



**Stronger Economies Together**

## **Session I:**

*SET Overview and Exploration of Regional Data*

### **Mount Rogers**

Tuesday, December 8, 2015

### **Overview of the Mount Rogers Stronger Economies Together Initiative**

The Mount Rogers Planning District (MRPD) was chosen as one of three Virginia areas to participate in Stronger Economies Together (SET). The MRPD consists of Bland, Carroll, Grayson, Smyth, Washington, and Wythe Counties and the Cities of Bristol and Galax and, as of the most recent Census, is home to almost 200,000 people. As a leadership and planning initiative, Stronger Economies Together (SET) project will bring leaders from each of these localities together to develop and implement the region's economic development blueprint. Mount Rogers SET meetings began in the fall 2015 and will extend through spring 2016, with implementation of the SET economic development plan extending through 2016. To guide the Mount Rogers SET process through implementation, a regional leadership team has been produced. For more information about the team and the project in general, please visit the initiative webpage at <http://www.mrpdc.org/set.htm>.

### **Regional Recap**

To date, the Mount Rogers SET team has hosted a Civic Forum and the first session in the SET curriculum. We have determined what we view as the strengths and challenges of our region and are working to decide how to build upon our strengths to support and develop the economic industries in the region, while at the same time determining how we need to address our challenges and their relation to economic development.

#### **Top Strengths:**

- Cultural/natural resources related to recreation and eco-tourism including arts
- Variety of organizations and agencies offering resources to support area
- Utility infrastructure is second to none

#### **Top Challenges:**

- Lack of unified approach has created an overlap in planning and access to resources
- Stigma of technical education or obtaining "just" a two-year degree
- Inability to accept reality and/or change
- Poverty still exists and families are locked into it
- Talent attraction
- Wi-Fi and cell services availability affects information infrastructure
- Connecting the dots (workforce and education)—> interest and skills to jobs

Dr. Walker discussed that our end goal from this process is to create a high quality plan (HQP) that is focused, realistic, and attainable. The HQP will be evidence-based and will help us guide our region toward sustainable future growth, allowing us to tap into the resources and assets of our region and strengthen and start to correct the areas that are challenges.

## **Session I Attendees**

### **Stronger Economies Together Regional Team:**

- Dr. Martha Walker, Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE)
- Douglas Jackson, Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD)
- Janice Stroud-Bickes: USDA Rural Development
- Craig Barbrow, USDA Rural Development
- Dr. Kasey Martin, USDA Rural Development

### **Regional Representation:**

- Congressman H. Morgan Griffith's Office: Cody Mumpower
- Virginia Cooperative Extension: Kevin Spurlin
- Virginia Tourism Corporation: Randy Rose
- USDA-FSA: Aaron Blackburn, Lindsey Carrico, and Ron Hale
- Virginia's aCorridor: Joshua Lewis
- Wythe Community College: Jane Mitchell
- Emory & Henry College: Lou Fincher
- New River/Mount Rogers Workforce Investment Board: Marty Holliday
- Grayson County: John Fant and Elaine Holeton
- Smyth County: Lori Hester Deel
- Wythe Joint IDA: David Manley
- City of Galax: Brenda Marrah
- Project Glade/Emory & Henry College: Dirk Moore
- Town of Abingdon: Kevin Costello
- Town of Wytheville: Wayne Sutherland
- Marion Downtown!: Olivia McDonald
- Friends of SWVA/Heartwood: Stephanie Otis
- Blue Ridge Discovery Center: Brenda Bonk
- People Incorporated of Virginia: Maggie Costello and Traci Mitchell
- Chestnut Creek School of the Arts: Chris Pollins
- Hands and Feet Ministry: Linda Austin
- ABB: Herb Grant
- Mount Rogers Planning District Commission: Aaron Sizemore and Rocky Warren

## **Introduction and Warm-up Activities**

Dr. Martha Walker and Doug Jackson facilitated the Stronger Economies Together (SET) Session I: Exploring the Region's Unique Economic Opportunities. The group completed a warm-up activity that involved cataloging our talents, experiences, and skills. Answers varied from individual skills to our skills as a region. Talents included:

- Knowing more/less than we let on like we do
- Influencing and stimulating large groups to act

- Seeing the bigger picture
- Problem solving and coming up with creative solutions

Many of our skills focused on the knowledge that we have about our region, but also branched out to include our individual skills such as planning, marketing, public speaking and listening to those in need.

Experiences included many problem solving items such as reinventing ourselves and thinking outside the box, in addition to working with diverse partnerships and having a global perspective.

After the warm-up was completed, as per established procedure, attendees were split into groups that were rearranged throughout the day to allow individuals to meet and work with others and to challenge attendees to come up with more innovative ideas. Many of the activities were geared toward learning how we can work together as individuals, agencies, and a region. The group used Lego building block activities to show how we will pull together resources from several agencies to make a project that is greater than its individual parts.

## **Review of Progress**

After completing the warm-up activity, the group began a review of the Stronger Economies Together (SET) process and what has happened in the region thus far, attendees were asked to discuss the strengths and challenges established in the Civic Forum and add any others that were needed.

### **Additional Strengths**

- Agriculture
- Faith community is strong and involved
- Cultural tourism

The group also felt the need for the clarification of the workforce, because while we do have a subset of the workforce with a strong work ethic, that does not necessary apply to the workforce as a whole.

