Danville MPO Updating Transportation Analysis Zones

Beginning in February 2014, the Danville MPO, in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), began to update transportation analysis zones (TAZ) within the MPO area, which comprises the City of Danville and the urbanized area of Pittsylvania County (that portion of the county falling within the MPO area). TAZs are defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as geographic areas that are utilized for the purpose of tabulating data pertaining to transportation, especially those related to journey-to-work and place-of-work. The Danville MPO contains approximately 166 TAZs.

The main goal of updating the TAZs is to project both residential and employment figures to the year 2040. For the purposes of the residential component of the TAZ update, the MPO is starting off with 2010 census figures and then projecting those to 2013 for use as an initial projection. Data obtained by the MPO for this purpose includes real estate records dating from 2010 to 2013 for the City of Danville and the urbanized portion of Pittsylvania County, building permits issued from 2010 to 2013 for the same areas, information from local colleges including student populations and planned dormitory locations, and number of recent housing unit developments in high growth areas such as Danville’s River District. For the employment projections to the year 2040, real estate records, commercial building permits issued, as well as other data relevant to employment and commerce, will be utilized.

The process is expected to be completed by June, at which time the Danville MPO will generate a report detailing the process as well as the results of the TAZ update.

Harvester Performance Center Opens in Rocky Mount

Rocky Mount’s new music venue, the Harvester Performance Center, opened to the public on Friday, April 11th. The venue opened in the former Lynch Hardware Store on Franklin Street after an estimated $2.2 million renovation project funded in part by the Virginia Tobacco Commission and historic tax credits enabled the destination to become a reality.

The Harvester provides seating for 475 in its theater and can accommodate up to 700 spectators standing up, according to the venue’s website. In addition to the music hall, the 8,000 square-foot facility includes a lobby area, concessions, and gallery space. Levi Lowery, a singer from Georgia who sings an Americana genre, opened the Harvester with the first performance on April 11th. Other notable artists that will perform at the Harvester in 2014 include The Mavericks, the Marshall Tucker Band, Gary Puckett & The Union Gap, and many others.

The Harvester solidifies Rocky Mount and Franklin County’s position as the eastern gateway to the Crooked Road—Virginia’s Heritage Music Trail; in addition to a variety of musical acts, comedy, dance, cultural events, and other performances are planned to take place at the venue. Even before the Harvester opened, investment in the area increased, as a Bed & Breakfast and a restaurant announced plans to open in the area, and a general increase in development inquiries was reported in the vicinity.
Henry County Awarded Grant for “15 Magical Miles” Initiative

In early February, the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) announced that it had awarded Henry County a $35,000 planning grant to fund recommendations for its “15 Magical Miles” initiative, which seeks to promote economic development activities in a roughly 15-mile area of Henry County which includes the communities of Bassett and Fieldale.

The vision for the initiative is to capitalize on existing assets located mainly in the centers of Bassett and Fieldale and promote economic development through promotion of tourism and place-based strategies. While concrete strategies have not yet been established to bring the vision to fruition, improvements are likely to include the establishment and extension of trails to link prominent destinations such as Fieldale, Bassett, Stanlytown, and Koehler, along the Smith River; building/façade improvements; and infrastructure (sidewalk/road) improvements.

In addition to Henry County, some other organizations that are involved in the initiative, which comprise the Smith River Small Towns Collaborative, include the Harvest Foundation, the Dan River Basin Association (DRBA), the West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC), and Phoenix Community Development Corporation, among others. After recommendations have been established, the County will formally apply for a construction grant to enable the endeavor to proceed.

For this initiative, WPPDC staff has conducted building and open space inventories for Bassett and Fieldale; participated in site visits to Galax and St. Paul, VA to observe what similar communities have done to promote economic development and revitalization as part of the planning grant requirement; and attended meetings in furtherance of this initiative.

Planning Grant Awarded to Improve Ferrum Community

In December 2013, the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) announced that it had awarded a $30,000 planning grant to Franklin County for the purpose of exploring opportunities to improve quality of life and enhance economic development in the Village of Ferrum, located in Franklin County. Other parties involved in the effort include the Ferrum Water and Sewage Authority, Ferrum College, the West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC), and various consultants.

