



## ***Connecting for Prosperity – Charting the Future Together***

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On May 24, 2012, Shenandoah National Park in partnership with James Madison University and the Shenandoah National Park 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Planning Committee hosted a one-day conference, *Connecting for Prosperity – Charting the Future Together*, in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Nearly 130 representatives from the park, partner organizations, tourism and convention bureaus, local governments, and conservation organizations gathered to talk about ways to identify the region’s shared goals and to build an awareness of the economic potential for the area. Participants enjoyed presentations by guest panelists, case studies, and facilitated discussions. Panelists included park neighbor and winery owner Jimm East; Hampton, Virginia Mayor Molly Ward; Luray Caverns Marketing Director John Shaffer; former Roanoke County Councilman Dr. Rupert Cutler; and tourism consultant Gail Price. The keynote address was presented by Catharine Gilliam, founder of Community Collaboration, LLC, a company focused on building partnerships between communities and their national park neighbors. Following the keynote address, participants attended breakout sessions to brainstorm and share ideas on how best to partner and leverage a national park for maximum economic benefit while protecting park resources and community character. The notes from each afternoon breakout session are included below:

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### **Breakout session #1: Creating a Vision for the Future**

**Leader: Mayor Molly Ward, Hampton, Virginia**

This breakout session centered on the following discussion question: How does our community and region develop a comprehensive and appropriate strategy that takes advantage of the close proximity of Shenandoah National Park?

#### What is the value to the community?

- The quality of a rural setting. “No curtains needed” - the value of privacy
- The most popular viewpoint was that the park represents an authentic culture.
- At times communities may feel tension as to where to focus between tourism destinations (Monticello and Shenandoah National Park).

#### Will the value of the park from the communities’ perspective change in five years?

- People seem to be more aware of the need to preserve the intangible values that the park represents.
- A balance is needed between the quality of life versus the convenience of facilities.

- The viewshed is important whether looking up at the mountain or down from the park.
- Grassroots organization is necessary to maintain the community character.
- Education of what is available within the park.
- Large organizations (like James Madison University) can have a huge impact on values and should be included in the conversation.
- The partnership with the gateway communities that began with the planning of the 75th Anniversary and Rededication must be maintained.

How can the park advance the value to the communities?

- Educate about the past and engage students in local schools both within the park and in the classroom.
- As more of the local communities become "commuter" communities, help these people recognize the importance of the "refuge" that exists within their communities.
- Utilize staff at visitor centers (both park and community tourism) to work in both locations to develop a broader understanding.
- Develop a "Regional Tourism Passport" to engage visitors in a variety of locations to what is available within the local communities and Shenandoah National Park.

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**Breakout session #2: Enhancing Community Character**

**Leader: Dr. M. Rupert Cutler**

This breakout session centered on the following discussion question: How do we capitalize on the unique characteristics and special qualities of the gateway communities and ensure the preservation of those community assets and Shenandoah National Park by encouraging and attracting complimentary development in the future?

- Connect with localities and build a tapestry across landscape to preserve heritage
- Develop a sense of place at Shenandoah National Park.
- Many local residents are unaware of Skyline Drive and Shenandoah National Park.
- Harrisonburg tourism works to educate visitors and direct them to Shenandoah National Park for various activities and services.
- Inform local businesses about Shenandoah National Park.
- Get people to experience resources.
- Think about ways in which to care for, maintain, and develop transportation corridors en route to Shenandoah National Park (e.g. VA-29).

How can communities benefit economically in a meaningful way that doesn't detract from park?

- Within communities, share stories from park and community.
- Need a community vision
- Make it attractive, unique, with character.
- Develop downtown activities, nightlife, festivals, events, etc.
- Offer shuttle buses or parking areas adjacent to park to offset issues in park with overcrowding and difficulty with accessibility.

- Park-community tension
- Harness opportunities to make people proud of Shenandoah National Park, e.g. re-enactments, living histories, also Byrd Visitor Center and interpretations of displaced people.
- Familiarization (FAM) tours for our own backyard
- Turn-of-the century farm on park fringes, similar to Luray's heritage museum.
- Apply for National Scenic Byways Grants.
- Identify sense of place.
- Brand the region and extend dialogue between valley, park, and visitors with Skyline Drive as the backbone.
- Create a standard way of identifying the park: "Skyline Drive in Shenandoah National Park."
- Appalachian Trail Gateway Community - this is an existing term - why not use Shenandoah National Park Gateway Community as a pervasive concept and identifier? T
- Involve communities in developing their own image and the ideas for how their communities will be portrayed as a gateway community.
- Establish greater connectivity to school systems.

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### **Breakout session #3: Telling Our Story**

**Leader: Jimm East**

This breakout session centered on the following discussion questions: How do we better inform visitors and residents about the cultural, natural, and recreational treasures of Shenandoah National Park and its neighboring communities? How can we enlist visitors and residents in protecting these assets?

#### How do we inform visitors within the limitation of not being able to advertise in traditional ways?

- Increased use of Internet (minimal or no cost involved). Use QR codes to increase accessibility.
- Promote through special interest groups, e.g. adventure groups, hiking clubs, etc.
- More emphasis on tags and apps.

