Chapter 2
CHALLENGES & STRENGTHS

REGIONAL CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES

Nearly 23% of those living within the Spearhead Trails' seven county region are living below the poverty level with Russell Countians being the highest at over 31% which is almost 1/3 of their population!   The State average is 9.9%. The national average is only 13%.

> *Nearly 1 in every 3 people in Russell County is living below the poverty rate!*

And while Virginia on average is seeing a 9.7% increase in population and the United States as a whole is seeing an 8% increase, nearly every county in the Spearhead Trails region have experienced a significant decline. In fact, Buchanan has lost nearly 13% of its population since the 2000 census.

The overall health of this seven county region shows that Lee County ranks in the 90-100% of the worst counties in the U.S. for adult inactivity. Wise, Scott, Russell and Tazewell rank in the 50-90 percentile. Buchanan County's adult obesity rate of 33% ranks in the worse 4% in the nation.

> *Buchanan County is in the top 4% of worst in the nation for adult obesity with 33% of its residents considered obese!*

High numbers of diabetes, coronary heart disease, stroke, breast & colon cancer and many other diseases have been reported in the study area. *See Appendix B – Health of Southwest Virginia for more on this.*

SOMETHING NEEDS TO BE DONE TO CHANGE THE CURRENT TRENDS IN SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA

Improving the health of SW Virginians through physical activity will help to reduce health costs.   Trails can provide a great variety of physical activities for communities at a relatively low cost to the user and require limited maintenance and oversight. Trails also promote quality of life and community livability which could entice more people to stay in the area. Improving existing trails or building new trails could be used as a way of lowering overall health costs in SW Virginia as well as provide opportunities to bring more revenue into an area that desperately needs it.

OTHER CHALLENGES

There are several other challenges that could seriously impact this trail system that legislators need to be aware of, and that could potentially affect the ability of the Authority to maximize the economic feasibility and potential economic impact of the trails. Some of those issues include:

- Road, river and railroad crossings
- Trails located in close proximity to all of the above
- And addressing environmental issues differently including but not limited to:
    - In areas where trails are developed on federal property, private property, reclaimed land, land proposed to be mined, etc.
    - Where trails already exist as in old coal roads, gas roads, timber roads, etc.
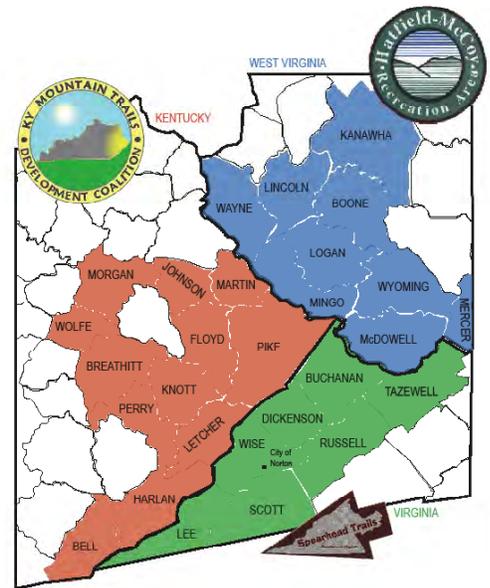
Other challenges include:

- No one community has enough to keep people in the area for very long but combined, the region could become a destination.
- Disjointed marketing and promotional campaigns along with a limited sense of regional connectivity.
- No single resource to obtain tourism information on the region although preliminary steps have been taken through this study.

STRENGTHS

- SW Virginia is in close proximity to two other state trail systems in southeast Kentucky and southwest West Virginia that are already drawing thousands of people within miles of the Virginia border. The fact that SRRA is focusing on more than just OHV trails puts them in a position for greater gains.

- Mountainous terrain, unique to this region, is a tremendous draw in itself. One cannot manufacture mountains such as those found in the Appalachia region of the three state area. But unlike West Virginia and Kentucky, Virginia has larger valley areas which allow for greater building opportunities in closer proximity to existing and potential trails.

- Many of the mountains in both southeast Kentucky and the southwestern portion of West Virginia have such steep grades that accessibility by anything other than a motorized vehicle is extremely limited. Portions of Southwest Virginia's topography offers a more gradual elevation grade making those areas much more conducive for walking, biking and even horseback riding.

- Being located in "Coal Country" where, unlike other parts of Virginia and many other of the eastern states, there are large masses of land with single property owners within all three regions of SE Kentucky, SW West Virginia and SW Virginia.

- "Coal Country" has also provided the region with pre-existing trail systems created by old logging roads, coal roads, and gas line roads.