In addition to the planning grant, the Ferrum Water and Sewage Authority contributed $5,000, Ferrum College contributed $5,000, and Franklin County contributed $7,500. The combined $47,500 in funding will support efforts by consultants Earth Environmental and Civil and Southeast Rural Community Assistance Project, Inc. (SERCAP), to conduct outreach for and promote housing rehabilitation in the village; to plan for water system upgrades and extensions; sidewalk and lighting improvements; drainage upgrades; and establish a wayfinding signage initiative to direct visitors to prominent destinations, thereby promoting economic development. A major component of the project would be a pedestrian bridge to enable Ferrum College students and others to safely traverse railroad tracks between the west side of the village, where Ferrum College’s campus is located, and the village’s main business district.

In March, the County submitted a second application to DHCD to obtain approximately $1.4 million via a Comprehensive Community Development grant to fund the improvements listed above, with the exception of the pedestrian bridge. For the construction of the pedestrian bridge, anticipated to cost about $900,000, transportation funds and other funds are being sought.

Functions which the WPPDC has been involved with for this initiative have included tabulating surveys from homeowners and conducting a windshield survey for the housing rehabilitation component of the initiative, providing letters of support for the initiative, and participating in meetings.

Martinsville Improves Uptown With Pocket Parks

The City of Martinsville has embarked on a program to develop “pocket parks” in areas of Uptown where vacant land is present as a means to help eliminate blight. The program is being funded by the Virginia Department of Housing & Community Development (DHCD) through a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program intended to improve Uptown. Elements of one park that will be funded through the CDBG program at the pocket park sites include picnic tables, trees, grass seed, shrubs, soil, a bench, and planter components, as well as the construction and hardscape for a new and separate park.

One park which has been constructed has tentatively been named College Park, but may receive a permanent name. It is located on Fayette Street adjacent to the Governor’s School Wet Lab building. Another park, Fayette Square, is under development as a City in-kind match to the CDBG project, and is located at the corner of Moss, Main, and Fayette streets. Fayette Square will be developed as a community service project by NCI interns in May, and an official opening event will take place in July. This park is planned to be temporary until the parcels it is on are redeveloped, and the materials paid for through CDBG funds can be relocated to other City facilities once that happens. In addition to these two City of Martinsville Community Development-initiated parks, there are private ventures. The new College of Henricopolis School of Medicine is developing a “physick garden” on its property and the new NCI building on the Baldwain Block will contain a green space.
WPPDC Awarded Project Grant for Improvement of Mayo River in Patrick County

In early 2014, the West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC) was awarded a grant by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) to work with several area partners to improve water quality of the upper South Mayo River and North Mayo River in Patrick County. A total maximum daily load (TMDL) study was subsequently conducted to identify sources of bacteria and in 2013, an Implementation Plan was finalized, which serves as a blueprint for improving the quality of the waterways.

The grant, which totals $134,393 with a match of $95,471, will provide either a 50 percent or a 75 percent match for up to 31 residential septic system pump-outs, 18 system repairs, 10 system installations or replacements, 2 system replacements or installations with pumps, installation of one alternative waste disposal system where needed, and the establishment of 2.5 acres of vegetated buffer areas around the rivers to prevent the entry of fecal coliform bacteria into the rivers from the waste of farm animals. Another component of the project will be a pet waste education program, which will be the responsibility of the Dan River Basin Association (DRBA). This component will involve the placement of a pet waste station along the Mayo River Rail Trail and a second waste station in DeHart Park in Stuart, as well as placement of literature for the public at the Virginia Department of Health office and at the Patrick Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) in Stuart, for the purpose of educating the public regarding proper disposal of pet waste. In addition to the WPPDC, which will be administering the grant, partners include the DEQ, DRBA, the Virginia Department of Health, and the Patrick Soil and Water Conservation District.

The contract between the WPPDC and DEQ for the administration of funds for the project was signed on April 3rd and a kickoff meeting is scheduled to take place on April 22nd. Later this spring, the WPPDC will promote awareness of the cost share grant program to households via individual mailings to each household located within the watersheds, public meetings, announcements through a local radio station, notices in church bulletins, via the local newspaper, and via septic tank companies which will provide information about the program to homeowners with septic system issues. The DRBA will be responsible for periodic sampling of water from the rivers as a means to document the initiative’s progress. The duration of the grant period will be two years.

