



Jackson County, NC
CREATING OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMIES
August 2023



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Acknowledgements

The Creating Outdoor Recreation Economies (CORE) program is made possible by a U.S. Economic Development Administration State Tourism Grant which awarded \$6 Million to the State of North Carolina's Supporting and Strengthening Resiliency in North Carolina's Travel, Tourism, and Outdoor Recreation Sectors Initiative. As a component of this Initiative, the North Carolina Department of Commerce's Rural Economic Development Division (REDD) developed the CORE program. The CORE program offers strategic planning and technical assistance to help rural communities leverage North Carolina's abundant outdoor recreation assets to bolster local economic vitality.



The Rural Economic Development Division announced the technical assistance program offering Outdoor Recreation Economy Strategic Planning and Asset Development services in late 2022. Communities from across the state applied to engage with strategic planning services and 34 local governments were accepted to participate. Jackson County, NC was among the first local governments to begin the planning process. Rural Planning staff, who is responsible for facilitating strategic economic development planning and implementation services, worked with local government staff to communicate the goals of the program, identify local opportunities, and assemble a planning work group.

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Executive Summary

Through the Community Outdoor Recreation Economy (CORE) process, Jackson County collaborated with NC Commerce Rural Economic Development Division staff and local stakeholders in a strategic planning process to identify and develop outdoor recreation assets that present economic growth opportunities. Strategy development focuses on leveraging outdoor recreation assets to increase income from tourism experiences, encourage small business development, enhance quality of life for residents, plan for outdoor recreation asset and infrastructure development, and position communities to grow and attract outdoor manufacturing industries. The planning process is tailored to identify specific needs, goals, and opportunities based on the knowledge of local leaders and stakeholders.

The plan proposes strategies, actions and tasks that communities can take to increase economic vitality by leveraging outdoor recreation. For the purposes of this strategic planning program outdoor recreation is defined as all recreational activities undertaken for leisure that occur outdoors, with an emphasis on those activities that involve some level of intentional physical exertion and occur in nature-based environments. Furthermore, other community assets and economic institutions that benefit from or complement the outdoor recreation economy are addressed in the plan.

This is a strategic plan that includes a vision or economic target state, directions to start out in and some first projects to further leverage outdoor recreation activity. It is critical that the assembled Work Group continue to meet, add members as expertise is needed, and be empowered by the local governments to implement this plan. The proposed Actions—short and longer term—are expected to evolve as conditions change and opportunities arise but the Work Group should still move Jackson County toward the economic position using the Strategies the group has established.

The Work Group of professionals and avid recreators undertaking this study were surveyed at the very beginning of the process for their priority economic impact areas and outcomes. The most important benefits to be gained from Outdoor Recreation assets are focused on:

- 100% Increased revenue for existing outdoor businesses
- Developing a skilled outdoor workforce
- 92% Attracting new outdoor business and industry to the County
- Improving the quality of life for full/part-time residents

Some of the critical issues raised and addressed by the proposed Actions include: increasing residents participation, access and knowledge of the outdoor activities that others come to Jackson County to enjoy; creation of some “known” destinations or signature Jackson County activities and experiences; discouraging overuse and abuse of natural assets; developing the cohesive outdoor community that will help to develop and recruit new outdoor businesses.

Three areas of work or Action Strategies have been defined with a fourth added to then share information about what Jackson County has to offer and how to access it. This Work Plan is not exhaustive. It represents the critical work of getting organized and directed with empowered leadership. These strategies should guide efforts over the coming several years—but especially the next four. Other needs and opportunities will arise as work gets underway!

Action Strategies

1. Home Basecamp + Natural Escape

Lodging and dining are recognized as strengths in Jackson County hospitality with a wide variety of options and high levels of customer satisfaction. The county is also home to many second home residents. Visitors come to stay in the county while making day trips in all directions to activities even in surrounding counties, before coming “home” for dinner, entertainment and a good night sleep. The Work Group named these conditions and the first Strategy--our “Home Basecamp” and Natural Escape.

Highest priority was given to the Greenway and developing walking and biking trails and routes that connect the communities with recreation facilities. These need to be accessible for most residents and guests. The goal is to make outdoor recreation part of everyday life—convenient, safe, invigorating and enjoyable.

It was very important to the Work Group that the visitors develop a greater sense of community with regard to resource stewardship. This can be encouraged through activities like recognition and geographic naming of local places, special ecosystem exploration and an understanding of local history and traditions. When visitors engage and treat Jackson County like home, it will truly become their Natural Escape Homebase.

2. A Diverse outdoor recreation scene

There is a wide variety of outdoor recreation that is supported by the resource base in Jackson County. And yet—there is not a specific activity or attraction synonymous with Jackson County in the minds of outdoor enthusiasts. One area of work was to develop an experience that would put the County on the outdoor recreation map. A few projects are suggested here to explore and address this issue. One is the development of the whitewater surf, competition and observation area in Dillsboro and the other is the connection of existing mountain bike trails to create a longer expedition-style experience. The suggested trail would be a connection from WCU to Asheville! A third is the development of more informal riverside parks. These may host water access and other recreation activities, food options and events.

The Work Group has also proposed to convene the many resource providers, volunteers and stewards, outdoor businesses, sport organizations, local celebrities, aspiring entrepreneurs and ardent supporters in a regular social setting that would encourage development of broader

friendships, collaboration and a cohesive Jackson County outdoor culture. This is the model that successfully started the Outdoor Gear Builders and has now expanded to become the Outdoor Business Association.

3. Unique, personal experiences

Jackson County also has some of the steepest terrain in the state. Even “moderate” hiking and biking trails and climbing faces can be too difficult for most visitors. Extensive tourism studies have shown that visitors to Jackson County are primarily retired couples or families. A major challenge is the provision of outdoor experiences appropriate to the skill level of most of the visitors-- and indeed also the resident base!

This Strategy focuses on the issues of access for different kinds of recreators and in ways that are respectful of the natural resource base. Targeted groups include local youth who may not have the opportunity to enjoy or even try some of the activities that visitors come to enjoy— but that are the future workforce for the outdoor businesses in the region and stewards of the landscape. Another is families that come to the mountains to “be” in the forest and along the rivers. There is currently no place to spend lazy play time with food and entertainment options.

