i>	2,659	1,852	-807	-30%	\$11.53
<i>Retail Salespersons</i>	1,274	1,163	-111	-9%	\$12.81
<i>Nursing Assistants</i>	465	458	-7	-2%	\$14.00
<i>Stockers and Order Fillers</i>	282	422	140	50%	\$13.80
<i>Waiters and Waitresses</i>	586	404	-182	-31%	\$12.66
<i>Cooks, Restaurants</i>	216	300	84	39%	\$13.35
<i>Fast Food and Counter Workers</i>	195	155	-40	-21%	\$11.28
<i>Maintenance and Repair Workers, General</i>	15	29	14	93%	\$17.72
<i>Bakers</i>	14	18	4	29%	\$14.03
<i>Forest and Conservation Workers</i>	<10	<10	2	33%	\$13.31
<i>Recreation Workers</i>	<10	<10	-5	-71%	\$12.22

*Source: Lightcast (2022 dataset). Staffing Patterns Table. <http://www.lightcast.io>*

## Overview of outdoor recreation in the SRRA region

Outdoor recreation and tourism are recognized regionally as a strategy for economic and community development. Table 6 summarizes outdoor recreation recommendations in counties' recent strategic or comprehensive plans. Several plans, including Tazewell, Buchanan, and Wise, call out Spearhead or motorized trail development specifically as part of their growth trajectory. Additionally, the High Knob Master Plan outlines a vision for the development and conservation of the High Knob region, part of which overlaps with SRRA. It proposes strategies to enhance outdoor recreation opportunities, protect natural resources, and promote sustainable outdoor tourism. The plan underscores the significance of community engagement and collaboration to reach its goals and aims to create a destination that displays the area's natural beauty and assets while helping economic growth and environmental

sustainability so that these assets can be enjoyed well into the future. To date, the High Knob plan has been widely adopted and associated development is occurring.

*Table 6: County-Level Outdoor Recreation Planning*

<i>County</i>	<i>Plan Title</i>	<i>Summary</i>
<i>Buchanan</i>	Buchanan County Comprehensive Plan 2017	Prioritizes scenic drives and easy access to tourist destinations. Develops biking trails and hiking areas, including the Coal Canyon Trail within Spearhead. Public transit connects to recreation areas, enhancing accessibility.
<i>Dickenson</i>	Dickenson County Strategic Economic Development Plan 2022	Aims for a high quality of life, which often includes access to natural areas. Discusses potential development around the Flannagan Dam and Breaks Park.
<i>Lee</i>	Lee County Comprehensive Plan 2020	Leverages natural resources, including forest land and former surface mines, to attract tourists and enhance outdoor recreation. Develops amenities like the Leeman Field trailhead to cater to trail users. Aims to increase tourism and outdoor recreation opportunities through land reclamation and development.
<i>Russell</i>	Russell County Comprehensive Development Plan 2010	Focuses on preserving sensitive habitats and promoting ecotourism. Sees tourism as a growing industry, with a focus on natural assets like the Clinch River and Pinnacle Natural Area.
<i>Tazewell</i>	Tazewell County Comprehensive Plan 2017	Emphasizes the support for the newly opened Pocahontas ATV Trails and the addition of cabin facilities for riders. Highlights the protection and preservation of natural resources alongside recreational development. Goals include improving environmental quality and balancing rural and urban land uses.
<i>Wise</i>	Wise County Comprehensive Plan 2018	Supports Spearhead Trails and other recreational hubs as part of tourism efforts. Highlights the positive impact of Spearhead on tourism and outdoor recreation. Aims to protect natural resources and promote future trail development.

The SRRA and Spearhead Trails continue to provide an important recreation opportunity in Far Southwest Virginia. Spearhead Trails also represents one of a network of motorized trail systems in Appalachia (Figure 3), that are adapting existing logging and mine road alignments that have long been used informally by riders, and creating systems of trails for visitors to also enjoy safely.

Two such trail systems, The Hatfield McCoy in West Virginia, Hillbilly Trails in Kentucky were the subject of case study interviews. Summaries of those two systems and items relevant to this strategic plan are summarized below, and reinforced throughout the recommendations section.

Hillbilly Trails, located in Pikeville, KY, spans 6,000 acres, with 100 miles of trails. Pike County owns half of the trails and lease the other half to a private land company. This motorized trail system caters mainly to ATV enthusiasts and employs four full-time and two part-time staff, under the direction of Jerry





generates revenue through activities, retail, and lodging without requiring entry permits. Marketing is minimal during peak seasons, relying heavily on word-of-mouth, while maintaining a presence online and through social media. The park actively engages in community and conservation efforts, including educational programs and wildlife habitat enhancements, collaborating with organizations like the Access Fund and the Department of Wildlife Resources to manage and improve the natural environment.

## Methodology and Planning Process

To develop this strategic plan, VTCECE, Aspire, and ConsultEcon employed a comprehensive methodology to gather insights and data necessary for informed recommendations. Data was collected over four months, January – April 2024. The compressed timeline necessitated frequent site visits and weekly communication with the client and SRRA. The team developed and validated findings through discussions with esteemed experts, trail riders, local businesses, and other local stakeholders. The methodology comprised several key components:

**Review of Existing Plans:** The project team examined strategic plans from local governments, regional groups, and statewide agencies, with a specific focus on sections pertaining to outdoor recreation, outdoor tourism, and Spearhead Trails.

**Project Website & Press Releases:** Information dissemination was facilitated through the project website, complemented by strategic press releases. ([www.srraplan.com](http://www.srraplan.com)).

**Surveys:** VTCECE formulated and distributed surveys via QuestionPro, targeting trail users, residents, businesses, and governmental entities. Promotion efforts leveraged social media, email channels, and local intermediaries, ensuring broad participation. During the site visits, members of the project team also helped individuals fill out the survey and encouraged others to take it by distributing QR codes at local businesses.

- Resident Surveys
- Trail User Surveys
- Local Government Surveys
- Local Business Surveys

**Site Visits:** The team visited the region four times throughout the project allowing firsthand observation and interaction with stakeholders. The initial March four-day “fam tour” visit provided critical insights into trail infrastructure and local business dynamics. Starting at the SRRA Headquarters in Coeburn and moving throughout the region, the team conducted focus groups with business associations, interviews with local business owners and partners, rode trails across the system, toured the Dixon Shooting Range, visited adjacent outdoor recreation sites, spoke with SRRA operations and maintenance staff, and explored the communities that are or could be connected to the system.

Additionally, a 2-hour strategic planning with the SRRA Board of Directors provided further insights into board interests, expectations, and capacity.

A second trip focused on sustainability and environmental challenges and included extensive trail riding and on-trail discussions with the chief Spearhead operator, Chris Sargent, and meetings with the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and the Clinch Coalition.

An additional notable trip focused on assessing the connectivity between each trailhead and the adjacent community, with discussions in Big Stone Gap, Pennington Gap, Wise, Appalachia, Pound, Haysi, Grundy, Pocohontas, and St. Paul.

**Regional Overview - Data Sources:** Various data sources were utilized to gain a comprehensive understanding of regional dynamics, including small businesses, chambers of commerce, and specific towns visited during the research phase. Specifically, the team used Lightcast data which is accumulated from a variety of sources such as Census data, industry reports, government agency reports, and proprietary data providers.

**Case Study Interviews:** The Spearhead Trails system is one of a family of motorized trail systems created on old logging and mining roads across Appalachia. To enrich the strategic planning process with additional ideas and models of success, as well as better understand the two systems adjacent (and potentially connected in the future) to Spearhead, in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from Deep River Shooting Range in North Carolina, Hatfield McCoy Trails in West Virginia, Breaks Interstate Park, and the Hillbilly Trails in Kentucky.

**Strengths, Weakness, Opportunities, and Threats Analysis:** The team synthesized survey feedback and incorporated comments from local tourism, economic development, and nonprofit leaders who participated in their respective focus group sessions. Additionally, the SWOT was informed by listening to the thoughts of SRRA staff members and in-person observations by the project team. Lastly, the project team held a SWOT session with the SRRA Board to gather their perspectives on the organization's current state. All this information was used in the aggregate for the SWOT.

**Recommendation Development:** After reviewing the current state of SRRA and determining its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, the team prioritized the most significant factors within each of the six strategic categories and developed short-, medium-, and long-term goals. Aspire, a professional marketing firm, developed recommendations for the marketing and community engagement sections, and case studies built around other trail systems were used to build a consensus for best practices that SRRA could implement for the Spearhead system.

**Trailbuilding and Environmental Conservation Expert and Stakeholder Interviews:** Dr. Marion sought input on proposed trail enhancement and expansion strategies from esteemed experts such as UVA Wise Biology professor Dr. Wally Smith, Profession Trail Building Association (PTBA) leader Woody Keen, professional trail builders Dr. Jeremy Wimpey and Dr. Fletcher Meadema, and representatives from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). While the recommendations should not be considered an endorsement of this plan by these individuals, they greatly enhanced the feasibility and accuracy of recommendations.

This methodology ensured a holistic approach to data collection, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative insights garnered from site visits and stakeholder engagements. The following sections will clarify how these findings informed the formulation of strategic initiatives to advance the objectives of Spearhead Trails and foster sustainable regional development. Some limitations to this process included a compressed timeline of just six months, which needed to take place during the winter months, when ridership and tourism is low. Additionally, challenges stemming from staff turnover, especially a lack of institutional knowledge, coupled with paper (as opposed to digital) recordkeeping, limited the amount of review the team could undertake on past operations. Discussions therefore focused heavily on the future of SRRA and Spearhead Trails, envisioning a new day and looking towards 2030.

## **A note on economic impact:**

Initially, this study included an economic impact analysis in addition to a strategic plan. However, upon further assessment, it was determined the lack of well-organized and digitized operational spending data and visitor counts would hamper efforts to accurately compile and analyze the necessary information within the allocated timeframe, leading to an inaccurate estimate of economic impact. Furthermore, the timing of the project coincided with the off-season, posing constraints on the collection of substantial visitor spending data crucial for an effective economic impact assessment.

Recognizing the SRRA leadership transition and the importance of quality data inputs, the research team and client suggested allocating resources toward a more thorough assessment and strategy development process, with the economic impact analysis postponed to the 2025 season.

Portions of initial economic impact work were completed prior to shifting resources to the organizational strategic plan. The project team surveyed trail users, local businesses and community members to understand the impacts of the Spearhead Trail System. Primary data was also collected through open-ended focus groups with tourism and economic development stakeholders, to give a clear image of the local impacts of the trails. Further data of this nature would enhance the development of a future economic impact model. Additionally, as Spearhead solidifies its organizational infrastructure and fosters collaborative partnerships, a future economic impact report stands to gain from the inclusion of 3-4 vignettes showcasing pivotal industries within outdoor tourism, such as lodging and services. These vignettes will serve to augment the understanding of the trail system's impacts. Appendix X contains a step-by-step guide for SRRA to prepare for a future economic impact study, which is recommended to take place starting in 2025 or 2026.

## **SWOT Analysis:**

A Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis is a strategic planning tool used to identify and evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing an organization, project, or initiative. Strengths are internal to the organization and are being done well or provide a benefit. Weaknesses are things internal to the organization that disadvantage it. Opportunities are external factors that could be leveraged to aid the organization. Threats are external factors that could potentially harm the organization. The data for this SWOT analysis comes from the surveys, focus group

sessions, observations of the project team, interviews with community stakeholders, and secondary data related to outdoor recreation and tourism.

## Strengths

### The Trails

The trails are a primary tourism driver, highly rated for beauty, and have a good variety that appeal to different skill levels. Based on survey data, riding the Spearhead trail is the primary reason riders surveyed visit the region, and many riders visit frequently. About 45% of riders live in the region or can make day trips to ride the trails. Another 40% stay two-four nights. The most popular trails are Coal Canyon, Mountain View, and The Original Pocahontas which account for about 59% of riders.

Trail beauty is important to riders; 90% of respondents scored Spearhead's natural beauty 4 or 5 out of 5 stars. Respondents also use the trail for photography and to view wildlife, such as the recovering elk population. There is also a good mix of trail skill levels that appeal to different types of riders. While some requested additional challenging trails for the more skilled trail users, others requested more family friendly options, indicating that there are a range of interests, and desire from multiple user groups in expanding the variety outwards towards both easy and extremely challenging terrain.

### The Staff, especially Rangers and Operators

Both the SRRA board and executive staff noted that they have several dedicated staff members who are truly passionate about the trail system and avid trail riders themselves. Dedicated staff is a positive sign that they would be open to and willing to invest in the necessary training to improve their skills in sustainable trail maintenance.

The survey responses positively painted most interactions with rangers as kind and understanding. Negative feedback centered around rangers enforcing rules that riders did not agree with, such as helmets. This was reinforced by conversations with staff members where they emphasized that they want to work with riders to ensure they are safe, follow the rules, and can have a fun time.

### Avid Local Riders Base

Spearhead has an avid local rider base that is passionate about motorized trails. Many have been riding the Spearhead Trail system well before the SRRA was developed. On average an individual rides on the trail 36.8 times per year. The most dedicated group is middle upper-class men from the 30-60 age range. When interviewed, many trail riders shared that they enjoyed riding with several friends or as one big group, which indicates events and after riding social activities could be popular.

## Weaknesses

### Internal Processes and Planning

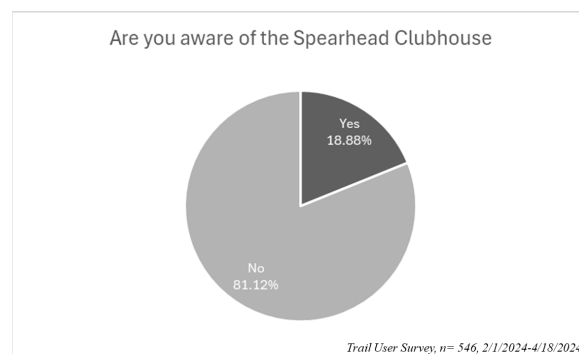
As a state agency with a governing board, both the staff and the board have responsibilities for planning and ensuring strong internal processes. Before 2023, the SRRA seems to have operated without the

systems, procedures, checks, and balances common in similar organizations. This may have contributed to purchase decisions with a low return on investment, unreliable records, operational inefficiency, and staff turnover. As of the writing of this report, SRRA staff has indicated plans to develop better defined processes for record-keeping and decision-making. The continued strengthening of internal processes, use of adaptive management procedures, and proactive planning are essential as SRRA moves forward.

## SRRA HQ

The SRRA's headquarters presents a financial challenge due to high maintenance costs, lack of physical connection with the trail system, and underutilized space and equipment. During site visits, the team observed unused space and equipment, such as the axe-throwing area, billiards, large indoor climbing wall, surplus furniture, unused four-wheelers, and unsellable merchandise. Furthermore, the underutilized headquarters building itself lacks direct connection to any of the trails or adjacent commercial areas, is costly to maintain, and requires a replacement roof. When trail users were asked about their awareness of the SRRA site only 1/5 respondents knew about it.

Figure 4: SRRA Headquarters Trail User Awareness



## Maintenance Budgets and Budgeting Structure

The SRRA is limited by budget constraints, mainly due to its dependence on government funding as its main source of revenue, with only a small contribution coming from permit sales. The largest contributor is the state government which is contributing \$5 million over the next two years (July 2024 – June 2026) for operations and maintenance. Prior to this change, SRRA received \$1.1 million annually from the state. SRRA receives marginal amounts from permit sales, fines/tickets, and merchandise sales.

For expansions and capital projects, SRRA receives funding from each of the county governments in the region to support trail expansion in their respective counties. They have also secured grants from various regional organizations for new facilities including Virginia Coalfield Economic Development Authority (VCEDA), and the Tobacco Commission. However, maintaining these facilities and staffing them appropriately continues to be a challenge. Prior to 2023, the staff and board lacked training in financial decision-making, and HR management to properly maintain these assets using existing staff resources.

## Staffing Capacity

While the SRRA has passionate staff, based on observations of similar systems, as well as staff, board, and DEQ discussions, there are far too few operators and rangers to properly maintain and patrol the trails. Rangers and operators report that they are stretched thin and unable to effectively keep up with the necessary maintenance and operation of the trails, especially when they are occupied with building new trails. Trail building consultants say that there is no magic number or formula for estimating how much staff capacity is needed per mile of trail, rather it is dependent on whether or not new trails are



being built, and the existing trail maintenance requirements, which are currently very time-consuming to address. Furthermore, the physical distance between the trails (3 hours on the highway and 2-lane between Pocahontas and Stone Mountain for example), make it even more difficult for the limited staff to properly service each trail. Beyond additional rangers and operators, additional positions missing from the Spearhead staffing structure, which exist at similar organizations, include an environmental engineer, emergency management supervisor, and events and marketing manager. As of May, 2023, SRRA was in the process of hiring those additional ranger and operator positions, as well as an environmental engineer and emergency management supervisor. Existing staff and the board also need training to more efficiently and effectively manage the organization. This training has already begun and will continue.

## Opportunities

### Collaborations

Through discussions and surveys, the research team found that local businesses, residents, and other regional stakeholders are extremely interested in establishing a more deliberate connection with Spearhead. There are substantial opportunities for mutually beneficial cross-promotion initiatives with local businesses that support outdoor recreation and tourism, and significant potential for community development initiatives with local government and agency partners.

Respondents shared that in the past, relational dynamics have been somewhat overlooked, but that they are eager to work with the new executive director and re-establish relationships. This presents an opportunity for the organization to capitalize on a significant avenue for improving its public image and garnering enhanced support from the local community. By strategically cultivating and nurturing relationships with local businesses and organizations, SRRA can not only reinforce its standing within the community but also contribute to broader socio-economic strength.