Ribbon Cutting for Dan Riverwalk Trailhead Takes Place, Fountain Springs to Life

April has proven to be a transformational month for Danville’s River District, as the JTI Fountain—a centerpiece of Main Street Plaza—sprung to life on April 2nd, and a new nearby trailhead connecting to the Dan Riverwalk Trail was officially opened during a ribbon cutting ceremony on April 4th. The 40-foot diameter fountain contains seven water jets with each signifying one block of the city’s Tobacco Warehouse District; the fountain was fully funded by Japan Tobacco International at a cost of $465,000.

The new trailhead provides access from Main Street Plaza to the Riverwalk Trail, and the plaza serves as a functional and aesthetically-pleasing segue between downtown, the trail, and the Dan River. The plaza was fully funded by a $2.6 million VDOT revenue-sharing grant.

A major theme of the ribbon cutting ceremony was fitness, and representatives of Get Fit Dan River Region were present to kick off a 50,000-Pound Challenge, through which residents of Danville and Pittsylvania and Caswell counties would pledge to lose 1/2-pound each until a total of 50,000 pounds are shed. The organization will provide a new workout video each Monday to demonstrate local exercises to enable residents to lose weight as part of this effort.

WPPDC Commissioners

**Franklin County**
- Brian Hamilton
- Bobby Thompson
- Leland Mitchell

**Henry County**
- Tommy Slaughter
- Jim L. Adams
- Wesley E. George, III

**Patrick County**
- Roger Hayden
- Danny Foley
- Jerry Adams

**Pittsylvania County**
- Edward Hairston
- James H. Snead
- Jessie Barksdale

**City of Danville**
- Bryce Simmons
- Albert K. Rawley, Jr.
- John Gilstrap

**City of Martinsville**
- Sharon Brooks Hodge
- Kathy Lawson
- Kim Adkins

**Town of Rocky Mount**
- Jerry W. Greer, Sr.
- Ralph A. Casey
- Gregory B. Walker

West Piedmont Planning Dispatch
The Appalachian Spring, a creative economy initiative, an effort to promote the assets of the 19 counties and four cities of Southwest Virginia, is underway. The effort is a collaboration between various entities such as the Virginia Creeper Trail, the Appalachian Trail, planning district commissions, state parks and national forests, and other organizations to help facilitate tourism, community development, and development of business, with a general emphasis on outdoor recreation. The Appalachian Spring will be similar to The Crooked Road, in that it will serve as a mechanism to promote development throughout the region (with an emphasis on downtowns), much like The Crooked Road has promoted the region as a musical destination. Furthermore, this initiative will be of a similar regional scale to The Crooked Road, extending from the Cumberland Gap to Franklin County.

Objectives of the Appalachian Spring include promoting the region’s quality of life to attract individuals and businesses, leveraging the area’s cultural heritage to attract tourists, and rendering the area as a desirable location for retirees to settle. The program is being led by the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation.

The Appalachian Spring is funded via $1.05 million in grants, and is currently in the strategic planning phase. The entities and their funding amounts include the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) which contributed $500,000, the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development which contributed $215,000, the Appalachian Regional Commission which contributed $100,000, and the Virginia Tobacco Commission which contributed $215,000 in matching funds.

Capitalizing on the region’s outdoor assets offers the potential for a significant return on investment, as outdoor recreation accounts for $646 billion, provides tax revenue of $80 billion, and generates 6.1 million jobs nationally.

**“SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BECOME AS WELL-KNOWN FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION AS VIRGINIA IS FOR HISTORY.”**

—BEN MELDROW, ARNETT MULDROW AND ASSOCIATES, VIA SWVATODAY.COM—

**“PLANNER LOOKS AT REGION’S PROMISE” MARCH 20, 2014**

**Commonwealth Crossing Business Centre Gets Approval from Corps**

In early April, it was announced that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers approved essential permitting required to develop Commonwealth Crossing Business Centre, a 740-acre industrial park located in Henry County near the North Carolina state line. The Corps acts on behalf of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in administering the Clean Water Act, and has adopted a policy to deter permits for land grading until an end-user is committed to invest in an industrial park. It is unlikely, however, that an end-user would commit to investing in an industrial park without any infrastructure developed.

