

# Strategies for Economic Improvement in Appalachia's Distressed Rural Counties

An analysis of ten distressed and formerly distressed Appalachian counties



APPALACHIAN  
REGIONAL  
COMMISSION

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TENNESSEE 

***On the cover:***

Background photo: View of the North Fork Valley landscape from the top of Nelson Rocks Recreation Preserve in Pendleton County, West Virginia. *(Photo courtesy of Nelson Rocks Outdoor Center)*

Foreground photos, left to right: An American flag outside a historic building in downtown McConnelsville, Ohio *(photo by Eric Ogle)*; a group of people crossing a sky bridge as part of the canopy tour at Nelson Rocks Outdoor Center near Circleville, West Virginia *(photo courtesy of Nelson Rocks Outdoor Center)*; a worker at a new factory expansion in Waynesburg, Pennsylvania *(photo courtesy of the Greene County Chamber of Commerce)*; hand-crafted storefront sign on a sidewalk in downtown Mountain City, Tennessee *(photo by Tim Ezzell)*.

# Strategies for Economic Improvement in Appalachia's Distressed Counties

An analysis of ten distressed and formerly distressed Appalachian counties

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## Acknowledgements

This project was based upon a simple premise: In order to truly understand the challenges of Appalachian communities one must visit the region and talk with the people. To that end, the project team from the University of Tennessee traveled over two thousand miles to visit ten case study communities in eight states. Along the way we met and held discussions with over 100 community leaders, ranging from elected officials to community volunteers, health care workers to youth educators, bank presidents to small business owners, hourly workers to retirees, and even a parish priest.

During our travels and discussions, we witnessed firsthand the paradox that often defines Appalachia: the region is one of great beauty and a wealth of resources, yet remains burdened with pockets of poverty and privation. We also noted the vast gains made by the region in the past half century and remain optimistic that Appalachia will reach its just potential.

The project staff members are grateful to the Appalachian Regional Commission for the opportunity to work on this project. We are especially indebted to John Cartwright, the agency's Director of Regional Planning and Research, and Dr. David Carrier, ARC economist. We appreciate their support, their counsel and direction, and their tireless service to the nation, the region, and its people.

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Above all, we would like to thank the residents of the ten communities who participated in this project. We remain touched and humbled by your hospitality, kindness, and knowledge. Your frank and insightful perspective provided us with an unparalleled understanding of the region and made this study very special. This research is as much yours as ours and we look forward to sharing it with you.

Tim Ezzell, Ph.D.

Knoxville, Tennessee

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## Executive Summary

This report provides an understanding of the challenges confronting economic and community development efforts in rural Appalachian communities and explains the ways local governments, agencies, and community organizations plan and respond to challenging issues. The authors of this report examined ten representative case study counties, which were selected using a number of criteria, including economic performance, location, infrastructure investment, and demographic factors. The ten project counties are:

- Greene County, Pennsylvania
- Morgan County, Ohio
- Pendleton County, West Virginia
- Calhoun County, West Virginia
- Pike County, Kentucky
- Bell County, Kentucky
- Avery County, North Carolina
- Johnson County, Tennessee
- Lawrence County, Alabama
- Noxubee County, Mississippi

Each county was evaluated using both econometric and qualitative approaches. The counties were assessed using an economic modeling process, and county stakeholders were surveyed to learn more about local strengths, weaknesses, and perceptions. Project staff visited each community, met with local officials, and facilitated discussions with a wide range of community stakeholders. The results of this approach reveal much about local development efforts and the obstacles confronting rural and low-resource communities.

Regional and large-scale development strategies appear to have a mixed impact at the local level. Some communities have clearly benefitted from regional approaches. Lawrence County, Alabama, for example, can attribute much of its transformation to aerospace investments in nearby Huntsville and Decatur. Likewise, Pike County, Kentucky, can attribute its transformation to the county's designation as an ARC Growth Center. In many other cases, however, regional strategies appear to have had little effect. Local leaders and stakeholders are often, in fact, oblivious to such regional efforts. Local development programs are, in many cases, *ad hoc* initiatives perceived and conducted independent of any larger strategy. In some cases regional development efforts are even seen as a detriment to local growth, as they may siphon jobs, residents and resources away from smaller communities.

Location, not surprisingly, is a significant factor in determining economic status. Counties located closer to urban areas, major transportation corridors, or supplies of natural resources generally perform better than those in more rural areas with few resources. Yet, transportation improvement strategies appear to yield mixed results. While road enhancements can certainly improve local access and reduce isolation, they are far from being a panacea for economic distress and can often bring unintended consequences.

Although transportation-focused efforts encourage business development in some areas, they often have a negative impact on the vitality of downtown areas, existing business districts and adjacent neighborhoods. While better roads improve access and can reduce isolation, they cannot by themselves transform failing schools or resolve long-standing community conflicts. The limits of transportation improvements must be recognized, and such strategies are most effective in conjunction with other location-specific reforms.

