

Listening Session
Interagency Task Force to Support Economic Development in SWVA
Friday, December 9, 2022
10:00 AM - 12:00 PM
Dickenson Center for Education & Research

Summary:

About 20 attendees from the area met at the Dickenson Center for Education and Research building to share input for the taskforce. Kristen Dahlman gave an introduction and overview of the taskforce's activities and mission. Doug Jackson presented the agenda and facilitated discussion. After introductions, the group focused on 3 of the four factor areas identified by the taskforce (workforce, housing, and infrastructure).

Major Themes:

The group talked at length about workforce development, specifically the apprenticeship model as the best way to bring students into the trades. Business owners talked about the importance of school programs, however, the importance of hands-on, on-the-job training through apprenticeship was considered the ideal way to get students into these professions. Showing the career paths to K-12 students is seen as an opportunity.

Sewer is considered a major piece of missing infrastructure. The group talked about the success bringing public water to communities and these projects can serve as examples for wastewater projects. The main challenges for sewer include the higher cost, topography, flood zones, user agreements, and health department regulations. A DEQ proposal coming before the legislature in 2023 may provide additional resources.

We heard again about the challenges finding sites for development because outside entities own a majority of the property. These properties are simply not available to buy/develop. A new GIS system was mentioned several times as a way to identify potential sites for development. Property owners and governments alike need this technology to identify their properties.

On housing, a common theme was lack of supply for all income levels. Residents shared anecdotal stories about higher income individuals wanting to move to the region for the quality of life but housing is not available. Universal broadband is the foundation because it will attract IT and remote workers. The area needs to develop housing stock for all incomes because these newcomers are looking for places to live.

Organizations Attending:

VCEDA, Town of Clintwood, Dickenson County, Friends of SWVA, Appalachian Voices, Appsol Solutions, Town of Clinchco, Mainboard LLC, Re/Max Cavaliers

Public Comment

1. Introduction

What a barrier to economic development looks like here. Give one example in any of the factor areas (workforce, housing, infrastructure, sites/business readiness). You can be as specific or as general as you want. We're looking for high-level here - sum it up in a sentence. Extra credit question...Current strategy if you're working one.

- The region needs planning by professionals in order to best utilize resources.
- There is no reliable GIS system for the county. This is needed to locate properties for development. Folks want to sell property but it is hard to identify/find these locations.
- The area needs improvements in technology, namely, cell service and internet access.
- Housing is a big need. We need more assisted living facilities in order to open up housing and increase supply for other residents.
- Site readiness is important, currently working to locate properties to develop.
- Moved back to the area to bring experience in process improvements. Currently looking at how to improve quality of life and provide a higher standard of living for area residents. The area needs a one-stop-shop for business assistance. For Dickenson County, we need investments in the right timeframe. It is currently difficult to find housing. Site readiness should focus on “e-commerce” readiness. There are great opportunities to sell online. Population loss in the region is a symptom of lacking in the 4 factors.
- Represented the central Appalachian region at the UN regarding climate change. Focus was on flooding. Currently writing papers and letters on environmental concerns. Has a particular focus on addressing mental health and special education issues.
- A major challenge is the amount of funds available. Asked how do we match our vision with the money available? Asked how are we going to “meet this moment?”
- Working in the creative economy. There is an opportunity to shine a light on things we do well. We need to come together as a region and capitalize on the opportunities available.
- Has experience in site readiness. Shared his experience working in the area as they went from 40% to 90% of homes with public water. Without infrastructure there cannot be sites, without sites there are no businesses. Housing comes after businesses establish themselves in the area. Topography is a challenge but feels that groups are making progress. We need to “chip away at it.” Every group works together to accomplish these projects.
- Sites/buildings are key for traditional economic development projects. Timing is a challenge. An example is the coalfield expressway. That project was making progress but partnerships fell apart because of shifting federal priorities in the early 2000s. This highway will be a “savior” for the region. Public sewer next big challenge in infrastructure. Topography a challenge for sewer. There are opportunity for young people because jobs are available in the region.
- Focusing on one project at a time to support countries solve their problems/projects. GIS and tax mapping can be improved. We need staff to develop GIS. The current staff wears lots of hats and expertise is needed. Region needs more development of wireless technology, cell towers especially. The wireless assessment project is looking at where service gaps are and where new developments can happen. This project is currently in the planning phase and will need money when construction phase begins in the next 5 years.