- SW Virginia already has a number of existing publicly-accessible trail systems which primarily just need to be better maintained, signed, marketed and promoted in order to encourage greater use especially by those outside the region. The study also has identified numerous potential trails, if properly constructed, could become premier trails.   Preliminary work has already begun in identifying large property owners and forging relationships that would allow trails to be developed on private lands.
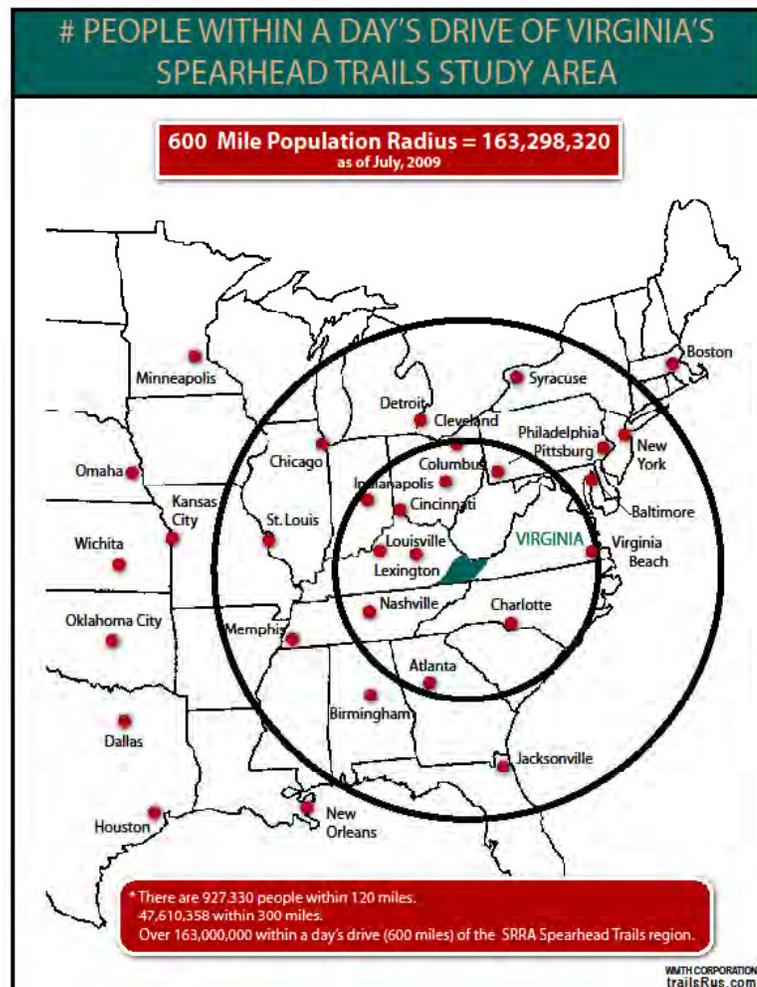
- A review of the seven counties (Buchanan, Dickenson, Lee, Russell, Scott, Tazewell and Wise) and the City of Norton in southwest Virginia, show that they offer numerous lodging rooms and tourism related amenities necessary to accommodate a large influx of additional visitors to the area and to keep them in the area for multiple days.

- Strong community and public support for the Spearhead Trail initiative has been shown. Communities are already stepping forward and investing time and money to explore the potential for developing trails in their area.

- There is an entity (SRRA) already in place to help develop, manage and market the trails.

- **Over 163,000,000 people are within a day's drive (600 miles) of the SRRA Spearhead Trails Region.**

OPPORTUNITY

A cursory comparison was made between what the seven counties in West Virginia had to offer in the way of hotels/motels, museums, attractions and restaurants when they started the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System and what Virginia's seven county Spearhead Trails area currently has available to see how ready Virginia is to receiving an influx of additional visitors to the region.

What the comparison showed was that although West Virginia has an extensive trail system that attracts thousands of visitors every day; Virginia, by far, is starting with a much stronger and developed infrastructure and will be better able to accommodate the visitors and keep them in the area longer. *See Vol. 4 - Tourism Offerings and Amenities.*

PEOPLE WITHIN A DAY'S DRIVE OF VIRGINIA'S SPEARHEAD TRAILS STUDY AREA

600 Mile Population Radius = 163,298,320
as of July, 2009

* There are 927,330 people within 120 miles.
47,610,358 within 300 miles.
Over 163,000,000 within a day's drive (600 miles) of the SRRA Spearhead Trails region.

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> *Over a million people annually use West Virginia's trail system. Virginia has the potential to attract more visitors to their area and keep them there longer.*