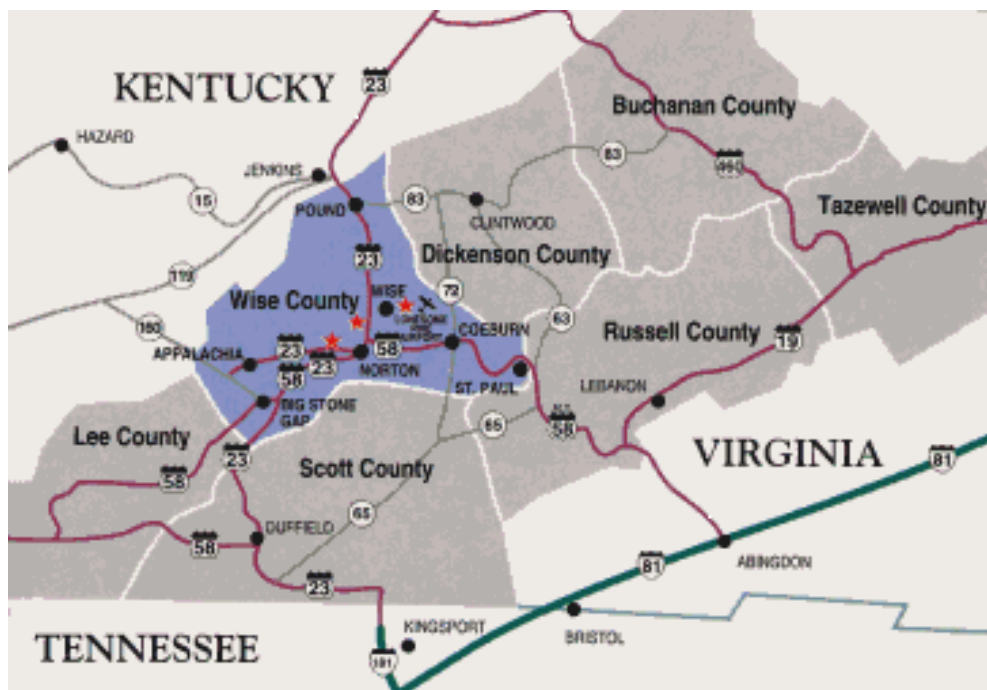




Situation Analysis Report



Wise County

2019

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Introduction

A survey was created in August 2018 that asked five questions:

1. What are the positive and negative characteristics that most accurately define Wise County?
2. What are the most pressing issues and problems confronting residents in Wise County?
3. What strengths and resources are currently in Wise County to address these issues and problems?
4. What barriers prevent residents from addressing the issues and problems?
5. How can Extension help to address the issues and problems through educational programming?

In addition, the survey provided an opportunity for responders to rank 14 family issue statements by their order of importance.

The survey link was provided to Extension Leadership Council members and was also promoted by agents to their clientele via newsletters, emails and social media.

Unit Profile

Wise County occupies about 407 square miles and includes the towns of Appalachia, Big Stone Gap, Coeburn, Pound, St. Paul and Wise along with the City of Norton. The county is home to a four-year liberal arts college, a community college, three hospitals, and the Norton/Wise area is a major retail and service business hub in the region. The county is dissected by US 23 and US 58, which allow for a reasonable commute into Pikeville, Kentucky, Abingdon, Virginia and the TriCities area of eastern Tennessee.

The county's natural resources have historically contributed much to the economy and quality of life in the region, from the jobs associated with coal, natural gas and timber to the recreational opportunities presented by the public lands within the county. Eco-tourism continues to evolve in the region and includes the development of the Pine Mountain Trail (for hikers) and the Spearhead Trails (for ATV riders and equestrian use).

The Wise County Unit Office of the Virginia Cooperative Extension system is housed in the Wise Skill Center complex of the Wise County Public School system. There are currently six full-time employees working from the Extension Office.

Wise County had a population in 2017 of 38,586, a 7% reduction from 2011 estimates, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The population is 7.7% minority or multiple-race, and 17.5% of the population is comprised of persons 65 years of age or older.

From 2013 to 2017, the median household income in Wise County was \$38,255, with 23.3% of the population living at or below poverty level.

The 2012 Census of Agriculture indicate 165 farms in Wise County, at an average size of 157 acres. The total number of farms decreased by 7% from 2007, but the total acreage in farms increased by 17%. Of the land in farms, 45.7% is in pasture, 33.1% is in woodland, and 13.6% is in cropland.

