



Tourism Business
Opportunity Assessment

Whitesville, West Virginia

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Prepared for:

West Virginia Community Development Hub
424A Shrewsbury Street
Charleston, WV 25301
(681) 404-6053
www.wvhub.org

Prepared by:

Downstream Strategies
911 Greenbag Road
Morgantown, WV 26508
(304) 292-2450
www.downstreamstrategies.com

About the Authors

Sara Cottingham, M.S., Impact WV Fellow. Ms. Cottingham concentrates on community and environmental planning and nonprofit organizational development. She earned a Master's in Community & Regional Planning and has worked with many nonprofits, ranging from small grassroots groups to regional and national organizations. She specializes in watershed management, grant writing, organizational assessment, community development, capacity building, fundraising, and volunteer management.

Fritz Boettner, M.S., Principal. Mr. Boettner has over ten years of professional experience in a wide array of environmental consulting activities. He has developed and managed complex environmental projects, including organizing resources, outlining project scopes, and developing and working within project budgets. He offers clients expertise in applying computer-based GIS systems, simulations, and animation. He utilizes GIS and computer visualization to complete projects at the local, regional, and national levels in the fields of planning, water resources, and environmental science. He also has experience performing complex spatial analysis to assist with natural resource management as well as providing GIS tools and support.

Evan Hansen, M.S., Principal. Mr. Hansen explores resource and environmental problems and solutions in three areas: water, energy, and land. He manages interdisciplinary research teams, performs quantitative and qualitative policy and scientific analyses, provides litigation support and expert testimony, develops computer tools, provides training, and performs field monitoring.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report explores current and future opportunities for tourism business development in Whitesville, West Virginia.

Using the context of the tourism value chain, this study:

- identifies marketable tourism products and attractions in the Whitesville area,
- assesses the town's tourism capacity based on existing businesses and services,
- identifies gaps in Whitesville's current tourism infrastructure, and
- outlines business-specific recommendations and next steps to develop and maintain a thriving tourism industry.

This study is one of a series of business opportunity assessments performed by Downstream Strategies for the Northern West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Center and the West Virginia Community Development HUB with regards to tourism development in specific West Virginia towns.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

With over 100 years of mining history, Whitesville seeks to celebrate its rich history while embracing new developments such as its downtown riverwalk and nationally-recognized river trail.

The following recommendations to enhance Whitesville's tourism products and services were identified in this report.

1. **Learn from the lessons** and experiences of other towns in the Hatfield-McCoy Trails area.
2. Seek **economic diversification and community engagement** to develop a common vision the entire town can get behind.
3. **Enhance and market existing products** to increase their tourism potential.
4. **Invest in basic services** to make Whitesville a more enjoyable place to both live and visit.
5. **Collaborate with other nearby communities** to enhance the tourism products and services in the Big Coal River region.

These items are outlined in full in the Recommendations section, followed by resources for achieving these goals and actionable next steps for the town to pursue.

ABOUT DOWNSTREAM STRATEGIES

Downstream Strategies is an environmental and economic development consulting firm located in Morgantown and Alderson, West Virginia. We are considered *the* go-to source for objective, data-based analyses, plans, and actions that strengthen economies, sustain healthy environments, and build resilient communities.

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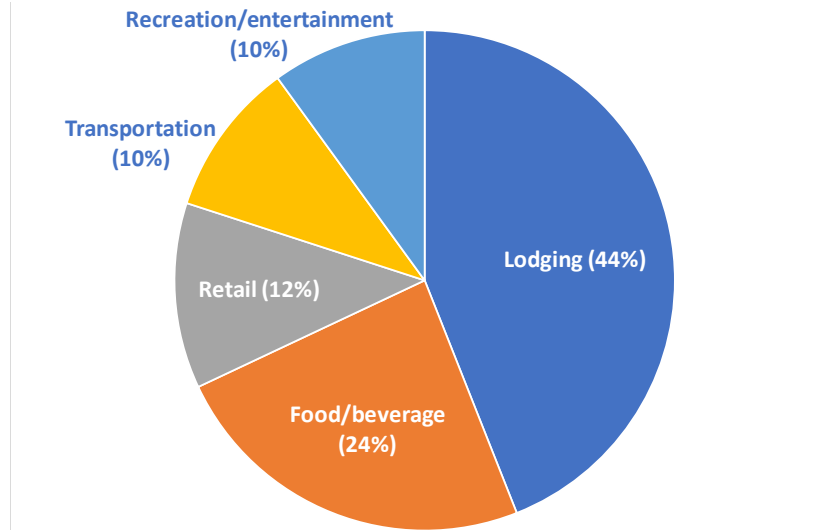
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TOURISM IN WEST VIRGINIA

Tourism is a growing industry in West Virginia. Trends at the statewide level show that increased investment in tourism development and promotion over the last five years have paid off (West Virginia Division of Tourism, 2016). Tourism added \$5.1 billion to the statewide economy in 2015. Nearly 16 million visitors stayed overnight in West Virginia in 2015. While 47% came to visit friends and relatives, 41% of overnight visitors came to the state on leisure trips influenced by marketing efforts (Longwoods Travel USA, 2015).

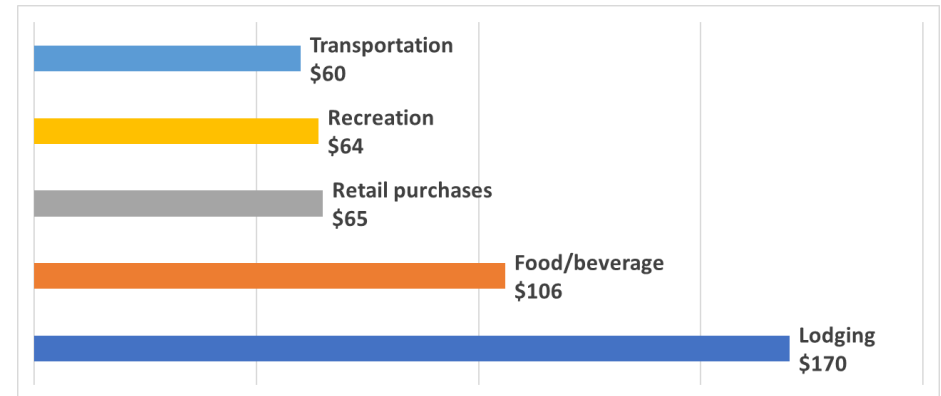
During their stays, visitors enjoy a range of activities such as shopping, dining, and visiting landmarks, parks, and historical sites. The average family/group spends a total of \$465 over the course of their stay (Figure 2), which averages 2.7 nights in length (Longwoods Travel USA, 2015). This direct spending has a significant impact on local economies, and, as a result, many towns across the state are evaluating how they can leverage local resources such as natural assets and cultural heritage into tourism products.

