



Virginia Cooperative Extension

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Situation Analysis Report



Wythe

2018

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Introduction

Wythe County VCE collected and discussed county needs throughout the 2018 Calendar year. Formalized groups included Wythe County School System personnel; teachers, principals, and school administrators, Wythe County Farm Bureau, Wythe County DHIA, Big Walker Soil and Water, Wythe County Board of Supervisors, Wythe County Planning Commission members, Wythe County Social Service, Wythe County Attorney and Legal Counsel, Wythe County Administrator, Wythe County Clergy, Wythe County ARECA Authority Board members, Wythe County JIDA, and Wythe County area businesses both local and corporate, the Wythe Bland Chamber of Commerce, Wytheville Town Council, Rural Retreat Town Council and traditional clientele of VCE programming. Additionally, Wythe County collected data for comprehensive plan evaluation and an ever-changing look at county dynamics and goals.

Unit Profile

Wythe County is a rural county located in Virginia's Southwest District with neighboring counties of Smyth to the west, Bland to the north, Pulaski to the east, and Carroll and Grayson to the south. The land area totals about 465 square miles or about 297,400 acres. Of the 297,400 acres that compose Wythe County, over 55,000 acres are in the Jefferson National Forest.

Demographics

Recent Census data supports a slightly declining population of 28,882 residents. Projected population growth over the next 20 years is minor with limited projected increases in total population. Two incorporated towns, Wytheville and Rural Retreat, are located within county boundaries. Population diversity consists of an approximate 95% White or Caucasian, 3% African American population and approximate 1.5% Hispanic population (which is indicated as an increase from previous analysis), although seasonal workers increase the Hispanic population working within the community much of the year.

Education

Wythe County maintains a geographically located school system with distribution throughout the county. Wythe County maintains three high schools, three middle schools, and six elementary schools. While total enrollment in the county has decreased over the last 20 years more marked is the distribution of High School enrollment in the eastern end of Wythe County with the largest enrollment in Fort Chiswell High School and a decrease in George Wythe Enrollment compared to 20 to 30 years prior. Much of the decrease in population is then recognized to be centered towards Wytheville and the industries no longer viable within the town confines. Rural Retreat High School numbers are virtually unchanged. Wythe County has a growing enrollment in Christian based private school options as well as home school participation. Wythe County residents, as a percentage, rank lower in any advanced degrees

and post high school education compared to both Virginia and National Averages. Access to associate programs at Wytheville Community College was recognized as great asset, however indications are that those enrolled and completing associate programs do not go on to complete a bachelor's degree at a university or college.

Economy/Business

Median Household income grew over the last five reported years with noted more polarization at both ends of the household income scale. Current median income as reported of \$46,119 falls more than \$10,000 below national averages. Wythe County has a diverse employment profile but the largest employment sectors are Government (Local School System) and Manufacturing with top employers Somic, Gatorade and Pepsi. Additionally, many high-volume employers are service industry related and many utilize a part time non benefit workforce.

Health/Well-Being

Health issues continue to pervade Wythe County on several fronts. Wythe County has higher percentages of the population classified as obese and higher percentages with excessive drinking. Additionally, teen pregnancy rates are substantially higher than both the VA and National percentages. Access to primary care physicians falls well below state and national averages with Wythe County physicians serving over 450 more patients per doctor relative to national coverage rates. Since previous situation analysis Wythe County has seen rates of unemployment higher than state and national averages, a higher level of children living in poverty and substantially higher percentages of children living in single parent homes relative to both VA and national percentages. These conditions continue to place pressure on school systems and service providers to address child care and wellbeing in the county.

Community and Resident Perspectives

Resident and community perspectives will be addressed by area of input and categorized via sub-heading areas.

Government

Overarching goals surround the ability to generate tax revenue and have supportive jobs and infrastructure for county residents. This issue is crosslinked to areas of substance abuse as the availability and perceived availability of a dedicated workforce is seen as a deterrent to new industry locating in Wythe County. As referenced above, the largest employer in the county is the Wythe County School System which has the need to fund current schools and fund new and improved school construction. These issues are a constant pressure on tax revenue. Local government strives to increase employment and business growth and in doing so has invested more funding towards tourism and placed emphasis on enterprise zones. Additionally, the ability to attract high level industrial development places increased emphasis on school quality, quality of living, life experiences, cultural diversity, public safety, and a variety of activities for youth, families, and professionals.

