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Craig County 2023 Situation Analysis Report

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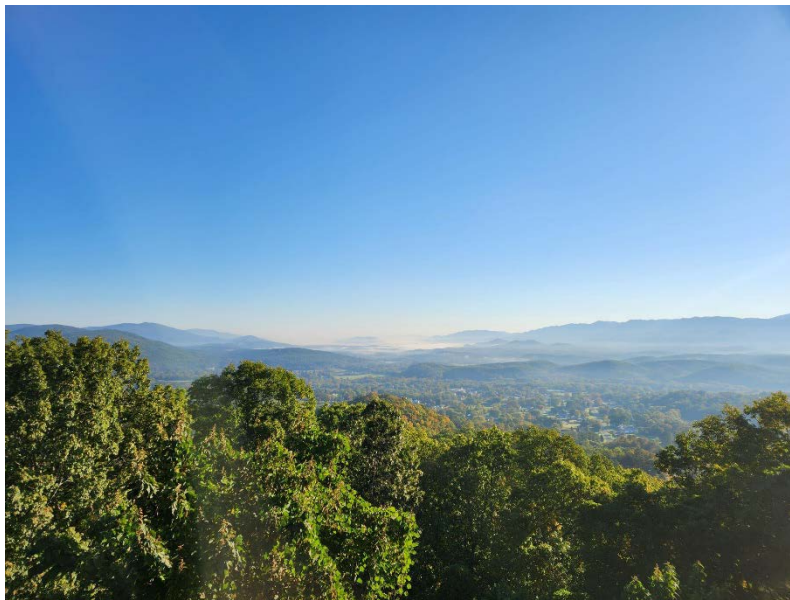
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Introduction

The Craig County Cooperative Extension staff, in collaboration with its Extension Leadership Council (ELC), conducted a comprehensive Situation Analysis during 2023 using the **Virginia Cooperative Extension** procedures for conducting a comprehensive community needs assessment. Members of the ELC participated in meetings to prepare for and plan the process, gather and analyze data, and assemble and edit the final report. A survey prepared by the State Cooperative Extension Office was used to gather information that was analyzed for the situation analysis report.

Community and resident perspectives were obtained through an online Qualtrics survey link and surveys mailed to farmers on the Craig County mailing list. The survey link was also sent out electronically to parents and volunteers enrolled in Craig County 4-H. The survey link was posted on the Craig County 4-H Facebook page, Craig County Community Bulletin Facebook page, and the New Castle Facebook page. The ELC met to review survey results and to summarize data from quantitative and qualitative questions measuring respondent perceptions of the most important and relevant issues for Craig County residents.

Unit Profile

Basic Demographics

Craig County is located in the southwestern part of Virginia. The land area is 328 square miles. It is bounded by Giles, Montgomery, Alleghany, and Botetourt Counties. It also shares a border with West Virginia. It is a mostly rural county with New Castle being the only incorporated town in the county. Paint Bank on the western side of the county has become a popular tourist area with the Paint Bank Store, Swinging Bridge Restaurant, Tingle's Mill, Depot Lodge, and Hollow Hill Buffalo Farm. Another popular agritourism spot is Joe's Tree's. Joe's Trees is a multi-generational business that provides entertainment while marketing pumpkins during the fall and Christmas trees during the lead up to the holiday season. The business also hosts school groups for tours. More than half of the county is part of the George Washington & Jefferson National Forest, Appalachian Trail, and Niday State Park. The major employers for the county are the Craig County Public Schools, County of Craig, Innovative Community Solutions, and Food Country USA. About 1,000 residents commute to Roanoke City, Salem City, and Roanoke County.

Population, Age, Gender

Census data estimated that the population of Craig County was 5,110 in 2019 and 4,914 in 2021. This represents a population loss of 3.8% (- 196) in the two-year period. In 2020, the population density was 15 people per square miles with the Virginia average being 219 people. Between 2019 and 2021, the age distribution numbers have remained relatively stable but with increases in ages 10 - 19. In terms of 2022 gender data, the percentage of males is 50.6% and females 49.4%. The racial make-up of the county based on the 2022 data is as follows: 97.3% White, 0.6% Black or African American, 0.5% American Indian and Alaskan Native, 1.2% Two or More Races, 1.8% Hispanic or Latino. The educational level of Craig County residents ages 25 and over is as follows: 88.6% High School Graduate and 20.7% bachelor's degree or higher.