For the most part, Local Development Districts (LDDs) in each state appear to be strong and effective community partners. In general, LDDs do an effective job of providing assistance and resources to local governments. In some cases, however, LDDs appear to fall short. Some LDDs appear overly politicized or favor more prosperous communities. In other cases the agencies fail to offer needed services or lack the capacity to address important needs. Further research is needed to assess the extent of these issues and examine possible improvements to this important system.

Not surprisingly, a strong correlation exists between educational attainment and economic performance. Investments in education are thus a critical element in any economic development strategy. The gains made by Morgan County, Ohio, are particularly impressive and their school-centered approach is especially noteworthy. Also, several communities exhibit direct benefits from collaborative relationships with higher education institutions. Local development efforts should be made in concert with local and regional colleges and universities for reasons ranging from educating and retaining local youth, to having access to research and expert-level advice and planning for community organizations and the issues they face.

Coal and other energy resources found in Appalachia remain an important economic mainstay and are an essential element of the nation's energy portfolio. Overreliance on the coal industry, however, is a serious issue. This is particularly true in the Central Appalachian subregion, where the culture of coal conflicts with the need for long-term economic diversification and sustainability. While progress in this area is acknowledged in this report, more should be done to help communities prepare for likely changes in the nation's twenty-first century energy profile.

This report shows a significant need for improved communications infrastructure, especially Internet access. Every community in this study reported issues with broadband and mobile communications, which present significant barriers to local development opportunities and public safety. The issue was most prevalent, as one might expect, in the poorer and more rural areas. Notable exceptions to this trend are the two counties in Kentucky, where these counties enjoy above average business and residential Internet access, and their state's approach serves as a model for the entire region.

Economic development efforts throughout Appalachia continue to be stymied by persistent social barriers and antiquated beliefs and customs. Fear of change, aversion to risk, and outmoded racial perceptions are among the cultural barriers noted in this study. Alcohol restrictions, including "dry" county laws remain in place, and serve only to deprive some areas of much-needed tax revenues and deter tourism growth.

Finally, this report offers recommendations to help address identified issues and to help promote current and emerging best practices. The recommendations reflect findings from the ten case study communities and include many observations and concerns expressed by local leaders and stakeholders:

- The ARC should encourage a dialog among regional communities and create opportunities for shared learning and the exchange of ideas.
- The ARC should evaluate the existing LDD network, assess its effectiveness, and develop new and uniform performance standards.
- Local and county governments should form strong partnerships with academic institutions. State and federal agencies, including the ARC, should encourage and promote these endeavors.

- Communities and agencies at all levels of government should make rural broadband access a priority. States should consider Kentucky a model for the development of digital infrastructure.
- Communities should develop youth leadership programs and encourage youth participation in entrepreneurship, college mentoring, and planning projects.
- Small counties should consider shared government services and combined marketing and development programs.
- ARC should assist counties with the redevelopment, repurposing, or adaptive reuse of vacant industrial sites and underutilized industrial parks.
- Small remote counties should focus on strategies that grow local jobs through entrepreneurship, education and training, and the leveraging of local assets.
- As infrastructure improves, more resources should be devoted to education, leadership development, and entrepreneurship programs.
- Communities should make use of social media networks to promote their communities, develop tourism, encourage local buying, build a sense of community, and increase government efficiency and transparency.
- Outmoded racial beliefs and policies undermine the region's competitiveness. Counties and agencies, including ARC, should do more to promote racial diversity and tolerance throughout the region.
- As Appalachian counties expand their tourism industries, they must also devote additional resources to marketing, training, and the development of hospitality services.



## Summary of Best Practices

During visits and discussions with each of the ten Appalachian counties included in this report, several extraordinary examples of innovative local programs and partnerships for community and economic development were identified. Such outstanding examples are summarized below with further detail of each best practice provided in each county's respective county profile in Chapter 4 of this report.

### Small Business Development

*Avery County, North Carolina*

The State of North Carolina leads the region in small business development, and as such Avery County was clearly the leader in entrepreneurship and business development among the ten study counties. A wide range of resources are available to entrepreneurs, including assistance developing business plans, business management training, and even affordable business loans. Of particular interest are programs at North Carolina community colleges and the loan program managed by the MAY coalition.

**Contact** Tommy Burluson, Avery Co. Economic Development Commission (avery.edc@ncmail.net); 828-733-8208

### Incubator

*Morgan County, Ohio*

Morgan County's incubator project addresses local concerns related to economic development, educational attainment, workforce development, youth retention, and entrepreneurship. The vision for the facility, currently under phased development and construction, intends to link students in secondary school STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and vocational training programs to develop new local innovations and business ventures. Particularly commendable are efforts to engage youth and encourage "cross pollination" of ideas between traditional and emerging technology students, encouraging youth with both college-bound and vocational interests to work and learn together.

