

Tourism and Rural Virginia

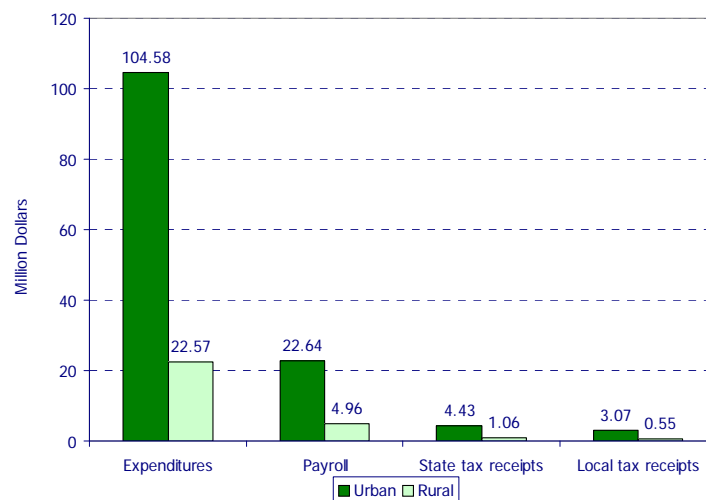
Karen Mundy

Tourists—the bane and blessing of many communities. Tourists bring money and jobs to the places they visit. Whether these visits are for personal, recreation, or business reasons, they will spend their money on food, accommodations, and other items and services. What do these visitors mean to the Virginia economy, particularly that of rural Virginia?

In 2005, the Travel Industry Association (TIA) conducted a study of the economic impact of “travelers” in Virginia. The TIA study does not use the term “tourist” because they felt it was too vague. Instead, they defines travelers to “..include both state residents and out-of-state visitors traveling away from home overnight in paid accommodations, or on any overnight and day trips to places 50 miles or more away from home.” The study excludes commuters, military personnel having travel orders, and students traveling to and from school (TIA, p. 1).

The TIA study findings focus on employment, taxes, and direct spending. They estimate that travelers spent \$16.5 billion in Virginia in 2005. Travelers’ expenses were equivalent to 4.7 percent of that year’s gross state product, and constituted an increase of 9.6 percent from 2004. Travel expenditures were estimated to support 206,500 jobs (5.6 percent of total Commonwealth non-agricultural employment), and generated total payrolls of \$4.1 billion. Travel spending generated over \$2.3 billion in total federal, state, and local tax revenue. Of total tax revenue, federal taxes were 50.5 percent of the total collected, state taxes were 29.3 percent, and independent city/county revenues were 20.2 percent (TIA p.17).

No regularly tourism statistics or economic data are collected for localities in rural Virginia. Of the urban jurisdictions, only five account for nearly half of the estimated employment, taxes, and direct spending in the TIA study: Fairfax, Loudoun, Arlington, Virginia Beach, and Norfolk. Since these five counties and cities are considered urban, the remaining economic impact is spread across both the remaining rural and urban areas. With rural areas receiving significantly less of the economic impact than urban areas, rural areas need to enhance their tourism presence (Figure 1). The Virginia Tourism Council (VTC), a state agency under the Department of Commerce and Trade, produces the Virginia Tourism Monitor monthly, which provides data at the state level. They also produce the Virginia Tourism Monthly Barometer, which shows percent changes in the number of



Source: TIA Table A.

Figure 1. Economic impact of traveler spending, rural and urban, 2005.

¹ These VTC publications are available at www.vatc.org, research.

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people visiting attractions, parks, and travel information centers by region.¹

Where do tourists go in rural Virginia? The Blue Ridge Parkway is the biggest attraction in terms of number of visitors: 1,869,913 from January through May 2007. However, the number of visitors that the National Park service counts is only those who stop at visitors centers or attend park programs, probably underestimating the actual number of people driving the parkway. The numbers are reported jointly for both the Virginia and North Carolina sections of the Parkway. Other National Parks in rural Virginia include Assateague Island National Seashore (Accomack County); Booker T. Washington National Monument (Franklin County), Cumberland Gap National Historic Park (Lee County); George Washington’s Birthplace National Monument (Westmoreland County); and Shenandoah National Battlefield (Shenandoah County). The Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park crosses Warren, Rappahannock, Madison, Shenandoah, Greene, Albemarle, and Augusta counties, where it joins the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Virginia has numerous state parks as well as national parks. In 2001, Virginia state parks were ranked number one in the nation. State parks in rural Virginia include

All of these bring travelers to Virginia or from one part of Virginia to another, thus, adding to the economic impact at the local level.

Rural Virginia has many other attractions as well that contribute to both the state and local economy. The Barter Theater in Abingdon is the official state theatre. Opened in 1933 it accepted produce as admission to the plays. the Fiddlers’ Convention in Galax is the world’s oldest and largest fiddlers convention—72 years old this year. Kerr Place is an early nineteenth century Federal style house located in Onancock, Accomack County. Frontier Culture Museum, an outdoor living history museum, is located in Staunton. A memorial house and Colonial kitchen were built in 1931 in an attempt to recreate the home where Washington was born. The original home burned in 1791. Appomattox Courthouse in Appomattox is known for the location of the surrender of the Confederate States of America to the United States. The Crooked Road, a relatively new development in Southwest Virginia, offers a series of attractions from Dickenson to Franklin counties (Figure 2). Another new attraction is the Wilderness Road Trail in Lee County. It is a 10 mile hiking trail that follows the trail blazed by Daniel Boone and later followed by some 300,000 settlers heading west. These attractions are but a few of the many in Virginia. Other attractions in rural areas include Civil War Battlefields, athletic events, sport car races, fishing, hunting, agritourism, wine festivals, music festivals, railroad festivals, the Labor Day flea market at Hillsville, and more. Tourism is big business in Virginia.