- Revenue from fiber optic network developments are being reinvesting in the area counties. We will have universal fiber by 2024 (this process began in 2002). SWVA will have the same service as any major city. This development was done with help from grants.
- It is hard to find employees and even harder to find employees willing to just work part-time. Another issue is new development attracts business but old buildings/sites are left behind. Asked how can we get young people to invest in those old sites?
- A major problem is 85% of Dickenson County is owned by outside entities (lumber, corps, federal government, etc.). Asked how local entities/individuals can access this property to develop? The property currently owned by locals is not the best and hard to build on. There are not many places for young people to move into. The area need single family (3 bedroom), rather than apartments because folks with higher-paying jobs do not want apartments.
- The region needs people. Things like daycare and housing are needed to attract more people. Many jobs are unfilled so we need to attract people to fill current jobs before we bring in new jobs. People will come if they can find housing, services, etc.
- Water development is a big success story. We need to continue efforts like that in order to improve public health. Sewer remain a big issue because it affects clean water sources. Widespread internet access is a success. Cell service remains an issue and needs to be addressed because it is a safety issue. Workforce a challenge because the local economy has been going up and down because of coal. We need a strategic plan to make these factors (housing, infrastructure, sites/business readiness, workforce) blend together. Currently working with the Army Corps of Engineers to help folks living in flood zones. We need a vision and work with others to avoid tunnel vision. We need to work to find an overall goal.

2. Infrastructure

What recent current infrastructure investment has resulted in industry or business expansion or location?

- Recreational development (trails, shooting facility, etc) has attracted residents. Buchanan County is a good model and there are world class trails in Haysi.
- There are good trails in Clinch but conservation groups do not want to develop more.
- Outside private ownership of property is a barrier for new trails.
- The coalfield expressway may limit access to some communities since Clintwood may be bypassed.
- Recreation development depends on folks with good paying jobs to spend the money. Is there an opportunity in the region for semiconductor manufacturing? There are alot of workers in the coalfields with the experience needed for these jobs.
- Concerned that money invested by outside energy companies will not go to the communities. Concerned about waste produced by small nuclear reactors, threat to water. Residents depend on the reservoir, for drinking water and it should be protected from environmental threats. Gave an example of efforts to stop a landfill because toxins would have spilt into drinking water.

3. Housing

What housing success has the area seen recently?

- In Trammel, People Inc. got a grant through DHCD for a housing project. Phase 1 of the project includes 10 homes for rehabilitation and two additional grants from the federal government will help finish project. This project is fixing what used to be an eye sore in the community.

Are there current housing development projects in planned that are in need of resources?

- Leadership in Dickenson County are thinking about doing a housing study. The number of vouchers do not align with the supply of housing available. The county is working to attract businesses outside of coal. Working on training workers to fill these jobs. Working on rehabbing homes lost to fire, damage, disrepair.
- There is money in the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) for home rehab (new heat pumps, etc.). There is funding and opportunities for landlords to rehab rentals and increase the supply of quality housing.
- We are seeing bidding wars for homes that are available so we know the demand is there. The supply cannot meet demand so folks look for homes in surrounding counties. People looking to move to the area are attracted to lower cost of living, lower taxes. There are good work from home jobs and their paycheck go a lot further here.
- We are seeing outsiders buying up land through tax bills at the county.
- There is a lack of supply of housing for all income levels. The 3-bedroom home is common but there is demand for other options as well.
- New residents are attracted by the county's new school facilities.
- Expanded internet access has connected the region and there are opportunities for new residents who want lifestyle of SWVA. People are looking to move, we need places for these folks to live.
- There are barriers with Department of Health trying to permit/develop new sewer systems.
- The increase in federal resource for infrastructure is an opportunity to build sewer and other new projects. Localities need the help funding these projects because the cost of waste-water is much greater than public water. Flood zones are challenge to develop sewer and other regulations/reviews can stop projects. There is a SWVA pilot program at DEQ trying to get money for additional sewer development. Some projects face the issues of residents not wanting to be hooked up to public sewer. Asked if local governments are willing to do mandatory builds? On a regional level working on education, trying to educate folks when signing user agreements about what public sewer means.
- Sewer needs to be profitable for the providers.
- Flood zones are likely to grow. This presents a challenge for homeowners, buying insurance, raising homes, etc.

Is there a particular type of housing that you believe should be addressed as a first priority?

- Many homes in the area are not primary residences. Asked how these homes can become available for locals to purchase?

4. **Workforce**

What are the workforce challenges and opportunities in Dickenson County?

- We need survey workers and developers in general (contractors, etc.). Contractors are having a hard time finding workers. There is an opportunity to work with the schools and show this career path to students.
- There are currently classes on carpentry in schools but there used to be many more such as masonry and metal shop. It is becoming difficult to fill the classrooms teaching trade because there are fewer students. We should expand these classes to K-12 and partner with community colleges.
- Filling the current openings in trades would be very beneficial.
- The career center can help students get high paying jobs in IT that can be remote. We can show young people these opportunities in IT because they are already familiar with technology.
- Trades being taught in vocational school are important because young people are low-income.

What are the strongest tools or programs currently preparing the workforce?

- Software at VCEDA is identifying employers in the trades and engineering who need workers.
- The “self-help” program can serve as a model for sewer projects and workforce development in the trades.
- There are programs at schools to get kids certificates in trades and IT. Partnerships are growing and we are working to survey past students to improve our programs. It is good for current students to see graduates and understand salaries/career path.
- Speaking from experience in the mining industry, success comes from apprenticeship opportunities. Working alongside skilled tradesperson is the best way to train. Training should go beyond school. We do not have an employment problem, we have a people problem (not enough people). We need people to live locally and send kids to local schools.
- All new technologies started through apprenticeships.