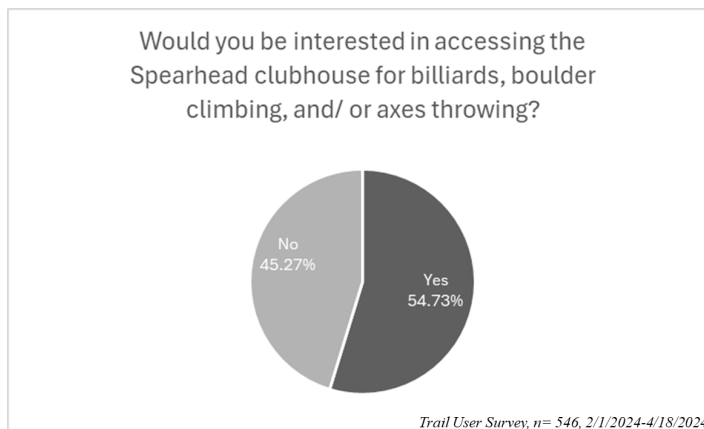
### Trail Connectivity

Despite Spearhead boasting an impressive expanse of trails across many thousands of acres, certain communities do not fully perceive the system's benefits. For instance, when asked about the impacts of Spearhead Trails, residents predominantly discussed the trail closest to them, and did not view the entire system as relevant. The lack of interconnectivity also poses constraints on trail users' mobility, and experience, requiring them to load their ATVs back onto trailers if they wish to visit more than two trails. An enhanced, interconnected system would enrich the overall trail experience, enabling riders to traverse a broader spectrum of the region's offerings and fostering a greater sense of cohesion and accessibility within the trail network.

## Reuse of SRRA HQ & the Expansion of Dixon Shooting Range

The SRRA headquarters offers ample space suitable for hosting events such as community gatherings, events, and has facilities for rock climbing, axe throwing, and billiards, though these remain unused.

While events can generate additional revenue streams, it remains uncertain whether the organization can fully utilize these existing SRRA/Spearhead HQ assets. When prompted to indicate if they would be interested in accessing the site for billiards, boulder climbing and/or axe throwing, 54.73% of trail users indicated yes. Among residents, 15% had never heard of SRRA/Spearhead HQ, 54% knew where it was, and 29% had visited once or



more. Furthermore, only 8% of residents surveyed are interested in indoor bouldering, and only 9% in axe throwing. Residents are more interested in special events for hiking/bicycling/equestrian (20%), sustainable trail building workshops (14%), and special events for motorized sports (13%). More market research is required to determine if liquidating these SRRA HQ assets and moving the money to more mission-driven areas would be preferable to utilizing them. Connecting the HQ to the motorized trail system (potentially Mountain View) would greatly enhance the facility's use overall.

Among trail users, Dixon Shooting Sports is the least visited Spearhead site, accounting for only 2.06% of visits. Among residents, it is also the least known and least visited SRRA asset, with 45% of residents saying they had never heard of it, 47% saying they knew where it was, and only 8% having ever visited. Conversations with SRRA board members, staff, and shooting range patrons during site visits suggest that the range is highly regarded and frequented by local residents, though not very well known. It has features that make it unique among other similar facilities. Nonetheless, due to its location and limited marketing efforts, it may be less recognized. Therefore, there is an opportunity to improve branding, enhance marketing strategies, diversify revenue streams and attract a broader audience, especially out-of-region visitors. Most adjoining states have reciprocity agreements with the Commonwealth of Virginia regarding gun ownership, making this opportunity available to out-of-region visitors.

## Threats

### Negative Environmental Perception

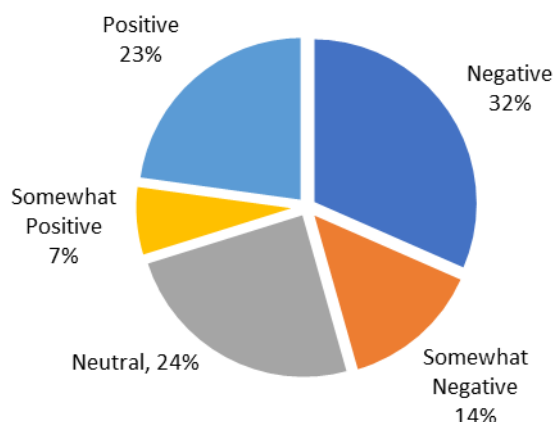
Concerns have been voiced about the impacts of stormwater runoff on the trails, which might especially harm wildlife in the Clinch and Powell watersheds. Residents perceive the environmental impact of Spearhead Trails as negative, with 46% of respondents saying that Spearhead as a somewhat negative or

negative impact on the environment. The research team engaged with a number of environmental and recreation scientists, reviewed complaint logs and investigation reports, and discussed concerns with UVA biologist Wally Smith, author of several articles detailing environmental issues with the trail.

After observations by Dr. Jeff Marion during site visits, followed by discussions with DEQ, and TNC, it appears that most water quality challenges and complaints have been

"Poor design of trails, ignoring environmental effects and despoiling of areas, especially wetlands. Excessive runoff from some trails has polluted streams and rivers and harmed wildlife including endangered mussels and amphibians in Clinch and Powell watersheds."

Figure 5: Residents view Spearhead having a negative environmental effect  
Perceptions of impacts of Spearhead Trails on the environment



systematically addressed over the past year. The primary strategy has been the creation of sumps, which stop and filter runoff from trails. This measure has been effective at reducing runoff but has proven costly to maintain. There may be additional environmental challenges related to wildlife, especially on mine benches, that would require further collaboration with DWR and others.

## Negative Publicity and Public Perception

Community members have expressed uncertainty regarding SRRA's direction and stability. Local stakeholder groups appear cautiously optimistic about engaging formally with SRRA, partly due to concerns such as recent executive director turnover. Environmental improvement efforts and DEQ collaboration have not been actively publicized, leaving the public and local stakeholders unaware of improvement measures. Furthermore, Spearhead has never engaged in a public planning process for new trails and enhancements. One resident says about public communication: "Those of us who live in the communities Spearhead serves don't even know trails are being built until the bulldozers show up in our neighborhoods or Spearhead announces an opening on social media."

## Reliance on State Funding

The reliance on state funding poses a significant threat to the SRRA's sustainability. Should the state opt to reduce or

"Those of us who live in the communities Spearhead serves don't even know trails are being built until the bulldozers show up in our neighborhoods or Spearhead announces an opening on social media. No one makes an effort to seek input from the people that will be impacted or even the trail users" - Resident Survey

discontinue its financial support, the organization faces the imminent risk of ceasing operations altogether. This vulnerability highlights the need for the SRRA to diversify its revenue streams and cultivate alternative sources of funding to mitigate the potential impact of state funding fluctuations or cuts. Should Spearhead funding decline or even stop, the trail system would revert to an “outlaw trail” system, presenting a major challenge for local law enforcement and private property owners.

## Trails on Private Property

The trail network's presence on both public and private land introduces a unique dynamic to its management and sustainability. While public land offers certain assurances of accessibility and continuity, the inclusion of private land parcels adds complexity due to varying ownership agreements and potential vulnerabilities if land changes hands or the owner wishes to withdraw from their agreements. These agreements are essential for maintaining trail connectivity and ensuring access to key segments of the network.

However, any withdrawal or alteration of these agreements by private landowners could result in the loss of significant trail mileage, disrupting the integrity and usability of the network. Also, the use of private land for logging and mining activities poses risks to the trail experience and environmental conservation efforts, highlighting the importance of effective land management and cooperation between stakeholders.

## Lack of lodging near some trails

The lack of lodging near certain trails isolates trails and communities, hindering their ability to fully capitalize on the potential benefits of trail-related tourism. Without nearby lodging options, visitors may be deterred from exploring these areas, leading to missed opportunities for economic growth and community development. Additionally, the absence of lodging facilities may limit the length and frequency of visitors' stays, resulting in reduced spending and revenue generation for local businesses. Overall, addressing this issue is crucial for maximizing the trail system's potential and ensuring equitable distribution of benefits across all communities involved.

## Recommendations

The following strategies are organized by six core strategic areas identified through community engagement and market research. Each section describes the current situation, based on stakeholder input, introduces promising practices from three case study systems: Hatfield McCoy in West Virginia, Hillbilly Trails in Kentucky, and Breaks Interstate Park on the Virginia/West Virginia border, and concludes with the core recommendations. A summary of each recommendation is included below. The team also included a “bonus recommendation” section which discusses crosscutting data management for trail sustainability, marketing and promotions, revenue diversification, and community engagement.

Table 7: SRRA Core Recommendations

Area	#	Recommendation
Trail Enhancement and Expansion	1	Focus trail expansion on connections with other trails, and existing commercial centers
	2	Create a more family-friendly trail experience
	3	Emphasize wildlife, view sheds, solitude, trails provide access to assets and amenities
	4	Establish multi-year capital budget, target one new trail every 1 to 2 years; account for lifecycle costs upfront
	5	Add more trail operators/maintenance staff to better maintain existing trails and create new ones
	6	Take care of existing trails to ensure high degree of user satisfaction that translates directly to word of mouth marketing
	7	Create and promote destinations on the trail with accompanying interpretive signs and places to rest
Sustainability	8	Conduct a sustainability analysis of the entire trail system and develop a plan to systematically address areas of greatest sustainability concern; convert trails to rolling grade dip drainage
	9	Use adaptive management strategies for expansion and enhancement with expert and community engagement
	10	Consult with nationally accredited professionals and associations for trail building, ensure external consultants use capacity building/training approach with staff
	11	Invest in appropriate equipment, especially compact trail loaders
Marketing/ Promotion	12	Create a 3-5 year marketing plan with staffing, advertising, sponsorship, and collaboration. Allocate 3-5% of annual operating budget to execute this plan.
	13	Complete a comprehensive branding and wayfinding update (adopt the 2018 Spearhead Branding Wayfinding recommendations), and install wayfinding and directional signage
	14	Use freelance or contract support for content creation, graphic design and brochure creation, photo and video creation, website maintenance, execution of wayfinding plan, meta advertising
	15	Online outreach through review websites and trail rider communities on Facebook and Instagram.



	16 Hire an events and marketing manager to lead and implement marketing efforts, collaboratively with Heart of Appalachia.
<b>Revenue Diversification</b>	17 Increase retail sales with merchandising strategy to work with local retail partners and develop robust online store with branded merchandise 18 Implement diversified recreational facilities near or adjacent to trailheads, such as motorbike track, pump tracks, flow trails, obstacle courses, etc. 19 SRRA HQ: Assess assets, contract out existing activities management (axe throwing, bouldering, billiards) management, connect to motorized and non-motorized trails 20 Dixon Shooting Range: enhance through accreditation, training, events, promotion 21 Create special and regular events for motorized and non-motorized trail users 22 Add tours and excursions, in collaboration with other businesses for customized packages, amenity additions, and trailhead services 23 Increase enforcement of permits
<b>Community Engagement</b>	24 Develop educational and training programs for schools, colleges, youth and adult groups, public safety, certification, etc. 25 Engage community groups in order to build support and educate the community, start an ambassador program 26 Promote transparency and communication 27 Develop and implement conflict resolution mechanisms 28 Increase board representation to include additional stakeholder groups
<b>Collaboration &amp; Partnerships</b>	29 Partner with niche associations related recreational market, such as rock climbing, birders, hikers, motorcycles, bicyclists, etc. 30 Partner with manufacturer and dealer ecosystem, tied to events and promotions and sponsorships 31 Develop educational and training programs for schools, colleges, youth and adult groups, public safety, certification, etc.
<b>Data Management</b>	32 Collect trailhead and range visitor data using automated trail visitor counting devices; digitize waiver forms 33 Capture and monitor trail condition data, including maintenance needs and incident reports 34 Create internal systems to organize business and community partnerships, volunteers, manage and report on capital projects, and document and communicate sustainability improvements

## Strategy Area One: Enhance and Expand Trail Network

Spearhead Trails comprises seven motorized routes: Coal Canyon, Dante Coal Heritage, Jawbone, Mountain View, Ridgeview, Stone Mountain, and The Original Pocahontas. Spanning 400 miles of mountainous off-road terrain, these trails accommodate dirt bikes, and 4-wheelers including ATV/UTV/OHVs, and side by sides. Offering a variety of landscapes, from scenic mountain views to wooded areas, these trails are accessible year-round, from dawn until dusk. Some nearby ATV-friendly towns provide lodging, dining, and attractions suitable for families exploring these trails. Additionally, Spearhead Trails manages three non-motorized trail segments known as the Dante Miners Trail, Russell Fork, and Thunderstruck. These trails cater to equestrian activities, mountain biking, hiking, blueways, and birding enthusiasts. Appendix 6 illustrates the details for each trail system including trailhead coordinates, length of trail, difficulty level and unique attributes to each trail.

Table 8: Trail Enhancement and Expansion Recommendations

#	Core Trail Enhancement and Expansion Recommendations
1	Focus trail expansion on connections with other trails, and existing commercial centers
2	Create a more family-friendly trail experience
3	Emphasize wildlife, view sheds, solitude, trails provide access to assets and amenities
4	Establish multi-year capital budget, target one new trail every 1 to 2 years; account for lifecycle costs upfront
5	Add more trail operators/maintenance staff to better maintain existing trails and create new ones
6	Take care of existing trails to ensure high degree of user satisfaction that translates directly to word of mouth marketing
7	Create and promote destinations on the trail with accompanying interpretive signs and places to rest

### Trail User and Resident Sentiments about the Trail Network

According to nearly 600 survey responses the most popular trails in Spearhead’s system are Coal Canyon located in Buchanan County, Mountain View located in Wise County, The Original Pocahontas located in Tazewell County, and Ridgeview located in Dickenson County. Feedback regarding trail expansion and enhancement centered around signage and wayfinding, trail maintenance, trail connectivity, safety, trail amenities, and community engagement and collaboration.

First, many respondents mention the need for clearer trail signage, real-time information sharing, and updated digital and paper maps. During site visits, the team also observed

“Improve signage so that those who don't have a digital map can more easily find their way back to Trailhead. Also make bigger the display showing the level of difficulty of the hills. Provide safety barriers on large drop offs and better maintain deep ruts.”

- Trail user survey

that some trails and trailheads lack adequate signage, making navigation difficult. Riders also note discrepancies between trail markings and actual trail difficulty. Local businesses and other stakeholders recommend that Spearhead focus on providing better wayfinding to trails and better infrastructure, such as parking at the trailheads. Lodging businesses catering to OHV riders also said they need more frequent communication from Spearhead about trail status to feel comfortable encouraging people to go to specific trails.

Second, respondents to our resident and rider surveys suggested an increased focus on maintenance and enhancement before additional trail expansion takes place. Respondents expressed concerns about fallen trees, rutting created by vehicles using two-wheel drive to go up steep inclines, and removal of trash and debris along the trail. When asked to suggest trail improvements, one respondent said “I don't visit as much as I would if your trails were built better and not as eroded and washed out. I ride for the nature experience”

In addition to maintenance improvements, riders also asked for more continuous miles of trails. There is a desire for longer trails, especially single-track trails, and trails of a higher degree of difficulty. Also, many said to achieve more miles of trails, they would like to see better connectivity between existing trails which would significantly expand the ride's length without creating entirely new trail systems. This would help make Spearhead feel like one large system as opposed to many smaller trails.

Next, many riders felt that Spearhead could do more to address and mitigate safety concerns. The main safety concern was related to encounters between diverse types of trail users. One respondent stated that they have on multiple occasions met a vehicle coming down a

“More miles and access to more towns and parks. More things that are appealing to the lady riders. Permits sold yearly per a machine... connecting to Black Mountain from Stone Mountain”

- Trail user survey

steep path while they were going up and due to the narrow nature of the path it was difficult and unsafe for the vehicles to pass each other. Riders would also like to see more defined safety areas where they could meet or where rangers would check frequently to help any riders in distress. As with any motorized trail system with helmet, alcohol, and firearm restrictions, there are a group of riders who recommend relaxing Spearhead regulations to be more like West Virginia and Tennessee which is not supported or recommended by this research team. While some suggest relaxing rules for certain vehicles like UTVs, others emphasize safety and environmental concerns. Signage and safety barriers are suggestions:

Additionally, respondents felt there is a lack of amenities along and surrounding the trail systems. Users would like to see greater connectivity from the trails to the nearby towns so they can ride in and get food, beverages, or refuel their vehicle. Riders would also like to see more infrastructure around the trailheads such as bathrooms or information kiosks. Some riders also mentioned that bathrooms along system would be beneficial too. There was also additional interest in connecting to other attractions, such as overlooks, waterfalls, and historical sites. Figure X shows the proximity of each town to trailheads:

“I believe the system has made a positive impact in tourism and recreation. I believe the system is still underdeveloped, and needs to be expanded to include access to more communities in the region which can improve financial benefits of tourism in these communities. Community connectors to the trails from more and larger communities, even by paved roads, would give more access to the trail systems by locals and visitors, who would benefit from ease of access to food fuel and lodging... We also know many other local people who don’t ride as much as they would like to because of limited access requiring them to transport their machines to trailheads, where if there were direct community access these folks would be able to ride more frequently as well as produce more tourism benefits.”