FIGURE 1: TOTAL OVERNIGHT SPENDING BY SECTOR IN WEST VIRGINIA (2015)



Source: Longwoods Travel USA (2015).

FIGURE 2: AVERAGE PARTY EXPENDITURES ON OVERNIGHT TRIPS TO WEST VIRGINIA



Source: Longwoods Travel USA (2015).

The single greatest driver of tourism in West Virginia is **outdoor recreation** (Longwoods Travel USA, 2015). West Virginia's mountains and rivers offer some of the best opportunities for outdoor recreation in the nation. As a four-season destination within a day's drive for half of the country's population, outdoor recreation tourism in West Virginia is poised to grow.



Source: West Virginia Tourism Office (2017).

Outdoor recreation generated \$9 billion in consumer spending in 2016, as well as \$2.4 billion in salaries and wages and \$660 million in state and local tax revenue. And with 91,000 direct jobs in the industry statewide,

outdoor recreation employs nearly twice as many West Virginians as the coal industry (Outdoor Recreation Association, 2017).¹

Cultural and heritage tourism also plays a significant role in attracting visitors to the state: 45% of overnight visitors in West Virginia came to experience historic places and cultural activities in 2015 (Longwoods Travel USA, 2015).

Across the United States, 78% of all leisure travelers (118.3 million adults) participate in cultural and/or heritage activities while traveling. Cultural and heritage travelers spend an average of \$994 per trip and contribute more than \$192 billion annually to the U.S. economy. As baby boomers retire, the amount of heritage tourism (and overall travel expenditures) is expected to rise. (Mandala Research, 2009)

Compared with other types of travelers, cultural and heritage travelers are more frequent travelers and are more likely to participate in culinary activities, including visiting farmers' markets, attending food and wine festivals, and enjoying unique dining experiences. Table 1 shows the most common activities cited by cultural and heritage tourists.

TABLE 1: PREFERRED ACTIVITIES BY CULTURAL AND HERITAGE TOURISTS

Activity	Percent
Visiting historic sites	66%
Attending historic reenactments	64%
Visiting art museums and galleries	54%
Attending arts and craft fairs or festivals	45%
Attending professional dance performances	44%
Visiting state or national parks	41%
Shopping in museum stores	32%
Exploring urban neighborhoods	30%

Source: Mandala Research (2009).

With its rich history and unique mountain culture, West Virginia offers plenty of cultural and heritage attractions—from historic sites and parks to fine art and traditional crafts.

¹ The coal industry employed 48,000 people in 2015, including jobs in mining, contracting, and processing facilities (West Virginia Coal Association, 2017).

COMMUNITY PROFILE: WHITESVILLE

Located in Boone County, West Virginia, Whitesville is a town of under 500 residents that lies in the heart of the state's Southern Coalfields region. The history of Whitesville is intrinsically linked with that of coal, dating back to West Virginia's first discovery of coal at Peytona, just miles downstream from Whitesville, in 1742. The nation's first series of inland locks and dams were operated along the mainstem Coal and Big Coal rivers in the 1850s to ship coal from Boone County to markets downstream (Dean, 2015).



Source: Kaycie Stusheck (2017).

Whitesville was formally incorporated in 1935, and the construction of the railroad turned the sleepy farming area into a thriving boomtown. Dozens of coal companies opened, employing 10,000 miners at one time. By the 1950s, however, coal mine mechanization and shifts in the national energy economy led to

drastic reductions in local mining, and Whitesville's population entered a swift decline. Though coal has ebbed and flowed and maintained a dominant place in the town's economy, the industry never returned to a level that supported the growth and prosperity Whitesville had once experienced.

Whitesville was home to 30 businesses in 2015; however, several have closed since then as the town's population has continued its precipitous decline (U.S. Census, 2015). Recent closures include the town's Save-a-Lot grocery store and Dairy Queen, Whitesville's only chain restaurant.

The Coal River forks into two rivers, the Big Coal River and the Little Coal River, near the Boone and Lincoln county line. The Big and Little Coal rivers are divided by a ridge of mountains that forms a stark barrier splitting the county into two halves. Route 119 (Corridor G) was developed on the

Little Coal side of the county and provides Madison, the county seat, with a direct corridor to Charleston, the state capital. As a result, most jobs, businesses, and development in Boone County are concentrated on the Little Coal side of the county. The county's largest employers, which are all located in Madison and its surrounding towns, include:

- Boone County Schools,
- Boone Memorial Hospital,
- Alpha Natural Resources,
- Boone Nursing & Rehabilitation,
- the Boone County Commission, and
- the Donald R. Kuhn Juvenile Center (BCCEDC, 2013).

Table 2 shows the most common occupations held by Whitesville residents.

TABLE 2: MOST COMMON OCCUPATIONS HELD IN WHITESVILLE

Occupation	Percent
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance	31%
Sales and office occupations	27%
Service occupations	15%
Management, business, science, and arts	15%
Production, transportation, and material moving	13%

Source: U.S. Census (2015).

Though Whitesville is the biggest town on the Big Coal side of the county, development has largely bypassed this geographically isolated region. Residents must drive an hour in any direction on small, mountainous roads to reach stores and amenities in Madison, Charleston, or Beckley.

Today, Whitesville residents are working hard to enhance their community by making the town a nice place to live and visit. Several new businesses have opened, including a bakery, a small grocery store, and a number of businesses in the new Shoppes in the Ville. River recreation on the Big Coal River is bringing increased numbers of visitors who come to the kayak on the Coal River Water Trail, and town leaders are working hard to create a new rail trail from Whitesville through the Clear Fork Valley.

TOURISM VALUE CHAIN

The tourism value chain refers to the system of tourism-related products and services that enhance a town's or region's overall economy.

Tourism products comprise the specific destinations, attractions, and/or activities that visitors want to experience. Examples include trail systems, scenic rivers, ski resorts, historic parks, and cultural festivals.

Having a strong tourism product is essential in attracting visitors to a destination; however, it takes a number of supporting services to develop and sustain a tourism industry. When visitors travel to experience a tourist product, they likely interact with several different services within the community. For instance, a family embarking on a weekend river float trip would likely eat at a restaurant, buy fuel and snacks at a gas station, stay overnight at a hotel or campground, and perhaps rent a kayak or purchase gear at a local outfitter.

As a result, tourism development requires investment in basic infrastructure of tourism-supporting services that will serve and attract visitors. These standard tourism services include:

- **Lodging** – hotels, motels, bed and breakfasts, cabins, campgrounds
- **Food and beverage** – restaurants, grocery stores, food providers
- **Outfitters, tour, and guide services** – gear shops, rentals, shuttle services
- **Shopping and entertainment** – retail shopping and other activities

These standard services enhance a tourist destination from a visitor's point

of view and stimulate the overall economy by providing tax revenue and by creating and supporting local jobs.