**Contact** Mike Workman, Morgan County Improvement Corp (workmanwod@embarqmail.com); 740-962-6772

### Health Care Access

*Pendleton County, West Virginia  
Calhoun County, West Virginia  
Pike County, Kentucky*

Access to health care is a vital issue for rural communities. Health care facilities not only improve the quality of life, they provide jobs and much-needed economic activity. Three counties stand out for their health care initiatives. Pendleton County's sliding scale clinic provides affordable health and dental care and helps the rural county remain among the healthiest in the state. Calhoun County, despite its isolated location and economic distress, has maintained a local hospital to serve its population. Pike County is noted for developing health care into an important local industry.

**Contact** Michael Judy, Executive Director of Pendleton Community Care; 304-358-2355  
Bob Weaver, Calhoun County Commission Chairman (bob@hurherald.com); 304-354-6725  
Juanita Deskins, COO, Pikeville Medical Center (juanita.deskins@pikevillehospital.org); 606-218-3565

### Tourism Development – Visitor Centers

*Morgan County, Ohio*

Tourism was identified as a significant growth area by most study communities and visitor centers are an important resource to direct visitors to local businesses and raise awareness of local attractions. Visitor centers are also a central source of information to help residents stay informed of regional and local events. Morgan County's visitor center, located in the heart of downtown McConnelsville, is an outstanding example with a central location, accessible parking, a wide range of brochures, guides, and maps, and a helpful and well-trained staff.

**Contact** Amy Grove, Morgan County Chamber of Commerce (grove.68@osu.edu); 740-962-3200

### Tourism Development – Adventure Tourism

*Bell County, Kentucky  
Pendleton County, West Virginia*

Adventure tourism appears to be one of the fastest growing asset-based development segments in the region. Bell County is a leader in this field, with successful off-road vehicle trails, whitewater rafting, and other outdoor activities that take advantage of their mountainous terrain. Successful partnerships with state government, local businesses and nonprofits, and significant industry investments have played a major role in the county's success. Pendleton County is also showing leadership in this field, leveraging the county's unique rock-climbing sites in the county to promote tourism and attract new manufacturers and jobs complementary to the rock-climbing industry.

**Contact** Liz Warner, Pendleton County Chamber of Commerce (pendletoncoc@verizon.net); 304-358-3884  
Alby Brock, Bell County Judge Executive (brock@bcje.com); 606-337-3076

### Broadband Deployment

*Pike County, Kentucky  
Bell County, Kentucky*

A common constraint for Appalachian counties is the lack of modern communications infrastructure, both mobile communications and Internet access. The exceptions in this study are the two Kentucky counties, where the level of Internet connectivity and broadband performance is largely due to ConnectKentucky, a statewide initiative to extend broadband access to all parts of the state. ConnectKentucky has been so successful that it has become a national public-private model, and led to the creation of Connected Nation, a organization currently active in 22 states and Puerto Rico.

**Contact** René True, ConnectKentucky, Executive Director (rtrue@connectky.org); 866-923-7501

<b>Higher Education Partnerships</b>	<i>Multiple Counties</i>
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Several counties in this study benefit from strong partnerships with academic institutions. Colleges and universities bring innovation, energy and capacity to counties in need of affordable assistance. While each of the ten counties in this study have ongoing programs with their state land grant institution, the most notable of these partnerships – each with a specific local focus – were found in these counties

Downtown Revitalization	Waynesburg University	<i>Greene County, Pennsylvania</i>
<b>Contact</b>	Bruce Werminger, Waynesburg Planning Commission (wbgboro@windstream.net); 724-852-5210	
Economic Development	Ohio University	<i>Morgan County, Ohio</i>
Food Access	Ohio State University	
<b>Contact</b>	Amy Grove, Ohio State Extension for Morgan County (grove.68@osu.edu); 740-962-4854 Jeff Shaner, Morgan County Extension Director (morg@postoffice.ag.ohio-state.edu); 740-350-8385	
Energy Research	Pikeville University	<i>Pike County, Kentucky</i>
Health Care Access		
<b>Contact</b>	Wayne T. Rutherford, Pike County Judge Executive (wayne@judgerutherford.com); 606-432-6247	
Small Business Development	Appalachian State University	<i>Avery County, North Carolina</i>
Nonprofit Support	Lees-McCrae College	
Workforce Development	Mayland Community College	
<b>Contact</b>	Tommy Burlison, Director of Avery County EDC (avery.planning@averycountync.gov); 828-733-8208 Bill Weeks, Director of MAY Coalition (mayloan@bellsouth.net); 828-765-8880 Rick Garrett, Dean of Mayland Community College (rgarrett@mayland.edu); 828-733-5883	
Youth Retention	Auburn University	<i>Lawrence County, Alabama</i>
Leadership Development		
<b>Contact</b>	Linda Robinson, Lawrence County Extension Coordinator (robinlh@aces.edu); 256-974-2464	