– Trail user survey

Finally, groups suggest that when Spearhead makes enhancements and opens new trails, community input and transparency are essential. To this end, there are untapped opportunities for collaboration between SRRA and local groups that would simultaneously promote the local businesses and increase brand awareness for Spearhead. One stakeholder very aptly summed up many of the challenges and opportunities:

### Case study promising practices

Compared to other motorized trail systems across Appalachia, Spearhead Trails covers a very wide area, and its seven trails are relatively disconnected geographically from one another. This limits the total number of miles of trails that communities can claim in their marketing and promotions, and the number of continuous miles riders can use. In contrast, the Hillbilly Trails and Breaks Interstate Park are self-contained destinations. Hatfield McCoy has component destinations but is more connected than Spearhead Trails. Hatfield McCoy shared that connecting the trails expands riding opportunities. They also stress the importance that even when the trails are connected to one another, each trail should have sufficient visitor services at multiple access points to provide a range of experiences that increase repeat visitation.

None of the cases emphasized trail expansion, instead emphasizing maintenance to improve visitor experience. Their business models rely on people returning if the trails are in excellent condition. Building trails requires more staff than to maintain them, and when considering new trails, the cases emphasized the need to fully account for lifecycle costs of new construction.

### Trail Expansion Recommendations

Expanding the system will appease users who want many miles of trails, especially those who like neighboring Hatfield McCoy’s expansive system. The team recommends that trail expansion be focused primarily connecting trails to one another to create a contiguous system, connecting the trails and trailheads to adjacent towns to facilitate economic growth, and to adjacent recreation assets to enhance the overall outdoor recreation experience. When planning expansions, it is essential to be transparent with funders about expansion implementation.

#### ***Expansion should focus on purposeful connections***

When the research team asked an avid OHV enthusiast and business owner what riders mean when they say they want “more miles of trails”, he stated what they really want is more miles of continuous

riding. Due to the large number of private landowners in SRRA's footprint, competing with Hatfield McCoy to add acreage to increase the number of trail miles is not realistic, and they should focus instead on developing connections between trails, quality amenities, a unique experience with both kid friendly and extremely advanced terrain, and a safe atmosphere. Here is a typical response from a trail user who mistakenly believes that the Mountain View trail is the only one in the system and recommends adding more miles of trails:

"Continue to add more trails to the system. At this point we typically make it our goal to ride from the trail head in St. Paul to Coeburn and back again... then the next day explore other trails [on Mountain View]. If we were provided with more trails, we would take another day and explore them."

"Dining or places to get food that you can drive to from the trails on your ATV/UTV without having to trailer up and go somewhere to eat. This is one of the main reasons we ride the HMT trail system as you can easily ride into town on your atvs for lunch/dinner as needed. Love the trails at spearhead, but they lack amenities and decent place to stay near the trails." - Trail user survey

There are three priorities for expansion:

1. Connect trail systems to one another for more continuous miles of riding
2. Connect trails to existing commercial areas
3. Connect trails with other outdoor recreation and cultural assets

### ***Future expansion to non-motorized trails in the long term:***

In the longer term, SRRA can consider adding more non-motorized options. However, when adding an additional recreation activity, experts recommend considering how it works with an existing activity. Trails open to everyone (hiking, OHV, and mountain bikes, for example) tend not to get used as much as trails for one specific purpose, because those uses can conflict with one another.

## **Trail Enhancement Recommendations**

Enhancing the trail has several benefits. It can decrease operating costs, ameliorate environmental concerns, provide a safer rider experience, help emergency management and improve the overall rider experience. Based on survey feedback, stakeholder discussions, and case study best practices, the following enhancements are recommended: install improved trail and trailhead signage, create destinations on the trail with accompanying interpretive signage, create more family friendly features, and continue offering challenging terrain and mudding features.



### ***Destinations on the trail and interpretive signage***

Create destinations on the trail; somewhere for people to park and turn the engine off and have a picnic. These could be at lookout points or cultural points of interest.

Encourage people to enjoy the natural beauty and wildlife while they are riding. Place interpretive signage on the trail that shows the natural history, and the hallmark signatures of the region. Show the visitors where the mine benches are, where logging happened, and tell the story of the place and of the people.

### ***More family-friendly trails and experiences***

Residents and trail riders desire a more kid-friendly and family friendly experience. There are already many green trails in the system, and Mountain View is maintained with the beginning rider in mind. However, making certain portions of trails, especially that lead to destinations, more kid friendly, could encourage the next generation of riders and family vacations. SRRA could also partner with existing assets, such as the Haysi Motocross Park, currently managed by Kiwanis, to put on kid-friendly events and training workshops.

### ***More challenging trails and mudding features, sustainably designed (crosscutting with sustainability)***

Riders desire more challenging terrain that they can explore continuously. Stone Mountain has the most challenging terrain on the system and has potential for developing more challenging features in a sustainable way, given the terrain. Riders often like to “workshop” challenging boulder climbs, so

“Work on the trails more. Go visit hillbilly trails in Dorton and compare the “difficulty level” black trails at spear head are their blue trails. Make some new trails that are harder, not impossible but harder for sure.” - Trail rider feedback

providing a space for them to do so in unused areas could be attractive. Riders also like “mudding”, which is driving their vehicle through mud. Active driving in streams and existing wetlands damages water quality and wildlife, and all trails that go through wetlands or in streambeds have been closed by SRRA in the last year in collaboration with DEQ. However, to provide that same mudding experience, SRRA could continue to develop artificial “mudding” areas for riders to enjoy.

“Better trail design and maintenance. Most of the trails on your system that I visit are like they were built for experts, people who like to ride only to tear up the environment and trash land they don't own, or both. I don't visit as much as I would if your trails were built better and not as eroded and washed out. I ride for the nature experience not to act rowdy and trash the place”

- Trail User Survey

### ***Install Improved Trail and Trailhead signage (crosscutting with marketing)***

Though local riders are comfortable with the existing signage, to improve the overall visitor experience and improve safety, the team recommends installing a comprehensive system of on-the-trail signage. See the marketing section for further wayfinding details.

## Strategy Area Two: Environment and Sustainability

The existing Spearhead Trails system was largely comprised of pre-existing “legacy trails” from earlier sources, many associated with extractive resource activities like forestry and mining. Some trails were developed by visitors, and a few were constructed by Spearhead Trails staff. Use of such legacy alignments is common, including for protected areas like National Parks and Forests. Studies reveal that these legacy alignments can vary considerably with respect to the sustainability of their design and construction.

*Table 9: Environment and Sustainability Recommendations*

#	Core Environment and Sustainability Recommendations
8	Conduct a sustainability analysis of the entire trail system and develop a plan to systematically address areas of greatest sustainability concern; convert trails to rolling grade dip drainage
9	Use adaptive management strategies for expansion and enhancement with expert and community engagement
10	Consult with nationally accredited professionals and associations for trail building, ensure external consultants use capacity building/training approach with staff
11	Invest in appropriate equipment, especially compact trail loaders

Sustainable designs generally have lower trail grades (<12%) and sidehill alignments that concentrate traffic on an excavated bench in sloping terrain with upper and lower trailside slopes. Sidehill trails avoid flat terrain, where muddiness and widening are common, and fall-line alignments (parallel to the direction of water flowing downhill), which are highly vulnerable to soil displacement from traffic and erosion from water.

The Spearhead Trails system is designed primarily for 4-wheel ATVs and UTVs but includes trails for hiking, biking, equestrians, and motorcycles. The system appears to have predominantly side-hill trail alignments, though some are in flatter terrain, and a few are fall-aligned. However, the most significant problems stem from trail grades that exceed 15%, with some that exceed 25-30%. As revealed from our visitor survey, the Spearhead Trail system riders desire challenging driving experiences, including steep hill-climbing and technical rock driving, and opportunities for “mudding” in flatter terrain. Accommodating these desired experiences and the protection of natural conditions and processes, water quality, and sensitive flora and fauna is possible by adopting environmentally sustainable trail design, construction, and maintenance practices. Accomplishing these visitor uses and resource protection objectives are possible, though this will be challenging and require additional expenses, particularly for trail segments with steep trail grades, mud, and for trails that receive the heaviest use.

To date many significant accomplishments have already been achieved. Most trails that were close to and negatively impacting water quality have either been closed or moved away from permanent streams and original wetlands, which are protected by federal and state laws. Considerable mechanized

trail maintenance work by experienced Spearhead staff have “reopened” these legacy trails, substantially improving their safety and drainage, while also conducting routine vegetation management work to keep the trails open and physically blocking access to closed trails. Other Spearhead staff have established a Trail Ranger program to establish and maintain a signed trail system with safe trailhead access points, paper and electronic trail maps, and staffing for visitor contact, safety, and law enforcement. Together these efforts now provide visitors with safe and enjoyable access and riding experiences on some 400 miles of trail in seven separate systems. Early problems with soil erosion and water drainage, which could negatively affect water quality, have been greatly reduced, though some remain. Many hundreds of soil and water retention sumps have been constructed along most of the Spearhead trails to intercept and filter trail drainage so that eroded soil can be recovered and replaced on the trails.

Some significant challenges remain. Budgets and staff remain inadequate to fully address existing challenges, which are likely to continue and grow as the Spearhead Trail system further develops and attracts greater visitation. Spearhead staff are currently considering a comprehensive trail sustainability assessment that would quantitatively characterize and rate the sustainability of the entire trail system. This would identify the most challenging locations where additional management attention and design and maintenance efforts will be necessary, particularly the steepest segments, those with fall-line alignments, and areas where excessive muddiness and trail widening occur. Spearhead staff are also beginning to seek the professional assistance of experienced trail experts who are members of the Professional Trail Builders Association to learn more about the most sustainable “Best Management Practices” for the design, construction, and maintenance of motorized and non-motorized trails.

## Best Practices from Case Examples

The Breaks and Hatfield McCoy had several sustainability strategies. Hatfield McCoy uses the “tread lightly principle” and uses a best practices maintenance manual from the Forest Service. Universities and other conservation organizations are involved in preserving threatened species with Hatfield McCoy and The Breaks who is reintroducing elk habitat which has been a boon for the park with more visitors viewing wildlife. Trail improvements are done considering the ecological impacts of the trails and poorly suited trails are improved to mitigate the damage they are doing.

The experience from the case studies indicates that trail maintenance can be done incorporating sustainability principles and working with conservation and university partners helps with wildlife conservation and habitat restoration that can reflect positively on the Spearhead Trails.

## Recommendations for Sustainable Use with Environmental Protection

Achieving sustainable trail use while protecting natural environmental conditions is possible and begins with sustainably designed and located trails. Nearly all recreational trail systems are originally formed from an assortment of existing trails constructed for non-recreational purposes, many of which may not meet visitor needs and desires or be sustainably designed to accommodate heavy long-term recreational use. Recommendations are divided into trail sustainability assessment and sustainable trail construction and realignment.

### Trail sustainability assessment

Assessing the utility and sustainability of the trail alignments currently included in a trail system is therefore recommended. Two primary attributes are trail grades and a trail's alignment to the prevailing landform, commonly expressed as trail slope ratio (trail grade/landform grade, ranging from 0=contour aligned trail, to 1=fall-line trail). Such assessments are most efficiently conducted using GIS software with accurate (sub-meter) mapped trail and elevation data. Another consideration is trail proximity to permanent and intermittent streams and wetlands, including natural wetlands and well-established wetlands on reclaimed lands (those with assemblages of wetland flora and fauna). When possible/practical it is best to keep the trail system perhaps more than 100 ft from these areas, except when stream crossings are unavoidable.

Such an assessment can rate trail sustainability from high (side-hill aligned trails with grades of <10%) to low (side-hill trails with grades >15%, fall-line trails with grades >10%, and flat terrain trails, particularly those with wet soils). Trails with low sustainability and proximity to streams and wetlands can be further evaluated to determine if they are needed, could be replaced with more sustainable alternatives, or

Figure 6: Sustainability Rating Scale, credit: Dr. Jeffrey Marion

Sustainability Ratings	Sustainability Rating Descriptions and Rationales
1	<b>High Sustainability.</b> Side-hill trail alignments with a 2-5% trail grade in >15% landform grades. Optimal trail grades with steep side-slopes that promote narrow easily drained treads.
2	<b>Moderate Sustainability.</b> As above – less optimal trail or landform grades.
3	<b>Low Sustainability.</b> As above – less optimal trail or landform grades. Trail alignments closer to the fall-line that inhibit tread drainage; less-steep side-slopes allow some tread widening.
4	<b>Unsustainable.</b> Flat side-hill trails in landform grades >2% that can retain water/muddiness and fall-line trails with 2-5% landform grades that inhibit drainage and allow tread widening.
5	<b>Moderately Unsustainable.</b> Fall-line trails with 5-15% trail and landform grades that inhibit drainage and allow tread widening, and steep trail grades in steep terrain (10-15%).
6	<b>Highly Unsustainable.</b> Fall-line trails with >15% trail and landform grades that can quickly erode and widen.

have non-sustainable sections relocated or improved through rock armoring and/or improved trail drainage. A long-term perspective is recommended when making these decisions – it is better to develop new sustainable trails or relocate problem segments to sustainable alignments than to either accept substantial chronic degradation or the need for constant intensive and less effective maintenance work. Environmental protection will

be substantially higher and maintenance expenses substantially lower once a sustainable trail system has been developed.

### Create opportunities for riders who want challenging terrain

Note that some visitors desire particularly challenging steep, rocky, and/or muddy trail segments and that these can be restricted to a subset of the Spearhead trail system. Recognize that keeping these trails open and sustainable will involve more intensive trail design, maintenance, and management activity, often in the form of rock armoring, improved drainage, more substantial maintenance, and possibly additional visitor use management educational and regulatory actions. For example, a mudding area in a well-established wetland in flat reclaimed mining lands could be rerouted away from the wetland and replaced with newly constructed mudding features located in flat terrain bordered by

dense woody vegetation that will prevent excessive widening, a common problem in mudding areas. Mudding features could have deep and shallow options to provide visitors with choices. Mudding features could also be created on flat graded side-hill trails, with the steeper side-slopes restricting widening and berm heights controlling mud and water depths. In summary, some steep or muddy trail sections may be necessary but only those truly needed should be retained, and they should be carefully selected, designed, and maintained to provide the more challenging riding experiences desired by trail riders so that environmental protections are still achieved.

### **Consider Rock Substrate and Water Bar Features**

Other important considerations include the amount of rock present in trail substrates and the type, frequency, and efficacy of trail drainage features. These should also be evaluated and considered in the trail sustainability assessment process as secondary criteria, though this generally requires field-based assessments. Large angular crushed rock (3-6") and larger rock armoring embedded into trail substrates can be added to any trails to make them more sustainable, generally to increase the durability of steeper trail grades or the approaches and crossings of permanent streams. While water bars have been developed to drain water from many of the trails, the team recommends a much greater reliance on rolling grade dips, which are substantially more effective and sustainable. The greater length and size of these features allows them to withstand heavier use with less maintenance, while providing enhanced "self-cleaning" capabilities. If used with sufficient frequency (density) they do not require sumps, which can be restricted to fewer locations where trails cannot be moved away from intermittent or permanent streams or where fall-line alignments are unavoidable. Sumps are effective in retaining eroded soil, but their use requires more intensive maintenance to excavate, dry, and return eroded soil to the trails. Sumps also attract amphibians to lay eggs that rarely result in successful reproduction.

### ***Sustainable Trail Construction and Realignment***

Following a sustainability analysis, Spearhead managers will have a more accurate and comprehensive list of all non-sustainable trail locations, their lineal extent, and other relevant characteristics (e.g., rock, drainage, proximity to intermittent and permanent streams and wetlands). Consultants from Professional Trail Builder Association firms could offer some effective guidance on a problem analysis process for evaluating the list of least sustainable "problem" locations and identifying preferred "best practice" alternatives. For example, while some should be permanently closed, others may be resolved with sustainable relocations, improved drainage, or rock armoring. Consultants could assist Spearhead staff in developing and applying a problem analysis process to a small yet diverse set of case study problems (e.g., eroding and excessively steep side-hill and fall-line trail segments, a trail with unnecessary stream crossings and/or proximity to a stream, and one or two mudding areas that should be relocated).