It is recognized that some of the most extreme sport recreators come to enjoy specific resource “gems” that are tucked away in Jackson County but may leave without contributing much to the local economy. This strategy also includes an effort to develop access for guided groups that will respect the natural carrying capacity of the place and leave with a curated experience they will not forget.

4. Information sharing, outdoor brand development and targeted marketing

This Strategy is about defining the Jackson County outdoor experience and helping local residents and visitors to easily find and enjoy it. One project suggested is the location of outdoor information kiosks in places that local residents frequent, outlining what there is to do and where to access it. Residents and WCU students are not always sure what is available in Jackson County. There is also interest in developing a recognizable and consistent signage program on roadways, in downtowns, at trailheads and even along the trails.

Another body of work under this strategy is keeping tabs on the locations and accuracy of information about outdoor recreation in Jackson County. One popular app that is crowd-sourced includes trails that cross private land—without letting hikers know that they need to be extra respectful.

Implementation

The need to keep the Work Group meeting and moving ahead with the outlined projects and tasks has already been mentioned. To accomplish any new development and management tasks, as well as the many outreach activities required to build an economy, additional staff

time is needed. Being pro-active in developing an economic sector like outdoor recreation would also benefit from some specialized knowledge and passion—as well as connections. To grow an economy requires a gardener!

Funding is required to support development as well as maintenance and management. Various stakeholders and Work Group members have offered ideas for funding streams from ensuring that income-producing activities are built into as many outdoor recreation facilities and experiences as possible, to dedicating a new two-percent bed tax in the communities most interested in developing this sector, to possibly starting a mission-driven business with any profit dedicated to further outdoor recreation economy development.

This line of thought needs further development as implementation moves forward. An economic report from Headwaters Economics, *“The Amenity Trap: How high-amenity communities can avoid being loved to death”* includes a listing of how other outdoor asset-rich communities are raising the funds needed to address these challenges. The report can be found online at: <https://headwaterseconomics.org/outdoor-recreation/amenity-trap/>.



Background

Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation

Outdoor recreation activity and associated expenditures generate a substantial economic impact. This is a broad economic sector that comprises a diverse range of industries including manufacturing, retail, arts, entertainment and recreation, as well as many supporting activities such as construction, travel and tourism, accommodation and food service, and many more.

Nationwide, in 2021 the outdoor recreation economy represented \$454.0 billion in current-dollar gross domestic product (GDP), or 1.9 percent of the United States' total GDP. The outdoor recreation sector of the economy is growing at a faster rate than the overall economy. In 2021, Inflation-adjusted ("real") GDP for the outdoor recreation economy increased 18.9 percent, compared with a 5.9 percent increase for the overall U.S. economy, reflecting a rebound in outdoor recreation after the decrease of 21.6 percent in 2020 during the initial pandemic shut-down. Real gross output for the outdoor recreation economy increased 21.7 percent, while outdoor recreation compensation increased 16.2 percent and employment increased 13.1 percent. Employment in the outdoor recreation industry increased in all 50 states during 2021.

(U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2021.

<https://www.bea.gov/news/2022/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-us-and-states-2021>)

In 2021 outdoor recreation contributed \$11,836,649,000 in total value-added economic impact to **North Carolina's** GDP. North Carolina ranked as the 11th highest state in "Value-Added Outdoor Recreation in Total outdoor recreation activities". This included employment for over 130,000 individuals that resulted in over \$5.9 Billion in total compensation. Employment in key industries within the outdoor recreation sector includes over 8,000 in manufacturing, 44,000 in retail, 27,000 in accommodation and food service, and over 23,000 in arts, entertainment, and recreation.

(U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Economic Analysis. Outdoor Recreation Satellite Account, U.S. and States, 2021.

<https://www.bea.gov/news/2022/outdoor-recreation-satellite-account-us-and-states-2021>).

Outdoor Recreation Participation

According to the 2022 Outdoor Industry Association 'Outdoor Participation Trends Report', "outdoor participation continues to grow at record levels. More than half (55%) of Americans ages 6 and over participated in at least one outdoor activity in 2022, and the outdoor recreation participant base grew 2.3% in 2022 to 168.1M participants. This growing number of outdoor participants, however, did not fundamentally alter long-term declines in high frequency or 'core' outdoor participation". (Outdoor Industry Association. 2023 Outdoor Participation Trends Report.

<https://outdoorindustry.org/resource/2022-outdoor-participation-trends-report/>)

These studies show that approximately 56% of North Carolinians also participate in some form of outdoor recreation each year. This includes more than 22.8 million visitors to North Carolina State Parks in 2021 — three million more than any other year on record. Many other public parks, national parks and forests, and other recreation areas report increased visitation as well. These numbers represent a solid base of individuals participating in outdoor recreation and contributing to the associated economic opportunities.

Local Tourism


Jackson County is shown below by VisitNC (EDPNC) to outpace surrounding counties in visitor spending in 2021. These numbers are from the traditional NAICS classification and not the Special Account for outdoor recreation. Jackson County shows \$63.7M in Arts, Entertainment and Recreation spending with Henderson County second with \$54.9M. Jackson County's role as a "homebase" is clear from the Lodging and Food + Beverage numbers.

Visitor Spending 2021 (\$M) from VisitNC						
	Haywood	Jackson	Swain	Macon	Henderson	Transylvania
Lodging	80.4	115.2	88	84.12	94.7	45.9
Food + Beverage	101.1	129.7	96.9	101.83	126.1	53.9
Recreation	44	63.7	49.8	45.77	54.9	25.4
Retail	28.9	39.6	30.7	29.81	34	16.5
Transportation	69	89.2	69.1	62.38	81.6	36.4
Total	323.3	437.4	334.5	323.9	391.3	178.2

The slide below from the Destination Research project undertaken and shared by the Jackson County Tourism Development Authority (JC TDA or TDA), summarizes who is coming to Jackson County to visit. Please note the high visitor satisfaction! Usually overnight expenditures are three times what day users spend but in Jackson County it is over five times.