Housing and Economic Status

In 2022 there were 2,610 housing units as opposed to 2,955 in 2015. The median value of owner-occupied housing units from 2017-2021 was \$176,500 with an owner-occupied housing rate of 77.7%. The neighboring counties of Botetourt had a median housing value of \$242,600, Giles had \$133,700, and Alleghany \$117,100 for the same years. The Craig County median gross rent was \$630 plus or minus \$95.

The 2021 estimate from the five-year community survey, showed Craig County had a median household income of \$60,283. The neighboring counties of Botetourt had a median household income of \$72,941, Giles had \$57,911, and Alleghany \$49,705 for the same years. The Craig County per capita income was \$28,973. The neighboring counties of Botetourt had a per capita income of \$37,5225, Giles had \$28,945, and Alleghany \$28,423 for the same years.

The percent of persons falling below the poverty rate in Craig County was 14.2 %. Also, the largest group affected by poverty is youth under 18 years old with a poverty rate of 25.2%. Craig County public schools provides free breakfast and lunch to all students as well as providing food for low-income students to take home on Fridays to use for meals on the weekend.

Unemployment

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics as of July 1, 2023, the unemployment rate for Craig County was 3.3%. Rates for the bordering counties were similar: Alleghany 3.1%, Botetourt 2.4%, and Giles 2.8%.

Crime

As reported by the Virginia State Crime Commission, in 2017 there were 42 incidents reported. Craig County had a lower incident rate then neighboring counties. To compare with the neighboring counties, the incident rate per 100,000 persons in Craig County was 428.93, Giles County 2735.12, Alleghany 2027.37, and Botetourt County 2188.90.

Health

Persons with a disability were reported to be 10.3%. Residents without health care coverage were reported at 3.7% from the five-year community survey released from the US Census. There is one medical center that is affiliated with the Monroe Center of West Virginia, the Craig County Health Center and two dentist offices in Craig County. Craig County Health Department also serves patients. There also is one pharmacy.

The top five causes of death reported from 2018-2021 were in order of prevalence: Cancer, Heart Disease, Chronic Respiratory Diseases, Accidents, and Covid-19. Craig County has a higher crude death rate per 100,000 residents (2186.2) then Virginia (893.1) or the United States (952.5) averages for 2018-2021.

Education

The Craig County Public School District (CCPS) serves approximately 513 students for the 2023 – 2024 school year. After experiencing a decrease in enrollment since 2020 -2021 this school year showed an increase of in enrollment of 36 students. The school system consists of two schools: McCleary Elementary serving Pre-kindergarten to 5th grade and Craig County High School serving grades 6-12. Both schools are fully accredited through the Virginia Department of Education. Overall results from the 2021-2022 Virginia Standards of Learning Tests showed that Craig County students achieved lower test pass rates vs. state average student scores. For pass rates comparison: English Reading Craig County 61% vs. Virginia 73%; Writing Craig County 61% vs. Virginia 65%; Mathematics Craig County 59% vs. Virginia 69%; and Science Craig County 63% vs. Virginia 67%. The class of 2023 was awarded 39 diplomas and one GED. There were 43 in the class cohort with 3 students dropping out of school for a drop-out rate of 7%. In 2022-2023 school year, 36% of students experienced chronic absenteeism missing at least 10% of school days.

Agriculture Industry

Total land area for Craig County consists of 209,984 acres with 43,431 acres (20.7%) of farmland according to the 2017 Census of Agriculture. The farmland use is 34% pasture, 33% woodland, and 28% cropland. Livestock, poultry, and products make up the largest share of agricultural sales with crops holding an 18% share. The number of farms in 2017 was 179 which was a 14% decrease from 2012. The average size of farms is 243 acres, an 8% increase since 2012. The market value of products per farm increased in value from 2012 (\$23,606) to 2017 (\$26,021) with an increase of 10.2%. The net farm operating income also increased in that time period with the income -\$3,355 in 2012 and \$1,306 in 2017 showing an increase of \$4,660. The cattle inventory has decreased 1,108 head from 7427 head in 2012 to 6,319 head in 2017 while the number of head sold during that time period increased 195 head to 3,681 head. Corn for grain increased 76% from 2012 to 2017 with a harvest of 45,174 bushels.