In addition to these primary tourism-related services, other associated services play a vital role in sustaining a viable infrastructure for tourism. For instance, a resort destination planning to attract large numbers of visitors each year will require an adequately-sized water and sewage treatment plant, waste management, and good roads in order to operate. Local banks and insurance will be needed to serve the primary tourism services. These businesses will expect access to broadband internet, nearby emergency services, and schools for the children of their employees.

The associated and supporting services to the tourism infrastructure include:

- **Infrastructure** – buildings, water, wastewater, waste management
- **Transportation** – roads, railroads, bus service, gas stations
- **Telecommunications** – cell service and internet
- **Emergency and health services** - fire, police, ambulance, hospitals, pharmacies
- **Schools and training opportunities**

Most of these supporting services rely on the management or involvement of the town administration and/or local governing agencies. Involvement and buy-in from local and county leadership is therefore essential to the success of tourism development.

COMMUNITY TOURISM ASSESSMENT

TOURISM PRODUCTS OVERVIEW

The following marketable tourism products currently lie within Whitesville and its immediate vicinity.

Located on the Big Coal River, Whitesville forms one of the starting points for the **Coal River Water Trail**. The Coal River Water Trail is a federally-recognized river trail comprising the Big Coal, Little Coal, and mainstem



Source: Coal River Group (2015).

Coal rivers. Public access boat launches with signage and parking are available throughout the 88-mile trail. Starting in downtown Whitesville, paddlers can float the entire length of the Coal River all the way to the St. Albans, where the Coal meets the Kanawha River. The Big Coal River offers sections of beginner rapids surrounded by beautiful scenery and wildlife, and the Whitesville-to-Orgas section provides the trail's most

challenging float trip. Though most of the water trail's visitation is concentrated in the lower stretches of the watershed close to Charleston, the annual Kevin's Lazy River community float trip in nearby Racine and Ashford is generating increasing interest in kayaking on the Big Coal.

The **Coal Heritage RiverWalk** is a riverfront walking trail in downtown Whitesville. The RiverWalk features two picnic pavilions, a stage, a mural of an old country coal store, and a historic train caboose with an observation deck. Historic markers are currently being incorporated into the park to educate visitors and students about Civil War history in the Big Coal River.



Source: Kaycie Stusheck (2017).

The **Upper Big Branch Miners Memorial** is located along Coal River Road (West Virginia Route 3) in Whitesville, approximately five miles from the site of the Upper Big Branch Coal Mine disaster that took the lives of 29 miners in 2010. This roadside memorial plaza contains monuments to the miners and first responders and displays interpretive signage with sweeping views of the Big Coal River.



Source: UBB Miners Memorial (2017).

The West Virginia Division of Tourism promotes Route 3 through Whitesville as a **scenic motorcycle tour route**. Running from Beckley to Charleston, Route 3 is the main thoroughfare through Whitesville. This scenic and historic route through the heart of West Virginia's coal country is a popular route for motorcyclists.

Special events in Whitesville include the Whitesville Fall Festival (September), the Big Coal River Heritage Festival in the nearby town of Racine (September), and the Kevin's Lazy River Adventure community float trip from Racine to Ashford (July).

Key Tourism Activities include fishing, kayaking, hunting, motorcycling.

TOURISM PRODUCTS ASSESSMENT

Gaps identified

While Whitesville is home to a few tourism products, the town does not currently have any significant tourism activity. The total number of tourists visiting the town annually is considered to be exceedingly low, though no firm estimates were available at the time this report was compiled. To develop tourism, Whitesville will need to enhance its existing tourism products and develop new amenities that will attract visitors.

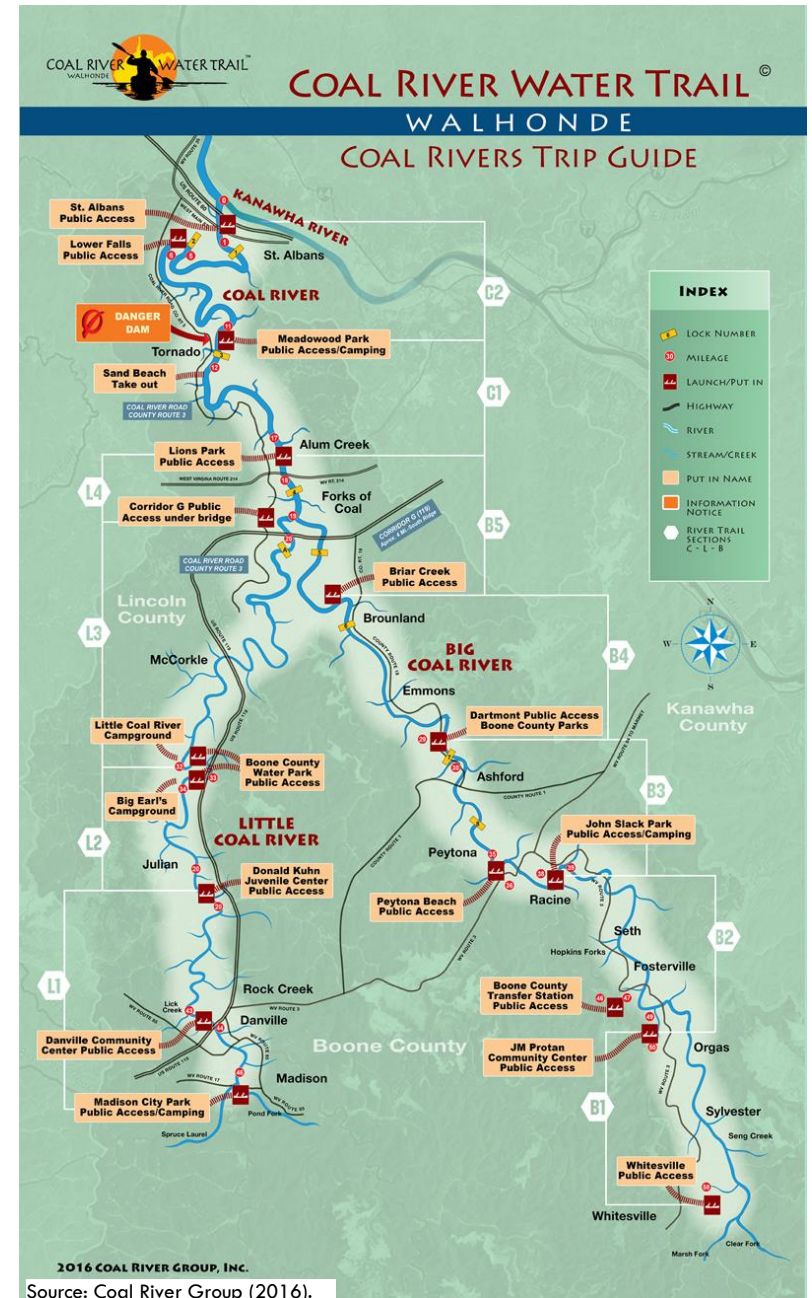
Business opportunities

Of Whitesville's existing tourism products, the scenic motorcycle route on Route 3 and the Coal River Water Trail offer the most promising development potential.

