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## *Blue Ridge Highlands Regional Section*

### *Introduction*

As a supplement to the Virginia State Tourism Plan, this section is dedicated to the Blue Ridge Highlands region. ***It is strongly suggested that the Virginia State Tourism Plan be read in conjunction with this regional section.***

The key elements of this regional section include the following:

- A situational analysis of tourism in the region, which highlights the key tourism products, regional strengths and challenges, competitive considerations, and other relevant information, is presented to set the framework for the regional strategy.
- Key product themes of focus are identified and applicable objectives and strategies are presented for the five plan outcomes of Products, Pillars (infrastructure), Partnerships, Promotions, and Policies for the Blue Ridge Highlands tourism strategy.
- Action steps specific to the region, which are above and beyond the actions of the state level plan are outlined.
- Stakeholders proposed to be involved in implementing the plan are also identified.
- Key takeaways for the Blue Ridge Highlands' tourism development in the next five years are outlined.

### *Process for Findings*

Numerous factors formed the basis of the Blue Ridge Highlands' tourism strategy, including the tourism industry's own vision for the region, an inventory and analysis of the tourism assets currently offered, input and analysis of visitor information, and an analysis of the competitive environment. These four key areas are further described below:

**Industry Vision:** The industry vision served as the foundation for the region's strategy, based on input from approximately 1,300 responses statewide, including stakeholders from the Blue Ridge Highlands through workshops, surveys, and discussions. The overwhelming desire among Blue Ridge Highlands stakeholders is to utilize the region's natural assets and further develop outdoor recreation and build upon the region's rich musical and cultural heritage in an authentic manner to increase tourism.

**Tourism Assets:** The Blue Ridge Highlands' tourism assets were analyzed by the study team. This included the current mix of tourism products such as attractions, visitor activities, hotel inventory, natural assets and topography, industry base, and socio-cultural character. The strengths and challenges of the region's current characteristics such as infrastructure, road/air accessibility, partnerships, policies, and promotions were

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also discussed with numerous key stakeholders and assessed. In addition to the study team's personal experience of the Blue Ridge Highlands, other input contributed to an understanding of the existing tourism assets, including input from tourism stakeholders, VTC databases, local tourism marketing information/promotional information from organizations such as the Blue Ridge Travel Association, DMOs, chambers of commerce, existing tourism plans from numerous destinations including Carroll, Franklin, Giles, Grayson, Patrick, Pulaski, Smyth, and Washington counties and the towns of Bristol and Radford, tourism industry associations, tourism industry resources, PwC resources, and others.

**Consumer Perspective:** Research was analyzed on a global, national, state, and regional level. This research included visitor trends, activities, perceptions/preferences, performance indications, and emerging elements. Macro trends impacting tourism such as population and demographic trends, GDP/GSP, unemployment rates, consumer prices, personal consumption spending, gas prices, and other factors impacting tourism in a broad sense were also analyzed.

Sources of research related to Virginia and the Blue Ridge Highlands region compiled by the VTC were analyzed, which included profiles of past visitors (by traveler type, geography, season, and activity), traveler attitude studies, and other data. Profiles of past visitors (statewide) showed activities engaged in which are offered on the Blue Ridge Highlands, seasonality, party size, spending, demographics, income levels, travel distance and patterns, duration of trip, travel party origin, and other relevant information. Attitude studies of past and prospective travelers provided additional insight for the Blue Ridge Highlands in terms of appeal, perceptions of tourism products, activities, and destination attributes as well as other relevant hub and spoke travel behavior and activities engaged in by past and prospective visitors to Virginia. Visitor data was also analyzed against existing tourism assets. Visitor insights show that Blue Ridge Highlands has a high favorability rating among past and prospective travelers, particularly among millennials. It is highly rated for being relaxing, good for families and couples, its overall atmosphere, and outdoor recreation. The region was widely recognized for being scenic with mountains/hills being top of mind among visitors. The region was also recognized by most for being great for scenic drives, possessing interesting small towns, great for hiking/exploring nature, and good for viewing wildlife/birds. Camping was also cited by nearly half the visitors as being significant in the region.

Additional state/regional sources included data on visitor spending patterns based on economic impact data in the region, state parks attendance, welcome center statistics, the Economic Impact of Wine and Grapes on the State of Virginia, Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, and other sources. Examples of national and international sources include data from the United Nations World Tourism Organization, U.S. Travel Association, Office of Travel & Tourism Industries (OTTI), MMY Global, Outdoor Industry Association, U.S. Culture and Heritage Travel Council, National Trust for Historic Preservation, World Food Travel Association, National Parks Service, Smith Travel Research (STR), America's Byways, Woods & Poole, other U.S. government sources, travel industry publications and articles, and other relevant sources.