Presently Craig County is building a Farmers Market in downtown New Castle that producers will be able to use to direct market their products.

Craig County contains 154,170 of forest land which covers 78% of the county, of that 53% are National and State Forest lands. Craig County receives money from the federal government in lieu of taxes for the National Forest land. In 2017, the county received \$177,000 for the year's payment.

Craig County has one operating Grade A Dairy Farm, down from three Grade A Dairy Farms in 2017.

Community and Resident Perspectives

Based in trends identified in the unit profile and through discussion with ELC members, we developed a Qualtrics survey (see appendix) that was modified from the state survey. The survey focused on issues relevant to Craig County. ELC members offered input to the survey and the survey was posted online and sent out to the extension offices contacts. The results of the survey were analyzed to rate the importance of issues to Craig County citizens and to prioritize the most important issues for the county. The link to the Qualtrics survey was emailed to farmers, 4-H volunteers, and 4-H parents. Also, the survey link was posted on 3 Facebook pages that are used by Craig County residents. For those farmers who do not use the internet, a hard copy of the survey was mailed to them. Sixty-nine (69) individuals completed the survey. Of the top ten issues identified by respondents, seven of those have an agricultural focus, two a youth focus, and one issue could be addressed with youth and agricultural programming. The survey respondents were more likely farmers than parents of youth as the age of respondents was older. Of those surveyed, 76.5% were 55 years of age or older. All of the top 10 issues identified are issues that VCE has the ability to address either alone or as a collaborator with other agencies.

The quantitative results are described in Table 1.

Table 1: Show the top 10 results for the question: From your perspective, how much effort should VCE spend on each of the following issues?

Issue	High effort	Very high effort	%
Preserving farm and forest land	32	31	92.6%
Protecting water quality	31	32	92.6%
Assisting farmers and forest landowners in production and profitability	24	36	88.2%
Strengthening the local food system	27	29	82.4%
Controlling invasive pests (plants, animals, insects)	32	24	82.4%
Protecting air quality	27	27	79.4%
Building capacity for farm to school programming	30	21	75.0%
Ensuring safe food handling practice to prevent foodborne illness	27	23	73.5%
Assisting forest landowners with sustainable management practices	31	18	72.1%
Helping youth develop leadership, citizenship, and other life skills	20	27	69.1%

Survey respondents were given an opportunity to answer the following open-ended question regarding the most pressing community issue for Craig County.

See below for the results:

Question:

VCE, the outreach arm of Virginia Tech and Virginia State University, is dedicated to helping steward natural resources, improving public health, strengthening our food supply, empowering youth, and supporting agriculture to advance the wellbeing of all Virginians. What do you believe is the most pressing community issue for VCE to address in Craig County and why do you think this?

Responses:

The top three responses were as follows:

1. Support for agriculture and farmers.
2. Increasing youth participation in agriculture
3. Strengthening the local food supply

Community Issues

Seven of the high priority issues that were identified from the survey were chosen to be future programming priorities for our unit. Some of the high priority issues that were identified, such as air quality, are beyond the

scope of our office capacity for programming. Craig County has two agent positions, ANR and 4-H, and as of this time the ANR position has been vacant for almost 4 years. Although youth programming was not in the top seven issues identified, due to the ability to provide support to youth in Craig County and the lack of responses from parents and younger adults, it was felt that this priority was not represented accurately in the data collection.