Education

Education as referenced above is the largest employment sector in Wythe County. As schools continue to face tight budgets and incur reductions in state funding, issues that dominate pertain to the ability to modernize facilities and provide a diverse curriculum. Educators share that the issue of home environment, food availability and the concern of children coming to school malnourished is an emerging topic. Additionally, the education sector cited interest and demand for increased availability of after school programming to create an educational environment between school hours and the end of the work day. Safe and engaging learning environments establishes differential learning experiences for out of classroom opportunities.

Agriculture

A resounding issue among the dairy sector is the loss of profit and the ability to stay employed within that sector of industry. Dairy farms continue to exit production. Wythe County has lost half of its dairy farming operations since the completion of the prior situation analysis. Multiple concerns surround the dairy sector such as mental health, divorce, bankruptcy, and farm sustainability. Increased pressure is recognized on local supporting farm businesses as the reduction in dairy equals a reduction in infrastructure needs to support that industry. Feed, seed, fuel, and machinery dealers have all felt the pressure of the loss of the local dairy industry. Additional attention within the agriculture sector is given to an overall loss of profitability and a poor choice of commodity production suited to the geographic area that creates more cash flow and enables farm expansion. Agriculture respondents cited loss of revenue and increased expenses as the top issues and a loss of the ability to secure borrowed funds for their enterprise expansion or diversity into new production.

Social

Since the previous situation analysis there is an increase in the concern of drug abuse and the effects that it has on multiple fronts. As discussed in the Government section, the perception or reality of a dedicated workforce to attract industry is an issue. Additionally, cross-linked with the Education section the number of single parent household or no parent household has placed increase pressure on childcare and is observed by the conditions of children coming to school. The destruction of marriages and the increasing divorce rate was attributed with respondents to the fact that many of these families are afflicted by addiction. Other respondents focused on the desire to see increased activities for children and the community to increase the appeal of the community and to increase the diversity of learning options and entertainment within the community.

Priority Issues

Priority Issues tended to be multifactorial with cross linkage to several input groups.

Standard of Living

Summarized across respondent input the desire to improve job availability, bring in new business to the community, increase higher paying jobs for residents, and in doing so increase the tax revenue for county government, addresses multiple concerns. In doing so conditions improve for children, available funds increase for school systems, family living conditions improve and disposable income for entertainment and educational activities increase. This concern also addresses the increasing and abundant drug addiction epidemic, both battling current prevailing conditions and setting a stage for improvement by building an economic foothold to improve conditions for future generations.

Sustainability of the Agriculture Industry

Compared to prior Situation Analysis the urgency amongst agriculture respondents to secure additional sources of revenue and to find a path to economic prosperity was the main concern. Commodity prices having been repressed, the dairy industry in financial peril, the availability and ease to attain lending and the concern over generational transfer dominated respondents. This issue impacts multi informant groups such as government in searching for additional business growth suffers from farm economy decline, local businesses struggle as sales and ability to pay have suffered in the more recent farm economic down turn and business either has to retool its marketing audience and downsize its workforce. Increased economic stress in the farm sector places more pressure on families, increased divorce rate, mental health issues, and the inability of a younger generation to return to the area to move the farming operation forward.

Youth Development

An overarching concern exists in the development of youth. The most pressing issues that need to be addressed are the ability of the school system to provide a quality education, to afford appropriate security for school populations and provide impactful afterschool programs. Providing opportunities that appeal to youth as well as offering the opportunity to obtain a standard of living that youth desire to have is necessary to grow a healthy and reliable workforce.

Appendices

http://virginialmi.com/report_center/community_profiles/5104000197.pdf

<http://www.wytheco.org/index.php/component/jdownloads/send/22-planning-commission/246-comprehensive-plan>