**Competitive Perspective:** To understand the offering and competitive positioning of Virginia and the Blue Ridge Highlands region, research and analysis was conducted which evaluated destinations, product offerings, market segments, and key strengths of competition on a regional basis and analysis of products, tourism spending, product rankings, and best practices and trends in tourism product areas on a statewide/national

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basis. For the Blue Ridge Highlands, North Carolina, Tennessee, and West Virginia were analyzed. Destinations were specifically analyzed for key product strengths, such as North Carolina for its outdoor recreation, main streets, heritage, and arts, Tennessee for its musical heritage and outdoor recreation, and West Virginia for its active outdoor recreation offerings. While the region's outdoor elements serve as strengths, the region is challenged in differentiating its experiences from outdoor offerings from nearby states, some of which may be well known, competitively marketed, and offered in a concentrated area. Competitive insights show that these other destinations offer similar active and family-oriented outdoor recreation, shared Blue Ridge heritage, traditional arts, various musical heritage, and interesting small towns. Asheville and the surrounding areas of northwest North Carolina, for example, pose strong competition where towns, cultural offerings, culinary experiences, and outdoors are relatively concentrated. However, the distinct music of the Blue Ridge Highlands region serves as a distinguishing feature in combination with its other tourism lures, including its outdoor opportunities, main street communities and charming towns, arts, cultural heritage, agriculture, and others.

Sources of this competitive information included, but were not limited to, review of tourism marketing websites/promotional information, tourism marketing and strategic plans, tourism organization annual reports, tourism industry publications and articles, rankings, available consumer-oriented research (statewide) which addresses competition, and tourism companies (outfitters, tour guides, etc.).

## Tourism Situation

The Blue Ridge Highlands region is situated in the southwest portion of Virginia, bordering Tennessee and North Carolina to the south and West Virginia to the north. It is also adjacent to the similar Heart of Appalachia region, with which it shares culture, heritage, and assets such as the Crooked Road and Round the Mountain – Southwest Virginia’s Artisan Network.



Set within the Blue Ridge of the Appalachian Mountain range, the region is rich in natural beauty and assets, including scenic mountains and valleys, the George Washington & Jefferson National Forests, the New River, Smith Mountain Lake, Claytor Lake, and others. The region also has historical roots of Appalachian cultural heritage and musical history as the "Birthplace of Country Music."

Today, the region has grown to over 430,000 residents. The most populous cities include Blacksburg (42,500), home to Virginia Tech, Christiansburg (21,000), and Bristol (18,000). It is also strategically located at the crossroads of Interstate 77 connecting West Virginia and North Carolina and Interstate 81 connecting Northern Virginia to Tennessee. While the region benefits from interstate connectivity, the closest commercial airports are just outside the region in Roanoke and Bristol, Tennessee. There are, however, several general aviation airports.

### Regional Facts:

- Region Population: 430,000
- Largest Town/City: 42,500
- Border States: NC, TN, WV
- Interstates: I-77, I-81
- 2011 Tourism Expenditures: \$733 million
- 2007-11 Expenditure Growth: 11.6%

The Blue Ridge Highlands region accounted for nearly \$733 million in travel and tourism expenditures in 2011 (approximately four percent of the state's overall travel and tourism expenditures), which is an increase of 11.6 percent since 2007. In addition to tourism marketing at the destination level, the Blue Ridge Travel Association advertises on a region-wide basis; however, regional tourism partnerships could be strengthened. Furthermore, the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation also has a presence in the Heart of Appalachia and Blue Ridge Highlands regions. The foundation promotes tourism and supports major initiatives in the regions, including Appalachian Spring, Heartwood, Round the Mountain – Southwest Virginia’s Artisan Network, and the Crooked Road. There is also a movement to form the Southwest Virginia Region through the cooperative efforts of the Blue Ridge Highlands and the Heart of Appalachia regions.

Visitor insights show that Blue Ridge Highlands has a high favorability rating among past and prospective travelers, particularly among millennials. It is highly rated for being relaxing, good for families and couples, its overall atmosphere, and outdoor recreation. The region was widely recognized for being scenic with mountains/hills being top of mind among visitors. The region was also recognized by most for being great for scenic drives, possessing interesting small towns, great for hiking/exploring nature, and good for viewing wildlife/birds. Camping was also cited by nearly half the visitors as being significant in the region. Other outdoor elements such as fishing, paddle sports, and hunting were not as prominent in visitors’ minds overall despite the offering of these activities in the region and value recognized by stakeholders from visitors participating in these activities..

Nature and outdoor recreational opportunities are key visitor strengths for the region, offering scenic getaways and adventure for families and outdoor enthusiasts. Well-known experiences such as the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Appalachian Trail both run through the region. Other trails include the Virginia Creeper Trail, the New River Trail, and the Wilderness Road – Virginia’s Heritage Migration Route. In conjunction with these trails, there are also opportunities to hike, bike, horseback ride, observe wildlife, hunt, fish, kayak, canoe, and rock climb throughout the region among other nature areas such as the George Washington & Jefferson National Forests, Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, Clinch Mountain Wildlife Management Area, the Crooked Creek Wildlife Management

#### **Highlights of Regional Lures/Strengths:**

- Scenic Beauty and Outdoor Recreation Opportunities
- National Assets: Appalachian Trail, Blue Ridge Parkway, George Wash. & Jeff. National Forest, Mount Rogers National Recreation Area
- State Parks: 6
- Crooked Road, Music, and Musical Heritage
- Events & Festivals: Bristol Rhythm & Roots Reunion Festival, Floyd Fest, Old Fiddlers' Convention
- Visual and Performing Arts: Barter Theatre
- National Main Streets: Abingdon, Bristol, Marion, Radford, Rocky Mount
- Notable Cities & Towns: Wytheville, Damascus, Floyd, Galax
- Interstate Connectivity
- Virginia Tech
- Appalachian Culture and Heritage
- Camping and Campground Availability

#### **Regional Challenges:**

- Experiences are dispersed throughout the region
- Differentiation from competition in nearby states - outdoors
- Limited recognition of assets and towns
- Limited upscale hotel supply

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areas, or one of the six state parks. The region is also home to three of Virginia's highest peaks. The Appalachian Spring effort planned for Southwest Virginia is also designed to help connect outdoor experiences for visitors.