### **Replace water bars with rolling grade dips**

Professional consultants could also provide advice and work with Spearhead staff to develop an efficient process for replacing water bars with rolling grade dips, again working together to transform several different types of trails to perfect the process. Investigations and interviews with trail professionals

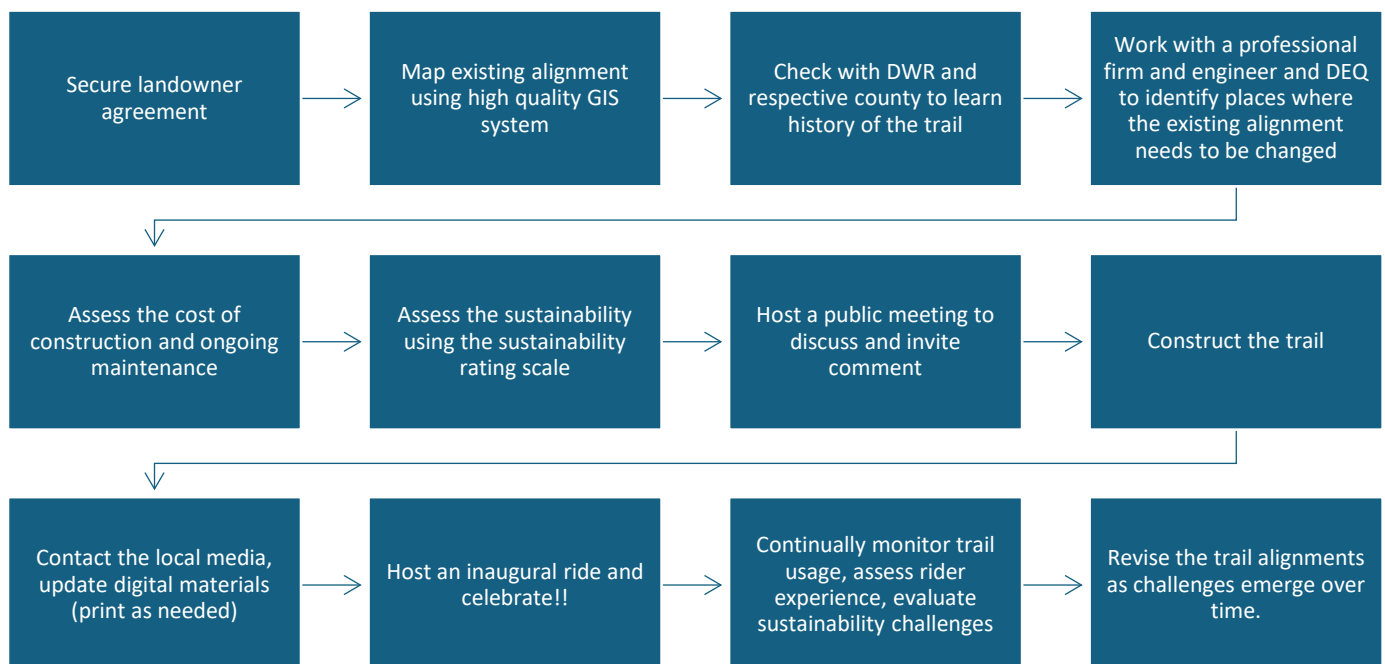
indicate that compact track loaders may be more efficient and effective in maintaining trails with rolling grade dips than the currently used excavators. These machines should have a width of less than 50 inches, enclosed cabs with heating and air conditioning to permit year-round maintenance work, and higher travel speeds (>6 mph) to allow workers to quickly access and return from distant work sites. Excavators are still useful for digging and maintaining sumps, ditching, and installing culverts where necessary. The team also suggest the need to shift staff and maintenance equipment to locations closer to where work is routinely performed to reduce staff time and travel costs.

### Implement Collaborative adaptive management strategies

Finally, an efficient process for trail system expansion is needed. The team recommends that such a process begin with GIS analyses of existing legacy trail alignments to select and use those which meet the needs of riders, are sustainably located, and aligned as previously described with respect to trail grade, slope ratio, and proximity to streams and well-established wetlands. This can be followed by contacts with landowners, state agencies, and local organizations to share prospective or proposed trails to obtain consent, comments, and initiate environmental reviews related to sensitive or rare flora/fauna, and stream crossings. This process is followed by revisions and finalization of a proposed set of new trails, applications for permits, and planning relative to the work needed to reopen or create new trails, including installation of rolling grade dips, signage, stream crossings, and necessary trailhead developments.

The following list is a suggestion sequence for planning to adopt an existing alignment into the Spearhead system. It can be adapted for any new trail or realignment. Each step should be properly documented, focusing especially on the evidence used to formulate decisions and the stakeholders involved in the review.

Figure 7: Sample Adaptive Management Process





## Strategy Area Three: Marketing

A review of existing practices and efforts found that SRRA has very limiting existing marketing practices and no staff dedicated to marketing. They rely mainly on their website, in addition to Facebook to communicate with their audiences. Because the Spearhead Trails and SRRA represent an incredible resource to Southwest Virginia, our recommendations regarding marketing and outreach provide a framework for future development of the Spearhead Trails as it looks towards a bright future.

Table 10: Marketing Recommendations

#	Core Marketing Recommendations
12	Create a 3-5 year marketing plan with staffing, advertising, sponsorship, and collaboration. Allocate 3-5% of annual operating budget to execute this plan.
13	Complete a comprehensive branding and wayfinding update (adopt the 2018 Spearhead Branding Wayfinding recommendations), and install wayfinding and directional signage
14	Use freelance or contract support for content creation, graphic design and brochure creation, photo and video creation, website maintenance, execution of wayfinding plan, meta advertising
15	Online outreach through review websites and trail rider communities on Facebook and Instagram.
16	Hire an events and marketing manager to lead and implement marketing efforts, collaboratively with Heart of Appalachia.

## Case Study Promising Marketing Practices

All the case studies had websites, social media marketing and appeared on review sites such as Yelp and TripAdvisor. Hatfield McCoy had the largest budget for marketing and has a five-year strategic marketing plan. They have evolved their marketing to focus on the natural beauty of the area, the solitude it offers, and wildlife viewing. They do cooperative marketing with the state tourism office and with other destination marketing organizations and generate income from advertising and sponsorships. Hatfield McCoy is very targeted in their marketing. The Breaks and Hillbilly Trails do not trail their visitors and so do not know their origin. Because they have a comprehensive understanding of their visitors, Hatfield McCoy is able to deploy more effectively targeted advertising.

## Market Research, Staff Capabilities, and Analysis

After considering existing staff capacities, the team recommends hiring a director-level position for marketing tasks soon. The person hired for this position should be both an equipped leader, capable of coordinating outside help for some aspects of marketing while also experienced as a generalist in marketing who can handle the day-to-day needs of Spearhead Trails.

In addition to hiring an in-house Marketing Director, Spearhead should continue to outsource specific marketing tasks that will only be required seasonally.

The team recommends SRRA looks to hire freelance or contracted support for the following:

- Graphic design and brochure creation

- Professional photo and video creation
- Website maintenance and development
- Creation and execution of wayfinding signage
- Meta (Facebook and Instagram) Advertising

By balancing in-house coordination with outside support as needed, Spearhead Trails will be equipped to successfully meet marketing and growth goals as the organization expands.

## Data Capture

Spearhead Trails should capture more current user data. Digital collection will aid in all marketing endeavors for long-term growth of Spearhead Trails. Relevant data that can be used for marketing include:

- Point of Sale (customer) information
- Email captures from Permit and Point of Sale purchases
- Monthly social media tracking (reach, engagement, advertising spend, etc.)
- Detailed tracking of website data
- Demographic information of attendees of any events

## Marketing Plan and Future Budgeting

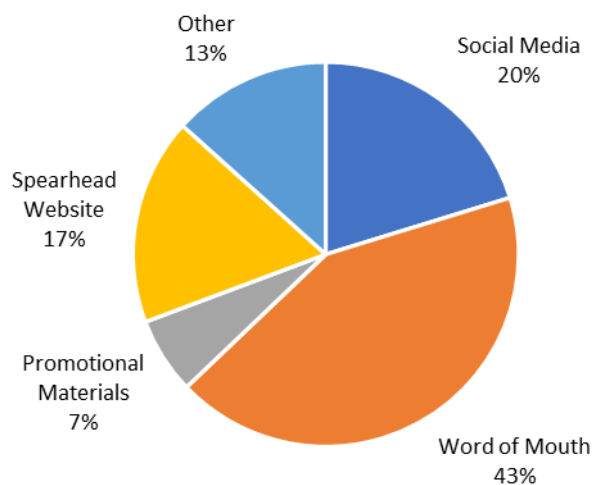
The team recommends SRRA work with a marketing agency and/or consultant to plan a 3 to 5-year robust marketing plan with hiring plans, job descriptions, duties, budgets, and specific marketing tasks quarterly and yearly. This plan should include more specific information on advertising, sponsorships, and collaborations. Spearhead should create a marketing budget that is 3-8% of their overall operating budget. This budget should take into account all marketing activities. This includes marketing labor, advertising budgets for print and digital efforts, website costs, Point of Sale systems, email marketing software, and any monies directed toward content creation.

## Audience Considerations

Key audiences for marketing consideration fall into three main categories: families, retirees/long-term vacationers, and experienced users.

A heavy emphasis on welcoming families and retirees in your marketing messaging will yield the best results from a growth perspective. Mixing in more sporadic (once every week or two) content for more experienced users is also important; however, avid participants

How did you learn about Spearhead Trails



are likely to find Spearhead Trails through word-of-mouth and organic means of outreach.

## Branding and Identity Guideline Development

Spearhead Trails current logos and branding are adequate, but a proper branding update should be completed in the next 1-5 years. Feedback from surveys and in-person interviews found that there is some confusion as to if the Trails are the same system, or which Trail is the “Spearhead Trail”. uniformity in design and color will help correlate and resonate with current and potential trail users.

## Trail Wayfinding and Signage

Aspire recommends SRRA follow the wayfinding and signage recommendations found in the 2018 wayfinding and signage recommendations provided by Hill Studio, which was funded and contracted via a competitive bid process.

Whenever possible, wayfinding should appear in prominent places and be large enough to be visible from all directions. Theft of signage is a reality for all trail systems. Order duplicates of essential signs so that they can be replaced quickly whenever one is stolen.

## Content Strategy

Multimedia assets are essential to the successful implementation of a marketing plan for SRRA. Professionally produced multimedia assets become valuable pieces for both social media and digital advertising as well as graphic design and physical signage for Spearhead.

The team recommends hiring a professional photographer for business branding photos. When possible, also source User Generated Content that shows safe trail riding and responsible use. SRRA should also purchase a professional camera and have the Marketing Director take weekly photos during their normal responsibilities. Drone photography from a licensed pilot can also be a content asset.

In addition to photography, work with a professional videographer to create videos throughout the year. Some content ideas include:

- 30 second to 1 minute highlight video of all of Spearhead’s capabilities and family-friendly offerings
- Explainer video about Spearhead’s community impact
- Testimonials from a variety of trail users
- High-energy, high-intensity showcases of advanced terrain

For SRRA and its entities, the use of video can not only be a key marketing tactic, but it can also be used for customer education.

## Social Media

The team recommends using the current Facebook pages and groups that are established. Consider using only Facebook and Instagram at this time. Other platforms are not a current priority. In the future,

adding an additional social media account on any platform should be planned and carefully considered as it can greatly affect the capacity to distribute quality content.

Post 3 to 4 times a week, on each account. Vary this based on content availability and needs but try to remain consistent throughout the duration of your marketing plan.

Topic Ideas that are appropriate across platforms include:

- Landowner success stories
- Proper Trail Etiquette
- ATV riding for beginners
- Have a family weekend at Spearhead
- Video tutorials
- Testimonials
- Rider Interviews
- Trail updates

## Email Marketing

SRRA should capture and use emails and other data for marketing purposes. Capture emails through the Point-of-Sale Systems by implementing and taking advantage of the online waiver and form process.

It's best practice to start email marketing by sending a monthly newsletter plus an update for special events. Use data to segment email lists for further specific messaging to certain audiences. Quality Point of Sale systems can automate this process to allow SRRA to reach first time visitors, high-use visitors, repeat visitors, visitors from specific regions, etc.

Ensure that all customers who receive emails were given the chance to opt-in to receiving these communications. This ensures compliance with applicable laws and best practices.

## SEO and Online Advertising

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a process aimed to improve website visibility via search engines such as Google, Bing, etc. SEO will usually involve:

- Keyword research & PPC
- Content creation and optimization
- Technical optimization
- Link building

Spearhead should consider having the website professionally audited. Generally, any optimization should be conducted with qualified outside help. Improper optimization can have long-lasting negative effects for SRRA.

## Online Advertising

Meta Advertising on Facebook and Instagram is a great way to reach specific audiences as well as target only geographic areas of interest that will benefit SRRA. Basic advertising setup is generally straightforward enough that an in-house employee can learn and become proficient in advertising, without the need for outside support.

## Event Marketing

Aspire recommends creating events throughout the year and at different trailheads that are focused on increasing ridership, tourism and community engagement. Events such as quarterly Night Rides, Season Kickoffs and local rider free days will accomplish such goals. There is a large opportunity to work with localities and vendors to create large-style events that create more tourism.

Events without proper marketing can fall short of goals and even become a negative in return on investment. Key items that should be included in this plan are:

- Facebook event creation and Facebook and Instagram social media plan
- Strategy to mix digital and traditional (print, radio, tv) event promotion with every event.
- Merchandise ordering and distribution plans for each event
- Food Truck and vendor contact list creation for events

Media coverage, both for in-house purposes as well as media outlets.

Marketing expenses for events should run in the 5-10% range of the expected overall events budget and take into consideration the expected income from the event. Remember that any event might fall significantly short of expectations due to outside forces like weather and competition with competing events, so be conservative with all estimates.

## Analytics and Monitoring

Quality analytics monitoring is essential to understanding the success of all marketing efforts for the Spearhead Trails system. The Marketing Director should view and analyze data intentionally and report to SRRA.

The Point-of-Sale system recommended should provide SRRA with clear and concise revenue information, sales data, and customer data. Use this across channels to better understand your target market.

Google Analytics (currently called Google Analytics 4 or GA4) should be considered an industry-standard for website metrics. Ensure that this is operational on your site and work with outside support to use this data to inform your marketing decisions.

Meta, Facebook and Instagram's parent company, offers robust analytics built into each channel. Use this to understand the impact of social media on overall growth. Special attention should be paid to any paid advertisement

## Strategy Area Four: Diversify Revenue

The SRRA uses a concentrated amount of revenue streams to sustain its recreational operations. A significant portion of its funding comes from state appropriations, consistently forming the largest share of its revenue year after year. The second largest source is through federal, state, and foundation grants, on average comprising a quarter of its income. Permit income, while constituting a smaller fraction, reflects a reliance on user-generated funds. Complementing these sources are contributions from county and municipal funds, constituting on average 10% of the total. Lastly, merchandise sales, fines and penalties and sponsorships constitute a smaller fraction, each accounting for less than 1% of revenue.

SRRA offers various Spearhead Trails permit options including annual passes, three-day passes, and day passes, as well as a youth trail permit for riders under 21. The annual permit pass (\$63.00) emerged as the most popular choice among survey respondents (58%), the three-day permit (\$21.00) was the second most purchased pass, favored by 18% of respondents, particularly popular among weekend visitors. Conversely, the day pass (\$31.00) was the least popular, garnering only 8% of responses. Surprisingly, 12% of respondents admitted accessing the trails without purchasing permits, indicating a need for enhanced enforcement measures.

While acknowledging the importance of revenue diversification, it is notable that previous attempts by the SRRA to implement such strategies have been met with limited success. Thus, these endeavors have since been halted due to constraints in staffing and management expertise.

*Table 11: Revenue Diversification Recommendations*

#	Core Revenue Diversification Recommendations
17	Increase retail sales with merchandising strategy to work with local retail partners and develop robust online store with branded merchandise
18	Implement diversified recreational facilities near or adjacent to trailheads, such as motorbike track, pump tracks, flow trails, obstacle courses, etc.
19	Spearhead HQ: Assess assets, contract out existing activities management (axe throwing, bouldering, billiards) management, connect to motorized and non-motorized trails
20	Dixon Shooting Range: enhance through accreditation, training, events, promotion
21	Create special and regular events for motorized and non-motorized trail users
22	Add tours and excursions, in collaboration with other businesses for customized packages, amenity additions, and trailhead services
23	Increase enforcement of permits

## Promising Practices from Case Studies

All trail systems rely on permit revenue. Hatfield McCoy generates 60% of its revenue from permits. Other earned revenue from merchandise, advertising and sponsorships accounted for another 16% of



revenue. State contributions made up 15% of revenue and other contributions 10%. These diverse revenue streams represent opportunities for SRRA. In addition, visitor facilities and lodging can generate substantial revenue, as is the experience of The Breaks, which relies on earned revenue from lodging, retail and rental operations. Most of its budget is supported from earned revenue and a modest amount of support from Virginia and Kentucky.

For the Dixon Range, the team also conducted a case study and site visit to Deep River Sporting Clays and Shooting School in Sanford, North Carolina. It is recognized for its shooting ranges and the efforts of the staff to foster a welcoming environment for individuals across skill levels. According to the National Shooting Sports Foundation, Deep River is a four-star facility. They offer a sporting clay course, a pistol course, and the wobble deck. On top of the courses, they also offer a shooting school to help individuals learn about fireman safety and become more comfortable using their firearms. Another key component of their business model is events. They host events with local groups for team building or retreats. They also host much larger events in the form of shooting competitions that attract people from across the world. Their signature event, The Southern Side by Side Championship & Exhibition, has been hosted for 25 years and functions as both a skill competition and a gathering place for enthusiasts. They focus on marketing through organizations like NSSF, social media, and word of mouth to bring people to the facility. They also rent firearms so they can cater to and welcome people from all skill levels.

## Revenue Diversification Recommendations

Achieving revenue diversification success entails reducing dependence on a singular source and mitigating reliance on volatile sources. Case study investigations unveiled that even established recreational authorities maintain a modest portion of state appropriations to sustain their operations. Nonetheless, revenue primarily stems from property users, facilitated through guided tour activities, shooting range activities, permit sales, and auxiliary industries such as hospitality and accommodation services.

### ***Re-assess and re-utilize Spearhead HQ Facility***

Given other case examples do not operate similar facilities, and their limited current usage, awareness, and high maintenance costs, the team recommends critically re-evaluating the Spearhead HQ, including axe throwing and rock-climbing facilities, to better align with the organization's core mission and need for resource reallocation. This could include selling the equipment or identifying an independent operator to use the equipment at Spearhead HQ.

**Assessment of Assets:** Conduct a comprehensive assessment of the entire building, including the axe throwing and rock-climbing installations, including their current condition, market value, and potential for resale

"I feel that Spearhead trails has not had a presence in the community. Residents in our area that do not own or that are not interested in trail riding do not know the other activities that Spearhead trails offered. In addition to that I have often wondered if the business in Coeburn has ever been opened up to axe throwing, wall climbing, and other activities. This has not been advertised to the community."

or reuse. Determine any necessary repairs or upgrades to maximize their appeal to future users, businesses, or buyers.