#### How do we engage visitors?

- Questing, similar to a scavenger hunt; participants visit both cultural and natural points of interest - both in and out of the park; receive a patch upon completion.
- Volunteers to help increase the number of "boots on the ground" to help answer questions and suggest activities to visitors.
- Interactive kiosks in visitor centers, ARAMARK Lodges, and at overlooks, if possible.
- More storytelling activities in small, short talks with easily deliverable content

#### Key recommendations

- Identify topics of interest, not necessarily topics we are interested in.
- Increase use of social media, i.e. Facebook, Twitter, to reach and inform visitors.
- More "real" human interest stories
- Enlist former residents or descendants to help tell the story of the park.

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## **Breakout session #4: Taking Advantage of Our Region's Tourism Potential**

**Leader: Gail Price**

This breakout session centered on the following discussion questions: How can we develop rural tourism offerings that take advantage of the unique character of our park and region? What services and attractions are currently offered and what needs to be developed to maximize visitor enjoyment and the economic impact of these visitors on our communities?

What is a gateway community?

Group answer: An entry point to someplace special

Critical tools for promoting value of tourism is tracking economic impact

- Revenue generated
- Source of visitors (where from)
- Visitor demographics
- Visitor interests (based on demographics)

Ms. Price's suggestions for the group

- Do a tourism inventory.
- Divide area (county) into grid and identify tourism opportunities.
- Determine connections.
- Look for competing and missing offerings.
- Look at packaging offerings as a tool to add value for visitors.

How do we engage those in our community who resist tourism?

- Use tracking information on revenues and benefits to community.
- Look for best practices from other communities to engage citizens.

What opportunities already exists in this area?

- Vineyards
- Boating/fishing
- Caverns
- Golf
- Hunting
- Civil war/history
- Hang-gliding, zip lines
- AT communities
- Bike trails

A discussion on bike trails ensued, regarding a desire for more/safer bike routes and mountain biking in Shenandoah National Park, which is only permitted on the Skyline Drive and in developed areas, not on trails or administrative roads.

A Nelson County representative discussed the potential for development of Crozet Blue Ridge Tunnel (an old railroad tunnel) near Rockfish Gap for a "rails to trails" project.

Consider connecting greenways with park to allow “free” entry at boundary for locals. Offered idea of free entry on Park Neighbor Day (an annual celebration of neighbors in nine counties).

The group discussed familiarization (FAM) tours for community organizations and “front line” employees, as well as park staff into the communities. Park staff has hosted staff and volunteers from local visitor centers to help them get more acquainted with park resources.

#### Marketing to motorcyclists as a tourism strategy

- Promote day rides with specified routes that link communities (Ms. Price cited example from WV -- new map of routes increase visitation by 75%). Culpeper County currently has a brochure for day trips based out of the county.

#### Ideas for improvements:

- Marketing across community lines
- Shuttle services from AT communities
- Include Shenandoah National Park in all tourism literature (e.g. “near Shenandoah National Park”).

#### Scenic Byways:

- Create loop tours as offshoots from designated scenic byways, connect/create tourism opportunities in multiple communities.
- Byways program is a source of funding for byway related projects.

Representatives were interested in seeing continuation of park connections with communities developed or expanded during the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration.

Information available on the factors that attract new businesses?

- Quality of life
- Community character
- Recreational opportunities

#### Questions outstanding from the participants:

- How to create a year-round tourism income –So much is seasonal dependent, can’t survive.
- How do you maximize tourist spending for locals beyond business owners? What’s in it for other citizens?
- How can communities work better with each other as well as with the park?

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### **Breakout session #5: Measuring Our Success**

**Leader: John Shaffer**

This breakout session centered on the following discussion questions: How can we determine if our community is handling tourism in a sustainable fashion? How can we do a better job of sharing our success stories and best practices region wide?

#### Sustainability

- Communities can write grants to help get projects started (e.g. create local farmers markets, greenways, etc.).
- Sustainable purchasing – Choose products that are made sustainably.
- Make recycling a priority and easily accessible to both visitors and community members.

### Best Practices

- Virginia Green certification – expand this program.
- Community advocacy
- Build LEED certified buildings, using LEED certified builders and products.

### Success Stories

- Build farmers markets.
- Build greenways.
- Conduct river cleanup events involving the community.
- Ensure communities are supportive of tourism development and related impacts.

### Sharing Success Stories

- Media
- Schools
- Get-togethers to check in periodically to see if we are meeting our goals (invite Planning Commissions, VCB's, Chambers of Commerce, etc.)

### Measuring Success – How do we do it?

- Hope to see occupancy rates go up.
- Hope to see dollar revenues go up.
- Track age of visitors; hoping to attract younger audiences.
- Hope to see an increase in in-kind contributions.
- Increase the visibility – Make sure the public can see the assets a community has.
- Increase the scenic beauty of towns.
- Protect the viewshed.
- Keep adding new opportunities both inside and outside the park to continue to attract visitors.
- Establish Trusts to raise money to help bring local school field trips to the park and for other needs.
- Continue to collaborate with partners.
- Create Agro-tourism destinations.