While the region's outdoor elements serve as strengths, the region is challenged in differentiating its experiences from outdoor experiences of nearby states with similar offerings, some of which may be well known, competitively marketed, and offered in a concentrated area such as in North Carolina, West Virginia, and Tennessee. In addition, nearby states may be more recognized for active outdoor recreation such as rafting, zip lines, climbing, etc. than the Blue Ridge Highlands region. For example, West Virginia has developed offerings for its active outdoor recreation including ATVing on the Hatfield McCoy Trails, white water rafting on the Gauley and New Rivers, zip lines, and other outdoor adventures. Furthermore, in West Virginia and Tennessee, outdoor recreation opportunities are concentrated in centralized areas, offering opportunities for families and outdoor enthusiasts to experience many activities in one area such as outdoor recreation vacations, including lodging, restaurants, and camping facilities, along with recreation activities (e.g. ACE Adventure Resort and Adventures on the Gorge Resort in West Virginia, French Broad River Dude Ranch in Tennessee, etc.). Eastern Tennessee is also well promoted for its outdoor experiences and packages for rafting, zip lines, ropes courses, etc.

Consistent with the nature and outdoor recreation theme, the region possesses the largest share of camping/RV parks (25 percent) and the second largest share of cottages/cabins (22 percent) in the state. The Primland Resort also offers a distinctive upscale resort experience in a natural setting. However, the region's economy and mid-scale chains comprise 96 percent of chain properties (excluding independent hotels) based on STR data indicating limited supply of upscale (and higher-rated) chain properties, which are typically full-service hotels. In addition, outdoor outfitters appear underserved for the region given the number of natural assets.

The region is differentiated by its combination of music, arts, towns, and other offerings, such as wine, agri-tourism, sports, and other visitor experiences. The Crooked Road, specifically, is a unique asset for the region and a significant differentiator. Visitors can travel the Crooked Road music trail to experience various musical genres, such as bluegrass, mountain music, folk, gospel, and country. Notable towns along the 300+ mile trail where travelers can experience musical heritage include Floyd, home of the renowned Floyd Country Store, Bristol, known as the "Birthplace of Country Music", and Galax, home of the Blue Ridge Music Center. Notable music events include the Bristol Rhythm & Roots Reunion Festival, Floyd Fest, and the Galax Old Fiddlers' Convention. Visual and performing arts are also strong in the region personified through venues such as Barter Theatre and Heartwood. Heartwood is one of the newest additions to the region, designed as the gateway to Southwest Virginia's craft, music, food, and local culture. A portion of the Round the Mountain – Southwest Virginia's Artisan Network is also located in the region, which provides opportunities to experience handmade and home-grown crafts. With the music and arts presence in the region, the creative economy is important.

In addition, Blue Ridge Highlands is also home to many of Virginia's great small towns. Marion, Radford, Rocky Mount, Abingdon, and Bristol are all designated main streets by the National Main Street Program. Other notable small towns include Wytheville, Damascus, Floyd, and Galax.



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Competitive insights show that these other destinations also share Blue Ridge heritage, traditional arts, various musical heritage, and interesting small towns. Similar experiences related to the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina and outdoor recreation near Asheville, for example, may deter visitors from the southern U.S. who stop in North Carolina rather than traveling further to Virginia. Asheville and the surrounding areas of western North Carolina pose strong competition where vibrant towns, cultural offerings, culinary experiences, and outdoors are relatively concentrated. However, the distinct music of the Blue Ridge Highlands region serves as a distinguishing feature in combination with its other tourism lures, including its main street communities and charming towns, arts, cultural heritage, agriculture, and others.

While the Blue Ridge region offers a range of visitor opportunities and prominent attractions, they are somewhat dispersed throughout the region. However, the Crooked Road, Blue Ridge Parkway, Appalachian Trail, wine trails, and outdoor trails, certainly help to connect attractions and destinations. Other visitor opportunities in the region include 13 wineries as well as over 50 agri-tourism attractions. For sport enthusiasts, the region also offers football at Virginia Tech or a race at the Bristol Motor Speedway in nearby Bristol, Tennessee. Meeting space is also available at the Wytheville Meeting Center, Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center, Primland, and various hotels, but supply is generally lower than other areas of the state.

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## *Blue Ridge Highlands Strategy*

### *Product Focus Areas*

Based upon research and analysis efforts described and in consideration of the tourism situation, the following are identified as the primary and secondary areas of product focus for the Blue Ridge Highlands. The key definitions below describe these areas, which form the basis of the product objectives.

- **Primary theme focus**: Nature & Outdoor Recreation, Arts & Music, History & Heritage, Town/City Centers, Events
- **Secondary theme focus**: Culinary (Agri-tourism, Dining, Wineries), Meetings (Meetings & Conferences), Sports (College, Motorsports), Commercial Attractions (Family, Higher-end)

Those product themes identified as "primary" can generally be characterized as existing or growing product areas that within the next five years should be further developed or enhanced in an effort to serve as (or support) primary draws for the area. Those categorized as "secondary" are areas that in the next five years may realistically need a longer time horizon to develop into a primary draw for the region. Secondary may also indicate areas that may be more niche focused, or those that are generally complementary/auxiliary product experiences to the primary draws in the next five years.

