

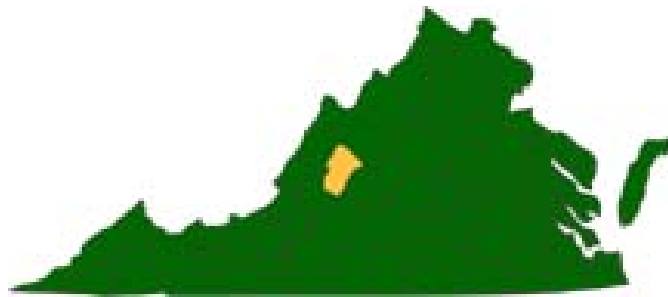


**Virginia Cooperative Extension**

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# Situation Analysis Report



## Rockbridge County 2018

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## **Introduction**

The Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Agent Faculty headquartered in Rockbridge conducted a situation analysis in 2018. The situation analysis process involved the development of a Rockbridge County Unit Profile that describes the county's land and people; gathering community and resident perspectives on issues, challenges, and opportunities for Rockbridge County and the cities of Lexington and Buena Vista; and identifying priority issues and needs for the locality.

VCE Agent Faculty analyzed demographic data, conducted key informant interviews, and recorded observations and comments of county leaders. Together, these sources provided a sharp image of Rockbridge County and the quality of life experienced by its citizens. A number of issues were identified from this look at the county and are summarized below. Some issues, VCE can potentially address while others are outside the scope of our mission.

## **Unit Profile**

Rockbridge County is located on the Interstate 81 corridor with the Blue Ridge Mountains on the East and the Alleghany Highlands on the West. It encompasses, almost in its entirety, the Maury River watershed which empties into the James River in the southeast corner of the county near the town of Glasgow. The independent cities of Lexington and Buena Vista lie within the county and in these cities are located three, 4-year colleges: Virginia Military Institute and Washington and Lee University in Lexington and Southern Virginia College in Buena Vista.

Rockbridge's natural beauty, easy access to transportation networks, low-tax rates relative to major metropolitan areas, and the presence of the academic communities have made the county a destination for retirees and a location for second homes. The proportion of county residents over the age of 65 is 25.3%, 10 points higher than the national proportion of 15%. Our mean and median household incomes and percentage of people at or below poverty thresholds are comparable to the national average..

Recent research compiled by the United States Department of Agriculture has identified significant portions of Rockbridge County as being a 'food desert' where there is limited access to stores with a selection of groceries capable of supporting a healthy diet.

Ironically, production agriculture is the second most common form of land use after forestry in Rockbridge. Dairy and beef cattle are the leading sources of agriculture income in the aggregate for the County but most of the farms that derive sufficient income from agriculture to be considered full-time farms are either dairy or integrated poultry producers. Market data

implies an opportunity exists to expand the production of fresh fruits and vegetables for marketing locally as well as regionally.

From the 2018 Rockbridge Area Community Health Assessment: analysis of demographic data revealed distinct communities in Rockbridge with significant differences in size and population and significant disparities both in health and in social determinants. The 2012-2016 American Community Survey (ACS) found the total population of the cities of Lexington and Buena Vista to be 7,036 and 6,610 respectively and the population of Rockbridge County to be 22,4509. For all communities, the ACS predicts positive future population change, but to varying degrees. Median age in the Rockbridge Area localities ranges from 21.5 in the City of Lexington to 48.5 in Rockbridge County<sup>10</sup>. The ACS finds that for most of the Rockbridge Area, a larger percentage of the population is White than in the State of Virginia as a whole. In Rockbridge County, 93.4% of the population is White, 2.6% of the population is Black and 2.4% identify as more than one race. All other races make up less than 1% of the population. Hispanic or Latino residents make up 1.6% of the population<sup>11</sup>. <sup>11</sup>

Lexington and Buena Vista are slightly more racially and ethnically diverse than Rockbridge County, with a populations that are 84.5% and 89.8% White, 9.1% and 1.7% Black, and 4.0% and 7.3% Asian, with 2.3% and 1.2% respectively representing more than one race and the remainder representing small minorities of American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander or some other race at less than 1%<sup>12</sup>. Of the population, 4.2% of Lexington and 1.3% of Buena Vista identify as Hispanic or Latino<sup>13</sup>. The region is divided into urban and rural areas, which vary greatly in the economic means of the residents who live there. The low income population in the Rockbridge Area has a federal designation as a MUA. Many communities are designated as Primary and Dental Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA) and the entire Rockbridge Service Area is designated as a Mental Health HPSA<sup>14</sup>

### **Community and Resident Perspectives**

Based on issue areas identified in the unit profile, comments of key informants were recorded in direct and indirect interviews.

In separate interviews and comments, members of the Board of Supervisors expressed a need to diversify economy and a concern that there were no jobs that would allow young County natives to stay in Rockbridge. Several small business leaders expressed a concern about their perceptions that Rockbridge had a disproportionate number of retirees and the long run implications for housing and real estate values. There is concern that as this portion of the county population becomes elderly their country homes and lifestyle farms (suited for a physically active lifestyle) will be forced onto the market. Additionally, there is a concern for how our aging population will be cared for.

In a survey of 93 Rockbridge residents across three different venues, the opioid addiction crisis, employment opportunities, and workforce development were the most common topics of concern.

The 2018 Rockbridge Area Community Health Assessment identified 10 priority health-related issues in the community.

1. Alcohol and drug use
2. Poverty / low average household income
3. Access to mental / behavioral health services
4. Poor diet
5. High prevalence of chronic disease
6. Culture: healthy behaviors not a priority
7. Lack of health literacy / lack of knowledge of healthy behaviors
8. Access to primary care
9. Access to specialty care
10. Tobacco use

## Priority Issues

Based on the unit profile and resident perspectives data from above, the following top priority issues were identified for Rockbridge County.

Issue 1: Economic development to diversify Rockbridge County's economy.

This issue is currently being addressed by VCE Agent faculty trying to explore avenues whereby farms can start enterprises that are nontraditional to this region such as commercial wholesale produce production and or value-added farm products that can generate sufficient profit and cash flow to support a family and possibly employ workers.

Issue 2: Attracting businesses that will bring jobs for Rockbridge County that at the same time will not compromise the county's rural character.

This is not directly addressed by VCE except indirectly through the Farm Family Transition program.

Issue 3: Opioid and other substance abuse and addiction. Virginia Cooperative Extension is increasing its presence in addressing this issue in Virginia.

Issue 4: Helping Rockbridge youth, especially at-risk and those living in poverty, to develop life skills that will empower them to be competitive in the workplace.

VCE's 4-H youth development program offers a range of curricula that develop knowledge, character, and leadership. The 4-H youth development program's presence in the schools is expanding. The Family Nutrition Program has a presence in our elementary schools as do our Master Gardener volunteers in coordinating school vegetable gardens.

Issue 5: Developing human capital and infrastructure to help provide care to the aging in Rockbridge County.

VCE is not working directly in this area of need at this time. The regional FCS Agent provides assistance and recommendations for the elderly related to financial management and training on how the elderly can protect themselves from fraud.

Issue 6. Chronic disease and healthy behaviors associated with prevention of these conditions. VCE is actively working to address obesity and chronic disease.

Issue 7: Preservation of Rockbridge's rural character and the viability of its farms. VCE is actively working to enhance opportunities for farms to expand viable farm enterprises and access new markets.