Two localities in the West Piedmont Planning District, the Village of Ferrum and the City of Martinsville, received national recognition for low cost of living. In March, Business Insider magazine published a list ranking small towns with populations between 1,000 and 10,000 based on affordability in each state. Based on the magazine’s methodology which involved analyzing the affordability of owner-occupied homes with and without mortgages as well as rental housing, Business Insider ranked the Village of Ferrum as the most affordable small town in Virginia. The magazine highlights nearby outdoor activities as well as the recognition by U.S. News and World Report of Ferrum College as one of the South’s best regional colleges.

In March, SmartAsset, a firm specializing in financial technology, ranked the City of Martinsville the 4th best locality in Virginia to retire, as well as the 9th most affordable locality in the state. In determining the best places to retire, the firm took into account state and local taxes, the number of area doctors’ offices, recreation areas, and other factors. From a local perspective, attributes underscored as making Martinsville a great place to live include a relatively mild climate, proximity to excellent colleges and universities as well as professional sports teams, affordable housing and amenities, and other factors.

Danville MPO’s Current Initiatives

In 2014, the Danville Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), which is administered by the WPPDC, retained the services of URS Corp./AECOM to update its Constrained Long-Range Transportation Plan (CLRP) to the year 2040. This document is updated every five years and articulates recommended transportation projects for the City of Danville and the urbanized portion of Pittsylvania County on a financially “constrained” basis, meaning the projects are reasonably expected to be completed by, in this instance, 2040 based on anticipated federal, state, and local funding streams. A new feature of this plan iteration will be the inclusion of performance measures, a tool to help determine which projects would yield the greatest benefits for the available funding. In addition, the plan will closely correlate with Virginia House Bill 2 requirements. The plan is expected to be completed by October.

The Danville MPO recently chose several planning studies for which it will retain consultants during Fiscal Year 2016 (July 1, 2015—June 30, 2016) as a first step to enhance the MPO’s transportation infrastructure. One study will analyze traffic conditions on Mount Cross Road at the entrance to Averett University’s North Campus in Danville, which will include recommendations to improve traffic flow. Averett’s North Campus will soon undergo a major transformation to include a new stadium and other improvements likely to impact traffic movements in the future; the intersection is burdened with heavy traffic during major events at the campus. Another study the MPO plans to undertake next fiscal year involves the intersection of U.S. Route 58 and Whispering Pines Road in Brosville. Development is taking place in the vicinity of the intersection and a number of accidents have recently occurred there. A third project will involve a study of Danville’s River District to formulate recommendations to improve bicycle connectivity and transit service in this rapidly-growing area of the city.
WPPDC Employee Profile—David Rakes

David Rakes, Cartographer/Planning Technician with the West Piedmont Planning District Commission (WPPDC), is responsible for all of the organization’s mapping activities. David holds an Associate Degree of Applied Science in General Engineering Technologies with a specialization in Computer-Assisted Manufacturing from Patrick Henry Community College. He also holds certifications in ArcGIS and AutoCAD software. David has been with the organization since December 1999 and much of the GIS work he has done over the years has included drafting a variety of maps as well as providing GIS-related assistance to local, state, and federal agencies and organizations.

Prior to his employment with the WPPDC, he was employed by Larry G. Rakes Land Surveying, where he worked in the same general region encompassed by the organization and which provided him with useful local knowledge for his current position. David’s greatest strengths include working with numbers and problem-solving, which are indispensable to the organization and beneficial in a variety of projects.

David lives in Stuart and in his spare time enjoys playing pool and outdoor activities such as hiking, target shooting, camping, and fishing.

WPPDC Engaged in VTrans 2040 Update

The West Piedmont Planning District Commission is assisting the Commonwealth with updating and overhauling VTrans 2040, the state’s transportation guidance document. Unlike past iterations, this update is being developed to serve as a basis for House Bill 2 (HB 2), a new mechanism which will rank proposed transportation projects based on their impact to safety, economic development, accessibility, environmental impacts, and congestion mitigation. If a proposed project does not satisfy a need identified in VTrans 2040, it will not be eligible for funding via HB 2.

VTrans 2040 will be composed of two parts, a Vision Plan and a Multimodal Transportation Plan (VMTP). The Vision Plan lays out a general vision of what we want our state’s transportation system to look like in 2040. The draft version of the Vision Plan was recently available for public review and comment. WPPDC staff reviewed the plan and submitted comments to the state.

The WPPDC is playing a much larger role in the development of the second part of this document, the VMTP. This component of VTrans 2040 will offer more specific recommendations for each region and with it, the state is doing something it has never done before: generating regional profiles with a focus on Regional Networks. Regional Networks are generally defined as urbanized (MPO) areas and the full counties in which the urbanized areas are located; in this region, the regional network comprises the City of Danville and Pittsylvania County.

The WPPDC is meeting periodically with the Virginia Office of Intermodal Planning and Investment’s (OIPI) consultant and local planning officials in a workshop setting to define “activity centers” and transportation needs throughout the Regional Network. These workshops, which are expected to continue throughout the summer, will form the basis for transportation needs as articulated through the VMTP’s community profiles, and which will ultimately define transportation needs for HB 2. The VTrans 2040 Vision Plan is expected to be published this year and the VMTP is anticipated to be complete in early 2016.
The table above, 2015 Health Rankings & Roadmaps for Localities of the West Piedmont Planning District, is a compilation of health indicators for localities of the West Piedmont Planning District contrasted with the State of Virginia. In terms of Quality of Life, Patrick County was ranked highest of all localities in the region. The region lags behind the state in terms of adult smoking and adult obesity (the latter typically a result of poor diet and lack of exercise), and most of the region’s localities lag behind the Commonwealth with regard to access to exercise opportunities, the exception being Martinsville, which significantly surpassed that of the state in this measure. Numerous localities in the region are currently working to construct or expand multi-use trails, so it is likely that access to exercise opportunities will improve in the near future.

The percentage of residents lacking health insurance in the region is higher in each of the region’s localities and the lack of primary care physicians compared to the state are issues that must continue to be addressed. Some progress is taking place, as a number of urgent care centers have sprung up across the region in recent years. Centra Health opened a medical center in Gretna, Pittsylvania County, in 2014, providing much-needed medical care to that county and its communities. The last row in this table, “Health Factors,” shows the health ranking for each of the region’s localities out of 133 localities ranked in the state.
The table above, entitled *Attainment of Work Readiness Goals for the Dan River Region Collaborative, January 1, 2012—April 30, 2015*, 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 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 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 in becoming a certified work ready community.

Based on the most recent data, Henry County is the closest of the localities to attaining ACT Certified Work Ready status, at 92.3%, and Martinsville is second, at 77.0%, followed closely by Halifax County at 75.5%. The winter 2014/2015 edition of the *West Piedmont Planning Dispatch* contained work readiness goals achieved up to January 31, 2015 and since that time, all localities representing the Dan River Region Collaborative exhibited modest increases. The City of Danville exhibited the greatest share of growth over that period, increasing by more than 10%.

By June 2015, the region will become a Certified Work Ready Community if 2,300 residents earn ACT Work Ready Certification. The Dan River Region Collaborative is serving as a pilot for this program in Virginia, as it is the first region in the Commonwealth to implement it.

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