



Situation Analysis Report

Grayson County

2018

Grayson Extension Staff

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Introduction

The greatest Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) impacts occur when areas of critical need are addressed through Extension programs. The first step in the process is to identify and prioritize the major needs locally. The Situation Analysis provides the foundation and rationale for deciding which problems should receive the time, energy, and resources of VCE. Local input is gathered regarding local issues by engaging key stakeholders and citizens who form the Extension Leadership Council (ELC). The ELC volunteers and VCE staff may also gather input from cooperating agencies, focus groups, individuals, and partners to build a more comprehensive picture of the county's concerns, and possible strategies to address those concerns.

Unit Profile

The Unit Profile provided by state-level VCE administration gave key demographic, education, health, agricultural and economic data for Grayson County summarized from various federal and state sources. The Unit Profile was shared and discussed with ELC members. Following are key aspects from that discussion:

Demographics

- 1.3% decline in population from 2010 to 2018 including added population from River North Correctional Facility inmate population. If inmate population is removed from the data, Grayson's population loss is 7.9%
- Median age in 2017 estimated at 48.1 years old compared to 47.1 years in 2011. Virginia's median age was 38.1 in 2017 compared to 37.5 in 2011.
- 24% population over 65 in 2017 compared to 21% in 2011. 15% of Virginia's population over 65 in 2017 compared to 12% in 2011.
- 59% of the population in the wage earning years between ages 18-65 in Grayson compared to 63% for all of VA.
- 93% of population is white, non-Hispanic with approximately a 3% Hispanic population. African-Americans make up about 2.3% of the population.

Business/Economy

- Grayson County ended 2018 with a 2.8% unemployment rate compared to 2.6% for Virginia and 3.7% for the U.S.
 - Local businesses state that they struggle to find quality employees. This is in part due to the local drug epidemic.
 - Adding employment opportunities is difficult because of the lack of available workforce.
- Government jobs including the public school system and public services are the largest employers in Grayson County by a significant margin.
- Manufacturing, health care, and retail are the top non-government employers.

- 4,732 workers travel outside of the county for employment while on 1,003 commute in to Grayson to work. Workers traveling significant time to and from work outside of the county presents a significant social strain on the family as well as limits civic engagement.
- 16.1% of Grayson residents are in poverty compared to 8.1% in Virginia.
- 26% of children live in poverty, and Grayson has limited day-care facilities
- 56% of Grayson residents are income and asset insufficient (41% for Virginia) with a median household income of \$31,002 (\$66,149 for Virginia).

Education

- All public schools Level One accredited by the Virginia Department of Education. Level One accreditation is the highest level a school can receive in Virginia.
- Strong Career and Technical Education program with multiple opportunities for youth to gain industry-recognized credentials
- High school students can complete Associates Degrees with many opportunities for Dual Enrollment with Wytheville Community College
- 15% reduction in enrollment from 2010/2011 school year to 2017/2018 school year (loss of 280 students systemwide)
- 111% increase in home school enrollment from 2010/2011 to 2017/2018 (gain of 49 students)
- Baywood Elementary School closed in 2018 with strong support for repurposing that facility as a technology center

Health/Well-Being

- Grayson County beats national average in % excessive drinking, preventable hospital stays, and severe housing problems.
- 30% adult obesity compared to 28% of U.S.
- 29% physically inactive compared to 23% of U.S.
- Limited access to health care professionals
 - 3X fewer primary care providers than national average
 - 3.4X fewer dentists than national average
 - 30X fewer mental health providers than national average
- 35 births per 1,000 females ages 15-19 (27 teen births in U.S)
- Rural drug epidemic led by methamphetamine addiction locally
- Less knowledge of food preparation, cooking, proper dietary habits, etc.
- Great demand and need for education in food preservation

Agriculture

U.S. Census of Agriculture (2017) has a scheduled release date of February 2019. As of the completion of this Situation Analysis, that data is not available. Previous Census data is presented, and additional context is given from local observations.

- Grayson County formed the Agriculture Advisory Committee in 2018 to provide recommendations for agricultural development in the county.