### *Key Definitions*

**Nature & Outdoor Recreation** - Relaxing and active experiences to enjoy Virginia's scenic natural environment and outdoors, including but not limited to driving tours, hiking, biking, paddling, boating, fishing, hunting, observing wildlife, and others. Beach experiences are also included.

**Arts & Music** - Visual, performance, and craft arts experiences and music of various genres and musical heritage

**History & Heritage** - Experiences, structures, and sites that show Virginia and U.S. history and heritage

**Town/City Centers** - Refers to the central area of a destination, generally a downtown or main street area

**Events** - May include festivals, fairs, concerts, performances, tournaments/races (running, biking, swimming, kayaking, rowing, boating/sailing, fishing, etc.), and other events. These events serve to further enhance other product themes.

**Culinary** - Includes wineries, breweries, distilleries, foodie/dining, and agri/aqua-tourism



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**Meetings** - Refers primarily to facilities that serve the meetings market such as conventions, conferences, corporate meetings, trade shows, exhibitions, trainings/seminars, and other group events

**Sports** - Refers primarily to facilities that host sports events and tournaments, including youth, amateur, college, professional, minor league, and motorsports

**Commercial Attractions** - Refers to tourism attractions designed for user entertainment and enjoyment and may not necessarily rely heavily upon inherent destination features. For Blue Ridge, this specifically refers to the higher-end/luxury attractions and family-oriented attractions (e.g. theme park). Higher-end/luxury attractions may include spas, resorts, golf courses, and other experiences with upscale elements targeted to an affluent market.

In addition, it should be noted that **cultural heritage** refers to the cultural and social characteristics of a region that are fundamental to evaluating a tourism destination. Culture consists of the beliefs, behaviors, objects, and other characteristics common to the members of a particular group or society. From a tourism perspective, visitors want to experience the local culture of a destination. This includes many components, such as art and music of the region, history, local crafts, traditions, style and types of local food, architecture, religion, and distinctive leisure activities. These are what make the cultural heritage of Virginia “authentic.” By its very nature, culture is interpreted by visitors in many ways. Each region will have the opportunity to further define the regional “cultural” lures, based on information in this plan.

### *Objectives and Strategies*

Applicable objectives and strategies are presented for the five plan outcomes of Products, Pillars (infrastructure), Partnerships, Promotions, and Policies. Following the objectives and strategies are additional action steps specific to the region which are above and beyond the actions of the state level plan. Additional action steps should be read in conjunction with action steps of the state level plan.

Strategies in the plan are assigned a priority/timing as high or immediate action (denoted by red) and medium or mid-term action over the next five years (denoted by blue). The categorization of high or medium is both a function of priority and timing for the region. Those categorized as "high" can generally be characterized as existing or growing product areas that within the next five years should be further developed or enhanced in an effort to serve as (or support) primary draws. Those categorized as "medium" are areas that within the next five years may realistically need a longer time horizon to develop into a primary draw, those that may be more niche areas, or those that are generally complementary/auxiliary product experiences to the primary draws in the next five years.

## Products

### Nature & Outdoor Recreation

Nature & Outdoor Recreation Objective: Visitor experiences are further developed which highlight Virginia's natural beauty and natural assets			
Strategy	Priority/Timing	Strategy	Priority/Timing
Develop, maintain, and expand outdoor trails and water trails	●	Seek and maintain designations for National Scenic Byways and the Virginia Scenic Byways and Scenic Drives	●
Continue to develop and enhance outdoor experiences at parks, forests, recreation areas, nature areas, and preserves	●	Develop and enhance accommodations related to outdoor experiences	●
Leverage Virginia's waterfront areas	●		

### **Additional Regional Actions:**

- Pursue the development of the Appalachian Spring Trail themed trail to connect various outdoor recreation opportunities
- Explore additional opportunities to enhance recreational trails with supporting activities or additional trail use activities
- Seek designations for Appalachian Trail Communities to help ensure more "soft" recreation and ensure accessibility and amenities near the Trail
- Continue to position Damascus as "Trail Town USA"
- Leverage the Blue Ridge Parkway to connect outdoor experiences
- Explore the development or designation of adventure parks with rigorous activities attractive for outdoor enthusiasts and families, which may include mountain biking, rope courses, zip lines, ATVs, and other activities, while continuing opportunities for relaxing or "soft" recreation
- Explore opportunities to further develop and promote hunting experiences and supporting amenities for this market in strategic locations in the region
- Continue support of the Fish Virginia First initiative and continue to develop fishing trails such as the Blue Ridge Fishing Trail for the "mountain stream" fishing experience
- Explore lakeside development at Smith Mountain Lake
- Develop and ensure accessibility and amenities near water trails
- Continue to maximize and promote the Blue Ridge Parkway designation as a National Byway
- Evaluate the need for additional cabins, camping, and lodges in strategic locations given the generally adequate availability of outdoor accommodations in the area
- Explore development of upscale-oriented lodging for the outdoors such as mountain lodges or resorts, which incorporate the character and nature of the region
- Explore connection of B&B's through B&B hikes or bike trails.

