

Economic Revitalization and Resource Protection in Rural Mountain Communities

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Many of North Carolina's most beautiful rural communities are home to remarkable natural resources. Sometimes, however, these unique environmental assets limit the area's economic development opportunities. Bakersville is one such community.

Located at the base of Roan Mountain, an internationally-significant natural area and the world's largest natural rhododendron garden, Bakersville (population 339) boasts a rich cultural heritage, with families that have called the area home for generations. As North Carolina's mountains became increasingly affected by growth, Bakersville town leaders realized the importance of shaping the future of their community. How could they maintain the small town character so important to residents and revitalize their local economy?

Lifelong resident Ed William Wilson, III, whose family has worked as subsistence farmers for more than nine generations, very eloquently describes the mountaineers' attachment to the land, which has helped to preserve the natural heritage of the Southern Appalachians over the years:

For generations my family has worked, played, gone to church, married, raised our children and died around this area. We made every effort to be good stewards of the land. It was not an option or an attitude, it was necessary to survive. In our nation, and all too often, the ability to exploit our resources for short term gain has outstripped our interest in, or understanding of, the consequences for the future.

But we stand in a position today to address this imbalance, to act rather than react; to not simply plan for the future but to shape and mold it into a legacy we can give our children without excuse or regret . . . We welcome the opportunities that growth offers . . . [b]ut not at the expense of the very things that define this place and our home: our mountains, the oldest in the world, it is said. Our forests that cloak the hills with life. Our streams and rivers, the fresh waters basic to our life. We must demand that what would be new accommodate, even embrace, that which is old. That those who come here seeking should also be willing to give in equal measure.

*And that those who make this home
remember that it already is home...*

Getting Started

Roan Mountain has long had an important connection with Bakersville. Home of the Rhododendron Festival for more than 50 years, Bakersville promoted itself as the “Gateway to Roan Mountain.” Early economic development proposals suggested capitalizing on the site’s popularity by building a visitor center on top of the mountain.

Discussions with town and county leaders focused on the long-term implications of building a visitor center on Roan Mountain and the fact that it would be similar to building a bypass around downtown Bakersville: visitors would never bother stopping in the town, which would effectively eliminate many downtown small businesses and related economic activities and leave this county seat with a very limited economy to serve its 339 residents. In addition, such a development would destroy the rhododendron gardens that offered such appeal. Community residents and leaders arrived at the conclusion that if they could focus on revitalizing their downtown, the entire downtown district could serve as a visitor center and the natural resources unique to this area would be preserved.

The Small Towns Project

In 1995 HandMade in America (HIA), a regional nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the handmade craft industry in 21 counties of western North Carolina, was laying the groundwork to help small towns promote their cultural resources through *The Craft Heritage Trails of Western North Carolina*. The *Craft Heritage Trails* guidebook, published in 1996, included over 360 shops, galleries, studios, restaurants and bed-and-breakfasts that celebrated the

traditional and modern handmade craft industry in the western North Carolina mountains.

Several small towns approached HIA staff to request assistance. Town leaders in Mars Hill, Chimney Rock and Andrews were all concerned that they did not have many sites listed in the guidebook, but felt that with a little bit of work, they could expand their list of attractions for inclusion in the next book. When Bakersville leaders heard about the project, and realized that their town was very similar to the other three, they asked to be included in the HIA project.

Four Small Towns Come Together

The Four Small Towns Project aimed to help local leaders in Andrews, Bakersville, Chimney Rock and Mars Hill revitalize their downtown business districts and create small business opportunities for local residents through craft heritage tourism development. HandMade in America’s effort drew broad-based support from many partners, including the North Carolina Division of Community Assistance, the Kathleen Price Bryan Family Fund, The Conservation Fund’s Resourceful Communities Program, Conservation Trust for North Carolina, the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy (SAHC) and the US Forest Service (USFS).

The four towns were similar in many respects: each was smaller than most towns in the National Main Street Program; each town had few or no sites listed in the *Craft Heritage Trails* guidebook; and each had two or more local residents who agreed to take the lead in helping to oversee the project work locally. Becky Anderson, HIA Executive Director, liked to say that in order to participate in the project, each town could have no more than one main street and one stoplight.

When a resident of Andrews heard this, he was concerned that Andrews would be eliminated from the project because they had two stoplights in town—and he quickly offered to shoot out the second stoplight if needed to keep Andrews involved in the Four Small Towns Project! (He was just as quickly assured that Andrews could participate, no matter how many stoplights they had.)

