



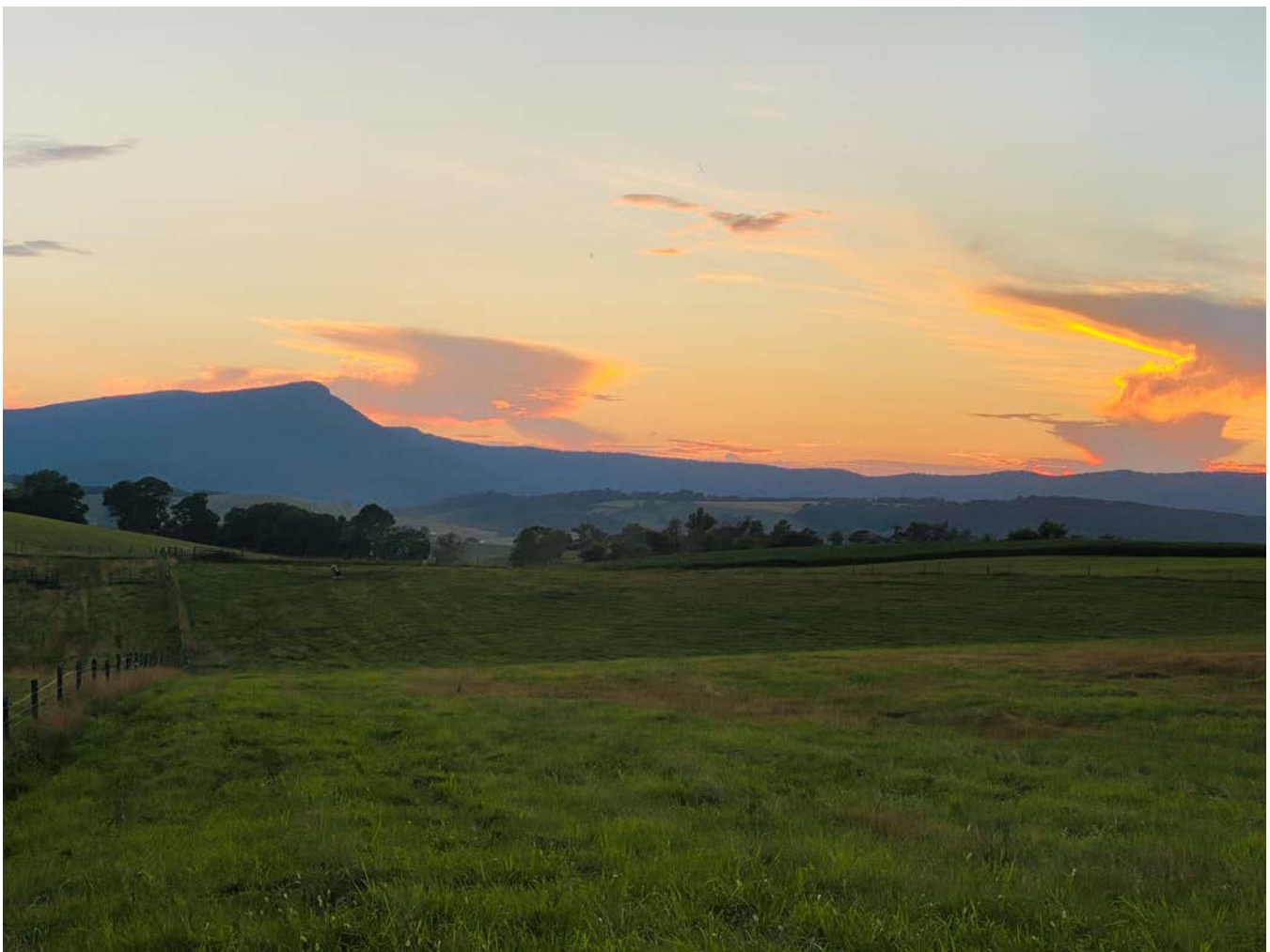
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Rockbridge County 2023 Situation Analysis Report