Agricultural endeavors in Wise County in 2012 included 2597 head of beef cattle, 424 horses, 401 goats and 101 honey bee colonies. In addition to livestock production, Wise County also hosts approximately five acres of blueberries, a commercial vineyard/winery and one remaining commercial orchard. Current commercial agricultural endeavors include over 3000 head of beef cattle, approximately five acres of blueberries, a vineyard/winery and a number of orchards. Four farmers' markets operate within the county. In January 2019, approximately 1000 maple taps were being managed in the county for commercial syrup production.

Community and Resident Perspectives

From the survey, some of the positive attributes identified by residents over and over included the natural features of the county, the rural lifestyle, family orientation, the cost of living, the institutes of higher learning such as UVA-Wise and Mountain Empire Community College, the biodiversity, low crime rate, Appalachian traditional arts, strong work ethics and well-developed roads (especially US 23 and US 58).

Negative attributes and issues that appeared often included mindsets stuck in the coal economy, lack of employment opportunities, land tied up by companies, drug addiction, lack of technological development, pollution and the "brain drain" of young folks leaving the area.

Strong opinions were voiced about existing strengths and resources in Wise County that can help address issues and problems. Our land, for instance, was identified as a tremendous opportunity for agricultural production, eco-tourism and economic development, although it was pointed out that much of this land is tied up by company bonds and other industrial pressures.

Churches, schools, colleges, Cooperative Extension and tourism boards/committees were highlighted as strengths within the county.

One person responding to the survey wrote, "There are some members of the community that are willing to help and create change, but they are not in positions of power. Not enough people are thinking outside the box to change. The county has wonderful beauty that could be used toward tourism and a back-to-nature lifestyle where people could work from home if there was more high-speed internet. There is some possibility that we could be a leader in rural solar power with high-speed internet if more was done. This would allow more agri-tourism, which would make a more diverse place for people to live."

As alluded to previously, a barrier recognized by those responding to the survey is land ownership and a lack of land access to those who want to develop certain types of enterprises. Also mentioned more than once was “cyclical attitudes handed from previous generations,” which I feel refers to what others have said concerning a “coal rut.”

Technological barriers were brought up multiple times, especially in reference to internet access and equipment.

Also mentioned were a lack of cultural activities and sporting events to keep youth engaged and connected to the broader community.

Regarding how Extension can help address issues and problems, some of the comments are listed below:

“Extension is amazing. I think if you could help to paint the picture to our state legislatures how these land traders have a stranglehold on growth and development then you will see growth. Grants and additional seminars help also.”

“Basic courses on how to start a farm. Getting a farm ID, registering a farm, business plan, filing taxes. Pros and cons.”

“Educate on how to make money farming. Where to sell and buy stock. Networking between farmers to build a farming community.”

“Offer programs during after school hours at school. At least initially, provide incentives for attendance.”

“By holding workshops and inviting community leader to events.”

“Investigate and educate the community about potential agribusiness that can be promoted and productive in Wise County. Continue to promote community activities that are educational and recreational.”

“Change always starts with the younger generations, so education is key is starting to break the current cycle.”

“Start at early age teach mechanical skills of growing, caring for plants and animals.”

“Workshops addressing nutritional needs, continuing to work on growing vegetables for families, continue to work on Maple syrup and other crops to create footprint for citizens to work together to draw visitors to area.”

“Training in planning & budgeting Opportunity education (what’s available or what’s possible)
Drug education.”

“Target the production of crops which would provide employment or second income Develop a label for Wise County such as the Blueberry County or Ginseng County Solicit knowledgeable individuals within the community to assume leadership roles and share their knowledge Free up abandoned or idle land for lease to individuals interested in agricultural endeavors.”

“Provide more technical training and workshops. Provide marketing techniques; Help residents find employment.”

“The extension is already doing many positive things with workshops and educational programs. The challenge is get more folks to participate and avail themselves of the opportunities.”

Priority Issues

Responders to the survey ranked the following family issues as the most important out of 14 listed. In order of the ranking, those issues were

1. Nutrition (obesity, managing food resources, chronic disease prevention) – 76%
2. Home-based business (agri-tourism, economic development) – 76%
3. Healthy lifestyles (exercise, stress management, etc.) – 65%
4. Adolescence (truancy, teen pregnancy, violence, suicide, afterschool activities, etc.) – 63%
5. Parenting (parent/child relations, discipline, etc.) – 59%
6. Aging (elder care, caregiving, etc.) – 59%

Based on the input cited previously, access to land and technology, drug addiction, as well as basic education on new business opportunities should be considered priority issues moving forward.