## Arts & Music

Arts & Music Objective: Visitor experiences related to music and arts (performance, visual, craft, etc.) are created and enriched			
Strategy	Priority/Timing	Strategy	Priority/Timing
Develop and enhance music and performance art venues	●	Add art to public spaces	●
Enhance and develop music and art trails	●	Develop and enhance concentrated arts experiences	●

### **Additional Regional Actions:**

- Explore the development of new musical venues in strategic locations, which may allow for events of greater size, yet maintain the authentic character of the region and music. New venue development would need to be studied for the potential to attract larger shows/performances to the region, while complimenting existing performance venues
- Continue to enhance the Crooked Road experience, ensuring regular venue availability and activity for visitors and utilize the Crooked Road to connect other visitor themes, including culinary
- Utilize the Blue Ridge Parkway as a connector for art experiences
- Cluster new development to enhance the Crooked Road and Round the Mountain Trails (to the extent possible) to ensure additional activities are available in destinations along the trails, including shopping, dining, and accommodations
- Explore enhancing experiential arts and music activities available to visitors, including participation in music and art events, classes, art viewings, and other experiences
- Ensure works of regional artists are displayed, including those that show musical character with genres of the region such as bluegrass, country, mountain music, etc.
- Include other visitor themes such as the outdoors which may feature sculptures or other mediums of hikers along the Appalachian Trail and iconic representations of the region
- Leverage Heartwood as a gateway to music and arts experiences in the region and position it to serve as performance, gallery, event, and education venue
- Leverage the Chestnut Creek School of Arts or explore the development of another arts and music institute in connection with existing musical and artistic venues to raise arts and music profile of the region and expand genres. An institute has the opportunity to attract potential students, faculty, those traveling for educational events, as well as serve as a place for artists to develop work, and display/perform for visitors
- Explore the development of concentrated arts and music experiences such as an art and music commune as a place for artists and musicians to live, work, and display work and hold events for the public
- Continue to seek designations for arts & cultural districts
- Explore opportunities to connect music, arts, and culture with B&B's in the region which may include art displays, events, trails, etc.

**Products (continued)**

History & Heritage

History & Heritage Objective: History and heritage experiences are preserved, refreshed, and expanded			
Strategy	Priority/Timing	Strategy	Priority/Timing
Refresh history and heritage visitor experiences	●	Continue to connect history experiences	●
Invest in historic structures, sites, and attractions	●	Enhance historical experiences through accommodations	●

**Additional Regional Actions:**

- Ensure music heritage experiences along the Crooked Road include experiential elements and incorporate modern technology, continue to enhance and support the Crooked Road experiences, and continue to pursue National Heritage Area designation for the Crooked Road
- Continue to showcase the region's history and heritage through events and festivals, including signature music festivals, as well as personifying the culture of the region through performance, visual, and craft arts and culinary experiences
- Develop the planned cultural heritage center for music in Bristol
- Explore the expansion of the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area designation currently limited to North Carolina into the Blue Ridge Highlands region as a means to preserve nature and history, while promoting the destinations in the region
- Continue to leverage the Blue Ridge Parkway to connect historical experiences, showcasing Appalachian Heritage and early American life
- Utilize the architecture of towns in the regions, including Abingdon, Wytheville and others, to explore historic accommodations such as hotels and B&Bs.

**Products (continued)**

Towns/City Centers

Town/City Centers Objective: Visitor experiences in town/city centers are improved to create attractive destinations			
Strategy	Priority/Timing	Strategy	Priority/Timing
Develop and enhance outdoor experiences in the town or city center	●	Take steps to align with standards of the Virginia Main Street Program and National Main Street Program	●
Enhance town/city center areas through development of the arts	●	Encourage the development of enterprises that enhance and balance the town/city center's current offerings and increase vibrancy	●
Establish and uphold guidelines for town/city center enhancement and redevelopment	●	Develop transportation that allows for enhanced connectivity within and to the town/city center	●

**Additional Regional Actions:**

- Leverage nature and recreation opportunities prevalent in the area and tie in these opportunities to the town/city center area. This includes outfitter locations in the downtown area where activity/equipment is visible to visitors, availability of shuttle service from town to outdoor areas for one-way biking, hiking, paddling trips, and connecting outdoor trails to town locations
- Ensure works of regional artists are displayed, including those that show musical character with genres of the region such as bluegrass, country, mountain music, etc. and include other visitor

- themes such as the outdoors which may feature sculptures or other mediums of hikers along the Appalachian Trail and iconic representations of the region
- Explore the development of business offerings to further support visitors, which may include the development of upscale hotel supply to balance offerings in destinations, additional unique dining, retail, and other visitor amenities in the town/city center area.

**Products (continued)**

Events

Events Objective: Events which leverage Virginia's tourism assets are created and expanded	
Strategy	Priority/Timing
Enhance and develop events which promote the key visitor themes	●

**Additional Regional Actions:**

- Develop and enhance signature events for the region. These signature events should build upon, promote, and reinforce key visitor themes and showcase the authenticity and character for the region, including outdoors, music and arts, and its small towns
- Use events to extend visitor seasons and attract visitor seasons during the traditional off-season
- Tie in multiple visitor themes in events, where appropriate, which may include heritage, local agriculture, wine, local artists, and others

- Further leverage the fall visitor season with events featuring fall foliage, seasonal harvest from agri-tourism business, and Appalachian music and arts
- Include events attracting the college population from Virginia Tech
- Encourage athletic races/competitions, which fit well with the terrain, character and tourism offerings which may include running, biking, climbing, paddling, adventure challenges, and others.