Through increased and more targeted marketing efforts, the area could potentially expect higher visitation from motorcycle tours. Similarly, the Coal River Water Trail offers potential for increased numbers of tourists coming to float the Big Coal River. While the Little Coal and mainstem Coal are mostly lazy, slow-flowing rivers, the Big Coal is a faster-moving stream. The Big Coal is the most scenic and undeveloped of the three Coal rivers and offers an intermediate-level float trip for those seeking to progress beyond flatwater paddling. The Big Coal is floatable most of the year when the river gauge at Ashford is at least two feet.

The Coal River Group (CRG), a nonprofit based in Tornado, WV, created and maintains the water trail. The water trail has successfully introduced tourism to other parts of the Coal River watershed, particularly in the lower stretches of the river near Charleston and St. Albans. The CRG received an advertising grant from the West Virginia Development Office in 2017 to promote tourism in the Coal River watershed through increased marketing efforts. The group's multi-modal approach will focus on promoting touring the watershed by boat, car, motorcycle, and bike.

Increasing tourism potential in Whitesville is one of the CRG's priorities. The CRG will be building two new boat launches in Whitesville—one at



the fire department and one at the UBB Miners Memorial—and another boat launch is being constructed three miles downstream at Sylvester’s new riverfront park. Whitesville’s sole existing boat launch at the water plant is a bit outdated, and the nearest available takeout for paddlers starting from Whitesville is in the town of Orgas, ten miles downstream. The limited access, length of the trip, and fast-moving water make this the most challenging trip in the entire water trail. Scheduled to be completed by spring of 2018, the three new boat launches will make the Big Coal section near Whitesville much more accessible for boaters and fishermen to enjoy.

In addition to existing tourism products, two key proposed projects offer potentially game-changing developments in Whitesville:

- Community members are working hard to make their vision for the **Clear Fork Rail and Trail** a reality. This proposed rail trail would start in Whitesville and extend 15 miles up the Clear Fork Valley. Modeled after the Virginia Creeper Trail, this trail would include three public access staging areas, designed with space for future private bicycle rental and shuttle services to locate, and would offer interpretive signage to educate visitors on the area’s history of industry and immigration. The project has broad community buy-in and support from the National Coal Heritage Area Authority; however, the site will require extensive remediation in order to be developed. The project team has applied for a \$2.3 million grant through the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection’s Abandoned Mine Lands program in 2017, which will determine whether this project can move forward.
- The **Hatfield-McCoy Trails** for all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and utility task vehicles (UTVs) has brought tremendous economic gains to Boone County and other areas of southern West Virginia. Tourism and development from the trails has bypassed Whitesville, which currently lies over an hour’s drive from the nearest trailhead. However, the Hatfield-McCoy Regional Recreation Authority (HMRRA) is currently preparing a feasibility study and property analysis for trail expansion in Boone County. The proposed system would extend from Madison to Chesapeake, running through Racine and Whitesville. This feasibility study will determine whether building a Hatfield-McCoy trailhead in Whitesville will be possible. If the study indicates that project can move forward, HMRRA will apply for Recreational Trails Program funding through the West Virginia Department of Transportation to complete the project, with build-out projected by 2023. If approved, this trail expansion would open doors to tourism development in Whitesville as never before; however, the results of the feasibility study will not be announced until November 2017.

Table 3 and Table 4 outline the primary and supporting tourism services existing in Whitesville.

TABLE 3: PRIMARY TOURISM SERVICES

Service type	Description	Assessment
Lodging/accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> JKLM Inn Cantley's Coal Country Inn (Sylvester, 3 miles away) Oak Tree Inn (Comfort, 16 miles away) 	<p>GAPS: The lodging sector in Whitesville is underdeveloped; however, there is currently little demand to support additional accommodations. There are no campgrounds in the area.</p>
Food/dining	<p>Restaurants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Country Bakery and Coffee Shop (<i>currently closed, but may reopen</i>) Terry's Cafe (hot spot) Route 3 Company Store and Diner (<i>closing soon</i>) The Pizzeria & Subs (Sylvester) <p>Groceries:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Midtown Grocery Farmers' market closed in 2017 	<p>GAPS: Whitesville has very limited food options.</p> <p>STRENGTH: The new Midtown Grocery and the Country Bakery offer promising additions to Whitesville's food and dining options.</p>
Tours/services	<p>Outfitters:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A&E Bass Barn <p>Tour/guide services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No guide services on the Big Coal Authentic Adventures Watercraft Rentals (Madison) 	<p>GAPS: There are currently no guides/outfitters in the Big Coal area; however, there is currently little demand to support these services.</p> <p>STRENGTH: A new boat rental service plans to open downstream in Ashford.</p>
Shopping/entertainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Terry's Cafe (hot spot) Nifty & Thrifty consignment store The Auction Block Arvon's Floral and Gift Shop Shoppes in the Ville includes: Bev's Country Closet (primitives shop), Bad Dog Graphix, Beach Bum Tanning, and a computer repair shop. Dollar General 	<p>GAPS: While the recent addition of Shoppes in the Ville has brought several new stores to town, Whitesville lacks any significant retail shopping or entertainment options to spur tourism. Most residents travel an hour each way to either Beckley or Charleston for their major shopping needs.</p>

TABLE 4: SUPPORTING TOURISM SERVICES

Service type	Description	Assessment
Infrastructure	<p>Buildings: The town has struggled with owners who refuse to sell or redevelop vacant downtown buildings.</p> <p>Water/wastewater: Whitesville is served by the Boone Raleigh PSD.</p> <p>Waste: The town hauls all municipal solid waste to either Charleston or Beckley, which has put a major strain on the town’s finances.</p>	<p>GAPS: The town is struggling to meet the basic service needs of its residents and has little current capacity for expansion.</p>
Transportation	<p>Whitesville is located on Route 3, a small, windy road that connects Madison and Beckley (roughly an hour in either direction). Charleston is just over an hour on Routes 3 and 94.</p>	<p>GAPS: Whitesville’s residents must drive an hour in any direction to reach most basic services, including grocery and retail stores. Whitesville is also isolated from the bulk of activity in Boone County, with an hour-plus drive to Madison and any of the Hatfield-McCoy trailheads.</p>
Telecommunications	<p>Whitesville has basic broadband internet but does not receive coverage from any cell towers, leaving the entire area along Route 3 with no cell phone service.</p>	<p>GAPS: Residents cite lack of cell service as a major impediment to the town’s development prospects.</p>
Emergency/health services	<p>Whitesville has one walk-in health clinic and two pharmacies (Mountaineer Drug and Rite Aid).</p>	<p>GAPS: Residents must travel to Charleston or Beckley for nearly all medical needs.</p>
Schools	<p>Whitesville has one elementary school. Local students attend Sherman Junior High and Sherman High School in Seth. The Boone Career and Technical Center is located in Foster.</p>	<p>GAPS: Whitesville lacks the population to support schools. STRENGTH: The Boone Career and Technical Center offers a tourism and hospitality training program in Foster.</p>

Tourism service assessment

While Whitesville has some existing tourism services, it lacks the majority of basic and supporting tourism services needed to support a tourism industry. Whitesville’s existing tourism products do not currently attract enough visitors to generate demand for tourism services. Though marketing and promotion efforts could somewhat increase visitation of existing tourism products, Whitesville’s greatest chances for creating tourism (and thus tourism service demand) lie with its prospective developments: the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System expansion and, to a lesser extent, the Clear Fork Rail and Trail and Coal River Water Trail.

