

# *R*egional Development

Regional development encourages cooperation and collaboration in seeking region wide economic, cultural and quality of life improvements. In West Virginia, Planning and Development Districts (PDDs) are responsible for coordinating regional initiatives as authorized by state and federal government. In turn, PDDs work closely with local government to provide planning assistance in developing, funding and implementing projects. It is critical for the NCHA to form a network of organizations, municipalities, agencies, and individuals to work together toward the organization's mission and goals. The importance of regional development is evident, as many of the organization's goals address region-wide change.

Essential elements of regional development must be understood and accepted before proposed initiatives can succeed. The elements include:

- proactive cooperation in pursuing plan strategies;
- working across governmental boundaries and among organizations with different and overlapping missions;
- identifying and acting on opportunities;
- commitment by stakeholders to residents and tourists; and
- commitment to stakeholders by the NCHA.

If these elements are pursued in a systematic and cooperative manner, regional development can occur in a collaborative manner with strong partnerships, effective local organizations, a sense of community, and pride in the history that shaped the region.



## 6.1 Current Issues and Pressures

Regional development issues and pressures currently exist that may adversely impact the implementation of plan objectives. Identifying such issues enables the NCHA to make informed decisions and to work within the realistic boundaries that such pressures and issues typically present. In the preparation of this plan, the project team evaluated a number of constraints that can potentially inhibit the implementation of this plan.

### 6.1.1 Transportation

A great deal of the viability of the NCHA, particularly interpretation opportunities and visitor services in its core counties, depends upon improvement to the transportation system. Improvements and new construction have been proposed for seven roadway corridors within the NCHA. The Coalfields Expressway and the King Coal Highway are particularly important to the pursuit of the NCHA vision. The proposed Coalfields Expressway will significantly reduce travel time from Beckley to Welch, making the core counties more accessible to residents and visitors. The King Coal Highway would produce a similar benefit for travelers between Williamson and Welch.



Construction of both corridors, combined with the recently completed Corridor G, would position Welch as the southwestern anchor of a regional network of four-lane divided highways. This network would include multiple anchors in Charleston, Huntington, Beckley, Williamson, Bluefield, and Welch.

### 6.1.2 Economy

Although West Virginia's economy has shown improvement during the recent national boom, no area in the state has had more difficulty rebounding from de-industrialization. The southern West Virginia economy still depends heavily on coal mining, but the increased productivity of the mining industry has led to heavy job and population losses in NCHA counties. Against this backdrop, there continues to be conflict over mountaintop removal mining practices. One outspoken McDowell County native has been speaking out against the mountaintop removal practices of today's coal mining companies while writing novels celebrating the cultural history of mining. From another perspective, mining interests claim that mountaintop removal is needed, both to keep the coal mining industry viable in West Virginia, and also to produce more flat land for development. The NCHA cannot and should not become mired in the politics of mountaintop removal. However, if it is to be a successful progenitor of the post-coal economy of southern West Virginia, the NCHA must be a strong advocate for preserving and interpreting the physical and cultural remains of the coal boom era.



### **6.1.3 Preservation & Conservation**

It is important to act quickly in many of the more physically deteriorating towns and coal sites in the area if physical artifacts of the coal boom era are to be saved. The loss of coal related structures continues, and the region's physical heritage is vanishing. Physical artifacts, sites and structures add a vital dimension to the stories of the people.

### **6.1.4 Identity**

Southern West Virginia's appeal as a destination for vacations and for retirement living has been growing. While this type of growth will not result in real job growth in basic industries, it will provide a more balanced view of the region to a broader audience. Unfortunately Appalachian stereotypes perpetuate distorted and inaccurate perceptions of the region and its people. The NCHA provides the opportunity for the region's story in all of its dramatic and complex aspects to be told in an authentic and historically accurate manner.

### **6.1.5 Political Outreach**

Although the NCHA enjoys strong support from the region's congressional delegation, support in the state legislature is uneven. New leadership in statewide elected and appointed office presents opportunities for the NCHA to build support for its mission and activities. Establishing stronger ties with political leadership from the southern coalfields, perhaps via a coal heritage area caucus, should be a priority.

### **6.1.6 Land-Use**

Southern West Virginia counties, like rural areas across the United States, lack land-use controls completely or else have controls that are weak or ineffective. The visual landscape that results is cluttered and frequently unattractive. Coal heritage resources are often left to deteriorate, are removed entirely, or altered to the point that their original form and function is no longer apparent.