**Products (continued)**

Culinary

Culinary Objective: Culinary visitor experiences (wineries, agri-tourism, dining, etc.) are established and expanded			
Strategy	Priority/Timing	Strategy	Priority/Timing
Expand wine tourism experiences	●	Build reputation as a destination for dining and continue to develop unique restaurant experiences	●
Develop tourism related to Virginia's growing breweries and distilleries	●	Develop and expand trails to enhance culinary experiences	●
Develop and enhance visitor experiences related to Virginia's agriculture and aquaculture products	●		

**Additional Regional Actions:**

- Continue to grow wine tourism experiences with opportunity to differentiate wineries in the region as mountain experiences
- Develop distillery experiences for visitors which build upon the region's moonshine history
- Continue to build agri-tourism experiences utilizing a relative concentration of agri-businesses in the region
- Further enhance culinary experiences and events which showcase Appalachian Heritage
- Tie in arts & crafts with agricultural experiences
- Leverage routes such as the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Crooked Road to help connect culinary experiences
- Leverage arts and music strengths to create distinctive dining experiences through themes and allow for performance and display space
- Continue to use events and festivals as a platform to enhance the culinary profile of the region, tying in heritage, arts, music, and other visitor themes
- Leverage the region's agri-tourism to build distinctive farm-to-table dining experiences and continue to develop unique dining experiences
- Develop culinary trails, including wine, distilleries, and agri-tourism, which tie in other visitor themes, including music and arts
- Develop outdoor trails, which connect culinary experiences.

**Products (continued)**

Meetings

Meetings Objective: Facilities to attract meetings (conventions, conferences, corporate meetings, trade shows, exhibitions, trainings/seminars, etc.) are built and improved to maximize economic impact and community value			
Strategy	Priority/Timing	Strategy	Priority/Timing
Develop and expand group event facilities in strategic locations	●	Enhance meeting facilities through supporting elements	●

**Additional Regional Actions:**

- Explore opportunities for mountain lodging retreats which incorporate the character of the area and are equipped for corporate and association conferences, reunions, youth group events, and destination wedding events. Facilities in the region have the opportunity to be upscale or value-oriented for youth events, and should be encouraged to be eco-oriented to tie in the natural environment.

Sports

Sports Objective: Facilities for participant and spectator sporting events are enhanced and developed			
Strategy	Priority/Timing	Strategy	Priority/Timing
Develop and enhance college and elite athletic facilities	●	Develop and enhance experiences related to motorsports	●

**Additional Regional Actions:**

- Continue to invest in athletic programs and events at Virginia Tech, which attract visitors and enhance the profile of the school and destination
- Continue to leverage proximity to the Bristol Motor Speedway and explore development of additional motorsports experiences, which

extend the stay of raceway attendees and offer experiences to visitors during non-raceway times. This may include additional events on race weekends, a racing museum, experiential motorsports park for families, and others.



## Products (continued)

### Commercial Attractions

Commercial Attractions Objective: Commercial attractions are increased			
Strategy	Priority/Timing	Strategy	Priority/Timing
Explore the development of family-oriented commercial attractions	●	Explore the development of commercial attractions designed for a higher-end, luxury market	●

### Additional Regional Actions:

- Explore the development of family-oriented attractions, which maintain the authenticity of the region. Attractions of the region, which also appeal to families as well as outdoor and cultural enthusiasts, help to broaden target markets for the region. An outdoor adventure park may be explored that is geared towards families. It may include the development of similar outdoor experiences on a smaller scale suitable to children or beginners, such as a smaller zip line or ropes courses, as well as traditional kid-friendly elements including play areas and water features.
- Explore the development of higher-end attractions, which incorporate the character and nature of the region. This may include a mountain resort and spa, which allow visitors to experience the outdoors and culture in an upscale environment.

## Pillars

Strategy	Priority/Timing	Strategy	Priority/Timing
Transportation Objective: Strategies to improve transportation are developed and executed			
Initiate concerted strategy to improve road transportation for tourism	●	Explore increased air access, rail, and mass transit for strategic locations	●
Wayfinding Objective: Visitor wayfinding is improved			
Ensure signage and visitor information is visible and available through multiple points	●	Invest in technology infrastructure (Wi-Fi, cell reception, GPS, etc.)	●
Reinforce community sense of place	●		
Education & Training Objective: Tourism education and training programs are continued and enhanced			
Enhance training and education of tourism workforce	●	Ensure tourism education programs are continued for students	●
Research Objective: Tourism research is available which supports tourism development and marketing initiatives			
Continue to engage in or obtain research on visitors	●		

**Additional Pillar Action Steps:**

- As a region, ensure tourism stakeholders are involved with other regional leaders in transportation planning initiatives, including improvements or expansions of highways, including enhancements to I-81 and expansion of Highway 58.
- Continue to work with Blue Ridge Parkway authorities related to on-going improvement initiatives
- Explore opportunities for additional rail access to the region, in conjunction with VDOT's I-81/Route 29 Intercity Passenger Rail Project intended to extend passenger rail service, increase capacity and improve service reliability between Bristol, Roanoke and Lynchburg, with connections to Richmond and D.C.
- As a region, ensure tourism stakeholders come together to work with VDOT related to signage issues.