Future Programming to Address Community Issues

Preserving Farm and Forest Land

According to the 2017 US Census of Agriculture, the average age of the Virginia farmer is 58.5 years old. It is important for youth to be involved in agriculture to replace aging farmers. The Craig County 4-H Agent works with the Craig County High School Agriculture teachers assisting with in-school programs and offering resources to support the youth agriculture program in the county. VCE also provides links to programs such as the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition, The Farmer Veteran Coalition, and Annie's Project. VCE also holds yearly workshops for women farmers giving instruction in farming equipment and animal science. VCE conducts workshops for older farmers to assist with transition plans for their farms after they no longer are engaged in farming or after their death. Although Craig County does not currently have an ANR (Agriculture and Natural Resources) Agent, hiring process has begun for that position. The ANR position supports farmers in their practices. Through the Virginia Department of Forestry, a variety of financial assistance and incentive programs are often available to assist Virginia landowners with the financial costs associated with forest management and conservation efforts. By "sharing the costs", landowners may be able to undertake projects they could not afford to do on their own.

Protecting Water Quality

The Craig County ANR Agent has historically worked with the Mountain Castles Soil and Water Conservation District to support farmers and residents engaged in protecting water sources in the county. There are cost share programs that farmers can sign-up for that provide alternate water sources and fencing to protect the streams from contamination and degradation by livestock. VCE also offers workshops in soil health that give agents knowledge to impart to farmers about using good soil practices to enhance soil health and reduce run-off into watersheds. The 4-H Agent offers in-school programming to teach students to importance of protecting our water sources within the county. Mountain Castle Soil and Water Conservation employees and the 4-H Agent have worked with students competing in the Envirothon.

Assisting farmers and forest landowners in production and profitability

VCE offers multiple educational opportunities such as value-added marketing options for beef cattle (VQA Sales) at the participating local livestock markets (Hollins and Pulaski), Master Cattleman's Program, Kentland Farm Field Day, forage and soil sampling, weed identification and control, on-site farm visits, Private Pesticide Applicator Testing and recertification. These programs assist farmers to minimize the amount of inputs needed to maximize income.

Strengthening the local food system

Craig County is currently building a farmer's market that will give farmers an opportunity to showcase products grown in Craig County. A student has received a grant to host a food bank at the Land Lab at the school. VCE can help publicize this and encourage residents with extra food items from the garden or pantry to donate to the food bank. VCE will continue to support the local agricultural program at the high school to prepare students to contribute to the local food system.

Controlling invasive pests (plants, animals, insects)

Craig County has serious problems with Autumn Olive and Multi-Floral Rose, as well as other invasive plants. The Autumn Olive problem is especially serious in the John's Creek/Dick's Creek area of the county. Virginia

Tech can identify and offer control solutions for invasive plant and insects. Private pesticide applicator testing and recertification programs are available for farmers seeking to purchase restricted pesticides for use on their farms. A large amount of public forest in Craig County is managed through USDA Forest Service. Forest Service employees routinely manage invasive plant species through mowing and spray treatment of plants.

Building capacity for farm-to-school programming

Craig County Agents work with the high school agriculture teachers to provide in-school programming, materials, and support for the school Land Lab. The 4-H Agent has been involved with the planning committee for the annual Land Lab Fair that raises funds for the school agriculture committee. VCE will continue to work with the local school to provide assistance to the agriculture programs at the schools.

Helping youth develop leadership, citizenship, and other life skills

The Craig County 4-H Agent works with youth through the 4-H program to develop positive life skills. Through the 4-H Camp program, youth are given the opportunity to learn citizenship and life skills by participating in a week-long overnight camping experience. The youth meet people from other areas of the state and have experiences that are not available to them in Craig County via camp classes and special programs. Craig County teens have the opportunity to join the 4-H Teen Club. These teens serve as camp counselors during 4-H camp week. The teens practice leadership skills as they take on the responsibility of supervising the younger campers, teach classes, and help plan the camp activities. The teens are given an opportunity to spend a day at the Virginia State Capitol during 4-H Day at the Capitol where they meet legislators and get a bird's eye view of the inner workings of the state government. Teens can also participate in 4-H Congress week at Virginia Tech where they stay at Virginia Tech and participate in workshops, special programs, and elections for the 4-H State Cabinet.

References

The following sources were used to collect data to prepare this report:

US Census Bureau

Virginia State Crime Commission

Virginia Department of Education

2017 Virginia Census of Agriculture

Virginia Department of Forestry

2018 Craig County Comprehensive Plan

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2024

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