Jackson County

Visitor Profile Research



Summary & Observations:

- Typical overnight leisure travel party composition is **middle aged adults or families with children**. Most are well-educated and are retired or professionals and arrive in travel parties of 2-4 people.
- The majority of travelers to Jackson County come from the **3 to 6 hour drive radius among contiguous states, however visitors responded to the survey from 42 states as well as the United Kingdom, Canada and Germany. Nearly all visitors drive into Jackson County.**
- **Overall trip satisfaction for visitors to Jackson County is high; Overnight (4.74), Daytrip (4.62) on a 5.0 scale.** Visitor amenities that rated the highest among both segments were variety of outdoor experiences, lodging value and unique, local dining.
- **Overall spending per travel party:** overnight = \$1,082; daytrip = \$202. It is important to note, typically in most destinations, overnight visitors spend 3X as much as daytrippers.
- The **primary purpose for overnight visitors** most recent leisure trip to Jackson County was getaway, general relaxation, driving/sightseeing, hiking and waterfalls while **daytrip visitors reported driving/sightseeing, general relaxation, hiking, getaway and waterfalls.**
- The **majority of overnight (83%) and daytrip (88%) visitors to Jackson County report being repeat visitors** indicating an opportunity to increase advertising and public relations to drive more first-time visitors who stay longer and spend more.
- **Top 5 Activities by OVERNIGHT Visitors: Unique local dining, driving/site-seeing, shopping, waterfalls and hiking.**
- **Top 5 Activities by DAYTRIP Visitors: Unique local dining, driving/site-seeing, shopping, waterfalls and hiking.**

Taken directly from: Young Strategies Inc. Destination Research - Nov 2018 – March 2019, 2,192 respondents

Outdoor Recreation Challenges

The Covid pandemic reiterated the importance of fresh air and time in nature for not only physical health but also as an antidote to mental and social stresses. Recreation is about overall health—especially when done in nature! It is important to ensure access to outdoor recreation, particularly among demographic populations that have not historically participated in outdoor recreation at levels comparable to others.

Local residents increasingly seek outdoor recreation opportunities that are convenient to where they live so they can participate on a regular basis without the need to travel long distances by car or to visit recreation destinations outside of their home communities. The ideal is the ability to walk/bike as a safe, pleasant and convenient mode of transportation for daily errands to work or school, purchase groceries, play.

During the Covid pandemic many of western North Carolina’s parks and forests saw record numbers of visitors, overwhelming the most iconic and fragile landscapes. A critical issue in the last two years has been the repair of these overused places and recovery of the natural ecosystems. Leave no Trace educational programs and many hours of volunteer labor worked first to clean up and then to stem the flow of trash left behind. Now resource providers are working on three issues critical in the planning of any additional tourism in natural areas:

- Understanding the natural carrying capacity and building-in facility or access limits to ensure that visitors do no harm—to nature, themselves or the surrounding communities
- Disbursement of visitors to ease the burden on many of our most loved views and destination resources
- Increasing staff capacity and the pool of trained volunteers

Flight to small towns and rural areas has also increased real estate demand and values. In addition to the critical impact on affordable housing is the challenge of maintaining the scenic landscape that underpins the tourism and recreation economies. So much of what North Carolinians and other guests come west to see and do takes advantage of “borrowed” landscapes. The Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation, during recent county meetings of the Blue Ridge Rising project, reminded us that what visitors look out over is not necessarily protected. Privately owned ridgeline and higher elevation properties are still available for development. Parkway visitors report that looking out from the parkway at homes covering the hillsides is not as desirable for the Parkway experience as long views of forests and fields. And according to Friends of the Parkway surveys, 97% of the over 43,000 average daily visitors are on the parkway for the views—and will decrease visits when the views no longer match expectations. The Destination Development research conducted for the JC TDA also underlines the importance of views with driving/sightseeing as one of the primary activities undertaken by both day and overnight visitors.

Planning Process

Under the Commerce Rural Economic Development Division, ARC Rural Planning staff facilitates the CORE strategic planning process with participation from the local government and an established local work group. This work group is comprised of individuals who have a vested interest in leveraging outdoor recreation to enhance economic development. The planning process employs established planning methods including presenting economic and associated data, asset mapping, economic driver identification, SWOT analysis, stakeholder interviews, business questionnaires, local work group discussions, and more. The planning process was tailored to meet the specific needs, goals, and opportunities that local stakeholders identified.

This planning effort was coordinated by the Jackson County Office of Economic Development who helped to identify and then assemble the core Work Group of outdoor recreation and economic development professionals in the County. A summer intern and recent WCU graduate, assisted the process with communications and by identifying and interviewing critical recreation experts and businesses not engaged in the regular monthly meetings.

The Work Group included representatives from Jackson County Economic Development, Planning Department and Parks & Recreation – Outdoor Recreation and others from the Town of Sylva Economic Development/Main Street office, Pinnacle Park Foundation, an avid recreator and career counselor from Southwestern Community College, Friends of Panthertown and the Southwestern Commission-Regional Council of Governments. NC Commerce Rural Planning staff facilitated the meetings.

The Work Group met monthly—March 2, April 18, May 18 and July 12 to work on the plans and priorities. On May 15 the Work Group toured three sites located along the Tuckasegee river that are owned by Jackson County and available for redevelopment. They were joined by Amy Allison from Made x Mountains with the Mountain Biz Works CDFI and Jackson County Floodplain Administrator Tony Elders. A follow-up interview was held with Shane Williams, local paddling expert, who was unable to join the tour. Further information about the sites, conditions and Work Group suggested activities are presented in the Appendix.

Asset-based economic sector development

The planning process included a review of the **outdoor assets**—natural, human, organizational as well as existing activities, tourism patterns, businesses engaged in or with outdoor recreation and existing information sources—virtual and mapped. These assets are the base on which economic expansion can be built. Asset lists are included in the Appendix at the end of this report.