**Partnerships**

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>
<i>Tourism Organizations Objective: Organizations to lead tourism initiatives are strengthened or formed</i>			
Create and strengthen tourism organizations	●		
<i>Government Objective: Collaboration among government organizations at the local, state, and federal levels for tourism initiatives is improved</i>			
Increase communication, planning, and coordination among government entities	●		
<i>Connectivity Objective: Connectivity among tourism attractions, businesses, and destinations is improved through partnering</i>			
Develop and enhance communication and partnering among Virginia tourism industry stakeholders	●	Increase coordination and collaboration among stakeholders that share interests in tourism assets outside of Virginia	●

**Additional Partnership Action Steps:**

- Continue movement to form the Southwest Virginia Region through the cooperative efforts of the Blue Ridge Highlands and the Heart of Appalachia regions. As a unified region through organized efforts, there is potential for a region-wide DMO
- Seek efforts to strengthen Blue Ridge Travel Association as a regional DMO
- Continue to build capacity for local DMOs in the region with tourism professionals dedicated to tourism marketing and development
- Continue to improve intra-government coordination and collaboration among the multiple destinations in the region and work as a region to address signage issues with VDOT, major regional events, trail initiatives such as Appalachian Spring, the National Heritage Area designation for the Crooked Road, and other tourism initiatives.

## Promotions

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>
<i>Government, Business &amp; Resident Objective:</i> Efforts to promote and educate government leaders, the business community, and residents on tourism initiatives and benefits are continued			
Communicate and inform local and state government officials on tourism benefits and initiatives	●	Communicate and inform tourism industry stakeholders, including partners, the business community, and residents on tourism initiatives and benefits	●
<i>Economic Development Objective:</i> Tourism promotion efforts for economic development are enhanced			
Enhance promotion of Virginia to potential tourism investors, businesses, and developers to generate economic development	●		
<i>Connectivity Objective:</i> Virginia is positioned based on the lures of tourism assets with a strategy to improve connectivity among destinations, attractions, and visitor themes			
Enhance and create visitor itineraries and packages	●	Enhance and develop themed trails	●
<i>High Impact Markets Objective:</i> Visitor markets with high impact continue to be targeted, while new markets are explored			
Continue to identify and evaluate key geographic and thematic target markets for promotions	●		

### ***Additional Promotion Action Steps:***

- Develop communication plans for government officials, tourism stakeholders, businesses, and residents and continue to educate and inform officials on tourism benefits (qualitative and quantitative based on research) as well as ongoing initiatives for economic development through various means
- Identify and engage key opinion leaders in the region, which may help to serve as ambassadors for the tourism industry and aid in the education and promotion of tourism to government leaders, funding efforts, and development initiatives
- Pursue completion of the Appalachian Spring Trail intended to connect outdoor recreation in the region
- Continue package and itinerary development based on key visitor themes for the region, including nature/outdoors, cultural heritage, town/city centers, music, arts, agri-tourism, and others
- Leverage border locations of North Carolina, West Virginia and Tennessee for promotions in addition to other high-value target markets
- Continue niche theme promotions to music genres and key visitor segments
- Explore cooperative marketing efforts with the Heart of Appalachia region as the regions move towards forming the Southwest Virginia region.

## Policies

<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Priority/Timing</i>
<b>Funding Objective:</b> Funding is available for tourism growth			
Enforce policy for use of tourism tax revenues collected by localities	●	Create sustainable funding policies for tourism marketing and development for communities	●
<b>Tourism Policies and Programs for Assistance Objective:</b> Tourism policies and programs which provide assistance for growth and development are enhanced			
Continue and enhance programs which support tourism marketing	●	Continue to evaluate policies which encourage an attractive tourism business environment	●
Continue and explore improvements for programs which support tourism product development	●	Educate public and private sector stakeholders on legislative policies and programs impacting tourism	●
Explore establishment of assistance program for tourism businesses	●		
<b>Tourism Policy for Government Objective:</b> Policy for government cooperation is created to assist and support the tourism industry			
Establish policy for cooperative guidelines and arrangements for cohesive government approach to the tourism industry	●		
<b>Preservation Objective:</b> Policies and programs designed to preserve historical, cultural, and natural assets are maintained			
Uphold policies and programs which promote sustainability and preservation of historical, cultural, and environmental assets	●		

### **Additional Policies Action Steps:**

- Explore the development of a tourism council at the community level in localities where policy enforcement is recognized as an issue. The council should be comprised of public and private stakeholders that are responsible for overseeing the use of tourism tax revenue in the community.
- Identify local liaisons or advocates which can work to address policies and programs, including the creation of Tourism Zones and national grant and assistance programs
- Continue to explore alternative creative funding solutions to achieve community solutions and work with local governments, where appropriate, to secure dedicated funding that could be reinvested for tourism marketing and development purposes.

- Garnering widespread support from tourism stakeholders and an advocacy effort of the industry will be important in influencing government leaders. For tourism development, the formation of a tourism development fund at local level could be explored.
- Explore the development of tourism business assistance programs, such as incubators, through local governments, small business administrations, and economic development departments, as appropriate, to seek support and assistance for tourism businesses
  - Continue to evaluate business policies, ordinances, codes, etc. at the local level that may impact visitation and tourism business growth. Local policies and their enforcement may vary throughout the state, and it is critical for local stakeholders to collaborate on

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efforts to create or amend policies which will positively impact tourism

- Continue to engage in preservation and sustainability efforts at the local level, regarding historical, cultural, and environmental assets,

including seeking Virginia Green Certifications and LEED certifications for new development.