There were differences, as well, ranging from population (Chimney Rock - 103; Bakersville - 339; Andrews - 1,100; and Mars Hill - 1,500); to local government involvement and support of the project; to access issues (Chimney Rock and Bakersville are relatively isolated, Andrews had been bypassed a number of years ago, and Mars Hill was in the process of being bypassed by I-26); to economic issues (in Bakersville, county government was the largest employer and they wanted to promote Bakersville as “the gateway to Roan Mountain,” Chimney Rock wanted to capitalize on nearby Chimney Rock Park and attract eco-tourists, Mars Hill was wrestling with the very real possibility that all their downtown businesses might move out to the bypass, and Andrews wanted to attract more tourists who were passing through on their way to the Nantahala River or the Great Smoky Mountains Railroad).

The Main Street Process

The project was designed to use the Main Street Program planning process developed by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and to customize it to meet the needs and the “workings” of small towns. Generous funding from the Kathleen Price Bryan Family Fund helped sustain the project. Second-year funding was required to be matched, dollar-for-dollar, by the towns, with each town required to raise \$6,250 locally. If any of the towns failed to raise their match, none

of the towns would receive their matching funds. This approach ensured strong local and regional support for the project.

Based on the Main Street Program, each participating community followed a similar process. During the first year, a “Resource Team,” comprised of downtown revitalization experts from throughout the mountain region, performed a thorough community assessment. Each small town chose a similar “sister community” in the mountain region that was also working on downtown revitalization; the “sister community” served as a mentor throughout the year. Finally, the towns were required to attend group planning and progress meetings held every six weeks in Asheville to report on progress, ask questions, share concerns and swap tales about their projects.

Public Involvement

Tailoring each Resource Team visit to the particular community was critical to their success. Each agenda was developed by a local steering committee and was designed to meet the needs and interests of the local government, the business sector and community groups.

A project coordinator worked closely with each town to provide the staffing support that would be needed to coordinate the Resource Team visit, and worked with the town afterward on implementing the team’s recommendations.

Team visits were publicized to all members of the community through newsletters distributed with water bills, individualized letters sent to business owners and newspaper articles and radio announcements.

The Resource Team agendas were designed to help team members meet as many folks as possible. Churches and fire departments sponsored community

suppers to enable Resource Team members to informally interview community members. Homemade cinnamon buns and coffee were served in the post offices when everyone came to get their mail in the morning, and were very useful in encouraging residents to complete a survey. Senior centers were visited so the elders' points of view could be included. In Bakersville, the Steering Committee felt it was important to find out what young people wanted for their town when they grew up, so the Resource Team ate lunch with the first and fourth graders at the elementary school on one day, and with the seventh and eighth graders in the middle school the second day. (Interestingly, 98% of the younger students wanted to live and work in Bakersville when they grew up, as did 93% of the seventh and eighth-graders.)

Resource Team agendas also were designed to provide a historical perspective on the community, including its traditions, economy, and culture. On the first night of each visit, Resource Team members were treated to presentations by life-long residents, historical society members, self-taught historians, teachers and others who could tell the story about the town's history, leaders and local characters, economic and recreational activities, schools, churches, and anything else that was important to the town. As Richard Dillingham said in the Mars Hill visit, "[Y]ou have to look back at where you've come from to figure out where you want to go."

Community leaders and project team members felt that this upfront communication and outreach helped generate strong local support for the community assessment process and subsequent recommendations. People felt that a sincere effort had been made to reach out to the community and hear people's thoughts and opinions.

Bakersville: Growth and Opportunity

The Resource Team visit focused on identifying Bakersville's assets and resources that could be sustainably used to promote economic growth and community improvement. Several key assets that were identified as potential eco- and heritage-tourism attractions were: Roan Mountain, Cane Creek, Penland School of Crafts, local craftspeople and artisans, and the historic County Courthouse (ca. 1907), to name a few.

The Resource Team's design expert, a landscape architect, saw a great deal of potential in developing a greenway along Cane Creek to provide recreational opportunities for residents and visitors alike. Local leaders were encouraged to capitalize on the fact that most of the Town's residents like to walk throughout the community, sometimes on sidewalks, sometimes on trails. The promotions expert pointed out that there are very few places where you can fish for trout in the middle of the downtown business district, and suggested that the greenway could be developed to showcase fishing opportunities as well.

The Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy secured a DuPont American Greenways grant to develop a walking trail along Cane Creek. The trail passed through three properties, so local leaders met with the property owners and the Town Attorney and secured donations of access easements. Using an Urban Forestry grant from the North Carolina Division of Forest Resources, a landscape masterplan has since been completed for the entire downtown and CreekWalk areas. Trees and rhododendrons have also been planted to create town entryways as recommended during the Resource Team visit. Townfolk are building a foot bridge, gazebo, picnic area, and exercise stations

along the CreekWalk. Artists from the nearby Penland School, with funding from the USFS/National Endowment for the Arts grants program, are working to create an entryway, fishing benches and paving stones for the creekside trail.