Service gaps and business opportunities

Lodging: Currently Whitesville supports the JKLM Inn, with about ten rooms available, and Cantley's restaurant in neighboring Sylvester offers six guest rooms upstairs above the diner. The quality and size of these establishments would not be sufficient to support increased tourism. The nearest standard hotel is the Oak Tree Inn in Comfort, a 25-minute drive north on Route 3. There are currently no campgrounds in the Whitesville area.

Should the Hatfield-McCoy trailhead be built in Whitesville, demand for local lodging accommodations will likely skyrocket. Boone County as a whole does not have enough beds to support the number of trail riders now using the county's existing Hatfield-McCoy trails. Feedback from HMRRA confirms that many of West Virginia's key trail areas, including the Hatfield-McCoy Trails and Ashland Resort, lack sufficient full-service campground hook-ups to meet their clientele's demand. HMRRA cites a lodging deficiency for their entire trail system and reports that existing campgrounds, cabins, and resorts are turning customers away in the peak summer and fall seasons.

Almost half of Hatfield-McCoy trail riders (43%) stay in the area two or three days while visiting the Hatfield-McCoy Trails. Most stay in a cabin/lodge (68%) or at a campground (27%). Approximately 23% typically stay in a hotel or motel. (Pardue and Shand, 2014) These figures offer a glimpse of the type and distribution of demand for different types of accommodations that could be expected near the proposed Whitesville trailhead.

Given the uncertainty of the trail development, current low levels of visitation, and unknown trajectory of tourism growth, Whitesville should pursue growth in lodging accommodations in the short-term with minimal capital requirements, including:

- **Campgrounds:** Camping options along the Coal River Water Trail are extremely limited, and no campgrounds

currently exist along the Big Coal section of the trail. As one of the starting points for the water trail, Whitesville is ideally situated for a campground catering to river tourists.

Campgrounds, which can range in offerings from tent/recreational vehicle (RV) camping to cabins, often require minimal infrastructure compared to traditional hotels/motels, which can be cost-prohibitive as start-ups. Campgrounds often offer a higher rate of return on investment than cabins because the initial capital is greatly reduced. The campground aesthetic often appeals to outdoor enthusiasts coming to take part in outdoor sports in the area.

While ATV, UTV, and other motorized recreation enthusiasts exhibit greater preference for higher-end camping facilities, Whitesville should prioritize lower-end camping facilities in the short term to capitalize on the growing river trail and potential rail trail market. Basic camping facilities for the area would require riverfront land with adequate sewer/septic service, restrooms, picnic shelters, and other minimal infrastructure, whereas full hook-ups for campers and RVs require electricity, water, sewer, and, increasingly, cable or Wi-Fi access.

Should the Hatfield-McCoy trail expansion move forward, Whitesville should expect increased demand for additional resorts and higher-end campgrounds over the next 5-10 years. Feasibility studies and full market analyses should be prepared as soon as funding is secured for the expansion.

- **Home or cabin rentals:** With the tremendous growth of websites such as Airbnb, VRBO, and HomeAway, home vacation rentals are becoming an increasingly popular

source of visitor accommodations worldwide. Though current tourism and visitation levels are unlikely to sustain growth in traditional hotels/motels, home and cabin rentals could offer a viable potential for gradual, incremental growth in in-town lodging. Rather than renting out individual rooms in the style of a hotel or bed and breakfast, whole-house vacation rentals are popular with trail riders and outdoor groups and are feasible in places like Whitesville that have available housing stock and relatively low real estate prices.

Outdoor recreation: Whitesville does not currently have any tour or guide services for outdoor pursuits in the area. A&E Bass Barn is the only business catering to outdoor activities in Whitesville. The store sells fishing tackle and hosts the “September to Remember” Bass Tournament.

While boating on the Coal River Water Trail continues to increase every year, much less boating tourism has extended as far as Whitesville.² There is some demand for kayak rentals and guiding services on the Big Coal—particularly during the weekend of the annual Kevin’s Lazy River Adventure float trip downstream in Racine; however, river-oriented businesses have not met resounding success thus far. Big Coal Kayak Rentals opened in 2016 but closed in 2017 due to lack of business. The nearest boat rental and livery service is currently located on the Little Coal in Madison, followed by the Coal River Group in Tornado; however, a new boat rental service is planning to open downstream in Ashford (Currey, 2017).

With an expected gradual increase in river tourism, Whitesville can expect potential growth in demand for boat rentals and livery services, as well as boating and fishing guides. These services will likely be difficult to establish as stand-alone businesses until such demand is realized and will require extensive marketing and advertising to markets beyond the region.

² No firm water trail visitor counts were available at the time this report was prepared.

The potential development of the Clear Fork Rail and Trail also presents opportunities for trail-side bike rentals and service shops. Demand for these services would not be realized until trail completion several years down the line, and the success of such services would depend largely on the degree to which the new trail is successfully marketed to outside audiences.

Should the proposed Hatfield-McCoy trailhead move forward, water and rail trail activity would likely take off as welcomed supporting activities for families coming to take advantage of the trails. Increases in ATV/UTV trail visitation would likely transform boat and bike rental businesses from part-time, low-budget services into larger, more profitable enterprises.

Food/dining: Food and dining options in Whitesville are extremely limited, though some progress is being made. Midtown Grocery & Deli just opened in September 2017, filling an important gap since the town’s only grocery store closed several years before. Another new business, the Country Bakery and Coffee Shop, opened in August 2017. The bakery has since closed but hopes to reopen in another storefront location in Whitesville. Whitesville did recently start a farmers’ market, but it did not open in 2017 due to low turnout and rain.

Whitesville currently sports Terry’s Cafe, a gambling and video lottery “hot spot” with pizza available for carry-out, and Route 3 Company Store and Diner, a convenience store with a small deli. The owners of Route 3 Company Store plan to close their business soon. Neighboring Sylvester has two dining establishments: the Pizzeria & Subs and Cantley’s Lunch Box diner. The Whitesville Dairy Queen closed several years ago, as did Paulie’s Restaurant and the Save-a-Lot grocery store.