- Began the Grayson County Fair in 2018
- Proposed that the county hire an Agriculture Economic Development position
- Lost 88 farms (10%) from 2007 to 2012.
 - In 2012, Grayson County had 11 licensed Grade A dairy farms. That number is now at 5, and with continued contraction/consolidation of that industry, Grayson could see the dairy sector disappear completely in the next five years.
 - Burley tobacco production, much like dairy, was once a strength. It too, has largely disappeared from the county.
- Timber production continues to be a strong component of the local agriculture and natural resources economy with significant global exports of forest products from the county.
- Seasonal/part-time labor is hard to find, and largely filled by Hispanic laborers via the H2A program.
- Few changes expected short-term relative to agriculture sectors with beef cattle and Christmas trees dominating Grayson agriculture landscape. Small ruminants and horses are also significant.
- Pumpkin acreage has been increasing over the past 5 years.
- Need for processing (value-add) meat and vegetables.
- Farmers are exploring more high-value, niche production and marketing such as the robust Independence Farmer's Market, online sales, non-conventional production practices (organic, grass-fed) and agritourism. Industrial hemp is gaining interest with legislative changes supporting its production.
- Invasive species, emerging pests, and wildlife continue to pose significant challenges to agriculture and forestry development.

Community and Resident Perspectives

Grayson Extension staff collects information constantly regarding citizen needs. While these are not formalized key informant interviews, daily contacts with clients reveal major issues of concern locally. It is appropriate to take these issues and vet them with the ELC and other community stakeholders.

Grayson County recently adopted its Comprehensive Plan revision. Each five years, the Comprehensive Plan is reviewed in much the same way the local Extension Situation Analysis is reviewed. Coincidentally, these two reviews occur at the same time. A key aspect of both is the community input section. The 2013 Comprehensive Plan and Situation Analysis included a robust citizen survey, which was completed by 693 residents regarding issues around youth, land use, agriculture, health, county facilities, education, and the local economy. Much of that information continues to be relevant in the 2018 revisions of both the Comprehensive Plan and Situation Analysis. A new youth survey, recent community listening sessions, and key informant interviews were conducted to add additional insights beyond the 2013 community survey.

Results from the community survey that are still relevant include the following:

- Areas of Grayson County, especially west of Independence, have limited availability to services such as mobile communication, internet, medical services, and public water/sewer.
- Top 4 improvements to public school system include: 1. Higher teacher pay; 2. Workforce training; 3. Technology; and 4. Better resources for teachers.
- Top 3 lifelong learning wants: 1. Vocational/technical education; 2. Business development; 3. Higher education
- Overwhelming support for wellness center as a new facility/service to offer residents
- Top 4 ways to support the agricultural economy: 1. Farmer friendly taxes; 2. Farm transition assistance; 3. Fewer government regulations; 4. Local farmer's markets

Below is a sample of some of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats from the citizen listening sessions conducted in 2018. The complete results can be found in the 2018 Comprehensive Plan.

Strengths:

- Community/cultural ties, for example art and music
- Natural assets
- Blue Ridge Discovery Center
- Existing events

Weaknesses:

- Access to services/opportunities
- Long commute distances for employment/services
- Lack of job opportunities
- Infrastructure (roads, high speed internet, cell service)

Opportunities:

- Arts/music
- Tourism
- Capitalize on natural assets
- Available "spaces" to develop/repurpose

Threats:

- Community segregation (east/west)
- Population decline
- Absentee landowners

Youth survey results conducted by the 4-H Agent in 2018 included 31 7th graders and 11 6th graders. Results include:

- Desire for greater access to clothing, entertainment and hobby retailers

- More opportunities for athletic programs, after-school programs that are not sports, and life skills training
- Strong desire to have training in personal finance
- Recreation amenities they would like to see include swimming, trails, and a wellness center
- Jobs that these youth are most interested in are in health care, manufacturing, agriculture, education, professional services, and tourism.
- Greatest strengths as seen by the youth are: their schools, caring people, sports, and outdoor spaces/activities.
- Greatest weaknesses revealed by youth are: nothing to do; no place to hang out; drugs; and lack of opportunities to shop, eat, and have fun.
- Having more to do (activities/attractions/etc), a wellness center, more resources for the arts, and more jobs were ideas that the youth thought would make the area more attractive for young people

The citizen and youth surveys provided justification for 115 strategies included in the 2018 Comprehensive Plan for Grayson County and its departments, including the local Extension office, to address. The ELC reviewed those strategies and set four major priority areas for the Grayson Unit to support, and ranked the issues by priority level. The second priority issue, Workforce and Business Development, was further divided into four programmatic focus areas of relative equal importance. The priorities are described in the Priority Issues section.

Priority Issues

I. Youth, Family and Community Development

Traditional 4-H programs such as camp and in-school curriculum enrichment should continue and expand. Emphasis should be placed on youth civic engagement, group projects, and programs for extracurricular opportunities, particularly for youth not involved with school athletics. VCE should explore collaborations to enhance after-school program offerings. Other areas to consider include coordinating internships, mentorships, and demonstration-style learning for youth.