Authored by Megan Sheets, Unit Coordinator & 4-H Youth Development Agent; Rebecca Owen, FCS Snap-Ed Agent; Tom Stanley, ANR Extension Agent; Helen Leslie, Administrative Fiscal Assistant



Summary of community issues and Extension office response

Priority Issue	Planned Unit Response
1 - Empowering youth and supplying a safe learning environment for them to express themselves, facilitate learning, and grow.	The VCE – Rockbridge 4-H Agent, Megan Sheets, has established a teen leadership club that promotes service to the community as well as personal growth and development. Continued efforts will be made to provide similar opportunities. There will also be increased collaboration between 4-H, ANR, and FCS to develop unique multi-program area opportunities for youth to continue to grow and learn.
2 - Strengthening the local food system by ensuring safe, high-quality foods.	The VCE – Rockbridge FCS Snap-Ed Agent, Rebecca Owen, will continue work on several community-based projects that promote the strengthening of our local food system in Rockbridge. Her current collaborations with W&L, the Little Pantries project, and the Rockbridge Area Community Services Board will aid in the continued response. Outside funding through community-based grants and awards will also provide avenues for increasing the impact.
3 - Teaching youth about the importance of agricultural practices and strengthening agricultural competency.	The VCE – Rockbridge 4-H Agent, Megan Sheets, and ANR Agent, Tom Stanley, will work together to provide agricultural-based learning opportunities for youth. We have plans to collaborate with the Rockbridge Farm Bureau, the Rockbridge Regional Fair Board, and the Soil & Water Conservation District to provide these opportunities. Preliminary plans are in the works to bring an Agricultural Safety Day to Rockbridge County in 2025 in collaboration with the Progressive Agriculture Foundation. We will continue to work closely with local farmers and agricultural enthusiasts to provide unique programs and learning opportunities.
4 - Reducing misuse and overuse of pesticides and fertilizers.	The VCE – Rockbridge Ag Agent, Tom Stanley, will continue to provide training pesticide recertification training for individuals in the Rockbridge area. Concentrated programming will also be implemented in order to ensure that shared information is current and relevant.
5 - Assisting youth in developing leadership, citizenship, and other life skills.	The VCE – Rockbridge 4-H Agent, Megan Sheets, will continue to provide opportunities for youth to develop leadership, citizenship, and other life skills through encouraged involvement in her 4-H clubs and other programs. 4-H Day at the Capitol, State 4-H Congress, and 4-H Camp are prime examples of the planned implementation of this intervention. Effort will also be placed on expanding programming opportunities so that each 4-H member has the ability to continue to expand their skillsets throughout their 4-H career.

Introduction

Rockbridge County Extension staff conducted a comprehensive situation analysis during Fall 2023. The process included input from county residents and Extension volunteers. 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.

Identification of local needs is ongoing and not limited strictly to the Situation Analysis period. Extension staff regularly meet with 4-H leaders, Rockbridge Cattleman's Association board members, administrators of Rockbridge County Public Schools, the Rockbridge Area Community Services Board, and Rockbridge Regional Fair Board members, to name a few.

VCE – Rockbridge faculty analyzed demographic data, conducted key informant interviews, and recorded comments of community leaders. Together, these sources provided a clear 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.

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 under the age of 5 is 2.6%, under the age of 18 is 17% and over the age of 65 is 27.7%. Our mean and median household incomes are slightly below the national average, and the percentage of residents at or below poverty thresholds (12.1%) is slightly above 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.

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 2021 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 United States Census report found the total population of Lexington and Buena Vista to be 7,457 and 6,591 respectively and the population of Rockbridge County to be 22,593. In the entire Rockbridge Area, a larger percentage of the population is White than in the State of Virginia as a whole. In Rockbridge County, 93.0% of the population is White, 3.6% of the population is Black and 1.9% identify as more than one race. All other races make up less than 1.5% of the population. Hispanic or Latino residents make up 2.2% of the population. 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 and the entire Rockbridge Service Area is designated as a Mental Health Professional Shortage Area.