Whitesville’s difficulty keeping restaurants alive stems from lack of demand: residents with limited expendable income lack the resources for dining out, and few visitors pass through the town to support local

restaurants. Growth in the food and dining sector will require an influx in demand to make these businesses sustainable.

Retail: Whitesville currently offers little in the way of retail; however, some notable progress has been made. Bad Dog Graphix, a local t-shirt design company, bought a building downtown and has rented out space to other small businesses. Known as Shoppes in the Ville, the space is home to Bev's Country Closet primitive shop, a tanning parlor, a computer repair shop, as well as Bad Dog Graphix.



Source: Kaycie Stusheck (2017).

Beyond Shoppes in the Ville, Whitesville has two thrift/consignment stores, an auction service called the Auction Block, Dollar General, and Arvon's Floral and Gift Shop, Whitesville's oldest locally owned business that sells flowers and small gift items.

Feedback from Whitesville residents indicates that these stores are barely enough to meet local needs, forcing most residents to do the bulk of their shopping in either Charleston or Beckley.

Existing retail options will not be enough to satisfy potential future Hatfield-McCoy trail riders. Should a trail system be developed in the area, Whitesville would benefit from offering additional retail businesses and things for visitors to do. Feedback from HMRRRA and the Ashland ATV

Resort in Bramwell, West Virginia indicates that the limited tourism services in McDowell County—particularly activities for non-trail-riding family member to partake in—is a major drawback for their customers, yet those businesses that have opened up have done incredibly well.

Supporting Services: Whitesville struggles to meet the basic service needs of its residents and has little current capacity for expansion. As mentioned above, residents must travel to Charleston or Beckley for nearly all shopping and medical needs and to find employment. Many of the town's senior residents, low-income young people, and those with limited transportation thus find themselves completely isolated from jobs, stores, and other resources.

Whitesville currently experiences more through-traffic from coal trucks than passenger vehicles, and many locals consider it unsafe to walk or even park downtown when coal trucks are passing through. The town is experiencing financial difficulties from hauling the town's municipal waste to Charleston and Beckley in a nearly-inoperable garbage truck.

One of the biggest impediments to Whitesville, however, is the lack of cell phone service. While the town has basic internet available, there is no cell service in Whitesville or along Route 3. Internet and cell service are both essential for conducting business in the modern workplace. The lack of cell service greatly hinders Whitesville's ability to attract and retain businesses and individuals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The pending outcomes of the proposed Hatfield-McCoy trail extension and Clear Fork Rail and Trail have the potential to dramatically change Whitesville's tourism potential and overall economic outlook going forward. The extension of the Hatfield-McCoy Trails to Whitesville could cause tourism to boom locally; without it tourism growth will likely continue at a slow pace.

Any forecast of Whitesville's tourism outlook will be premature until the outcomes of these proposed projects are determined. As a result, the following recommendations offer suggestions for Whitesville that will apply regardless of the outcomes of the proposed trail developments.

1. LEARN FROM THE LESSONS OF OTHER TRAIL TOWNS

Though the possible addition of a Whitesville Hatfield-McCoy trailhead is still years out, Whitesville should learn from the experience of towns with existing Hatfield-McCoy trailheads and plan their development accordingly.

HMRRRA sold approximately 39,000 trail permits for use at its seven existing trailheads spread across six southern West Virginia counties (HMRRRA, 2017). The Hatfield-McCoy Trails have provided a tremendous economic stimulus to the region and have helped many towns similar to Whitesville capitalize on tourism. Yet despite the demonstrable economic improvements in the area, Jeffrey Lusk, Executive Director of the HMRRRA, notes that "the supply and demand curve is broken" in the region. While the trails have generated incredible demand for tourism services that continues to grow at about nine to twelve percent this year, the area still lacks the primary and supporting tourism services to meet the needs of visitors. (Lusk, 2017)

The increased tourism service needs are consistent across the entire Hatfield-McCoy Trails area. The region lacks sufficient lodging accommodations and has an unmet demand for campgrounds, cabins, and home rentals. Lusk cites campgrounds as the number one need for most

trail towns, as roughly one-third of trail riders are "toy haulers" who tow their ATVs and UTVs behind their camper or RV. The region also lacks the restaurants, stores, and other attractions that trail tourists seek to enrich their time spent off the trails. (Lusk, 2017)

As a result, Whitesville can learn from these clear trends and develop its tourism infrastructure accordingly by prioritizing business opportunities in:

- campgrounds with full hook-ups, cabins, and home rentals;
- restaurants;
- retail stores; and
- other recreation activities, such as boat and bike rentals, guided fishing and kayaking trips, and shuttle services.

Developing these needed services has been a struggle throughout the region, yet the campgrounds, resorts, restaurants, and shops that have opened in response to Hatfield-McCoy-driven demand have fared well and are often quite successful. An interesting trend to note, however, is the prevalence of out-of-state investors who are forming businesses in response to the trail-driven economy. Four of the top five lodging accommodations as well as the four newest restaurants serving the Hatfield-McCoy area have been started by out-of-state residents who have capitalized on the business opportunities available surrounding the trail system. (Lusk, 2017)

While this reflects positive investment and growing interest in the region, Whitesville should strive to encourage business opportunities available to local residents as well as non-residents interested in relocating in the area.

2. SEEK ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Whitesville's history as a coal town has shaped the town's outlook on development. As one Whitesville resident noted, "We always put our eggs in one basket and depended on coal." Today town leaders are working to diversify the town's economy going forward, yet conversations with residents indicate that many residents are reluctant to embrace change and identify new possibilities. Several residents noted that many locals are passively waiting for the Hatfield-McCoy Trails to come, expecting that the economic boons experienced in other parts of the county will inevitably reach Whitesville. Though it is too soon to know whether the trail extension will occur, Whitesville should seek economic diversification rather than a silver bullet.



Source: Kaycie Stusheck (2017).

In 2008 the University of North Carolina and the North Carolina Rural Economic Development Center reviewed economic development strategies and case studies from 45 small towns across the country. The study found that none of the communities were saved by a single development strategy; instead, successful development in small towns was always multifaceted. When the towns in the study "hit bottom," their

leaders and residents came together to identify a path forward, often by trying new ideas and taking risks. Similarly, in most cases successful economic development strategies were guided by a broadly held local vision with buy-in from the community at large. (Lambe, 2008)

Drawing on these lessons, Whitesville still has work to do in developing a unified vision for the town's future. The town should continue community building efforts such as those underway with the West Virginia Community Development Hub and seek to increase the inclusion and engagement of community residents.