**Marketing and Promotion:** Research the market demand for axe throwing and rock-climbing installations in the local area and broader region. Identify potential buyers, such as outdoor adventure companies, recreational facilities, or individual entrepreneurs.

**Community Engagement:** Communicate transparently with the local community and funders about the decision to re-evaluate the use of Spearhead HQ and invite their input.

### ***Shooting Range Activities***

The Dixon Shooting Range currently operates a large facility that offers archery, pistol, clay, and skeet shooting to its members and the public. Additionally, periodic training sessions and events are hosted. Recognizing its potential, there's an opportunity to broaden its array of activities and events to further bolster revenue diversification. In addition to its current offerings of archery, pistol, clay, and skeet shooting, the range could consider the following enhancements:

**Pursue Additional Accreditation:** Join additional professional shooting associations and become an accredited facility. Pursue all applicable and relevant certifications, allowing the Range to be used for specialized law enforcement training and regionally and nationally sanctioned tournaments.

**Specialized Training Programs:** Monetize specialized training programs catering to different skill levels and interests, such as precision shooting, defensive pistol training, or sporting clays instruction. These programs can attract enthusiasts seeking to improve their skills and knowledge.

**Corporate Retreats and Team-Building Events:** Develop packages for corporate groups seeking outdoor team-building experiences. Offer tailored shooting activities combined with meeting spaces, catering services, and team challenges to appeal to businesses and organizations.

**Youth Programs and Camps:** Create youth-oriented programs and summer camps focused on introducing young individuals to shooting sports in a safe and educational environment. Incorporate firearm safety training, marksmanship fundamentals, and fun competitions to engage youth and families.

**Tournament and Competition Hosting:** Continue to organize regular tournaments and competitions for various shooting disciplines, including archery tournaments, pistol matches, and clay shooting competitions. These events can attract participants from across the region and generate revenue through entry fees and sponsorships.

**Equipment Rentals and Sales:** Expand the range's offerings by providing equipment rental services for firearms, bows, and accessories. Additionally, consider establishing a retail shop onsite to sell shooting gear, ammunition, and other related products to range visitors.

**Community Events and Outreach:** Host community events, such as open houses, safety seminars, and fundraisers, to engage with the local community and promote responsible firearm ownership and outdoor recreation. Partner with local organizations and businesses to maximize outreach efforts.

**Membership Programs:** Continue to implement membership programs, offering benefits such as discounted range fees, priority access to events and facilities, and exclusive member-only events. This can incentivize regular visitors to become members and contribute to the range's sustainable revenue stream. Re-evaluate the existing membership program, ensuring adequate staffing relative to usage. Consider limiting hours the range is open to members to reduce costs.

### ***Guided Motorized Activities***

**Themed Adventure Tours:** Create themed tours that cater to specific interests, such as wildlife photography expeditions, historical trail rides, or adrenaline-fueled night rides under the stars.

**Guided Group Tours:** Offer guided tours for visitors interested in exploring the trails via ATVs, UTVs, or dirt bikes. These tours can range from scenic rides through natural landscapes to more adventurous routes with technical terrain.

**Skills Clinics and Workshops:** Provide instructional sessions and workshops focused on improving off-road driving skills, safety techniques, and vehicle maintenance. These can attract both novice riders looking to learn new skills and experienced riders seeking to enhance their abilities.

**Family-Friendly Excursions:** Organize family-friendly guided rides designed for parents and children to enjoy together, with stops for picnics, nature exploration, and educational activities along the way.

**Eco-Tours and Conservation Programs:** Offer guided eco-tours focused on environmental education and conservation efforts along the trails. Participants can learn about local ecosystems, wildlife habitats, and sustainable trail management practices.

**Customized Private Tours:** Provide personalized guided tours tailored to the preferences and skill levels of small groups or individuals. This option allows for flexibility in route selection, duration, and activity focus, catering to the specific interests of each group.

### ***Guided Non-motorized Revenue Diversification Activities***

**Nature Walks:** Offer guided nature walks led by knowledgeable naturalists or park rangers to explore the flora, fauna, and geological features along the trail.

**Birdwatching Tours:** Organize guided birdwatching tours to showcase the diverse bird species that inhabit the area. Provide binoculars and field guides for participants.

**Photography Workshops:** Host photography workshops led by professional photographers, focusing on capturing the scenic beauty and wildlife of the trail. Offer tips on composition, lighting, and camera settings.

### ***Additional Revenue Promoting Strategies:***

**Permit Sales:** Currently, permit sales contribute approximately 15% to the organization's total revenue. Research from case studies suggests that revenue from permits could potentially contribute a larger proportion to the organization's finances if managed strategically. An important observation from case study research is that permit prices have remained consistent in the region and neighboring states.

Therefore, SRRA should prioritize increasing the volume of permit sales rather than adjusting the pricing structure.

**Online Booking System:** Implement an easy-to-use online booking system that allows visitors to purchase permits conveniently from their smartphones or computers, enhancing accessibility and streamlining the process.

**Partnerships and Collaborations:** Collaborate with local businesses, tourism agencies, or outdoor recreation organizations to cross-promote permit sales and leverage each other's networks and customer base.

**Improved Customer Experience:** Enhance the overall visitor experience by providing excellent customer service, clear signage, well-maintained facilities, and informational materials that emphasize the value of purchasing permits.

**Expanded Offerings:** Introduce new and innovative permit options, such as seasonal passes, family packages, or multi-use permits with adjacent systems, to cater to different visitor preferences and increase sales opportunities.

**Enforcement Measures:** Increase enforcement measures to capitalize on the large percentage of trail users that do not buy a permit. 20% of riders report not buying a permit to ride the trails.

- Increased Patrols and Monitoring
  - Deploy Park rangers, security personnel, or volunteers to coordinate enforcement efforts and address repeat offenders or instances of non-compliance.
  - Implement regular patrols during peak usage times, weekends, and holidays to deter unauthorized access and enforce permit requirements.
  - Utilize trail cameras or surveillance technology to monitor high-traffic areas and identify individuals violating permit regulations
- Education and Awareness
  - Provide clear signage at trailheads and key access points indicating permit requirements, fees, and consequences for non-compliance.
  - Streamline the permit purchasing process by offering online options and mobile-friendly platforms for convenient access.

### ***Auxiliary Industries***

Auxiliary industries of recreation trail organizations form a multifaceted network of businesses and services that collectively enhance the development, maintenance, and enjoyment of trails for outdoor enthusiasts of all ages and interests. These industries are integral components of the broader ecosystem surrounding trail systems, each playing a unique role in ensuring that trails remain accessible, sustainable, and enjoyable for users. Case study models revealed that accommodation and food services industry partnerships provide the greatest revenue diversification.

**Local Merchant Partnerships:** The SRRA has begun some of this work by partnering with local merchants to sell their permits. It is important to establish strategic partnerships with key industries, particularly

those in accommodation and food services. This allows for the creation of joint marketing initiatives, specialized packages, and promotional deals tailored to attract trail users.

**Customized Packages:** Work with accommodation providers to create trail-specific packages that combine lodging options with outdoor activities, gear rentals, and dining experiences. Offer discounts or incentives for trail users who book accommodations through designated channels, promoting longer stays and repeat visitation.

**Trail-Friendly Amenities:** Encourage accommodation providers to offer trail-friendly amenities such as secure bike storage, gear cleaning stations, and packed lunch options for hikers and cyclists. Highlight these amenities in promotional materials and online listings to attract trail users seeking convenience and comfort during their stay.

**Culinary Partnerships:** Forge partnerships with local restaurants, cafes, and food vendors to promote trail-friendly dining options and culinary experiences. Collaborate on special events, themed menus, and food festivals celebrating local cuisine and culture, creating additional incentives for trail users to explore nearby dining establishments.

**Trailhead Services:** Enhance the trailhead experience by partnering with transportation providers to offer shuttle services, bike rentals, and guided tours from accommodation properties to trail access points. Provide informational signage, trail maps, and visitor guides at trailheads, showcasing nearby amenities and attractions to enhance the visitor experience.

**Data Analysis and Monitoring:** Utilize data analytics and monitoring tools to track visitor trends, user demographics, and spending patterns associated with trail-based activities. Identify opportunities for revenue growth, market expansion, and product diversification based on insights.

## Strategy Area Five: Community Engagement

Past challenges with organizational oversight and responsibility have contributed to a somewhat strained relationship between SRRA and the local communities, with a general mistrust of the organization among many in the public.

Feedback from a recent resident and business survey indicates a perception among some respondents that previous SRRA leadership may have been less visible and engaged with the communities supporting the trail systems. While survey participants generally expressed some familiarity with SRRA, many noted limited interaction with its leadership in their communities or attendance at community meetings related to the trails. Some respondents also indicated a lack of awareness regarding SRRA's governance structure and the accessibility of its meetings to the public. Concerns about transparency were mentioned by several respondents: "Spearhead is run under the same model as far too many economic development efforts: run by a small and select group that make decisions out of the public eye and with minimal public input."

"Spearhead trails needs to have a bigger presence in the community. Activities and services that Spearhead offers needs to be known to our community. There is no advertisement or communication present for what spearhead has to offer other than trails."

-Local government survey

Table 12: Community Engagement Recommendations

#	Core Community Engagement Strategies
24	Develop educational and training programs for schools, colleges, youth and adult groups, public safety, certification, etc.
25	Engage community groups in order to build support and educate the community, start an ambassador program
26	Promote transparency and communication
27	Develop and implement conflict resolution mechanisms
28	Increase board representation to include additional stakeholder groups

### Promising Practices from Case Studies

While its importance is recognized, community engagement is a low priority among the case studies, who are focused on maintaining trails and specific areas where they operate rather than the broader population in the region. Landowners that host trails are primary stakeholders but a small segment of the population. Broader community engagement arises if there are issues or new development that residents may be in opposition to but in general, the interviewees reported no problems with community push back on the trails. One challenge for Hatfield McCoy is its large area makes it difficult and time-consuming to engage with all communities in the region.

The Breaks offers educational programs to schools and programs for people with disabilities. Programs and events that focus on local and underserved audiences are an opportunity for SRRA to reach beyond its core rider audiences to other audiences.

Other trail systems have the support of volunteer trail ambassadors and builders, such as the Trail Ambassadors (<https://www.trailambassador.com/>) which trains riders in Wisconsin, for example, to increase local club participation, create a trail presence, promote community events, and increase safety of other users.

## Recommendations

By actively engaging with the local community, prioritizing transparency and communication, fostering partnerships, and addressing conflicts constructively, SRRA can rebuild trust, enhance collaboration, and create a more inclusive and sustainable trail network for all stakeholders to enjoy.

**Community Group Engagement:** Engage with local businesses and community-focused volunteer groups to foster a sense of ownership and stewardship over trails and their surrounding ecosystems. Collaborate on events, volunteer opportunities, and joint fundraising to strengthen ties within the community. Consider forming or organizing local trail riding groups, and also potential non-motorized users like rock climbers, hikers, mountain and gravel bikers.

**Transparency and Communication:** Enhance transparency by providing continuous clear and accessible information about SRRA's governance structure, upcoming projects, and trail maintenance and closures. Regular communication channels, such as newsletters, social media updates, and website announcements, can keep the community informed and engaged.

**Community Education:** Offer educational programs, workshops, and guided tours to raise awareness about the ecological, recreational, and economic benefits of trails. Engage schools, youth groups, and environmental organizations in outdoor education initiatives to cultivate a sense of stewardship and responsibility among future generations. Improve rider behavior and ridership through volunteer workdays, education campaigns, and the promotion of local riding clubs who can provide leadership in that area.

**Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:** Establish effective mechanisms for addressing community concerns, resolving conflicts, and mediating disputes related to trail use, access, and

My experience as a local government official is that Spearhead operates 'on an island' with minimal engagement with other local government bodies, at least outside of periodic updates to government bodies or specific funding or statutory requests. This has especially been the case prior to the past couple of years. My recommendations would be for Spearhead to receive a full, top-to-bottom overhaul with respect to its operations and perhaps even its board composition...The board leadership of Spearhead either needs significant personnel changes to individuals with the requisite expertise needed to guide the organization, or the current board members need extensive training on the operations of a public government instrumentality and working within the public trust.

- Local government survey



management. Develop clear guidelines, grievance procedures, and community liaison roles to facilitate constructive dialogue and problem-solving.

**Board Representation-** One way to broaden community engagement is to expand the board to include more widespread community representation. Suggested representatives include: motorized and non-motorized trail users, OHV businesses (outfitters, ATV dealers), tourism supporting businesses (dining, lodging), local community groups, environmental groups, and system landowners. To become official board members, this would require legislative action. In the interim, the team recommends forming sub-committees, or the creation of an advisory board comprised of the members listed above. In addition, all board members should affirm and commit to specific roles and responsibilities related community outreach, staff and executive director management, and financial planning and oversight. Additional training is also recommended.

## Strategy Area Six: Collaboration and Partnerships

In the past, SRRA has struggled to sustain partnerships with nearby businesses and the surrounding community. Stakeholder feedback indicates that previous leadership did not successfully cultivate regional relationships and provide relevant information regarding the trails to local businesses and communities.

This disconnect has hindered the SRRA’s collaboration and expansion within the region. Many of the local businesses interviewed stated that they had never spoken to anyone associated with SRRA, even though trail riders frequent their establishment. During site visits, regional representatives frequently said “this is the first time we’ve met anyone from Spearhead in many years, and this is a great first step!” Additionally, Spearhead currently has no formal partnerships with vehicle dealers or other organizations outside the region to help promote the trails to a broader audience.

Despite these negative past relationships, most economic and tourism development organization representatives interviewed expressed strong optimism about the future of Spearhead and SRRA. During site visits, the project team observed positive reception from businesses and stakeholders participating in meetings, appreciative of SRRA’s efforts to involve communities in this strategic planning process. While acknowledging ongoing challenges, these initial steps are seen as encouraging progress. Across the board, every stakeholder echoed the community’s desire to see SRRA proactively engage and communicate with them.

*Table 13: Collaboration and Partnership Recommendations*

#	Core Collaboration and Partnership Strategies
29	Partner with niche associations related recreational market, such as rock climbing, birders, hikers, motorcycles, bicyclists, etc.
30	Partner with manufacturer and dealer ecosystem, tied to events and promotions and sponsorships
31	Develop educational and training programs for schools, colleges, youth and adult groups, public safety, certification, etc.

## Promising Practices from Case Studies

All systems partnered with state, regional and local destination marketing organizations. Like marketing and community engagement, building effective partnerships and collaborations with other organizations can be time consuming to build the relationship and requires dedicated focus to regular communication and well-defined roles and responsibilities. The case studies used partnerships with established programs to reach niche visitor audiences as well as partnered with government departments and higher educational institutions on land management and habitat and species conservation.

Hatfield McCoy partnered with the Central Appalachian Climbers Coalition for climbing and produced guidebook, the Bluegrass Whitewater Association for river clean up and hiking events, and Partner with the Access Fund: National Hiking Advocacy Group for trail maintenance. The Breaks is working with the Department of Wildlife and Resources doing habitat work to encourage Elk to use the park more with and with the Department of Forestry on controlled burns.

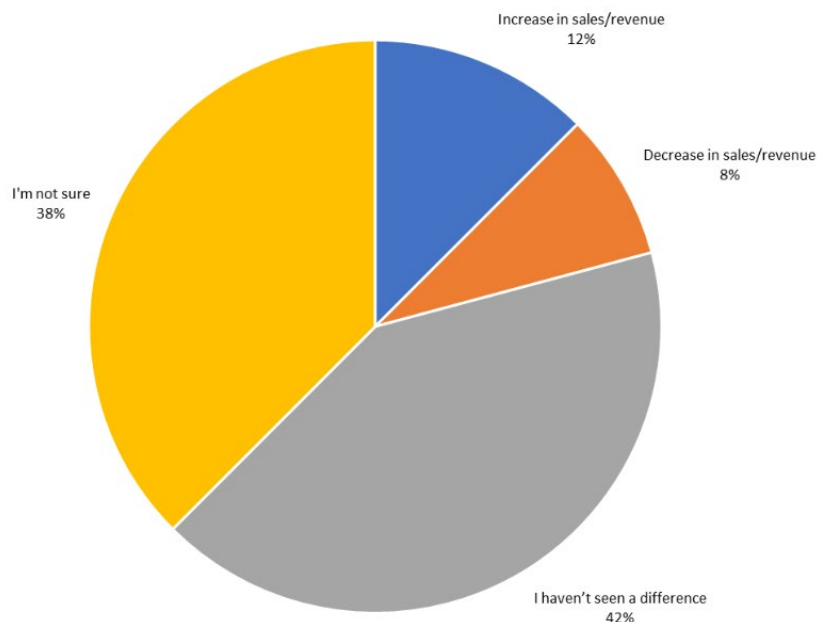
## Recommendations

Spearhead Trails is a key tourism asset of the overall Southwest Virginia region. As such, SRRA should work in conjunction with many regional entities for the overall goal of raising tourism visits into the region. This includes working closely with the 7 counties, Chambers of Commerce, and individual towns such as Big Stone Gap and St. Paul who have made significant investments into their downtowns.

### *Local business collaborations*

SRRA should also collaborate with local businesses to create amenities, and vacation-style marketing for more visits to the area and longer stays. Lodging locations such as the Western Front and Mountain View Lodge, Regional ATV Dealers and regional attractions such as Creation Kingdom Zoom should be used as marketing opportunities.

How have the trails affected you sales or revenue over the past 5 years



### ***Organizational Collaborations***

SRRA should continue to work with organizations like Heart of Appalachia, Friends of Southwest Virginia, and Virginia Tourism for marketing collaborations, grants, and tourism assistance.