Extension should seek ways to engage families in programming. That could be in partnership with existing programs such as Strengthening Families, or through existing community groups such as the Grange, Ruritans, faith-based organizations, and the Twin County Chamber of Commerce. Extension should revisit the Community Club model for ways to engage entire families in community betterment projects.

Leadership, conflict resolution and facilitation skills are needed among individuals whether those skills are deployed in the home, in youth and adult peer groups, in civic clubs, or in business environments. The ELC supports continued emphasis in these Extension program areas such as the Twin County Leadership Initiative and 4-H Day at the Capital.

The local ELC sees work with youth and families as vital to the long-term well-being of the county. For that reason, it take precedence over other local Extension efforts.

II. Workforce and Business Development

Job creation and stable employment continue to be at the forefront of local government efforts. ELC members recognize that simply providing more jobs will not achieve desired outcomes for Grayson County. Currently, employers struggle to fill existing positions due to an underprepared workforce and the significant drug addiction problem in the region. Furthermore, local wages that do not support financial stability of workers and their families without careful personal financial management. Many partners are involved in workforce development, but Extension can have an important role helping current wage earners attain greater personal and financial stability. Efforts here relate directly to those in Priority I above.

a. Preparing the Potential Workforce

Extension should emphasize programs that prepare youth for future careers through internships, mentoring and career exploration programs. The ELC encourages Extension faculty to collaborate with local assets such as Matthews State Forest, Matthews Living History Farm Museum, and New River Hill Farm as Extension develops programs in support of the potential workforce, whether youth or adults.

b. Support the Existing Workforce

Extension can have a significant role working with the employed population, particularly those who are income and asset insufficient. As individuals attain greater financial stability, they may be more likely to contribute to the community by civic engagement, philanthropy, and economic development. Extension can also support this “civic-mindedness” within the financially sufficient population by seeking ways to engage them in volunteerism and community development.

c. Keeping Land Productive and Profitable Now and into the Future

Extension is strategically positioned to address small business development related to Grayson’s local agricultural and forestry assets. Some of these include non-traditional or value-add opportunities such as local and regional foods, agritourism, and value-added processing of fruits and vegetables. In addition, Extension should be involved in raising awareness regarding the obstacles to developing these types of businesses, and offer up solutions to overcome such barriers. A key contribution is Extension’s continued leadership to the Agriculture Advisory Board for Grayson County, established in 2018 to support agricultural economic development through strategic policy and funding initiatives backed by local government.

A great deal of effort in current Extension programming is focused on supporting marketing efforts of specific industry segments such as beef cattle and Christmas trees. The ELC thinks this should continue, but that clients should not rely upon Extension Agents to do this on their behalf. Key roles that Extension may fulfill include facilitating greater cooperation and networking among traditional and non-traditional industry segments in an effort to capture brand identity, greater resource efficiencies like equipment sharing, and collectively exploring more marketing options.

“Sustainability” is a buzz word with many implications. The ELC decided that sustainability as it relates to Extension efforts means not only stewardship for future generations, but also productive and profitable farms and forests for current owners and operators. Focus areas include: water quality, land stewardship/conservation, business management education for working farms and forests of all types, and favorable policies and tax structures to support a vibrant natural resources-based economy. Estate planning and farm transition education is a high priority issue that Extension should focus on. Secondly, pesticide safety education for licensed and non-licensed users fits this priority, and is a legal mandate of Extension Agents serving agricultural producers.

d. Extension as Conduit to Land-Grant Technical Expertise

The ELC emphasized the opportunity for Extension to broaden their scope to provide technical assistance to all citizens from within both the state and federal land-grant systems. To do so, Extension should look beyond traditional program areas to those campus faculty in other disciplines who may not have direct Extension responsibilities.

III. Access to Healthy Foods with Improved Diet and Lifestyle Changes

Local and regional food efforts should be supported by Extension to ensure that locals have access to high quality, fresh foods. Just as importantly, Extension should assist with education on how to best use those foods. Strategies include proper and safe food handling, cooking, and preservation. Extension should also assist with education that focuses on how lifestyle changes such as exercise, avoiding unhealthy habits, along with proper diet work together to strengthen the whole person.

IV. Fully Operational Grayson County Agriculture and Technical Education (GATE) Center

A fully operational GATE Center is not essential to address Priority Issues I-III. However, the GATE Center does allow for a unique venue to support those Priority Issues in ways not currently available to the Grayson Extension Unit or the community. For that reason, the ELC supports all efforts to make the GATE Center a fully-operational county asset as soon as possible.