Jackson County has a very rich base of natural assets supporting outdoor recreation. Most renowned include the Blue Ridge Parkway, Great Smoky Mountain National Park, Tuckasegee River Blueway, Nantahala National Forest including Panthertown Valley, Roy Taylor, Big Laurel,

the Mountains to Sea trail, and Whitewater Falls to name just a few. In addition there exists a core of “small gems” that put Jackson County on the recreation map for those in various specific sport associations. The general public may not be aware of some of these gems and indeed they often support experiences beyond the skill levels of many visitors. Some of those gems by sport:

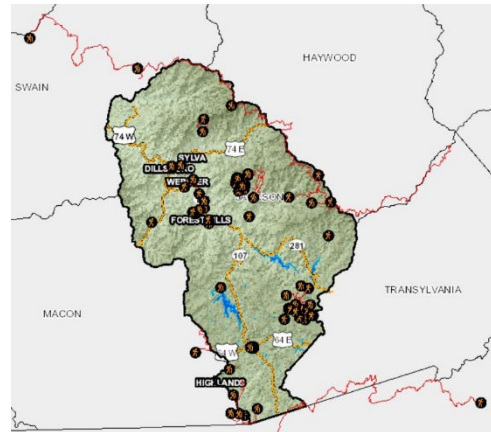
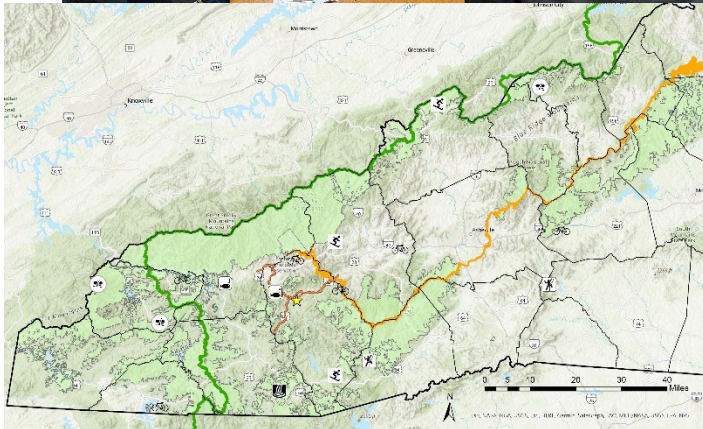
- Whitewater paddling – W Fork class IV, Class II mini-gorge, E Fork Eternity Hole
- Climbing – Laurel Knob (largest face east of Rockies), Green Mtn, Highway 107 Boulders
- Mountain Biking – Fire Mountain, WCU trails
- Fly Fishing – Tuck Central Valley

Jackson County Economic Development and Rural Planning staff assembled and reviewed as many existing plans and project reports as could be assembled relating to outdoor recreation. The idea of better using outdoor recreation as an economic base is not a new concept for Jackson County. It has been a stated goal for many years and is reflected in many plans, development proposals and research projects. Indeed much of the work outlined here endorses, prioritizes and builds on these existing plans and studies. Over time some projects have changed, been implemented or dropped and others have shown themselves to be even more pivotal now to the kind of community desired by its residents. A listing of some of the plans reviewed can be found in the Appendix.

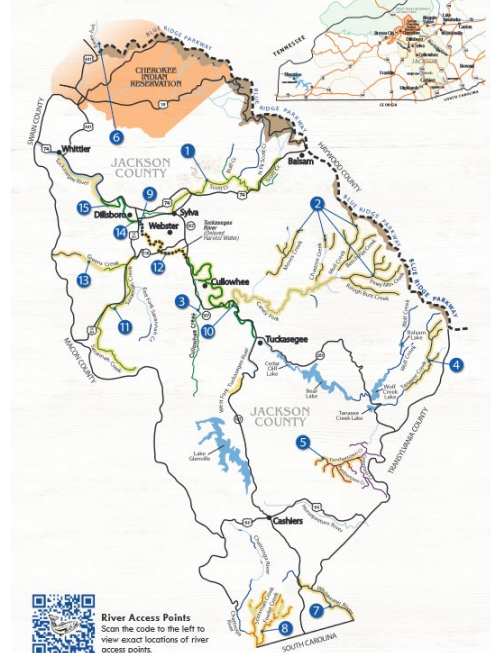
Before the first meeting of the Work Group, a survey was distributed to ascertain expectations and priorities for the planning process and outdoor recreation as an economic sector. Five responses were received although group discussion has unanimously supported the results, especially regarding the primary aspects of the outdoor economy that the group sought to accomplish. The priorities are: Increased revenue for existing outdoor businesses; Developing a skilled outdoor workforce; Attracting new outdoor business and industry to the County and; Improving the quality of life for full/part-time residents.

A traditional SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis was performed and has served as the basis for the development of the work plans. A question about what was sacred to local residents resulted in discussion about over-use and the need for more controlled access to the most pristine and sensitive resources. The tops of waterfalls and especially steep areas were recommended for a reduction in access to eliminate concerns from unsafe behavior. The “carrying capacity” of the resources, as well as maintaining a desired quality level for the visitor experience, underlay the key action opportunities proposed in this plan.

Numerous additional “stakeholders” were interviewed during this process. Avid recreators, recreation instructors and businesses were asked about the challenges and opportunities they see for their sport or business in Jackson County. This input was integral to the development of the strategies and informs their implementation. Many of these stakeholders should be engaged for project development as they provide the most accurate information for user and manager perspectives. A summary can be found in the Meeting notes at the end of this report.



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Rural Planning often prepares a map showing all of the outdoor assets in the County. There have been many such maps assembled by many organizations already. In addition, there are so many assets in Jackson County that scale and readability are an issue. The Jackson County GIS office prepared a map that was used by the group for reference and data checking. It has several layers showing various types of assets by activity. The GIS Department also hosts a Trail and Walking Path Finder tool (<https://gis.jacksonnc.org/Trails/>) that allows visitors to search for nearby trails and measure the distance of a planned outing. The Jackson County TDA is a rich source for maps and photos of many sports and lists of supporting businesses and services—like guides (<https://www.discoverjacksonnc.com/>). Each sport has websites and apps that they use with the specialized information necessary to find and safely enjoy areas of interest to them (for example <https://www.alltrails.com/mobile>; <https://carolinaclimbers.org/>; <https://www.singletracks.com/bike-trails/region/north-carolina/>; and so many more).