3. ENHANCE AND MARKET EXISTING PRODUCTS

For tourism to exist and thrive, a town must have strong tourism products that draw visitors. If Whitesville hopes to capitalize on tourism growth, the town will need to further enhance its existing tourist attractions and greatly increase its marketing efforts to reach outside audiences. These tourism products will then be stronger as stand-alone attractions and will also have increased potential to enhance the town's tourism offerings for prospective ATV and rail trail development.

The Coal River Water Trail offers promising tourism growth potential in the coming years. The water trail has existing infrastructure in place yet lacks users on the Big Coal side. Building demand for river recreation on the Big Coal will be essential to realizing tourism gains in Whitesville. The planned boat launches in Whitesville should improve river access, and the Coal River Group's watershed-wide advertising and marketing campaign will likely attract increased numbers of outside visitors to experience the river. Whitesville would be well-advised to collaborate and take part in the CRG's efforts to promote river tourism on the Big Coal.

This should include increasing community outreach to educate residents about the value and potential of the river. Business opportunities in campgrounds and river guide services should be pursued in coordination with any noticeable increases in river tourism; however, a market for these services will need to be built through intensive marketing in order for these businesses to be successful.

The West Virginia Division of Tourism includes Route 3 in several publications listing recommended motorcycle tours, yet the potential to market the motorcycle route to outside audiences is largely untapped. Targeted outreach to national motorcycle and tour groups would likely bring notable increases in motorcycle tourists in the region. Whitesville could follow the example of Wytheville, Virginia, which has successfully marketed their "Claw of the Dragon" motorcycle route (Wytheville CVB, 2017).

4. IMPROVE BASIC SERVICES

With or without tourism in Whitesville, the town must invest in basic services to improve the quality of life for its residents. Investing in local capacity building and basic services such as infrastructure are often vitally important to spurring economic development in small towns (Lambe, 2008). As a result, community building in Whitesville must go hand-in-hand with tourism and other economic development.

Whitesville currently lacks the stores, medical facilities, jobs, and other basic services needed to support its population. This forces most residents to drive to Beckley or Charleston for most of their major needs and leaves many residents effectively cut off from prospective jobs and services. The town currently has bus services that take seniors to town for shopping and appointments, but no similar service exists for the rest of the community.

Given Whitesville's geographic isolation and distance to services, one possibility would be to enhance transportation access for Whitesville residents. For example, Hollandale, Mississippi (population 3,000) created a grant-funded van service to transport the town's residents to and from work, school, shopping, and health care services in other towns. This allowed the town to increase opportunities for its residents in the short-term when the town itself was unable to expand its services (Lambe, 2008).

Cell service and internet access are two other key issues that must be addressed in the short term. Whitesville should pursue a planning grant

through the West Virginia Development Office's Community Development Block Grant Program to assess infrastructure possibilities and evaluate options for bringing cell service to Whitesville. While Whitesville currently has basic internet service available, the need for internet will rise in pace with tourism growth. As a result, the town should also pursue expanded internet coverage.

5. COLLABORATE WITH NEIGHBORING COMMUNITIES

Given Whitesville's geographic isolation and distance from larger population centers, its best hope for tourism development is to embrace a regional, rather than Whitesville-specific, approach to development. The nature of trail-oriented tourism products means that Whitesville's fortunes are linked those of the other towns along the Big Coal River. As a result, marketing and development efforts should be coordinated with other towns to give tourists a reason to come to the Big Coal region. Similarly, collaboration with other nearby communities opens doors to enhancing partnerships to share common services, thereby reducing each town's financial strain to provide municipal services to its residents.

One relevant model is that of the Clinch River Valley Initiative (CRVI) in southwest Virginia, which offers a mechanism for collaboration, peer learning, information sharing, and co-marketing solutions for towns in its region. By working collaboratively, towns in the Hometowns of the Clinch program have created a small business development center and an inter-town bus service. These small towns have accomplished more by acting together as a region than they could have individually (CRVI, 2017).

RESOURCES

Whitesville will need targeted assistance in many areas as it seeks to attract and develop new tourism-related businesses and services.

SMALL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

First-time entrepreneurs in rural communities often start at a disadvantage. In West Virginia, as in much of rural America, those coming from geographically isolated, economically depressed areas may not have been exposed to thriving local businesses. Without experienced local mentors, they may find themselves lacking the basic understanding of management, accounting, and marketing principles needed to start and run a successful business.

As a result, training and technical assistance are vital for supporting business development. To encourage new businesses to form in Whitesville, the town will need to develop a local education and training infrastructure to provide advice and encouragement to budding entrepreneurs.

Many resources are available.

- **The U.S. Small Business Administration's (SBA's) West Virginia District Office** in Clarksburg provides prospective, new, and established persons in the small business community with financial, procurement, management, and technical assistance. The SBA provides training and counseling on starting and/or expanding businesses, assists bank and non-bank lenders in securing SBA loans for their small business customers, and provides trainings for small businesses on how to do business with the federal government. (SBA, 2017)
- **The West Virginia Small Business Development Center (SBDC)** is a statewide network that provides assistance in all 55 counties. SBDC helps small businesses from the concept phase to established enterprises and offers training in business planning and development, coaching, financing recommendations, and more. SBDC can help compile all of the preliminary information

and paperwork needed to open a business legally, including information on licensing, taxes, insurance, recordkeeping, and the forms needed for hiring employees. SBDC can also assist with evaluating a business idea for feasibility and projected success and can provide hands-on assistance in obtaining loans. (WVSBDC, 2017)

- **The Boone County Community and Economic Development Corporation (BCCEDC)** is a nonprofit development corporation marketing and promoting economic, community development, and tourism opportunities in Boone County (BCCEDC, 2013).
- **The Boone Career and Technical Center** in Foster, West Virginia offers an Adventure Tourism Management Program. This program is designed for students interested in careers pertaining to event planning, hospitality, tourism, outdoor leadership, and hotel/restaurant operations and helps students prepare for belay training, first aid certification, swift water rescue training, "West Virginia Welcome" hospitality certification, "Leave No Trace" environmental ethics certification, and interpretive guide trainer certification. (BCTC, 2017)
- **The Southern Workforce Development** program through the Southern West Virginia Community & Technical College offers continuing education and business development services in Boone County (Southern Workforce Development, 2017).
- **The Hive Network** is a regional business accelerator located in Beckley, West Virginia. The Hive provides mentoring, coaching, technical assistance, and support tools to aspiring business owners. (West Virginia Hive, 2017)
- **HubCAP**, the West Virginia Community Development Hub's Communities of Achievement Program, offers support for communities as they take their community development efforts to the next level. The Hub's staff serve as coaches, connecting the

community with capacity-building resources needed to achieve the town's goals. (HubCAP, 2017)

In addition, training and mentoring opportunities specific to hospitality and outdoor recreation industries are recommended.