State park	County located	State park	County located
Sailor’s Creek	Amelia and Nottoway	Occoneetchee	Mecklenburg
Holiday Lake	Appomattox and Buckingham	Kiptopeke	Northampton
Douthat	Bath and Alleghany	Fairy Stone	Patrick and Henry
Smith Mountain Lake	Bedford and Franklin	Twin Lakes	Prince Edward
James River	Buckingham	Claytor Lake	Pulaski
Bear Creek	Cumberland	Natural Tunnel	Scott
Breaks Interstate	Dickinson	Hungry Mother	Smyth
Grayson Highlands	Grayson	Lake Anna	Louisa and Spotsylvania
Staunton River	Halifax	Westmoreland State Park	Westmoreland
Staunton River Battlefield	Halifax and Charlotte	Southwest Virginia Museum	Wise
Caledon	King George	New River Trail, Wythe	Grayson, Carroll, Pulaski, and Galax
Belle Isle	Lancaster	Shot Tower Historical State Park	Wythe
Wilderness Road	Lee		



Figure 2. Crooked Road

Location	Attraction	Established
1. Clintwood	Ralph Stanley Museum	2004
2. Norton	Country Cabin	1937
3. Hiltons	Carter Family Fold & A.P. Carter Museum	1974
4. Bristol	Birthplace of Country Music Alliance Museum	1994
5. Carroll/Grayson Counties	Blue Ridge Music Center	2001
6. Galax	Rex Theater & Old Fiddler’s Convention	1935
7. Floyd	The Floyd Country Store & County Records	1913 & 1965
8. Ferrum	Blue Ridge Institute and Museum	1986

Several organizations are available to help develop tourism in Virginia. The state agency, VTC offers advertising and

promotion assistance and the Marketing Leverage Program. This program

is designed to stimulate new tourism marketing programs through the creation of local, area, and regional tourism partnerships. The objective of this program is to leverage limited marketing dollars, resulting in increased visitor spending. A minimum of three partners must partner in the application. Applications are reviewed based upon the determination of the audience (market research), the program (what is the message and how will that message be delivered), and the effectiveness of the program (performance measures on how well the message was delivered). Additional requirements contained in the VTC Marketing Leverage Program Application and Guidelines must also be met. (VTC website)

The Spring 2007 awards totaled \$436,319. These awards range from \$5,000 to \$25,000 in matching funds. Applicants must either match the funds 1:1 for up to \$5,000 or 2:1 for

Name of Program	Locality
The Bedford Wine Trail	Bedford
Eastern Shore Artistic Hospitality Venture	Tasley
Come to Abingdon for Arts of Historic Proportions	Abingdon
Extended Big Walker National Scenic Byway Marketing Coalition	Wytheville
Gathering in Gap Marketing Campaign	Big Stone Gap
Grayson's Golden Opportunity	Independence
Round the Mountain Marketing Initiative	Abingdon
Wilderness Road Marketing Initiative	New Market
The Blue Ridge Plateau Tourism Ambassador Program	Hillsville
Virginia State Barbecue Championship – Smoke on the Mountain – 2007	Galax
Make the Wise Choice	Wise
The Crooked Road in Print and Other Media	Abingdon
Heart of Virginia Area Directory Brochure and Map	Farmville
Appomattox; history...and so much more	Appomattox
The Pound – Where the Crooked Road Bends	Pound
Getaway to the Great Outdoors	Wytheville
Clinch Mountain MusicFest Marketing Program	Gate City
Start Exploring Botetourt County	Fincastle
Horseplay in Henry County	Ridgeway
Eastern Shore Travel Pack	Melfa
Music from the Crooked Road: Mountain Music of Virginia	Galax
Southwest Virginia Blue Ridge Highlands Marketing Enhancement Program	Pulaski

Source: Steger, Martha. VTC 29 June 2007 media release

the larger awards. The following programs received grants for spring 2007. The sites that these organizations represent may prove to be some of the new “hot” rural attractions. With the help of the VTC, tourism continues to expand in Virginia.

The Virginia Tobacco Indemnification and Community Revitalization offers grants to the tobacco producing counties for development. Patrick County Board of Supervisors were awarded \$10,000 to help develop the Mayo River Rail Trail. In Southwest, Marion Downtown Revitalization Association, Inc. was awarded \$25,000 for The Marion Museum Complex;

Wise Pro-Art Association, Inc. received \$50,000 for sound and lighting equipment Performing Arts Center; and Southwest Virginia Community Foundation received \$150,000 for the Gate City Performing Arts Center.

Another source of funding for people in the Ninth Congressional District is through People Incorporated of Southwest Virginia. The Ninth District Development Financing loan fund provides working capital and fixed asset financing for projects that enhance tourism, create jobs, and expand economic development in the Ninth Congressional District. Both non-profit and for-profit businesses are eligible.

At least two other organizations support tourism with training programs and other assistance. The Virginia Hospitality and Travel Association focuses primarily on food service and lodging. To use their services one must be a member. They offer training, quarterly meetings, and information on creating and placing brochures in public places such as motels and rest stops. The Rural Information Center at the National Agricultural Library (NAL) offers information on starting a small business in Virginia (http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/ricpubs/small_business.htm). This information is not specific to tourism. The NAL has links to many tourism publications and other resources.

Tourism is big in Virginia. People and organizations wanting to promote tourist sites should contact the Virginia Tourism Council. VTC should be the first place to go for information and referrals when developing a tourist attraction—whatever the attraction is a theme park or a nature hike or arts and crafts festival. They are available to assist everyone in the tourist trade. Rural communities interested in developing greater economic returns from tourism should avail themselves of these services.

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