Measures of Success

The Bakersville project team has recently documented the economic impact of the downtown revitalization efforts over the past eighteen months. There have been 3 building facade restorations, 2 building renovations, 9 new jobs, 4 new businesses, and a total investment of over \$446,000 in Bakersville as a result of the downtown project. In the first published version of *The Craft Heritage Trails of Western North Carolina* there were no sites listed for the town of Bakersville. In the upcoming second publication, eleven sites will be included. Finally, because of the recommendations made during the Resource Team visit, there is a heightened interest in environmental and land use issues. In fact, the Town Board recently appointed a subcommittee to research and make recommendations on limited zoning to be implemented in the town. A part-time planner has been hired with funding from the Year of the Mountains planning grants program to coordinate the downtown revitalization and greenway efforts.

Looking Ahead

Bakersville will continue to work closely with many partners over the next few years. Partnerships with other mountain communities will be continued to ensure regional as well as local cooperation. The Four Small Towns Project generated two very exciting initiatives, in which Bakersville will be involved:

- A **leadership development grant** has been awarded by the Appalachian Regional Commission to help “train local teams to be their own town managers.” Four of the participating small towns have no professional town manager, so the responsibility for implementing projects has typically fallen on individual volunteers’ shoulders. This initiative will ensure that there is a local leadership base knowledgeable about all facets of project design, funding and implementation. Each town has chosen a major project they want to implement. Bakersville will expand its CreekWalk/greenway to include a new park and will acquire the historic (1907) courthouse from Mitchell County and renovate it, perhaps as a restaurant, overnight accommodation, craft gallery or museum.
- The **Blue Ridge Heritage Initiative (BRHI)** is a multi-state heritage tourism development project that will showcase the traditional music and agricultural and garden practices of the Blue Ridge Mountains, as well as the arts and cultural traditions of the Cherokee Nation. The small towns that have been involved in the Small Towns Project will integrate their downtown revitalization efforts with the thematic heritage tourism “trails” that will be developed through the BRHI. In essence, these small towns will become the “hub facilities” for heritage tourism and small business development, which will continue to strengthen their on-going downtown revitalization efforts.

Lessons for Community Planners

It is often difficult to pursue economic development while preserving

the cultural and natural resources of a community. However, as the process in Bakersville demonstrates, full community involvement results in creative solutions that have strong local support and commitment to implementation. Bakersville's success offers several lessons for development practitioners:

- **Rural residents are some of our mountains' most exceptional resources.** Families that have lived in rural communities for generations have an understanding and appreciation of the local culture and natural systems; such insights should be viewed as assets. This sense of stewardship has protected the natural resources over the years, with economic need (or greed, frequently from outside sources) often being the primary factor in actions leading to cultural and environmental degradation. People live in isolated areas because they like being there and have ties to the land—their home—that are hard to replicate.
- **Strong community involvement builds unmatched support for the project.** On January 7, 1998, Bakersville suffered severe setbacks when Cane Creek flooded, almost two feet higher than any previously recorded flood. Volunteer support to rebuild and restore the community has been extraordinary. Town leaders and residents are working to turn the challenge into an opportunity: when a mobile home park in the middle of town was condemned because of the flood, Bakersville leaders determined to restore the site and include it in the Cane Creek Greenway plan as a new community park. Funding is being secured for planning and site development, and local residents feel as though they have something

positive to work toward in the aftermath of the flooding.

- **Natural, cultural and historic resources are inextricably linked.** The mountains have been home to many families for hundreds of years. Historic and cultural ties to the land are important in most rural communities and will be perpetuated if communities are involved in natural resource protection efforts and decisions.
- **Find out about the local culture.** Every community has its own special characteristics that distinguish it from other communities. Mountain communities are very different from coastal or piedmont communities and from each other. This “community character” is an asset and should be respected.
- **Spend time with local residents, listen to their concerns, and “put yourself in their shoes.”** Conservationists frequently focus on the natural resource issues and overlook the underlying causes that lead to environmental degradation. More often than not, the real cause is economic need, or the need for jobs. On the other hand, planners often focus only on job development, overlooking the community's heritage and ties to the land. It is vitally important to spend time with local residents and listen to their needs and concerns.
- **Help identify economic alternatives that are compatible with natural and heritage resource protection.** The key to protecting rural resources is to develop new economies with jobs that are tied to protecting or restoring the heritage and natural resource base. This will build a local constituency that

supports conservation of the very resources that define the communities.

- **Help secure funding to implement culturally-appropriate and environmentally-friendly actions and programs.** The surest method to encourage sustainable development is to provide technical and financial assistance for implementation.
- **Above all, be patient.** Change does not come easily or quickly. The social and economic problems took many years to get to this point, and will take time to turn around. The positive community relationships and long-term benefits to the community, however, will be worth the investment of time and energy.