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## *Key Stakeholders*

The below list of regional and universal stakeholders illustrates the types of stakeholder groups that may be involved in implementing the State Tourism Plan and the region's strategies and action steps. The lists are comprehensive, but not necessarily exhaustive. In addition, regional stakeholders include local and regional government offices, economic development offices and planning district commissions. The list of regional stakeholders highlights organizations specific to the Blue Ridge Highlands, including those organizations identified as having tourism marketing representatives, while universal stakeholders includes a broader list comprised of key organization types, statewide organizations, state government entities, and federal organizations.

### **Regional**

- Abingdon Convention & Visitors Bureau
- Advance Abingdon
- Believe in Bristol
- Blue Ridge Travel Association
- Bristol Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Carroll County Office of Tourism
- City of Galax
- Community Partnership for the Revitalization of Rocky Mount
- Crooked Road
- Floyd County
- Franklin County Commerce and Leisure Services
- Giles County Administration
- Grayson County Courthouse
- Main Street Radford, Inc.
- Marion Downtown Revitalization Association
- Montgomery County Regional Tourism Office
- Patrick County Chamber of Commerce
- Pulaski County Chamber of Commerce and Visitor Center
- Radford Visitors Center
- Round the Mountain
- Smyth County Tourism Association
- Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation
- Town of Damascus
- Town of Saltville
- Wythe County Parks and Recreation
- Wytheville Convention & Visitors Bureau

### **Universal**

- Art/Music Programs
- Artisan Center of Virginia
- Attraction Management
- Chambers of Commerce
- Council on Virginia's Future
- Colleges (including community)/Universities
- Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
- Department of Business Assistance
- Department of Conservation & Recreation
- Department of Environmental Quality
- Department of Forestry
- Department of Gaming & Inland Fisheries
- Department of Historic Resources
- Department of Housing & Community Development
- Department of Rail and Public Transportation
- Department of Transportation
- Destination Marketing Organizations
- Downtown Development Associations
- Educational Institutions
- Environmental Organizations
- History Foundations/Non-Profit Organizations
- Horse Breed Associations
- Hospitality Associations
- Keep Virginia Beautiful
- Local Arts Organizations
- Local Downtown Development Associations
- Local Government (Town/City/County)
- Military Associations
- National Park Service

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- National Refuge Service
  - National Trust for Historic Preservation
  - Non-Profit Arts & Music Organizations
  - Non-Profit Organizations
  - Planning District Commissions
  - Preservation Virginia
  - Private Businesses
  - Sports Associations
  - State Government Departments
  - State Legislators
  - Urban Forest Council

- Virginia Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus
- Virginia Business Incubation Association
- Virginia Chamber of Commerce
- Virginia Commission for the Arts
- Virginia Community Development Corporation
- Virginia Downtown Development Association
- Virginia Economic Development Partnership
- Virginia Farm Bureau
- Virginia General Assembly

- Virginia Green
- Virginia Historical Society
- Virginia Horse Shows Association
- Virginia Hospitality & Travel Association
- Virginia Marine Resources Commission
- Virginia Music Associations
- Virginia Tech Community Design Assistance Center
- Virginia Tourism Corporation
- Virginia Wine Board
- Virginia Wine Marketing Office



## *Regional Strategy Takeaways*

It is the combination of the tourism products which create a destination, and as such, these combined strategies are meant to build the Blue Ridge Highlands as a destination in a sustainable manner and maintain the character and authenticity of the region. The strategies outlined are intended to build upon the Blue Ridge Highlands' core strengths, enhance visitor experiences, and ultimately enable the region to increase tourism. When unique and genuine tourism experiences are connected or clustered in offering, destination appeal and strength is increased, allowing the region to compete more effectively against other destinations. The Blue Ridge Highlands region has the opportunity to do just this by growing its tourism asset base and connecting visitor experiences to increase tourism and enhance competitiveness.

The Blue Ridge Highlands region has the opportunity to further leverage its natural assets for nature and outdoor recreation experiences in combination with the rich culture and heritage of the region. The region's landscape, parks, trails, and well-known assets such as the Appalachian Trail and the Blue Ridge Parkway offer adventure and challenge for outdoor enthusiasts in addition to soft recreation for families and those seeking relaxing outdoor getaways. Concentration and connectivity of these outdoor opportunities will help to enhance competitiveness with initiatives such as the Appalachian Spring Trail. Moreover, it is the authentic music, small town character, arts, creative economy and agriculture experiences that define the region and add significant depth of the visitor experience, and greater connectivity of these elements will add to destination appeal. It is the authentic music of Southwest Virginia, with the stand-out asset of the Crooked Road, that differentiates the region from other parts of Virginia and other destinations.

### **High-Level Regional Takeaways:**

- Leverage outdoors, music, and arts as unifying themes for the region, further developing active outdoor experiences and enhancing music and arts experiences
- Continue to build creative economy
- Build recognition of tourism assets and mountain towns
- Cluster product development and connect attractions and destinations for concentrated experiences, including outdoor recreation, heritage, music, arts, and culinary experiences
- Leverage younger population base in college towns for music, outdoor, and entertainment attractions
- Leverage geographic position of the region bordering three states
- Improve destination infrastructure for visitors, including accommodation and outfitters
- Maintain character and authenticity, including Appalachian and musical heritage, and create new development in a sustainable manner