The Town of Sylva was also engaged in a parallel CORE planning process but with a focus on especially downtown or Main Street. The economic position and strategies generated are complimentary to the work done here. Project coordinators served on both Work Groups and will be engaged in implementation.

A **Retail Market Analysis** was performed by Main Street & Rural Planning staff. Data was provided by Claritas and pulled in March 2023. Looking at the summary below--a retail gap shows potential for growth while a surplus often signals an area of existing economic strength—an attractor. NC Main Street program uses the gap to calculate sales space growth potential for each item classification.

In a 15-mile ring around the Recreation Center in Cullowhee there is:

- Total Retail Gap (*unmet mkt needs*) of **\$113,907,696**
 - Clothing \$21,904,360 10% capture may support 7,301 SF
 - Shoes \$ 2,260,548 10% capture may support 754 SF
 - Sporting Goods \$ 2,457,344 10% capture may support 2,171 SF

- Total Retail Surplus (*exceed expected need by population*) of **\$85,255,155**
 - Gasoline Stations \$31,237,252
 - Full-Service Restaurants \$ 1,397,892
 - Limited-Service Restaurants \$ 1,246,844

And then there is also projected growth—

- Beer, Wine & Liquor - Retail Gap **\$6,901,317** + \$1,250,962 Projected Growth (2027)

A full report is attached in the Appendix for further analysis and possible retail development programs. It will become more useful as work continues toward business expansion and development.

Economic Positioning Statement and Work Plan

Jackson County is our Western NC home basecamp and natural escape with a diverse outdoor recreation scene providing unique experiences everyone can call their own.

This economic positioning statement is important in the identification of how Jackson County fits within the larger regional outdoor economy. It articulates what the Work Group saw as the greatest strengths and unique role that Jackson County plays, and can expand on, for greater benefit. It is visionary as it is stated as an accomplished condition. The position also includes three strategies or areas of action that will move the County toward the accomplishment of the position. The three strategies include: being the home basecamp and natural escape; having a diverse outdoor recreation scene and providing unique personal experiences. A fourth strategy was included—information sharing and branding. The actions shown in **red** were the Work Group priorities.

More information on the evolution of the economic position and strategies can be found in the meeting notes in the Appendix. Here is an abbreviated list of what the Work Group discussed as part of each strategy followed by the work plan for it. The work plans are a starting place for action in the coming few years and are expected to evolve as groups further engage in and develop the tasks outlined.

Being the Home Base Camp + Natural Escape for residents and guests

The Work Group was anxious to continue offering and growing the quality and variety of hospitality offerings. This includes not only a place to land and stay or to live (short and long-term), but also ease and quality of shopping, eating and generally rejuvenating. High priority was placed on being the hub from which residents and guests can easily and quickly get to and between places to stay and places to be active in nature. Greatest visitor expenditures are made for accommodation and food/beverages. There was extended discussion on the development of a local ‘culture’ that starts with developing in residents and visitors a deep natural and cultural knowledge, which then translates to a sense of belonging and hopefully greater respect for Jackson County as a unique place, a home base, with highly-valued outdoor resources.

Strategy One: Be the Home Basecamp and Natural Escape

Action One: **Increase Trail Connectivity between the Towns and outdoor assets**

Task 1: Implement the Greenway Plan

- Develop and sign those areas already available for public access
- Over time fill in with the purchase of land or easements to complete

Task 2: Identify destinations and safe, connecting roadways to sign for convenient daily walking and bicycling

Action Two: Participate in Pinnacle Park planning

- Advocate for inclusion of multi-use trails, less strenuous options
- Identify trail connection into downtown Sylva

Action Three: Develop a Jackson County Stewardship Council

- Convene resource providers and stewardship groups to ascertain needs, challenges, priorities and resource needs
- Craft volunteer action program with coordinated recruitment, workdays, specialty skills and joint trainings

Action Four: Explore and encourage new recreation hospitality options

- Approach USFS regarding campground development in Jackson County
- Consider other overnight options that might keep budget-conscious recreators in County for an extra meal, overnight stay

Expanding and Developing a Diverse Outdoor Recreation Scene

This strategy seeks to expand the types of experiences available in Jackson County. It was suggested that Jackson County needs recognized destinations and signature experiences that place it on the maps as must-visit locations for avid recreators, gear makers—to keep them longer, investing and coming back. The intent is also to expand outdoor activities to include

more social, entrepreneurial and stewardship engagement. The Work Group seeks to be ready to attract investment and promote income-generating opportunities.

Strategy Two: Expand and Develop a Diverse Outdoor Recreation Scene

Action One: **Develop Whitewater park at Dillsboro former dam site**

- Convene local and regional paddling and river development experts to review river conditions, earlier plans, unique opportunities
- Undertake feasibility analysis including competition for such facilities in region
- Master Plan whitewater wave, access areas, audience viewing, parking and other activities for non-paddlers and those of lesser skill, bike and walking connections to Dillsboro and Sylva

Action Two: Expand Trail Experiences for longer stays, unique and notable experiences

- Convene Plott Balsam ridgeline property owners, Pinnacle Park and mountain bike trail ambassadors to evaluate feasibility, uniqueness and desirability of interconnected trail from Fire Mountain to Balsam Knob
- Explore potential for Moses Creek mountain bike “Long Trail” or route from Wayhutta to Asheville
- Strategize business and income opportunities, support services for Expeditions

Action Three: Convene and Nurture an Outdoor Social Network

- Establish regular, advertised informal meet-ups of outdoor businesses, guides, gear builders, stewards, experts and enthusiasts to gather for social interaction
- Invite Outdoor Business Alliance members and sport celebrities out for joint experiences and exposure to Jackson County
- Perform building and site inventory, evaluate supply chain needs, support opportunities

Expand and further develop unique, personal experiences

This Strategy focuses on expanding who can enjoy outdoor recreation in Jackson County and seeks to expand the experiences available that would encourage visitors to stay longer and return often. With concern over the carrying capacity of natural resources and quality of the local experience, there is a proposal to develop guide services and other income-generating services that engage residents and guests in smaller group activities that allow enjoyment of recreation, learning, stewardship and making.

