



# Situation Analysis Report



# Smyth County VCE 2018

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## Introduction

Smyth County engaged in a comprehensive situational analysis in 2018. Using the 2013 Situational Analysis (SA 2013) as a baseline, the process was conducted by the Extension Leadership Council (ELC) and information was gathered utilizing two methods. A group of key informants familiar with Extension Programming and representative of the makeup of the community and county information gathered by our local hospital which is part of the Ballad Health network in Southwestern Virginia and Eastern Tennessee.

Key to the formation of the SA 2018 were the report from Ballad Health, the Census data on Smyth County's population, and the 2012 Census of Agriculture. Using all of information provided by these reports, our ELC, along with Smyth County and Southwest District VCE staff and faculty will shape Extension programs over the next five years with the common goal of improving the lives of all Smyth County citizens.

## Unit Profile

### General

Smyth County is located in the Southwestern part of the state, a mountainous region that includes the highest point in Virginia on Mount Rogers. Smyth County is divided into three distinct valleys separated by mountains, with Interstate 81 running the length of the middle valley. We are blessed with an abundance of water with one of the three forks of the Holston River running the length of each valley and various streams and springs located throughout the county. The population of the county has not changed significantly over the past 20 years, which hovers around 32,000. There are three major population centers in the county, Marion and Chilhowie on the Middle Fork of the Holston River and Saltville on the North Fork. The average rainfall is about 42 inches, the average last frost date is May 15 and the average first frost date is October 15. This can vary as much as 10 days from different elevations in the county.

### Demographics

SA 2013 found Smyth County had a declining and aging population; this trend has stabilized somewhat in 2018. Our population over the age of 25 was fairly stable; however, we had seen declines in the number of school aged children in the county. While demographic data may suggest a possible rebound the local school system reports a decline of over 500 students overall enrolled in county schools over the past decade. One age group that continues to grow are the elderly. The great age group growth was in the 65-74 age group. This phenomenon creates an issue with care of elder people spread across fewer wage earning and able bodied citizens in the County.

Racial demographics are virtually unchanged from the findings of SA 2013. The percentage of people reporting their race as being White is 96.7 with the next largest group being those reporting black or African American at 1.9. The percentage of Hispanic citizens decreased however, the number of children enrolled in ELL classes in Smyth County has increased. Given the homogeneity of the population, one strong point among Extension educational offerings is

the parity of programming inviting participation among racial groups. The office strives to always seek and serve underserved audiences and we seek to enlist volunteers that can speak to the needs of citizens regardless of race.

### **Education**

SA 2013 found some interesting differences between Smyth County and Virginia statistics in the area of education. While still below State and National numbers, we commend the efforts of our public school system in helping close the gap. In Smyth County, the percentage of citizens with a high school diploma is higher than the State average; however, it should be noted that our percentage of citizens over 25 without a HS diploma is also higher. The percentage of people with college degrees is significantly lower than the State average. We feel that the reason behind this is that some few of our industries in the county require advanced degrees.

### **Personal Income**

Economically, Smyth County has experienced growth in both the extreme upper and lower ends of the wage scale. While the number of households with incomes over \$200,000 increased by nearly 80%, the median household income dropped nearly \$3000, and in comparison with State numbers is only slightly over 55% of the income of the average household in the Commonwealth. We have had some expansions of local businesses and a new industry settle in the county as of late, but their numbers will hardly compensate for the jobs that have been lost to closings and industries moving overseas.

### **Economics**

Smyth County is home to 1,540 business and those businesses employ 11,726 people. Service and manufacturing continue to be leading non-agriculture industry sectors in the County. Between the two facets of our local economy, over 64% of Smyth County citizens are employed. Retail and Government sectors add another 21% to the total employment picture. Among the Ag and Mining sector, the implosion of the dairy industry and the decline in coal mining have dealt blows to county residents involved in those enterprises.

### **Agriculture**

The sale of beef cattle continues to be the driving force behind successful agricultural operations in Smyth County. The number of surviving dairies have slipped into single digits and the local DHIA record keeping cooperative has merged with Wythe County in order to stay viable. Newcomers and young farmers continue to have limited success seeking out alternative crops and marketing schemes, largely because the local population and economic data does not support direct to public ventures. One telling fact regarding the consolidation of agribusinesses and suppliers is that Smyth County now has no tractor dealers within its county borders. The lone dealership left in the county was absorbed into outlets in Wythe and Washington Counties in the final quarter of 2018.