- **West Virginia University (WVU) Extension** offers a tourism specialist who coordinates the WVU Rural Tourism Design Team. The Team provides research, training, and technical assistance support for sustainable rural tourism development throughout West Virginia. Partnerships with Recreation, Parks, and Tourism Resources; Landscape Architecture; Graphic Design; Public Administration; and other colleges and departments at WVU provide a depth of knowledge and expertise strategically targeted to support the development of a sustainable tourism economy in West Virginia. (WVU Extension, 2017)
- **West Virginia Welcome**, designed by the West Virginia Hospitality Education and Training Program, is a collaboration between WVU's Hospitality and Tourism Program, West Virginia Department of Education's HEAT program, the West Virginia Hospitality and Travel Association, and the WVU Extension Service. The program offers introductory courses on hospitality, available as 45-minute online video courses and through two-hour classroom-style trainings. (WVU Extension, 2017)

MARKETING AND FINANCING

Whitesville's existing tourism products need to be marketed more effectively in order to increase visitation.

Whitesville should identify potential marketing partners that would be willing to collaborate. Some potential partners include:

- West Virginia Division of Tourism,
- Southern West Virginia Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB),
- Coal River Group,
- HMRRA,
- MotorcycleRoads.com,

- OpenRoadJourney.com,
- EdelweissBike.com,
- MotorcycleTours.com,
- SundayMorningRides.com, and
- Harley Davidson Ride Planner (Fogerty, 2015).

BUILDING REDEVELOPMENT

A wide variety of resources are available to help address abandoned, dilapidated, and brownfields buildings in Whitesville.

- **West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Centers** promote economic development and environmental and public health protection through innovative redevelopment of brownfield sites. The Centers promote and coordinate the development of brownfield properties by providing training and technical assistance, facilitating site preparation efforts, engaging community involvement, as well as by helping communities with grant writing and leveraging project funding. (WVBAC, 2017)
- The **BAD (Brownfield, Abandoned, Dilapidated) Buildings Program** is a statewide initiative run through the Northern West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Center. The program provides technical assistance and site analysis tools to enhance abandoned and dilapidated building programs. Failure to address BAD buildings imposes severe social and economic costs on neighborhoods. This program helps to identify, prioritize, and redevelop such buildings. The BAD Buildings Model and resources support West Virginia communities with limited local capacity and no abandoned/dilapidated buildings program. The program works with communities, generally at no cost, to create a complete building inventory and prepare a comprehensive redevelopment plan based on inventory findings. Applications for technical assistance provided through the program are accepted annually. (WVBAC, 2017)

CELL AND INTERNET SERVICE

Several resources are available for assistance in improving Whitesville's telecommunications potential.

- The West Virginia Development Office's **Community Development Block Grant** program (formerly known as Small Cities Block Grants) offers planning grants for municipalities that would cover an infrastructure feasibility assessment for cell service in Whitesville. The most recent round of applications closed on October 30, 2017, but there is the possibility for a second round in the spring of 2018 depending on the availability of funds. (WVDO, 2017)
- The **West Virginia University (WVU) Entrepreneurship and Innovation Law Clinic**, in partnership with Generation West Virginia, is creating a toolkit on how to start broadband cooperatives in the state. The toolkit should be available by December 2017 and will outline do-it-yourself options and recommended next steps for communities. (WVU Entrepreneurship and Innovation Law Clinic, 2017)
- The **West Virginia Broadband Enhancement Council** is a resource for communities interested in expanding their broadband capacity. The Council is currently looking for communities interested in creating broadband cooperatives as a pilot project. (West Virginia Broadband Enhancement Council, 2017)

TRAIL DEVELOPMENT

The **Coal River Group (CRG)** manages the Coal River Water Trail and is the major advocate for water quality improvement and river tourism in the watershed. The CRG maintains its own boat-rental business and livery service, Coal River Canoe & Kayak, at the nonprofit's headquarters in Tornado, West Virginia. Through a recent grant from the West Virginia Development Office, the CRG will provide mentoring and coaching to

entrepreneurs interested in starting river recreation-based businesses. The CRG will offer expertise based on its experience in the watershed and will help connect promising individuals with further training and assistance programs available in the state. (CRG, 2017)

The CRG's **Big Coal River Branch** is a committee of volunteers in towns along the Big Coal who organize river and stream cleanups, float trips, and other community-building events focused on the Big Coal River (CRG, 2017).

The National Park Service's **Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program** supports community-led natural resource conservation and outdoor recreation projects such as rail trail and water trail creation. This program would be a valuable resource for the Clear Fork Rail and Trail project (RTCA, 2017).

HMRRA is a public corporation founded in 1996 to manage the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System's off-road trails on private property in nine southern West Virginia coal counties. HMRRA currently manages 630 miles of ATV trails with seven unique trail systems located in five counties. The Hatfield-McCoy Trail System is the largest tourism project in the coalfield counties of southern West Virginia. Upon completion of its current trail development plan, HMRRA will have eleven trail systems in nine counties. (HMRRA, 2017)

Ashland Resort is the largest campground in the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System and the only camping facility with an "A" guest rating in West Virginia. Located in the community of Ashland (McDowell County), Ashland Resort built their resort from the ground up and have a wealth of knowledge about creating tourism services needed for the region. (Ashland Resort, 2017)

NEXT STEPS

Tourism products

- Collaborate with the CRG on improvements to the Coal River Water Trail, including:
 - marketing Whitesville as a key trail destination, and
 - improving existing and creating new boat launches and informational kiosks at Whitesville access points.
- Establish collaborative marketing relationships with statewide and regional partners to better advertise Whitesville’s motorcycle and water trail tourism opportunities, using the list of recommended resources above.
- Conduct a visitor study to develop baseline data for Whitesville’s current level of visitation.

Tourism services

- Promote business opportunities and conduct full market studies for potential tourism services, including:
 - campgrounds, cabins, and home rentals;
 - river guides and outfitters; and
 - restaurants and stores.³
- Identify riverfront property as suitable locations for campgrounds, river-based businesses, and other attractions.
- Coordinate with available small business development resources to determine how to best connect Whitesville residents with business development training opportunities.
- Facilitate mentorship, marketing, and hands-on, ongoing business support to ensure the viability of new business initiatives.

Infrastructure and basic services

- Continue work with the BCCEDC, the Regional Intergovernmental Council, and the West Virginia Development Office to develop strategies for bringing cell service to Whitesville.
- Submit a proposal to the Community Development Block Grants program to fund a cell tower infrastructure assessment.
- Connect with the Broadband Enhancement Council and the BCCEDC to plan for broadband internet expansion in anticipation of future tourism growth.
- Work with the Northern West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Center to:
 - use market data (including the findings in this report) to attract investment,
 - revise the town’s building inventory, and
 - pair the revised building inventory with potential new businesses outlined in this report.
- Consider adopting the Downtown Appalachia Program model as a resource for continued redevelopment.
- Explore options for sharing/coordinating services with other nearby communities.

³ The viability of restaurants and retail stores will depend on significantly increased tourism levels.

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