Strategy three: Further develop Unique, Personal experiences for all

Action One: **Establish Youth Outdoor Council**

- Identify and convene key actors in youth environmental education and recreation
- Identify program gaps and opportunities to provide recreation exposure and equipment access also targeting lower income youth, many levels of ability and summer break programming

- Work with Jobs Corp and new Stewardship Council to design outdoor student learning service programs

Action Two: Develop riverfront family outdoor activity centers and events

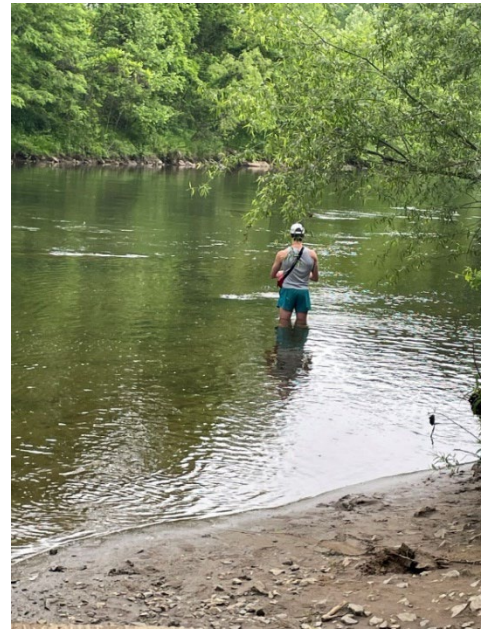
- Evaluate Drexel site for beginner and family river access, range of other outdoor games and experiences, re-use of building for indoor participation in traditionally outdoor activities with intent to extend the season and fill rainy days
- Evaluate other site options for similar day-at-the-river destinations – Dillsboro above the rapids, the Cullowhee (CURVE) park site for student and community use as well as the potential Monteith Gap location once the roundabout is built—and connections to downtown, commercial areas via trails

Action Three: Develop new small group experiences - educational, recreational and income opportunities

- Evaluate activities and unique resource areas that might be enjoyed with controlled visitation for resource education and respecting carrying-capacity
- Convene existing guides, resource experts (potential guides) for interest in expanding services and income potential
- Model concierge service feasibility – include accommodations, food, local travel with expert guides—for income generation and demand, target audiences, marketing strategy

Information sharing, experience branding and targeted marketing

Strategy four is fairly self-explanatory. During the process it became clear that many local residents do not know where to go or how to access the many recreational facilities enjoyed by visitors. Students from WCU have admitted to not knowing how many activities are available within the county and thus did not enjoy them during their time in Cullowhee. Similarly, many local people—young and old—do not have access to the equipment needed to enjoy outdoor sports. For many activities some guidance is also needed for safe and enjoyable experiences. Access to this information and equipment, as well as making Jackson County’s unique stamp on outdoor recreation, are important to economic success!



Strategy four: Information sharing, experience branding and targeted marketing

Action One: Develop a Jackson County outdoor brand and targeted marketing program that ties into the “Play On NC” brand.

- Convene representative advisory group to oversee branding program
- Find funding and prepare RFP/RFQ, guide consultant on desired uses of brand

Action Two: **Develop and Install outdoor recreation information kiosks**

- Identify appropriate facilities, experiences to share, create graphics
- Select sites for kiosks where most locals and visitors will see it
- Design, build, install

Action Three: Design and implement directional signage program

- Use brand and knowledge of destinations to evaluate existing signage and needs
- Develop one consistent sign design for vehicle and pedestrian traffic – NC DOT
- Implement on marketing materials plus some wayfinding as public art
- Incorporate branding and sign design in trail signs and markings

Action Four: Develop social media monitoring program

- Inventory and assess accuracy of most popular outdoor recreation apps
- Update as possible with best information
- Determine how best to keep recreating public up-to-date, single source

Outdoors



<https://www.discoverjacksonnc.com/>

Programs						
Category: Outdoor						
Archery 101 in Cullowhee Outdoor +						
Date(s)	Day(s)	Age(s)	Grade(s)	Openings	Remaining	Register Now
9/23/2023	Sat	10 - 14	-	8	7	Register Now
Canoe & Hike Bear Lake Outdoor +						
Date(s)	Day(s)	Age(s)	Grade(s)	Openings	Remaining	Register Now
9/2/2023	Sat	10 - 99	-	12	12	Register Now
HIKE the Smokies Series #1 Oconoluftee Outdoor +						
Date(s)	Day(s)	Age(s)	Grade(s)	Openings	Remaining	Register Now
9/15/2023	Fri	10 - 99	-	10	10	Register Now

<https://jcprd.recdesk.com/Community/Program?category=6>

Economy Impact and Development

Because this is an economic development study, the suggested projects were evaluated by the economic categories they would most impact. The Work Group considered four primary areas: Tourism/Experiences; Retail/Small Business; Manufacturing and Culture/Workforce Development.

Any new facilities proposed may create an improved experience or offer a new business opportunity or generally improve the quality of life and feeling of community. An outdoor culture has been found critical in the attraction and growth of entrepreneurial outdoor businesses. As mostly quite small outdoor businesses benefit from contact with others for encouragement but also eventually may jointly address supply and value chain development gaps or spark cooperation--perhaps shared ordering of a component that is cheaper in bulk. Most often these working relationships start with unstructured social interaction. The businesses also need an engaged workforce and if Jackson County youth have never experienced the activities the gear builders are manufacturing, it is difficult for them to be passionate or even interested in such work.