Land-use controls provide communities with a way to manage and guide land-use and future development and to protect important resources. Land-use controls are designed with the health, safety and welfare of the public in mind; therefore they should protect both urban and rural areas. Land-use controls should be encouraged by the NCHA to help control and guide growth and development in the region.

### **6.1.7 Regional Presence**

In order for the NCHA to succeed in building local capacity and forging stronger partnerships, it needs to have a presence within the heritage area. Beckley is the logical site for this presence, being the service center of the region due to its excellent access, proximity to recreational activities, and tourist support capabilities. Beckley's role as a visitor service center to the region is roughly analogous to Bluefield or Welch's earlier role as a mining service center.



## **6.2 Growth Management**

Knowledge of current issues and pressures brings to light the need for growth management initiatives. In an effort to prevent intrusive development and to protect the quality and character of the environment, growth management can control development quantity as well as quality. Acknowledging appropriate types of development and rates at which such development should occur can protect the natural, scenic, cultural, and historic resources from damage or, worse, destruction.

### **6.2.1 Investments in Infrastructure Development**

Coordination of land-use and infrastructure investments is one way for the NCHA to address poor stewardship of the land and its resources. The lack of capital improvement and land-use plans throughout the region may be contributing to damage of the natural environment, in addition to the built environment. Management of future infrastructure investments, in coordination with land-use development, will afford the construction of a support network. Such a support network would improve quality of life for residents as well as attract and support heritage tourism efforts.

We recommend forming partnerships with the Region I Planning and Development District, West Virginia Department of Transportation, and West Virginia Development Office, specifically its Infrastructure & Jobs Development Council. The NCHA should create

an inventory of existing land-use plans, zoning ordinances, growth management initiatives, infrastructure planning, and capital improvement projects throughout the eleven-county region. Creating such an inventory would give the NCHA a broad base of information for use as a planning tool. To better evaluate the needs of the area, it will be important to identify:

- existing sewerage and water treatment plants and their estimated capacity levels;
- areas lacking telecommunications services;
- roadways in need of improvements; and
- areas lacking adequate transportation access.

With the inventory and identification of needs, the NCHA may be able to offer technical assistance to communities in developing infrastructure and capital improvement plans and in writing grants for federal and state assistance.



### **6.2.2 Incentive-based Development Guidelines**

To make a real difference, the NCHA's efforts to encourage regional development must include a broad range of technical and financial assistance initiatives that create incentives advancing multi-jurisdictional objectives. Technical assistance can be provided directly and indirectly. For example, the NCHA can become a clearinghouse for information about regional approaches to development, providing the area's communities with pertinent case studies, news about progress in the field, or model ordinance language.

The NCHA can help communities incorporate land use regulations that encourage character-enhancing design and preservation of important sites, structures and artifacts. Treatment of mountaintops, grade cuts, and clear-cutting all need attention in the NHCA so that economic development and the landscapes that give the region its beauty can coexist.

Direct intervention might include funding or assisting efforts to incorporate growth management tools into development regulations, providing a "circuit rider" planner to address land use issues, and helping communities mount visioning processes to set directions for the future.

Financial incentives should be linked to program guidelines. For example, the existing grants program could be amended so that a portion of the funds becomes dedicated to applicants proposing regional development initiatives. Similarly, the system used to rank grant or loan applications could favor those submitted jointly by two or more jurisdictions or endorsed by several elected bodies.



### **6.3 Integration with Existing Regional Plans and Agencies**

In considering local jurisdiction's planning initiatives, the NCHA will be able to more effectively coordinate to retain the quality and character of the environment and to improve visitor accommodations. Emphasizing the first two elements of regional development, proactive cooperation and working across governmental and organizational boundaries, the NCHA can build organizational capacity and acceptance by the communities within the area. Coordinating existing regional plans and agencies with the NCHA will be challenging. However, it is crucial to the development of the region's identity, its marketing and tourism successes, and its economic development.

Building partnerships with existing regional organizations will allow the NCHA the opportunity to gain awareness of other initiatives that are currently taking place in the area. The Region I Planning and Development District, Southern West Virginia Convention and Visitors Bureau, Coal Heritage Trail Association, and Midland Trail all work in the NCHA region and, in some cases, share similar goals and strategies. Keeping these and other organizations abreast of ongoing work and improvements in the NCHA through website updates, e-mail, newsletters, and receptions would improve communication and in turn, develop and build stronger partnerships.