Community and Resident Perspectives

Based on issue areas identified in the unit profile, comments of key informants were recorded in direct and indirect interviews, and information was also garnered from the needs assessment survey that was distributed.

Community members that responded to the needs assessment survey indicated that many of their concerns surrounded our local youth. These included: empowering youth and supplying a safe learning environment for them to express themselves, teaching youth about the importance of agricultural practices, strengthening food availability to youth, protecting water and air quality, strengthening the local food system, ensuring safe, high quality foods, getting more adults involved in mentoring youth, teaching healthy relationship skills to teens, and helping youth develop leadership, citizenship, and other life skills, and reducing misuse and overuse of pesticides and fertilizers.

Additionally, parents of local 4-H youth indicated through informational conversation that some major concerns of theirs included: increasing agricultural competency for youth, prioritizing youth mental health, and providing opportunities for local youth to facilitate learning and personal growth.

In separate interviews and comments, members of the Board of Supervisors and other elected officials expressed a concern that there were no jobs that would allow young county natives to stay in Rockbridge.

Community Issues

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

Issue 1: Empowering youth and supplying a safe learning environment for them to express themselves, facilitate learning, and grow.

Issue 2: Strengthening the local food system by ensuring safe, high-quality foods.

Issue 3: Teaching youth about the importance of agricultural practices and strengthening agricultural competency.

Issue 4: Reducing misuse and overuse of pesticides and fertilizers.

Issue 5: Assisting youth in developing leadership, citizenship, and other life skills.

Future Programming to Address Community Issues

The following outline describes the VCE – Rockbridge unit plan to address our identified priority issues:

Issue 1: Empowering youth and supplying a safe learning environment for them to express themselves, facilitate learning, and grow.

Response: The VCE – Rockbridge 4-H Agent, Megan Sheets, has established a teen leadership club that promotes service to the community as well as personal growth and development. Continued efforts will be made to provide similar opportunities. There will also be increased collaboration between 4-H, ANR, and FCS to develop unique multi-program area opportunities for youth to continue to grow and learn.

Issue 2: Strengthening the local food system by ensuring safe, high-quality foods.

Response: The VCE – Rockbridge FCS Snap-Ed Agent, Rebecca Owen, will continue work on several community-based projects that promote the strengthening of our local food system in Rockbridge. Her

current collaborations with W&L, the Little Pantries project, and the Rockbridge Area Community Services Board will aid in the continued response. Outside funding through community-based grants and awards will also provide avenues for increasing the impact.

Issue 3: Teaching youth about the importance of agricultural practices and strengthening agricultural competency.

Response: The VCE – Rockbridge 4-H Agent, Megan Sheets, and ANR Agent, Tom Stanley, will work together to provide agricultural-based learning opportunities for youth. We have plans to collaborate with the Rockbridge Farm Bureau, the Rockbridge Regional Fair Board, and the Soil & Water Conservation District to provide these opportunities. Preliminary plans are in the works to bring an Agricultural Safety Day to Rockbridge County in 2025 in collaboration with the Progressive Agriculture Foundation. We will continue to work closely with local farmers and agricultural enthusiasts to provide unique programs and learning opportunities.

Issue 4: Reducing misuse and overuse of pesticides and fertilizers.

Response: The VCE – Rockbridge Ag Agent, Tom Stanley, will continue to provide training pesticide recertification training for individuals in the Rockbridge area. Concentrated programming will also be implemented in order to ensure that shared information is current and relevant.

Issue 5: Assisting youth in developing leadership, citizenship, and other life skills.

Response: The VCE – Rockbridge 4-H Agent, Megan Sheets, will continue to provide opportunities for youth to develop leadership, citizenship, and other life skills through encouraged involvement in her 4-H clubs and other programs. 4-H Day at the Capitol, State 4-H Congress, and 4-H Camp are prime examples of the planned implementation of this intervention. Effort will also be placed on expanding programming opportunities so that each 4-H member has the ability to continue to expand their skillsets throughout their 4-H career.

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