Jackson County CORE Work Plan Economic Area Influences				
	Tourism + Experiences	Retail + Small Business	Manufacturing	Culture + Workforce Development
Strategy + Action proposed				
Be the Home Basecamp + Natural Escape for residents + guests				
Increase trail connectivity between towns and outdoor assets	x			x
Develop Jackson County Outdoor Stewardship council	x			x
Explore new hospitality options	x	x		
Expand and develop a diverse outdoor recreation scene				
Develop whitewater park at Dillsboro site	x	x		x
Expand trail experiences - longer stays, unique experiences	x	x		
Convene + Nurture outdoor social network		x	x	x
Further develop Unique, Personal experiences for all				
Establish Youth Outdoor Council				x
Develop easier/family outdoor + river activities/facilities/events	x	x		x
Develop new small group experiences - recreation, education, income		x		x
Information sharing, experience branding and targeted marketing				
Develop + Install outdoor info kiosks	x	x		x
Create outdoor brand w targeted mkting plan		x	x	x
Design + implement directional signage program	x	x		x

These Actions include several tasks that are direct economy-building efforts. The Work Group identified several business opportunities that would enhance the outdoor experience and also prioritized the engagement of local youth and laying the groundwork for an entrepreneur-supportive network in the county. Youth engagement strives not only to improve mental and

physical health and quality of life, but also serves as the workforce development program for outdoor businesses in the region.

The major business opportunities proposed include the expansion of 1) Guide services, 2) a service offering more recreation training for beginners and equipment rental, 3) the development of educational programs or “camps” that engages a topical expert (history, botany, macro-invertebrates, nature photography, native craft, etc.) to lead a program targeted to those with such special interests. Food, event organizing and site management also generate income.

Such educational programs may last a couple of hours to help extend a visit or up to five days as a destination vacation. This camp model was used successfully for many years by the previous owners of the Snowbird Lodge. There is a wealth of knowledge in Jackson County with current and retired WCU faculty, local resident experts as well as skilled people coming back home in retirement. Guests sign up to take a three, four, five-day course with excursions throughout the region in smaller groups. This allows them to possibly access areas that cannot withstand prolonged, public use and gain a greater appreciation for Jackson County’s unique assets. Access discussions must include the USFS and other resource and facility managers.

Another opportunity is for a concierge service to package the camp time with some guide services to do other recreational activities like learning to kayak, climb or fly fish. There might be evening rental e-bike rides on back roads, a concert in a park, accommodations in unique locations and special dining experiences—or at least special box lunches showcasing fresh local fare. The intent is for guests to gain an appreciation and love for Jackson County that encourages stewardship and repeat visits for a feeling of coming home.

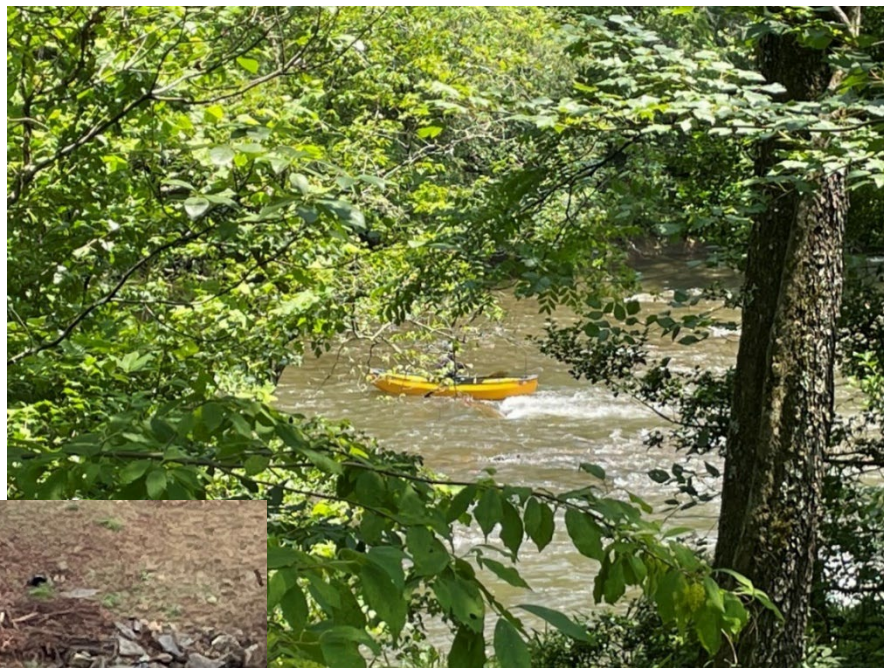
Along with Guide service development is an opportunity to develop training for Guides that will ensure quality experiences and help topical experts to be comfortable leading a group to remote areas. WCU, Southwestern Community College and others have programs that might be brought together to accomplish this. Other countries have such recognized training programs and as a result bestow more respect on Guides and their services.

The Youth Outdoor Council may have many goals—from convenient summer camp to empowering youth in crisis, learning about natural systems for greater stewardship and appreciation, exposure to alternative careers and assisting with recreation facility development and care. It is also a way to encourage entrepreneurial thinking and develop passion that may lead to income opportunities whether supplemental, employment or a business venture as they grow. This is a workforce development effort.

The Youth Outdoor Council may also work with the proposed Stewardship Council. The Stewards are envisioned as coordinating and even expanding/improving training for volunteers, coordinating work projects so not all the construction skills are required the same weekend, doing joint recruitment, possibly sharing tools and even grant writing and such staff expertise. Youth may enjoy the training and volunteering on a work team.

Finally, the establishment of an Outdoor Network is intended to bring together people who appreciate being active in nature with the supporting businesses, experts and guides, stewards and anyone supporting outdoor recreation in an informal, social setting. This group may also eventually assist as ambassadors in the recruitment of new outdoor retail, service and manufacturing businesses. The group may host the Outdoor Business Alliance or a cohort of businesses from Mountain Biz Works, SBTDc or other business acceleration training programs to showcase local locations for expansion or relocation in Jackson County.

One other important job development opportunity is a professional position to facilitate the growth of the outdoor economy in Jackson County. This position might assist businesses directly with finding suppliers or adequate storage space, connecting with support services, and finding and encouraging micro-entrepreneurs. Those at work in their back shed are the most likely candidates for growth and may just need help with a growth strategy, a network and to find a new market for their goods. The position will also support the various councils, stewardship organizations and facility planning groups as coordinator and communicator. Developing projects, writing and managing grants and contracts requires dedicated staff time.