Influencers can play a large content role for Spearhead Trails. Pay careful attention to any potential ideological or political differences influencers might have before agreeing to work with them.

The team recommends reaching out to Branded Influencer pages such as:

- FuelOffRoad (Tires for Off-Road Vehicles)
- ONXOFFRoad (off-roading app)
- Off Road Vixens Co, (women's clothing)

The team also recommends using local influencers like Alyssa Sturgill who has won the silver medal in Archery in the World Cup. As she is from Wise County, reach out and attempt to set up events with Alyssa for archery.

### ***Youth Collaboration***

Local 4H clubs, and the Girl and Boy Scouts are all familiar with Spearhead through shooting sports, especially archery. SRRA should continue these engagements, and expand them to local middle and high schools. Especially target high school football program in the trail counties and work with them on sponsorship and other marketing opportunities.

If it's safe to do so, host events with local teams and get them out on the trails. Promote this heavily on social media and reach out to media outlets.

### ***Regional ATV Dealerships***

Several regional ATV dealerships are identified that would be a great place to collaborate with for marketing. Strategy could include marketing materials, signage, and employee education. Invite ownership and key employees out to ride Spearhead for free to further encourage the mention and recommendation for purchasers of ATVs.

- YPK Motorsports
- East Tennessee ATV and Motorsports
- Kingsport Cycles
- Stateline Motorsports

## **Bonus Strategy: Data Capture and Management**

Data capture and management is critical to ensuring the correct implementation of the above strategies. Continually collecting data will allow for SRRA to make data-driven decisions and communicate up-to-date information to trail riders and other stakeholders. Specific data collection and management strategies are divided into three areas. Trailhead and Range visitor data counts are helpful for estimating trails' popularity, potential maintenance or amenity

needs, and for communicating the impact to stakeholders. Digitizing the waiver and permit purchase process will also allow SRRA to quickly see permit sales and estimate usage patterns. Capturing and monitoring trail condition data in real time fosters more efficient maintenance tasks, provides trail riders and supporting businesses data on closures for planning purposes, and can be essential for emergency management. Finally, a digital recordkeeping system should be developed to organize business and community partnerships, manage volunteers, track progress on capital projects, and document environmental and sustainability challenges and solutions.

*Table 14: Data Capture and Management*

#	Core Data Capture and Management Strategies
32	Collect trailhead and range visitor data using automated trail visitor counting devices; digitize waiver forms
33	Capture and monitor trail condition data, including maintenance needs and incident reports
34	Create internal systems to organize business and community partnerships, volunteers, manage and report on capital projects, and document and communicate sustainability improvements

## Conclusion

Outdoor recreation is a growing area of opportunity for the far SWVA region. SRRA is poised to move outdoor recreation forward as a tourism and economic driver, promoting community and economic health. To fully realize this opportunity, SRRA needs to make significant investments in maintenance and trail enhancement in order to provide a more enjoyable and safer rider experience, and connect to commercial centers and other trails. These investments can and should be made using collaborative community-based planning, engaging trail building experts and specialized equipment as needed, and using adaptive management strategies to slowly transition the system into one that is more environmentally and financially sustainable. Marketing and diversification of revenue is also necessary to increase visitation and the long-term financial health of the organization.

# Appendices

Appendix 1: Monitoring and Implementation Plan

Appendix 2: Supplemental Aspire Marketing Content

Appendix 3: Trail User, Resident, and Local Government Survey Summaries

Appendix 4: Economic Impact Plan

Appendix 5: Sample Economic Impact Data Collection Surveys

Appendix 6: Motorized and non-motorized trail network specifications

Appendix 7: Site familiarization tour notes

## Appendix 1: Monitoring and Implementation Guide

As a companion to the six core, and one supplemental strategies explained above, the following matrix illustrates the expected timeframe for each recommendation. *Underway* indicates the effort has begun during the study period (January – May, 2024), *Short-term* are items that should be undertaken immediately, within the next 1-2 years. *Medium-term* recommendations should be planned for now, and implemented during years 3-5. *Long-term* recommendations require significantly more planning and investment, and should begin in 2030 at the latest. Approximate cost is measured using one, two, or three dollar signs (\$, \$\$, \$\$\$). A single dollar sign (\$) indicates action items that can begin with existing funding. Two dollar signs (\$\$) require additional short-term investment, while activities with three dollar signs (\$\$\$) necessitate large-scale additional state, local or private investment. Last, many of the strategies recommended cut across other strategy areas. For that reason, secondarily affected strategies are also listed.

The team recommends reviewing this list once per quarter with the staff and board members to assess progress and course correct where needed. As a companion to this guide, the research team will provide the data below in an excel table, with additional columns for updating the status and sub-dividing into action steps.

Area	#	Recommendations	Timeframe	Cost	Crosscutting strategies					
					TE	S	M&P	RD	CE	C&P
Trail Enhancement and Expansion	1	Focus trail expansion on connections with other trails, and existing commercial centers	Mid-term	\$\$				*		
	2	Create a more family-friendly trail experience	Mid-term	\$\$			*			
	3	Emphasize wildlife, view sheds, solitude, trails provide access to assets and amenities	Short-term	\$		*	*			*
	4	Establish multi-year capital budget, target one new trail every 1 to 2 years; account for lifecycle costs upfront	Short-term	\$\$\$		*				*
	5	Add more trail operators/maintenance staff to better maintain existing trails and create new ones	Underway	\$\$\$						
	6	Take care of existing trails to ensure high degree of user satisfaction that translates directly to word of mouth marketing	Short-term	\$		*	*		*	
	7	Create and promote destinations on the trail with accompanying interpretive signs and places to rest	Mid-term	\$\$			*			
Sustainability	8	Conduct a sustainability analysis of the entire trail system and develop a plan to systematically address areas of greatest sustainability concern; convert trails to rolling grade dip drainage	Short-term	\$\$	*					*
	9	Use adaptive management strategies for expansion and enhancement with expert and community engagement	Mid-term	\$	*					*
	10	Consult with nationally accredited professionals and associations for trail building, ensure external consultants use capacity building/training approach with staff	Short-term	\$\$	*					
	11	Invest in appropriate equipment, especially compact trail loaders	Underway	\$\$\$	*					



Area	#	Recommendations	Timeframe	Cost	Crosscutting strategies					
					TE	S	M&P	RD	CE	C&P
Marketing/ Promotion	12	Create a 3-5 year marketing plan with staffing, advertising, sponsorship, and collaboration. Allocate 3-5% of annual operating budget to execute this plan.	Short-term	\$\$				*	*	*
	13	Complete a comprehensive branding and wayfinding update (adopt the 2018 Spearhead Branding Wayfinding recommendations), and install wayfinding and directional signage	Short-term	\$				*	*	
	14	Use freelance or contract support for content creation, graphic design and brochure creation, photo and video creation, website maintenance, execution of wayfinding plan, meta advertising	Mid-term	\$\$\$	*					
	15	Online outreach through review websites and trail rider communities on Facebook and Instagram.	Short-term	\$					*	
	16	Hire an events and marketing manager to lead and implement marketing efforts, collaboratively with Heart of Appalachia.	Short-term	\$\$						
	17	Increase retail sales with merchandising strategy to work with local retail partners and develop robust online store with branded merchandise	Mid-term	\$\$			*			
Revenue Diversification	18	Implement diversified recreational facilities near or adjacent to trailheads, such as motorbike track, pump tracks, flow trails, obstacle courses, etc.	Long-term	\$\$\$	*					
	19	Spearhead HQ: Assess assets, contract out existing activities management (axe throwing, bouldering, billiards) management, connect to motorized and non-motorized trails	Mid-term	\$\$						
	20	Dixon Shooting Range: enhance through accreditation, training, and events	Underway	\$\$						
	21	Create special and regular events	Mid-Term	\$-\$			*		*	

Area	#	Recommendations	Timeframe	Cost	Crosscutting strategies					
					TE	S	M&P	RD	CE	C&P
	22	Add tours and excursions, in collaboration with other businesses for customized packages, amenity additions, and trailhead services	Mid-Long-term	\$\$	*	*				*
	23	Increase enforcement of permits	Short-term	\$	*	*				
Community Engagement	24	Develop educational and training programs for schools, colleges, youth and adult groups, public safety, certification, etc.	Underway	\$\$		*	*	*		*
	25	Engage community groups in order to build support and educate the community, start an ambassador program	Short-term							*
	26	Promote transparency and communication	Short-term	\$			*			*
	27	Develop and implement conflict resolution mechanisms	Short-term	\$		*				*
	28	Increase board representation to include additional stakeholder groups	Mid-term	\$	*	*	*	*		*
	29	Partner with niche associations related recreational market, such as rock climbing, birders, hikers, motorcycles, bicyclists, etc.	Mid-term	\$						
Collaboration and Partnerships	30	Partner with manufacturer and dealer ecosystem, tied to events and promotions and sponsorships	Underway	\$		*	*		*	
	31	Increase engagement with local high schools and middle schools, especially high school football via volunteer work days and tours.	Mid-term	\$			*			
	32	Collect trailhead and range visitor data using automated trail visitor counting devices; digitize waiver forms	Short-term	\$\$	*	*	*	*	*	
Data Management	33	Capture and monitor trail condition data, including maintenance needs and incident reports	Short-term	\$\$	*	*			*	
	34	Create internal systems to organize business and community partnerships, volunteers, manage and report on capital	Underway	\$		*	*	*	*	*

Area	#	Recommendations	Timeframe	Cost	<i>Crosscutting strategies</i>					
					TE	S	M&P	RD	CE	C&P
		projects, and document and communicate sustainability improvements								

## Appendix 2: Supplemental Marketing Content

### Social Media Content Strategy

#### **Facebook**

Facebook (and various Meta-owned platforms like Instagram and Threads) offer an incredible array of tools for the promotion of Spearhead Trails.

Some functions of the platform we recommend using include:

- Creating Facebook events throughout the year to promote Spearhead Trails.
- Distribution of helpful announcements about the trails
- Consistent posting of organic (unpaid) content to help users learn about the trails.

#### **Facebook Groups**

Facebook Community Groups offer incredible organic (unpaid) reach for posts on the platform. It is best practice to “Share” existing posts to Facebook Groups in order to increase reach and extend distribution.

Please note that most large Facebook Groups have rules on advertising, such as restricting businesses from advertising more than once per week. Please make sure to follow these various rules so that your page is not restricted from accessing each group.

#### **Instagram**

Instagram is owned by Meta, the same parent company as Facebook. Instagram offers a variety of tools and is a good option for the promotion of Spearhead Trails.

Note: it is best practice to not connect your Facebook and Instagram pages together and duplicate posts. Instagram allows for several different functions like account and location tagging, which is best completed manually to prevent issues. In addition, you should be promoting to a different subset of your audience on Instagram vs. Facebook and even similar posts should be written differently.

#### **Other Platforms**

While Spearhead Trails has had accounts on other platforms such as Twitter/X, LinkedIn, Tik Tok, various Youtube Channels etc., Aspire recommends focusing on Facebook and Instagram. If a marketing hire is made who has an understanding of new or differing accounts, then those accounts can be put to use within a marketing plan. It is our viewpoint that most of the audience Spearhead Trails is trying to reach is within the platforms and they should take priority and focus.

#### **Frequency of posts and strategy**

Spearhead Trails should be posting consistently across platforms while balancing quality with each post. Usually posting 3-4 times per week across platforms is a good starting point; however, don't feel pressured to post if there isn't something of quality and value to say on a given day.

Organic social media content should be optimized for engagement. Ask questions of your audience, engage when anyone comments, and try to keep conversations going with each post. This is a great strategy to help each platform's algorithms understand what content is valued within a community.

1. "How To" and Safety Posts
2. Q&A's or FAQ's about trail usage, trail
3. Case Studies on Land and Trail Improvements

When you create content, you want to think ahead about the ways you could potentially distribute the content in different ways. For example, a video can be turned into a blog, a social media post and into an email. Retaining a comprehensive archive of any creative work is important as well. Many marketing materials can be repurposed seasonally, saving time and money.

## Email Marketing

Spearhead Trails should capture and use emails and other data for marketing purposes. Aspire recommends capturing emails through Point-of-Sales Systems and the online waiver and form process.

We recommend sending a monthly newsletter plus an update for special events. We also recommend using data to segment email lists for further specific emails. Certain Point of Sales systems can automate this process to allow you to reach First time visitors, High-use visitors, repeat visitors, visitors from specific regions etc.

Here are Template examples:



## Segmenting Audiences

Segmenting your email lists and only sending specific emails to a tailored audience allows you to focus on what each demographic might be interested in. This also allows you to increase your email frequency and increase your ROI on this marketing channel.

## Examples of Audience Segmentation for emails

- First-Time Visitors
- Repeat Visitors
- Visitor Drop Offs
- High-Use, High-Spend Visitors
- Visitors from specific regions
- Visitors interested in specific offerings

Remember to update lists over time. Your point-of-sale system should automate some of this for you. Continue to innovate with different lists and track success over time.

## SEO and Online Advertising

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a process aimed to improve website visibility via search engines such as Google, Bing, etc. SEO will usually involve:

- Keyword research & PPC
- Content creation and optimization
- Technical optimization
- Link building

Aspire recommends having the website professionally audited, and any SEO recommendations being done.

Aspire recommends hiring a marketing agency to set up Meta advertising for Facebook and Instagram ads with targeted audiences in the region and specific national niches.

After running an initial SEO audit via SEMrush, Aspire recommends the following for Spearhead Trails based on the errors and warnings found in the audit:

- The first recommendation would be to run an SEO audit yourself to better understand your website and see which pages aren't useful to have, moving forward. Due to the high volume of pages crawled, it is difficult to read and decipher the report.
- A 404 HTTP code or a broken internal link means that the page no longer exists but the URL slug is still being pulled, we recommend using URL mapping to permanently redirect the link to the correct link/page by either using a 301 or 308 code.
- There are no meta descriptions on a few of the pages, this can be easily fixable by adding an SEO title and description to these pages. The SEO description must include keywords that reflect the content on the page.
- A low text-HTML ratio means that the word count on the pages could be higher in order to pull this page to reflect in search results. The higher the word count and use of keywords, the better chance you have to be pulled onto a search page.
- H1 headings are a simple fix, we recommend reviewing the website and the headings to ensure the title of each page has an H1 heading.

- A couple of external links are broken, we recommend following these pages to see if it leads to a 404 error. If so, remove the links and add a corrected one or a new one that reflects the content on the pages.
- Some pages have too many parameters in the URL, we recommend reducing the amount of parameters to better assist in the crawlability of the website.

Ranking your website on the top page of a search takes time, consistency, and patience. It is important to monitor your search engine rankings by using tools, such as SEMrush, to run audits, make adjustments, and research keywords over time. There are two types of results that come from a Google search: Paid results, established through pay-per-click efforts and Organic results, established by SEO, previously discussed.

During the audit, we also performed keyword research for Spearhead Trails and recommend the following keywords for a Pay-per-click Campaign:

- Will require well-structured and unique content on the website to rank organically, but can be paid for via PPC:
  - “Atv rides near me” (3.6K annual searches)
  - “Rent atvs near me” (2.9K annual searches)
  - “Atv resort” (320 annual searches)
  - “Motorbike trails near me” (390 annual searches)
  - “Equestrian trails” (590 annual searches)
- Will need quality content focused on the keyword’s intent to rank organically, but can be paid for via PPC:
  - “Spearhead trails” (1K searches)
  - “Places to ride atvs” (260 searches)

Please note, the copy on the website must reflect the keywords you choose to use in your PPC campaign or what you want to rank for in searches. We also recommend doing your own keyword research and updating frequently to ensure the best results and staying within your budget.

SEO is built to make the searchers happy with the results they see. Google does this by crawling websites and finding keywords that resemble the Google search. To take advantage of this, business owners/marketers must perform keyword research for their brand and fill their website with the best keywords to research their desired audience.

### **Online Advertising**

Meta Advertising on Facebook and Instagram is a great way to target specific audiences as well as target only geographic areas of interest that will benefit Spearhead Trails.

Basic advertising setup is generally straightforward enough that an in-house employee can learn and become proficient in advertising, without the need for outside support. Please note that all advertising should be done using the Meta Ads Manager (Facebook.com/adsmanager) and not through “Boosting”



individual feed posts. This gives Spearhead Trails significantly more control over audience, budget, and demographics.