<b>Social Networking</b>	<i>Greene County, Pennsylvania Noxubee County, Mississippi</i>
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Communities increasingly recognize the importance of marketing themselves on the Internet and with social networking sites, such as Facebook, in promoting economic and community development. Greene County uses multiple Facebook pages to extensively assist downtown businesses, increase tourism, and improve communication with the community. Likewise, Noxubee County has established a Facebook presence that could serve as a model for other distressed rural counties.

<b>Contact</b>	Pam Snyder, Greene County Commission Chair (psnyder@co.greene.pa.us); 724-852-5210 Brad Moore, Noxubee County ECD Alliance (noxubeems@yahoo.com); 662-729-2603	
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<b>Downtown Redevelopment</b>	<i>Multiple Counties</i>
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Only two percent of survey respondents rated their local downtown area as “excellent.” The majority of respondents (54%) consider their local downtown as “fair,” but one-fourth classified their downtown as “poor.” A number of factors contribute to this decline, including changing transportation patterns and a shifting retail landscape. Not surprising, communities are taking steps to revitalize their downtown. Two trends in the study counties are especially noteworthy – theater renovations and buy-local campaigns. Buy-local efforts were found in several communities and show promise, and three communities have renovated performance venues. These improved facilities attract visitors, increase community pride and improve the local quality of life.

Downtown revitalization through strong partnership with Waynesburg University	<i>Greene County (Waynesburg), Pennsylvania</i>
<b>Contact</b>	Bruce Wermlinger, Waynesburg Borough Manager (wbgboro@windstream.net); 724-627-8111
Twin City Opera House and Buy-Local Campaign	<i>Morgan County (McConnelsville), Ohio</i>
<b>Contact</b>	Amy Grove, Morgan County Chamber of Commerce (grove.68@osu.edu); 740-962-3200
Buy-Local Campaign	<i>Pendleton County (Franklin), West Virginia</i>
<b>Contact</b>	Liz Warner, Pendleton County Chamber of Commerce (pendletoncoc@verizon.net); 304-358-3884
Bell Theater Renovation	<i>Bell County (Pineville), Kentucky</i>
<b>Contact</b>	Rob Lincks, Director, Bell County Chamber (chamber@bellcountychamber.com); 606-248-1075
Heritage Hall Theater Project	<i>Johnson County (Mountain City), Tennessee</i>
<b>Contact</b>	Karla Prudhomme, Director, Johnson County Chamber (prudhommerk@aol.com); 423-202-4386

<b>Alternative Energy</b>	<i>Pike County, Kentucky</i>
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Pike County has long been known as the epicenter of the Kentucky Coal Belt. The county is building on its heritage as an energy producer to become “America’s Energy Capital.” As part of this strategy, the community is engaged in energy research into emerging technologies and alternative and renewable sources. To promote this effort, local leaders have developed partnerships with a number of colleges and universities and Oak Ridge National Laboratory. This work promises to help the county adapt during the coal transition and retain its role as a center of energy production.

<b>Contact</b>	Charles Carlton, Director of Energy (ccarlton@americasenergycapital.com); 606-213-1041
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Youth Retention		Multiple Counties
<p>Youth retention is an important issue in every rural community. Young people in isolated areas often lack opportunities for recreation or career development and many move away once they reach adulthood. This phenomenon is especially prevalent among high achieving youth. In response, communities are trying a number of strategies to combat this "brain drain." Pendleton County improved recreational opportunities by constructing a bowling alley, Bell County is focusing on youth leadership development, and Lawrence County is promoting the development of agricultural careers. Most ambitious are efforts of Morgan County, where officials are integrating youth development into their business development strategy.</p>		
Business Incubator and Vocational Training Facility		<i>Morgan County, Ohio</i>
<b>Contact</b>	Mike Workman, Morgan County Improvement Corp (workmanwod@embarqmail.com); 740-962-6772	
Community Bowling Alley		<i>Pendleton County, West Virginia</i>
<b>Contact</b>	Liz Warner, Pendleton County Chamber of Commerce (pendletoncoc@verizon.net); 304-358-3884	
Leadership Development Program		<i>Bell County, Kentucky</i>
<b>Contact</b>	Rob Lincks, Director, Bell County Chamber (chamber@bellcountychamber.com); 606-248-1075	
Rural Entrepreneurship Program		<i>Lawrence County, Alabama</i>
<b>Contact</b>	Linda Robinson, Lawrence County Extension Coordinator (robinlh@aces.edu); 256-974-2464	