Reporting for the 2012 Census was more complete than in years past, as witnessed by the jump in overall farm numbers and total number of cattle in inventory and sold.

## Community and Resident Perspectives

The Smyth County ELC represents a cross section of the population and demographics of Smyth County. Representatives from county leadership, agriculture, youth, education, health care and ethnic groups came together with the VCE Unit Office to share their ideas and glean thoughts from others within their circles of influence.

### General

Overall, citizens feel that Smyth County has a bleak future. The County ELC acknowledged that the local paper is poorly read and that topics covered within local media outlets are largely negative.

### Jobs

The need for living wage jobs continues to be a major focus of the citizens of the county. Residents also acknowledge that the inability for many working aged adults to pass a drug test is a huge deterrent to many seeking employment. Entrepreneurship is a trend among citizens but declining population figures and lower disposable income totals limit self-employment opportunities.

### Labor

Similar to the “Jobs” heading above, employers are finding that windows of opportunity close on them quickly in our county because they are unable to attract and retain competent workers who can provide services their industries require.

### Family

Many people feel that the lack of family structure is taking its toll on Smyth County. The number of children being raised by grandparents or single parents continues to grow.

### Schools

Citizens feel that our county school system overall is a great asset, but schools are not without their challenges. A growing number of students are home schooled and the pay scale and benefit packages offered by our public schools make it more and more difficult to hire and retain top flight classroom teachers. Most school employees are lifelong residents of the county with values that go beyond pay bands.

### Crime

While our overall crime rate is low, citizens are concerned about the upward trends of drug abuse and the accompanying violent and property crime that travels with the rate of drug use. Our local hospital has secured one of only 12 grants nationwide to combat the opioid use epidemic in our county.

## **Agriculture**

Several themes under agriculture were recognized by our ELC and Farm Bureau:

### **Hemp and alternative crops**

Established farmers are concerned that the rush to make a quick and easy buck may destroy many who try new crops without established markets. Hemp is such a crop. There is much talk about large cash returns per acre but few buyers are coming forward seeking growers.

### **Farm Transitions and Estate Planning**

Estate planning workshops continue to be very popular across all sectors of farm owners. Calls to the Extension office bear this trend out as people seek ways to make their farms work for them following a transition of ownership.

### **Overall Farm Profitability**

Farmers continue to seek new ways to generate money either from new crops or by adding value to products they are currently selling. An example of added value would be the VQA Program.

### **Women in Agriculture**

Citizens expressed a need to continue to reach out to female and minority owners in order to help them grow their expertise in operating their farm.

## **Priority Issues**

### **Drugs**

While the ELC is not sure what role Extension will fully play in the war on drug use, it is noted that many of our issues as a county are tied to the drug epidemic. Extension plans to hire District specialists to help with this issue and Smyth County intends to put them to work here.

### **Leadership**

Conducting a civil discussion and meeting are not necessarily granted to those who are elected. By the same token, leading one's family is also a skill that would help our county grow. We look to 4-H to continue to help cultivate leadership among our young people.

### **Careers (Higher wages/Youth Retention)**

Financial and Career education will continue to be foci of the VCE Program through 4-H. Helping people get better paying jobs along with helping them make better spending decisions will only help to strengthen our county. Working with ELL in our county schools, one pillar of that process will be working with children of Hispanic decent to learn about roles they may play in our economic system.

### **Nutrition and Overall Health**

The VCE office will continue to work with partners across the county and region in helping combat obesity. We will also be engaged in helping citizens learn more about their role in the safe handling of foods. SNAP-Ed offerings will continue to help low-income audiences stretch their food dollars to gain the most access to healthy food choices.

### **Agricultural Issues**

The ANR Program offerings will continue to help farmers across the demographic spectrum to operate their farms with an eye to profitability, sustainability and environmental stewardship. Programs will take on current topics in a proactive approach with the recognition that offerings may be shaped by happenings such as droughts or price/market changes. Special attention will continue to be directed to the elevation of agricultural literacy among the citizens of the county, especially school aged children.