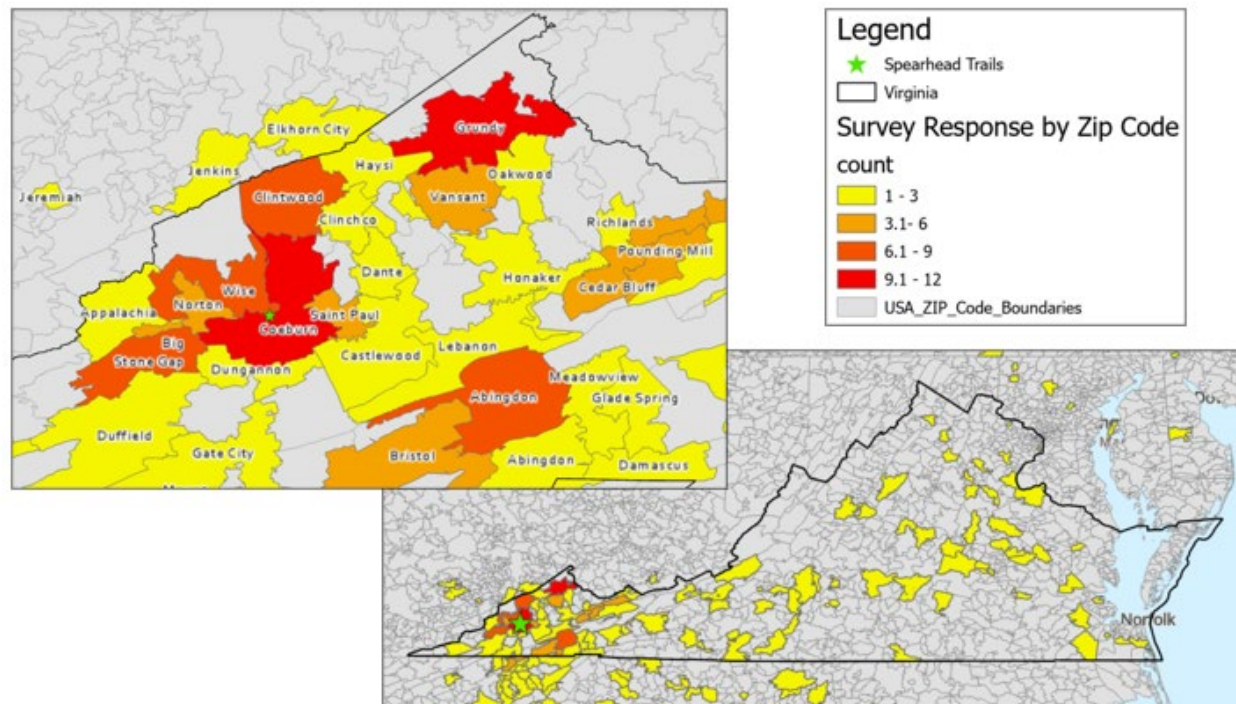
## Appendix 3: Survey Summaries

### Trail User Survey Summary

The Spearhead Trail user survey was developed to gather feedback on users' perspectives of the trail system and discover what additional assets they would like to see incorporated into the spearhead system. The results of this survey will also inform the strategic planning process. The Spearhead Trails region is defined as Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell, and Wise counties and the city of Norton.

The Spearhead Trail User Survey received 546 total responses, 340 of which were fully completed. This is a 62.27% completion rate. The average time for completion of the survey was 6 minutes. Survey responses were geographically distributed among the U.S., Canada, and Germany. The majority of respondents were high income earners (\$81,000+) in their mid-30s to 60s.

Figure 8: Location of Trail User Survey Takers



When asked for reasons for visiting the Spearhead Trails region, over 84% of respondents indicated riding on a Spearhead Trail as a primary reason. Visiting other attractions in the region was the most common secondary reason, receiving nearly 42% of responses. The most common times of year for respondents to visit the Spearhead Trails region were the warmer months of spring, summer, and fall. Less than 11% of respondents indicated that they typically visit the area in the winter. More than half of respondents use annual permits to access the trails. The next most common permit type was the 3-day permit used by approximately 18% of respondents. Nearly 70% of these permits were purchased from a local merchant. Another quarter of all permits were purchased online.

Over 38% of respondents spend an average of 2 – 4 nights in the region. A third of respondents live in the area. 12.44% spend 5 nights or longer and 11.68% do not stay overnight. Only 3.8% of respondents indicated that they spend 1 night on average. Over 90% of respondents visit local businesses including restaurants, cafes, and shops within the region either before or after using the Spearhead Trail, highlighting its economic impact on the area. Among 12 different trails and recreational opportunities, Coal Canyon and Mountain View were clearly identified as the most visited. The Original Pocahontas and Ridgeview were also popular. ATV/UTV use was recognized as the most common activity by nearly 70% of survey participants. Other activities included hiking, horseback riding, motorcycle/dirt bike, mountain bike, and shooting sports.

A staggering 81% of respondents were not aware of the Spearhead Trails clubhouse which offers access to amenities including billiards, bolder climbing, and games. Nearly 55% of respondents indicated that they would be interested in accessing this facility.

An overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they were very happy with the Spearhead Trails and its following attributes: trail condition, trail maintenance, trail beauty, ease of access to trails, trail signage, and trail cleanliness. Trail beauty and cleanliness received the highest ratings (5). Trail signage received lower ratings across the board (1 through 5), indicating that wayfinding could be improved to better support trail users.

Respondents weighed the “ability to explore, ride, in a natural setting” most heavily as a motive or interest in trail-riding. The “ability to ride with family and friends” was also a popular option. Most trail users learned about the Spearhead Trail system through word of mouth (42%), with another 37% through social media and the Spearhead website. Over half of respondents indicated that they spent \$50 - \$300 on average per visit on trail-related activities excluding permit costs. The amount spent varied significantly from less than \$10 to \$1000+. Additionally, nearly 90% of respondents use their own equipment on the trails.

Lastly, respondents left comments for improvements and changes that would enhance their experience of the Spearhead Trails. Several trail users mentioned improvements to trail signage as well as the availability of updated maps. Connectivity between trails and the addition of more technical trails were also common requests. Respondents also noted the lack of facilities including food, gas, restrooms, and resting areas along the trails. Some also suggested partnering with other nearby trail systems (Hatfield McCoy) or expanding the current system.

## Resident Survey Summary

The Spearhead Trail region resident survey was developed to gather feedback from locals and how they perceive the impacts of the trails in the local communities. The results of this survey will also inform the strategic planning process. The Spearhead Trails region is defined as Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell, and Wise counties and the city of Norton.

The Spearhead Trail Region Resident survey received 102 total responses, 60 of which were fully completed. This is a completion rate of nearly 60%. The average time for completion of the survey was 5 minutes.

Surprisingly, only 30% of respondents indicated that they are “Very familiar” with the Spearhead Trails. Another 38.6% were just “Familiar,” and the remaining 31% “Slightly familiar.” This may indicate that many Spearhead Trails visitors travel from outside the region. Although many respondents indicated that they knew of the motorized trails, Dixon shooting range, and Spearhead Trails Headquarters Building, less than 30% indicated that they visit the motorized trails frequently. The shooting range and headquarters building were utilized even less frequently. Additionally, most respondents were unaware of the existence of non-motorized trails.

When asked about the impact of the Spearhead Trails system on the region, residents felt that the local economy, quality of life, and recreation were positively affected. However, over 30% of respondents indicated that the environment was negatively affected. Public safety was neutrally impacted. When given the opportunity to answer this question through comments, many respondents mentioned how the Spearhead Trails provide recreational opportunities for both locals and visitors. There were also many comments regarding the insufficient returns in investment in the region despite the Spearhead Trails receiving large amounts of funding. Respondents identified increased advertising and communications regarding the motorized trails as a possible improvement. Transparency and working with local communities were also mentioned. Residents also suggested adding more lodging options to the area, likely to attract more visitors for longer stays and subsequently increase local spending.

Despite many responses indicating dissatisfaction with the impact of the Spearhead Trails on the region, only 28% of residents indicated that they had previously attended a community event related to a motorized trail. This percentage was even lower for events related to the Dixon Range, with less than 2% of respondents indicating that they had previously participated. Lastly, respondents showed interest in attending activities such as ax throwing, ATV/UTV training, special events for hiking/bicycling/equestrian, and sustainable trail-building workshops. This may indicate the local community is open to further development of the Spearhead Trails.

## Business Survey Summary

The Spearhead Trail region resident survey was developed to gather feedback from local businesses on how they perceive the trails' impacts on their communities and whether they bring additional traffic to their businesses. The results of this survey will also inform the strategic planning process. The Spearhead Trails region is defined as Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell, and Wise counties and the city of Norton.

The Spearhead Trail Region Resident survey received 36 total responses, 18 of which were fully completed. This is a completion rate of 50%. The average time for completion of the survey was 3 minutes.

Overall, 91.3% of respondents are familiar with Spearhead Trails; however, opinions on the trails' impacts vary vastly, even among this small sample size. Many felt disconnected from the trails and the organization. While they are aware of them, they feel that they don't have enough information to recommend trails to visitors. Additionally, most businesses reported that they only felt marginal, if any, impacts from riders of the trail system.

The respondents' businesses came from the following industries: Hotel/Lodging (27.3%), Retail establishments (13.6%), Restaurants (13.6%), Attraction/Entertainment (13.6%), Service (9.1%), and other businesses (22.7%). Of the businesses that responded, roughly 70% of them have been in business for 4+ years. Many of them do not have a strong relationship with Spearhead and do not see significant impacts on their business. Only 23.5% advertise with Spearhead, and only 17.4% of them sell Spearhead permits at their establishment. Of that 17.4%, some also commented that it was a hassle to continue selling permits.

The trail has a marginal impact on sales, with 41.7% of businesses saying they have not noticed a difference in sales/revenue related to activities associated with Spearhead. 53.3% of businesses that do see some impacts from Spearhead reported that the change in sales/revenue was less than \$10,000 over the past five years.

Overall, businesses' main complaints about Spearhead were inconsistencies in maintenance, signage, and communication.

## Local Governments Survey

The Spearhead Trail region resident survey was developed to gather feedback from local governments on how they perceive the trails' impacts on their communities and their relationships with the parent organization. The results of this survey will also inform the strategic planning process. The Spearhead Trails region is defined as Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell, and Wise counties and the city of Norton.

The Spearhead Trail Region Resident survey received 75 total responses, 51 of which were fully completed. This is a completion rate of 68%. The average time for completion of the survey was 6 minutes.

The majority of responses came from Wise County (55%). With The City of Norton (9.1%) and Russell County (13.6%) being the next two most frequent.

Table 15 breaks down the opinions on the impacts of Spearhead Trails.

*Table 15: Resident Perceptions*

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Mostly Negative</i>	<i>Somewhat Negative</i>	<i>Neither Negative or Positive</i>	<i>Somewhat Positive</i>	<i>Mostly positive</i>	<i>Total responses</i>
<i>Economy</i>	1	0	10	25	20	56
<i>Safety</i>	3	3	27	14	10	57
<i>Tourism</i>	0	2	7	16	32	57
<i>Environment</i>	6	10	14	18	9	57
<i>Outdoor Recreation</i>	1	3	4	11	38	57

When asked how frequently you meet with Spearhead representatives, nearly 60% of them said that they do not meet with Spearhead. When asked how frequently they would like to meet, respondents felt it was fine not to have any formal meetings (21.1%), while others felt quarterly updates were necessary (30%). Additionally, most reported (67%) that they also do not communicate with the board representative. A few even went as far as to say they are unsure who their board member is.

Most respondents expressed interest in Spearhead's involvement in economic, tourism, and recreational development efforts. Sentiments on the trail ranged, but most expressed that they believe it brings tourism to the region. However, the impacts could be more significant if efforts were more collaborative, and many had significant concerns regarding whether Spearhead is doing enough to mitigate environmental concerns.

## Appendix 4: Economic Impact Plan

It is recommended to conduct a comprehensive year-long economic impact study to gain deeper insights into the sustained effects of the Spearhead Trails on the local economy.

Extending the duration of the study will allow for a more thorough analysis of seasonal variations, long-term trends, and the cumulative economic benefits generated by the trail system over time. By capturing data across all four seasons, including peak and off-peak periods, the study can provide a more accurate assessment of visitor spending patterns, job creation, tax revenues, and other economic indicators. Moreover, a longer study duration enables the identification of potential growth opportunities and investment strategies to maximize the positive impacts of Spearhead Trails on the community. This comprehensive approach will yield valuable insights for stakeholders, policymakers, and decision-makers, informing strategic planning efforts and ensuring the long-term sustainability and success of the trail system and its organization.

SRRA should undertake the following steps to prepare for a comprehensive economic impact study.

### Capture visitor, business, and community member data

SRRA should continue and expand upon the sources from which user data can be collected. This may include surveys connected to permit systems, social media platforms, and mobile apps. Additionally, visitor counts from visitor logs, permit systems and website analytics.

For each data collection method outlined below, maintain a detailed documentation of data collection procedures, include methodology, and any challenges or limitations encountered. This will enhance the credibility of the study findings.

### Surveys

#### Visitors

A sample visitor survey has been provided in Appendix B. Spearhead will need to conduct the follow steps:

1. **Develop Distribution Strategy:** Begin by crafting a comprehensive documented distribution strategy to ensure the survey reaches a representative sample of trail visitors. This strategy should outline the various methods and channels through which the survey will be distributed, for example (Table 15)



Table 16: Distribution strategy for EI data collection

Example Location	Front-desk staff/volunteers equipped with permit QR code and paper permits	Permit QR code	Spearhead survey flyer with QR code
<i>Sites</i>			
SRRA HQ	*		*
X Trailhead		*	*
<i>Businesses</i>			
Clinch Life Outfitters	*		*
<i>Electronically</i>			
SRRA Website		*	*
			*
<i>Lodging</i>			
The Western Front	*		*
<i>Special events</i>			
Free Trail Day	*		*

2. **Utilize QR Codes at Trailheads:** Print QR codes linking to the survey and strategically place them at trailheads or other high-traffic areas along the trails. Ensure the QR codes are easily accessible and visible to trail visitors.
3. **Leverage Email Communication:** Utilize the organization's permit purchase database to identify trail users and send out targeted email invitations to participate in the survey. Personalize the emails to increase engagement and encourage participation.
4. **Engage Social Media Channels:** Leverage the organization's social media channels to raise awareness about the survey and encourage participation. Share engaging posts, visuals, and updates about the survey to reach a wider audience and generate interest.
5. **Increase Completion Rates:** Implement strategies to increase completion rates, such as offering incentives for survey participation (e.g., entry into a monthly prize draw) or emphasizing the importance of the survey in shaping future trail experiences.
6. **Promote Survey on Website:** Feature the survey prominently on the organization's website, with clear instructions on how visitors can access and complete it. Provide relevant information about the survey's purpose and its significance in informing trail management decisions.
7. **Monitor and Evaluate:** Continuously monitor the effectiveness of the distribution strategy and adjust tactics as needed to optimize survey reach and participation rates. Track metrics such as survey responses, completion rates, and engagement levels across different distribution channels.

### Businesses

A sample business survey has been provided in Appendix 6. SRRA will need to conduct the follow steps:

1. **Develop Distribution Strategy:** Develop a distribution strategy tailored to reach local businesses. Identify relevant businesses such as accommodations, restaurants, outdoor gear shops, and other establishments that cater to trail visitors.
2. **Utilize Business Directories and Networks:** Utilize business directories, chambers of commerce, and industry networks to identify and reach out to businesses associated with the trail system. Obtain contact information and establish communication channels for survey distribution.
3. **Email Outreach to Businesses:** Send targeted email invitations to businesses inviting them to participate in the survey. Highlight the importance of their feedback in shaping the trail system's economic impact and visitor experience.
4. **Engage Business Associations:** Partner with local business associations or local tourism boards to distribute the survey to their member businesses. Leverage existing networks and relationships to expand survey reach and participation among businesses.
5. **Incentives for Participation:** Consider offering incentives or rewards for businesses who participate in the survey, such as entry into a monthly prize draw.
6. **Monitor Response Rates and Engagement:** Monitor response rates and engagement levels among businesses, adjusting outreach efforts as needed to maximize participation and data quality.

### Residents

A sample resident survey has been provided in Appendix B. Spearhead will need to conduct the follow steps:

1. **Develop Distribution Strategy:** Develop a distribution strategy tailored to reach residents within the local community. Identify the most effective channels and methods for engaging with residents and collecting survey feedback.
2. **Utilize Local Channels:** Utilize local channels such as community newsletters, neighborhood associations, and municipal websites to distribute the survey to residents. Ensure that the survey is easily accessible and prominently featured in these channels.
3. **Direct Mail Campaign:** Consider implementing a direct mail campaign to distribute physical survey forms to residents' homes. Include clear instructions on how to complete and return the survey, along with a postage-paid envelope for convenience.
4. **Online Platforms:** Offer an online version of the survey and promote it through the organization's website, social media channels, and email newsletters. Encourage residents to participate by providing links to the survey and highlighting its importance in shaping community initiatives.
5. **Engagement Events:** Join community engagement events or town hall meetings where residents can learn about the survey and provide feedback in person. Use these events as opportunities to engage with residents, address any questions or concerns, and encourage survey participation.

6. **Incentives for Participation:** Consider offering incentives or rewards for residents who participate in the survey, such as entry into a monthly prize draw. Incentives can help increase participation rates and engagement among residents.
7. **Promote Awareness:** Continuously promote awareness about the survey through various channels, including social media, local newspapers, community bulletin boards, and word-of-mouth. Emphasize the importance of resident feedback in shaping community decisions and initiatives.
8. **Monitor and Evaluate:** Monitor the effectiveness of the distribution strategy and adjust tactics as needed to optimize survey reach and participation rates among residents. Track metrics such as survey responses, completion rates, and engagement levels to gauge effectiveness.

### Permit Systems

Shift to online permit sales as the primary method for visitors to purchase permits. Maintain connections with businesses currently selling permits to support their continued involvement in permit sales, however, establish a standard procedure for the collection of waiver information and translation into a digital file.

Online permit purchasing should encompass the following:

- **Online Permit Purchasing System Setup:**
  - Choose or develop an online permit purchasing system that integrates with SRRA website
  - Ensure system collected relevant information during the purchasing process such as name, contact details, zip code, type of permit, and purpose of visit.
  - Implement a secure payment gateway to process transactions and generate digital receipts for each purchase
  - Set up a backend database to store and organize the collected visitor data securely. *Paper survey information will need to be integrated into this system.*
- **Paper Permit Reminders:**
  - Paper permits should be sold through only designated locations, with clear instructions for completion. It is recommended to eventually phase out of paper permits.
  - Some staff may need to be trained at these locations to assist visitors in filling out the permit forms accurately.
  - Solicit feedback from visitors regarding their permit purchasing experience to identify areas for improvement

### Social media platforms

Regular social media posts should encourage interested individuals to utilize the online platform for permit purchases. Additionally, reminders about participating in surveys should be consistently shared across social media channels.