Implementation

Jackson County Economic Development office will be responsible for monitoring, evaluation, and communicating accomplishments on the actions of this plan to the Rural Economic Development Division.

Plan Implementation

Maintaining a dedicated group to follow through after the planning process to begin addressing goals and objectives outlined in this plan is critical to attaining the potential economic impact of these strategies. This could be the same work group that helped develop this plan, or another similar group that is representative of the community and can advance the goals of this plan. The sustained presence of such a group builds ‘social capital’ within the group that improves their ability to work together and effectively address common goals. Furthermore, a dedicated group ensures continuity from planning stage through implementation, provides accountability to ensure that objectives are being met, and allows the community to react and respond quickly when an opportunity is presented. But this group should not be the sole entity responsible for implementing all the goals of the plan. Instead, the group should function as a convener and point of contact to connect to other individuals, organizations, and resources to help the broader community achieve these goals. Maintaining a regular meeting schedule will also help increase the effectiveness of the group, and the overall plan.

Work Group Engagement and Leadership Empowerment

The Work Group assembled includes many knowledgeable and passionate people who know how to move projects forward, craft supportive policies and develop effective programs. This assembly may be the most important aspect of this work and it is imperative that members remain involved and are given support to undertake the tasks about which they are most excited. Assigning a leader or co-leaders is a next step. Leaders would also feel free to bring in other local/regional experts who can provide the technical knowledge that may be missing or connections to funding sources. They should be asked to give regular progress reports to the whole Work Group and County Economic Development office for coordination.

Some expansion of the Work Group is anticipated as the County begins the Building Outdoor Communities effort in September 2023. Some groundwork has been done through this process so it is hoped that the assembled group might spend part of their time also moving the Actions in this plan forward. Action and Task implementation worksheets with timeline and partners can be found in the Appendix.

Coordination with Downtown Sylva

The Town of Sylva CORE plan includes many similar and supporting strategies, actions and proposed tasks. Coordination and cooperation between the Work Groups from each process plus the Main Street Economic Vitality and Promotions committees may make implementation easier and happen more quickly. Three recreation businesses participated in the Sylva process and will be anchor ambassadors for further business development in Jackson County.

Outdoor Business Development/Recruitment

The Jackson County Tourism Development Authority has been hosting an Outdoor Sustainability Council and the Friends of Panthertown is said to be hosting a gathering of trail users. A combination of these existing groups is encouraged as the core of a new Stewardship Council! It is assumed these groups would focus primarily on the issues of resource management. However, there might be discussion with participants in that meeting regarding the work of outdoor business development—if it might fall under their umbrella, or possibly that of a separate group including more outdoor business owners, to serve those tasks.

Sylva CORE is considering an outdoor expo event. The organization of such an event would assist with the convening of the outdoor business community. An effort might be made to find and facilitate the participation of as many micro-entrepreneurs as can be reached as well.

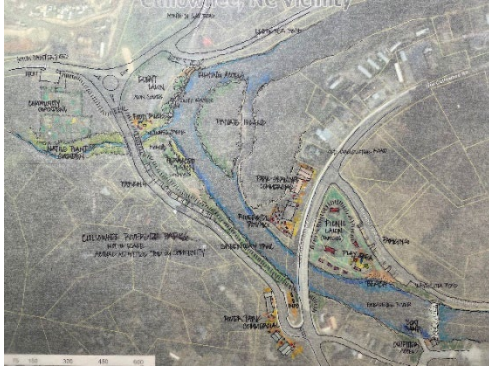
Three County-owned Sites on the Tuckasegee River

This process was unusual and exciting because of the opportunity for the Work Group to tour and brainstorm outdoor activities for each of three riverfront sites owned by the County. Research was done for each site regarding any environmental studies or reports that had been done in the past and recorded by the State Department of Environmental Quality. The State Historic Preservation Office also did a record search and was able to offer guidance on archeological work and site significance. Plans and reports undertaken by the County were reviewed as they were discovered. All three sites are located in floodplain and one in the actual floodway according to the most recent, although dated, flood review.

Jackson County seeks ideas for ‘highest and best uses’ for each of these sites. Highest and best use is a real estate term that most often favors sale to the highest private bidder or whomever will create the most jobs. Sometimes however, the highest and best use is one that will spur other income or investment, not just on one site, or address broader community needs, create new services and improve quality of life and community.

The Dillsboro site (PIN 7631-44-300), including the rapids resulting from dam removal, is unanimously proposed as a whitewater park for training, fun and competitions in the water. Land surrounding is proposed for terraced viewing and sunning with trails linking the 441 bridge back to the Harris boat ramp and land opposite. South side county land is suggested as a family river and forest park with food truck and picnic tables.





The Cullowhee site has an active community group (CURVE) engaged to develop a riverside picnic park and small event space. Additional land across the river, off Monteith Gap Road, may become available with the construction of a new roundabout and support a larger, informal riverside park. It may host similar activities and support the connecting commercial business space—equipment rental, restaurants, retail—to create a riverfront downtown and further extend the greenway.

The Whittier or Drexel site (PIN 7603-28-3884) got the group most excited with the recommendation to do only the most necessary clean up, stabilization and security of the building and site. Activities include beginner paddling and floating, river play, movies, music and food events, trails and lots of outdoor sport going in and through the partially open building—climbing walls, ziplining, disc golf, skating, mountain bike course, etc. Food trucks would serve food. Longer term may include a support kitchen, storage, classroom and proper restrooms but still offering an informal day at the river experience...even when it rains.



Monitoring and Evaluation

Regular monitoring and evaluation to review progress on the goals, objectives, and action steps in this plan, via regular review sessions with the Strategic Planning team and other community stakeholders, is critical to ensuring it remains a viable, living document. REDD staff will periodically communicate and provide assistance as needed to help advance the goals and document the outcomes of the plan.



Appendix to the Jackson County CORE report

- Asset and Business listings
- Implementation plans
- Site Development Information and Ideas
- Existing outdoor plan references
- Work Group Meeting notes
- Economy resources - Retail Market Analysis, Impact Areas