After several years of trying to obtain the needed permits to grade sites at the industrial park from the Corps, Henry County provided information on two potential end-users which led to the Corps issuing the permits. In a bi-partisan effort, U.S. representatives and senators from Virginia also worked on behalf of Henry County to secure the needed permits. As a condition of approval, Henry County was required to purchase $1.3 million worth of stream and wetlands credits from “mitigation banks,” as well as to engage in stream preservation activities.

Grading for one of the two sites would facilitate the construction of a 1 million square-foot building, and the grading of the second site would enable a 100,000 square-foot building to be constructed. The prospective firms were not announced. In early January, the Virginia Tobacco Commission announced it would provide $6.5 million for the grading of the sites, which will require 18—24 months to be completed.
Demographic Attributes of the West Piedmont Planning District

The table above, entitled Demographic Attributes of the West Piedmont Planning District, presents a variety of data pertaining to population, economic attributes, health, public safety, and education in the District. For the sake of comparison, data for Virginia and the United States are also shown, although not all is available at the national level. The data included for the WPPD Localities constitute an average or rate for the District’s localities.

The table shows that health indicators and various categories comprising public safety vary across the region, and that improving the health of the District’s residents must continue to be a priority, as the District collectively ranked poorly when compared to the state. In terms of the educational indicators, the results of each of the individual localities compared to the states were generally mixed. However, for the 2012 Percent with less than High School Diploma and 2012 Percent with Bachelor’s Degree or Higher, each locality in the region performed below both Virginia and the U.S., indicating a need for continued focus in these areas.

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Attainment of Work Ready Community Goals in the Dan River Region Collaborative

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<th>Actual NCRC</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Actual NCRC</th>
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<td>Employers Supporting</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>331</td>
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<td>231</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
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<th>Workforce Type</th>
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<td>282</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>53.5%</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>80</td>
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*Indicates that the Actual NCRC has surpassed the goal. In this case, the locality is not given additional credit for surpassing the goal, so the Actual NCRC figure only reflects the maximum for which a locality can take credit.

The table above, entitled Attainment of Work Readiness Goals for the Dan River Region Collaborative, January 1, 2012—February 28, 2014, relates to current goals attained by each locality in the Dan River Region Collaborative footprint, with regard to becoming an ACT Certified Work Ready Community. Attainment of ACT Certified Work Ready status is important to the region because it certifies that a minimum number of the region’s residents are able to perform certain jobs. For instance, bronze certification, the lowest certification level, ensures that an individual can perform 16 percent of jobs; and platinum, the highest, ensures that an individual can perform 99 percent of jobs. The exam one would take to determine their work ability evaluates skills in applied mathematics, reading for information, locating information, and “soft skills.” The table shows goals set for each locality in the region, as they pertain to accomplishment of work readiness certification status as well as the progress achieved for attaining those goals, expressed in both absolute numbers and percentages. Under the heading “Workforce Type,” Emerging workforce refers to high school juniors and seniors, college students, and recent graduates; the Current workforce refers to those individuals currently employed in either the public or private sector; the Transitioning workforce refers to those who are unemployed, are participating in an adult education or GED program, or have recently completed such a program; and Employers Supporting refers to businesses that have chosen to recognize, recommend, or prefer the National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) in supporting their locality to become a certified work ready community.

Based on the most current data, Henry County is the closest of the localities to attaining ACT Certified Work Ready status, at 56.9%, and Martinsville is just behind, at 53.5%. Since the winter 2013/2014 edition of the West Piedmont Planning Dispatch was published, which contained ACT Work Ready data up to December 31, 2013, the share of work readiness goals per locality in the Dan River Region Collaborative footprint has increased. Those increases are as follows: Henry County increased from 54.5% to 56.9%, Patrick County increased from 30.7% to 31.6%, Pittsylvania County increased from 41.7% to 51.1%, Danville City increased from 26.9% to 30.6%, Martinsville City increased from 51.4% to 53.5%, and Halifax County increased from 17.3% to 20.0%. Pittsylvania County experienced the largest percentage increase, at 9.4%. Within two years, the region will become a Certified Work Ready Community if 2,300 residents earn ACT Work Ready Certification.