### Website Analytics

1. Integrate website analytics tools such as Google Analytics or Adobe Analytics into SRRA website. Ensure that they are properly set up to track relevant visitor data, including the number of visits, unique visitors, page views, and demographics.
2. Key metrics to track may include the number of website visitors, their geographic locations, referral sources, time spent on the site, and pages visited.

3. House this information in a single database for EI consultants to analyze when a study takes place.

### ***Capture operational spending data***

Collecting operational spending data for an economic impact study is essential as it provides insights into the direct financial contributions of the trail system, assesses local businesses' support, estimates indirect and induced economic effects, informs policy and planning decisions, and demonstrates the return on investment of trail-related expenditures. This data serves as a foundational element for accurately assessing the economic impact of the trail system, guiding decision-making processes, and maximizing its benefits for the local community and stakeholders.

For these reasons, the SRRRA needs to undertake the following steps to ensure its operational spending reports are formatted in a manner conducive to an economic impact report.

1. **Review Current Reporting Practices:** Begin by reviewing the SRRRA's current practices for tracking and reporting operational spending. Identify existing formats, data collection methods, and reporting mechanisms to understand the current state of operational spending data management.
2. **Standardize Data Collection:** Establish standardized procedures for collecting operational spending data across all departments and activities within the SRRRA. Define clear categories and metrics for tracking expenditures related to trail operations, maintenance, staff salaries, equipment purchases, marketing efforts, and other relevant expenses.
3. **Implement Digital Tracking Systems:** Transition from manual or paper-based tracking systems to digital platforms for recording and managing operational spending data. Implement software solutions or online tools that streamline data collection, storage, and analysis processes, ensuring accuracy and efficiency.
4. **Train Staff on Data Collection Protocols:** Provide training and guidance to SRRRA staff involved in data collection to ensure consistency and accuracy in reporting practices. Educate staff on the importance of collecting comprehensive and reliable operational spending data for economic impact assessment purposes.
5. **Establish Reporting Templates:** Develop standardized reporting templates or formats for presenting operational spending data in a manner conducive to economic impact analysis. Design templates that capture key metrics, trends, and insights relevant to assessing the trail system's economic contributions. A description column is helpful for memory recall when needing to investigate the flow of money from certain operational expenses.
6. **Regular Data Audits and Quality Checks:** Conduct regular audits and quality checks of operational spending data to verify accuracy, completeness, and consistency. Implement measures to address any discrepancies or errors identified during the auditing process.
7. **Document Procedures and Best Practices:** Document standardized procedures, best practices, and guidelines for collecting, recording, and reporting operational spending data. Create a comprehensive manual or handbook to serve as a reference for SRRRA staff involved in data management and reporting activities.

8. **Monitor and Evaluate Reporting Effectiveness:** Continuously monitor the effectiveness of the new reporting practices and templates in capturing and presenting operational spending data. Solicit feedback from trusted users and stakeholders to identify areas for improvement.

# Appendix 5: Sample Economic Impact Surveys

## Regional Business Survey

Hello, Spearhead community member! You are invited to participate in the Spearhead Trail Business Survey. We want to hear your feedback on the impacts of the Spearhead Trail System on your business. This survey aims to collect information that will help the region understand the impact that the Spearhead Trails system has on the local business community and, ultimately, the economic impact that the trail system has on the region as an attraction. The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete, and responses will be strictly confidential. Data from this research will only be reported in aggregate. If you have questions, please contact [insert name] at [insert email] with the subject line "Spearhead Trails." Thank you very much for your time and support. To continue, please click the Next button below.

Are you familiar with the Spearhead Trail system?

1. Yes
2. No

Please indicate the zip code where your business is located: \_\_\_\_\_

What type of business do you operate?

1. Restaurant
2. Grocery Store
3. Gas or Fuel Station
4. Retail
5. Service
6. Hotel / Lodging
7. Attraction/Entertainment (i.e. museum, theater, outdoor recreation)
8. Other \_\_\_\_\_

How long has your business been in operation?

1. Under 1 year
2. 1-3 years
3. 4-6 years
4. 7-9 years
5. Over 10 years

Do you sell permits to the Spearhead Trail system?

1. Yes
2. No

How long have you been selling permits for the Spearhead Trails?

1. Under 1 year
2. 1-3 years
3. 4-6 years
4. Over 7 years

Over the past 5 years, how has the trail system affected your sales or revenue?

1. Increase in sales/revenue
2. Decrease in sales/revenue
3. I haven't seen a difference
4. I'm not sure

What share of sales would you attribute to customers from outside the Spearhead Trails region? \_\_\_\_\_

Over the past 5 years, what is the estimated change in revenue/sales?

1. Under \$10,000
2. \$10,000-\$19,999
3. \$20,000-\$39,999
4. \$40,000-\$59,999
5. Over \$60,000
6. Prefer not to say

During which seasons do you notice an increase in business? (check all that apply)

1. Winter
2. Fall
3. Summer
4. Spring

Do you have to hire seasonal employees during peak trail seasons to accommodate demand?

1. Yes
2. No

How many additional seasonal employees do you hire? (please specify full-time and part-time)

Have you collaborated with trail-related organizations or events?

1. Yes
2. No

Do you advertise your business with Spearhead?

1. Yes
2. No

Have you faced any challenges or concerns related to the trail system's impact on your business?

Additional Comments/Suggestions:



## Locals and Residents Stakeholder Survey

Hello, resident of the Spearhead Trail region! You are invited to participate in the Spearhead Trails Local Resident Survey. The information you submit as part of this survey will help us understand the Spearhead Trails system's impact on the region. Your opinion is very important to us. The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete, and responses will be strictly confidential. Data from this research will only be reported in aggregate. If you have questions, please contact [insert name] at [insert email] with the subject line "Spearhead Trails." Thank you very much for your time and support.

Please provide the zip code where you reside: \_\_\_\_\_

How familiar are you with the Spearhead Trails?

1. Not at all familiar
2. Slightly familiar
3. Familiar
4. Very familiar

As you may know, Spearhead Trails offers several activities. Please tell us your familiarity with each:

	Never heard of it	I know where this is	I've visited once	I visit frequently
Motorized Trails	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dixon Range (shooting range)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spearhead Trails Headquarters Building (Coeburn)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Non-motorized trails	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please rank your view of how Spearhead Trails System impacts the region.

	Negative	Somewhat Negative	Neutral	Somewhat Positive	Positive
Economy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Public Safety	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Environment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Quality of Life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Recreation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

In your experience, what are some of the overall impacts of Spearhead Trails in the region? (The region is defined as Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Tazewell, Russell, Scott, Wise counties, and the city of Norton)

Positive impacts

Negative Impacts

Do you have any suggestions for improving the overall use and management of the motorized trail?

Have you ever attended a community event or participated in a community project related to a motorized trail?

1. Yes
2. No
3. I'm not sure

Have you ever attended a community event or participated in a community project related to the Dixon Range?

1. Yes
2. No
3. I'm not sure

Which of the following lists of activities would you be interested in attending in the future, if they were made available?

1. Motorized trail maintenance volunteer
2. Sustainable trail-building workshops
3. Special events for motorized sports
4. Special events for hiking/bicycling/equestrian
5. Special events for shooting sports
6. ATV/UTV training events and clinics
7. Indoor Rock Climbing/Bouldering
8. Ax Throwing
9. Other

What other suggestions do you have for Spearhead Trails as part of this strategic planning process?

Please share your email address if you are available for any additional questions from our research team.

## Trail User Survey

Hello Spearhead Trails User! You have been invited to participate in the Spearhead Trail User Survey. The spending and travel information you submit as part of this survey will contribute to understanding the benefits of the Spearhead Trails system to the region. The survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete, and responses will be strictly confidential. Data from this research will only be reported in aggregate. If you have questions, please contact [insert name] at [insert email] with the subject line "Spearhead Trails." Thank you very much for your time and support.

What are your reasons for visiting the Spearhead Trails region? (The region is defined as Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell, Wise counties, and the city of Norton)

	Primary Reason	Secondary Reason
To ride on a Spearhead Trail	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To visit other attractions in the region	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Visit family / friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Vacation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Special event	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Business	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

During which season(s) do you typically visit the Spearhead Trails region? (check all that apply)

1. Winter
2. Fall
3. Spring
4. Summer

What type of permit do you use to access the trails? (choose one)

1. Annual Permit
2. Day Permit
3. 3 Day Permit
4. I'm not sure
5. I don't have a permit

On average, how many times per year do you visit the Spearhead trails? \_\_\_\_\_

Where do you purchase your permit? (choose one)

1. Local merchant
2. Online
3. Tour operator
4. Other \_\_\_\_\_

Please specify the local merchant where you purchased your permit. \_\_\_\_\_

On average, how many nights do you stay in the region? (The region is defined as Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell, Wise counties, and the city of Norton)

1. I live here
2. Single-day trip (no overnight)
3. 1 night
4. 2-4 nights
5. 5 nights or longer

When visiting the Spearhead trails, how many members are typically in your party?

	Number in your party
Number of Adults over 18	
Number of Children under 12	
Children between 12-18	

Do you typically visit local businesses (i.e. restaurants, cafes, shops) within Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell, Wise counties, and the city of Norton before or after using the trail?

1. Yes
2. No

Thinking about your most recent trip, how much per person did you spend in the following categories within Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell, Wise counties, and the city of Norton? (Please estimate the dollar value to the best of your ability)

	Amount
Grocery	
Restaurant	
Hotel	
Camping	
Equipment (rented)	
Clothing	
Souvenirs	
Transportation	
Entertainment	
Other	

What additional outdoor recreation activities do you participate in while in the region?

Which of Spearhead's trails or assets do you visit the most? (choose all that apply)

1. Coal Canyon
2. Coal Canyon at Jewel Valley

3. Dante Coal Heritage
4. Jawbone
5. Mountain View
6. Ridgeview
7. Stone Mountain
8. The Original Pocahontas
9. Dante Miners Trails
10. Russell Fork
11. Thunderstruck
12. Dixon Shooting Sports

On average, how many trail miles do you cover per visit? \_\_\_\_\_

Which activities do you participate in while using the trail system? (Check all that apply)

1. ATV/UTV
2. Hike
3. Horseback
4. Motorcycle/dirt bike
5. Mountain bike
6. Shooting sports (pistols, clays, archery, etc.)
7. Other \_\_\_\_\_

Are you aware of the Spearhead Trails clubhouse?

1. Yes
2. No

Would you be interested in accessing the Spearhead clubhouse amenities including billiards, bolder climbing, games?

1. Yes
2. No

How would you rate the following attributes of the Spearhead Trails?

	1	2	3	4	5
Trail Condition	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trail Maintenance	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trail Beauty	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ease of Access to Trails	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trail Signage	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Trail Cleanliness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please rank (1 being the least, 5 being the most) your motives and interests when it comes to trail-riding.

- Ability to explore, ride, in a natural setting \_\_\_\_\_
- Ability to ride with family and friends \_\_\_\_\_
- Ability to improve my driving ability in challenging terrain \_\_\_\_\_
- Ability to challenge my vehicle and skills in exceptionally steep, rocky, or muddy terrain \_\_\_\_\_

- Challenge my vehicle \_\_\_\_\_
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

What improvements or changes would enhance your experience of the Spearhead Trails?

How did you learn about the Spearhead Trails System?

1. Social Media
2. Word of Mouth
3. Promotional Materials
4. Spearhead Website
5. Other \_\_\_\_\_

On average, how much money do you spend per visit on trail-related activities excluding permit cost? (i.e. rental equipment, outfitters, gas)

1. Less than \$10
2. \$10-\$50
3. \$50-\$150
4. \$150-\$300
5. \$300-\$600
6. \$600 - \$1000
7. \$1000+

Which one of the following best describes the equipment you use on the trails?

1. I own my equipment
2. I rent the equipment from a local operation or outfitter
3. I rent the equipment from a entity outside the region and bring it to the trails.
4. I use a combination of owned and rented equipment
5. I do not use equipment
6. Other \_\_\_\_\_

What type of ATV/UTV do you own? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the zip code for your residence? \_\_\_\_\_

Select your age range.

1. 18-24
2. 25-34
3. 35-44
4. 45-54
5. 55-64
6. 65+

What is your annual household income?

1. Less than \$20,000
2. \$20,000-\$50,000
3. \$51,000-\$80,000
4. \$81,000-\$100,000
5. \$100,000- \$150,000
6. More than \$150,000
7. Prefer not to say

## Appendix 6: Motorized and non-Motorized Trail Network Specifications

Table 17: Motorized Trail Specifications

Trail Name	Trailhead Address	County Location	Trailhead Coordinates	Length of Trail	Unique attributes	Difficulty Level
Coal Canyon	1124 Chipping Sparrow Road Grundy, VA 24614	Buchanan	37.245800, -82.168659	127 miles over 6,000 acres	2 ATV Play Areas	53% Green, 24% Blue, 22% Black, 1% Yellow
Dante Coal Heritage		Dickenson				
Jawbone (Name change at the county line to Coal Canyon at Jewell Valley)	Doran	Tazewell		100 miles over 10,000 acres between 2 systems	4 overlooks, play areas, only for jeeps, 4x4 Street legal vehicles, ATV/UTV & motorcycles	
Coal Canyon at Jewell Valley (Name change at the county line to Jawbone)	17362 Dismal River Rd., Whitewood, VA 24657	Buchanan	37.243382, -81.872250			
Mountain View	3461 Hidden Acres Rd., St Paul, VA 24283	Wise/Russel	36.915365, -82.314613	118 miles over 5,000 acres	20 miles of single track	53% Green, 24% Blue, 22% Black, 1% Yellow*
	4850 Little Tom Rd., Coeburn, VA 24230	Wise	36.950624, -82.432258			
	13105 Pleasant Rd., Coeburn, VA 24230	Wise	36.955181, -82.434044			
Ridgeview	849 Kiwanis Park Road Haysi VA 24256	Dickenson	37.219902, -82.289451	78 miles over 2,650 acres	Motor Cross Track "Thunder Valley" located at Haysi Kiwanis Park	50% Green, 33% Blue, 16% Black, 1% Yellow
Stone Mountain	335 Fairground Rd., Pennington Gap, VA 24277	Pennington Gap, Lee	36.770310, -82.029394	34 miles over 500 acres	2 Miles of Single Track	0% Green, 89% Blue, 10% Black, 0% Yellow
The Original Pocahontas	210 Railroad Ally, Pocahontas, VA 24635	Tazewell	37.30517717638337, -81.34232274256647	94 miles over 1,800 acres	10 miles of single track	46% Green, 45% Blue, 5% Black, 0% Yellow
	132 Miners Park Lane, Bluefield, VA 24605	Tazewell	37.28950727240917, -81.37182704173028			

Table 18: Non-Motorized Trail Specifications

Trail Name	Trailhead Address	County Location	Length of Trail	Unique attributes
Russell Fork	941 Kiwanis Park Road Haysi VA 24256	Haysi, Dickenson	10 miles	Connects the Town of Haysi and the Breaks Interstate Park
Thunderstruck		Big Stone Gap, Wise		Powell Valley Overlook, Big Cherry Reservoirs, High Knob Fire Tower Lookout
Dante Miners Trail				





## Appendix 7: Familiarization Tour Notes

The project team first traveled to Coeburn to visit the trail system from March 18 to March 20 as part of the familiarization tour to learn more about the organization and trails and to conduct research.

Day 1: The project team first visited and rode on the trail system to get a sense of the scale and condition of the trails. The team was able to see some of the most popular and challenging trails. During these rides along Spearhead, rangers explained their daily tasks and how they managed all they needed to do versus the lack of adequate help. Additionally, it gave the research team a chance to see the trails and wildlife that bring riders to the system.

Then, the team interviewed local business owners to understand how Spearhead impacts the local communities. Team members met with individuals representing the Pocahontas and Tazewell County Business Community. A different project team met with individuals from Southern Gap Adventure, and they learned about Southern Gap's efforts to grow the local business community and better embrace the local Spearhead Trail near the campgrounds. A third project team visited St. Paul and met with the management of the Western Front Hotel, an avid supporter of trail ridership.

Day 2: The project team visited the Dixon Shooting Range and toured the property, seeing both the archery and shooting sports facilities.

After visiting the Dixon shooting range, the team hosted two focus groups at the SRRA headquarters. The first focus group was with local and state tourism and marketing groups. During this focus group, the team learned about ways that these groups promote Spearhead in their marketing materials and their opinions regarding its value as a tourism attraction for the region.

The second focus group was with local economic development organizations. During this session, we learned about the local and regional economic development initiatives and how Spearhead Trails could be an asset in these efforts.

The last meeting of the day was a SWOT session with the SRRA board. This session gave the project insights into the board's goals, aspirations, and pain points. The board consists of a representative from each county in the Spearhead region; each municipality selects its own board member. Therefore, the board members also act as proxies for the counties they represent.

Day 3: On the last day of the trip, the project team traveled to Lee County, where they met with additional stakeholders. The first meeting was with a former SRRA employee and a founding member of the trails. They were able to give additional insights into the organization's history and explain how things came to be.

The project team also met with the owners of local Airbnbs, which support trail ridership as hotels in the area are limited. The owners expressed that their Airbnb stays booked consistently and believe the trails bring in many renters.