### **Additional Challenges**

- Need for buy-in from elected officials—if you wait to get buy-in, you fail
- Lack of tradespeople in the service industry
- Agriculture/tourism as an economic strength
- Lack of access to private equity or capital
- Low minimum wage
- Lack of regional support for Passenger rail (becoming a destination on the Amtrak line)
- Noncredit class funding for workforce training classes (no incentive for employers for training)
- Lack of public transportation for individuals to travel to work

It was also noted that we should move substance abuse higher up in our list of challenges, because it is one of the biggest challenges facing our workforce.

## **High Quality Plan**

Dr. Walker discussed the plan and how the input from our group will be the driving force behind the creation of a plan that is usable for our region. She highlighted the essential components required in a successful plan:

- Practical (also possess a logical time table)
- Evidence-based
- Aligned with goals
- Broadly supported
- Focused on regional economic development

The plan will be an interdisciplinary effort and we need to make sure that we have the right partners to make it successful. There will be a great deal of inter-agency collaboration because we are focused on creating a plan that will be useful to not just one agency, but to all of those involved.

## Regional Data

(To view the regional data, please visit <http://www.mrpcd.org/set.htm> and view the regional data files.)

Dr. Kasey Martin presented the regional economic data, including agriculture data that had been requested by the attendees of the Civic Forum. She gave an overview of the industry the sectors with the most growth/decline in the region. The major section of the regional data section of the day focused on industry clusters: what they are, how they are characterized, and how studying them helps us understand what is going on in the region. Dr. Martin led the discussion on how to perform cluster analysis and explained the differences in star, emerging, mature, and transforming clusters and how to use their clusters to determine the sectors of our SET plan.



i: Industry Cluster Example (click image for data packet)



ii: Industry Cluster Analysis (click image for data packet)

There were two distinct opinions on how to work with star cluster companies and while there was a consensus on these industries needing support from local government/agencies, one approach was to support them but stay out of their way, while the other was to support them and make sure that we gave them what they needed so they would stay in the region. In discussion of how we should work with star clusters, Martha introduced the CARE Model (Creation-Attraction-Retention-Expansion) for how we should work with our industries, which the group will look at more in future sessions. Dr. Martin also discussed economic leakages and how these leakages affect the region. She explained how we can “plug”

these leakages to make the clusters in our region stronger.

## Selection of Sectors

The data presented by Dr. Martin was used to help the group select the sectors that will be the focus of our regional plan.

The group originally selected seven sectors, but after consideration condensed the main group down to four:

- Agribusiness
- Tourism
- Manufacturing super cluster
- Biomedical/biotechnical (Health care)

In addition to individualized questions, each sector had similar major questions that needed to be answered:

- Who/where are the players?
- What do they need?
- What are the leakages?
- What are the markets?
- What regional/state initiatives are already in place?
- What are the assets and trends in the sector?
- Who has the info that we need for the plan?

### **Agribusiness**

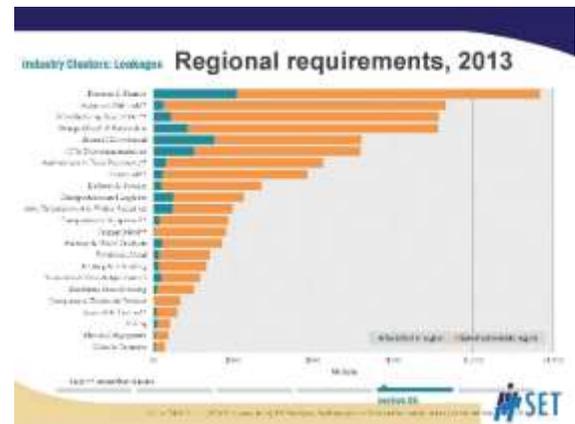
- Impact of subsidies
- Land access
- Financing
- Where to find info:
  - SWVA farmers market
  - NRCS
  - FSA
  - VDACS
  - Appalachian Sustainable Development
  - Virginia beginning farmers coalition

### **Manufacturing super cluster**

- What is the supply chain? Workforce?
- Cost comparison to foreign markets
- What is going on in geographically adjacent states?
- Where to find info:
  - Manufacturers themselves
  - Economic developers
  - Site selectors
  - VEDP

### **Tourism**

- Where are tourists from?
- ESRI tapestry



iii: Industry Leakages (click image for data file)

- Where to find info:
  - MySWVA
  - VTC

### **Biomedical/biotechnical (Health care)**

- Who is included in sector?
- Demand and wages
- Where to find info:
  - Local hospitals

The three sectors that were pulled from the main project were determined to be subsets of each of the chosen sectors.

- Business and financial services
- Small business and entrepreneurship
- Computer/electronic

### **Takeaways**

A takeaway from Session I was that while we easily chose seven sectors that we felt were important in our region, it made sense to scale them back to four sectors because the areas of small business and entrepreneurship, computer/electronic, and business and financial services were each imbedded in the other areas. Each of our industries needs the infrastructure, financial assets, or other services that may be provided by another. The group has determined that our economic sectors are all interconnected in some way and while we may not be choosing an area as a focus that does not mean it will not be a portion of our plan.

### **Assignment**

At the end of the meeting, attendees were asked to select a sector out of the chosen four that they would be willing to work in and contribute information to. This assignment is the start of development for our written plan. Additional information about this process will be sent out to attendees.

### **Next Meeting**

The next Stronger Economies Together (SET) meeting will occur on Tuesday, January 19, 2016, and its focus will be “Evidence Based Planning.” To RSVP for the meeting, please contact Stephanie Patton at [spatton@mrpdc.org](mailto:spatton@mrpdc.org) or (276) 783-5103 ext.0.

### **Website**

Please visit <http://www.mrpdc.org/set.htm> for more information about the Mount Rogers SET project. The presentation from each session is located on this page, as well as all the regional economic data.