

SWOT Analysis

A SWOT analysis assesses a community's major strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. This exercise can also provide a framework for identifying local action items and priorities, and for creating a legislative "to do" list for the locally elected officials. Action items under each category help decision-makers: build on community strengths; address weaknesses; take advantage of opportunities; and prepare for threats.

The items from this SWOT analysis originated from themes found in a recent community survey and public meeting, conducted for the Rockfish Area Planning effort. These items were almost consistent with the County Comprehensive Plan, last adopted in 2002.

Strengths

Strengths are existing features, amenities, and characteristics that lead to a community's success. These include intangible attributes as well as physical assets. (An "asset inventory" and "asset maps" have been developed to supplement this SWOT Analysis, and to specifically highlight the Rockfish Valley's incredible physical assets.) Successful communities reinforce, protect, and build on all their strengths.

Environmental resources:

The Rockfish Valley contains some of Virginia's highest-quality natural landscapes, core habitats, and watersheds as defined by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation's "Natural Lands Assessment." This "green infrastructure network" provides critically important ecosystem services such as watershed protection, groundwater recharge, and healthy air quality; and provides high-quality wildlife habitat. The area's green infrastructure network is also the foundation for the area's rural character and sense of place; and contributes to the area's high quality of life and economic vitality.

Rural charm:

The Rockfish Valley has a uniquely beautiful character that attracts visitors from across the region, the Commonwealth, and beyond. The public engagement process has highlighted residents' belief that preserving this rural environment should be one of the County's highest priorities. The existing Comprehensive Plan also prioritizes rural preservation and protection of the area's sense of place.

Scenic vistas:

The Rockfish Valley contains some of the most scenic vistas in all of Virginia. The exceptional scenery of the Blue Ridge Mountains, forests, and farms is a major component of the thriving agri-tourism industry along the Route 151 corridor.

Local agriculture:

Residents communicated their pride in locally sourced food and agriculture, seeing this as a critical part of the community. Throughout the public engagement process, local residents stated their preferences and support for small-scale farms and local value-added products.

Additional commentary:

Nelson County's population continues to age: there is out-migration of younger residents (typically after high school graduation) and in-migration of retirees. With an older population, there may be challenges with finding younger owners and workers to maintain and continue the success of local farms.

Community involvement and passion:

Rockfish Area residents and businesses were highly engaged throughout the area planning effort, participating via surveys, public meetings and other avenues. There were over 430 responses to the community survey, well above expectations. Additionally, there were over 120 attendees at the first community workshop. This high level of involvement indicates a local population that is heavily invested and which cares deeply for its community.

Relatively high income:

Compared to other areas of the County, the Rockfish Valley has a relatively high median income. Consequently, the residents have more resources to reinvest in the community and support local businesses.

Economic engine:

The Rockfish Valley is the economic engine for Nelson County, with resort and agri-tourism businesses as the economic base. With preliminary analysis, this base appears to be stable, continuing to support the County's finances.

Action items to build on strengths:

- Conduct a code audit to evaluate whether local ordinances effectively preserve Nelson County's rural character and scenic vistas.
- Conduct an assessment of best practices for programs that incentivize rural protection.
- Identify best practices for programs that support local farmers.
- Develop an asset-based development strategy which provides updated economic development priorities for supporting existing businesses and recruiting additional investment, and which identifies community development goals and objectives. The strategy should establish a balance between growth and development, preservation of rural character, and roadway capacity.

Weaknesses

Weaknesses are existing features, conditions or problems that hinder a community from realizing its goals. A community should consider ways to address or overcome these obstacles.

Inadequate growth management:

Throughout the planning process, residents communicated that the County lacks a cohesive or current (up-to-date) plan for managing growth in the Rockfish Valley area, especially along Route 151. The community consistently stated that the type and location of certain recent commercial development projects are threatening the area's rural character. The County's 2002 Comprehensive Plan also calls for improved growth management strategies.

Lack of transportation options:

The lack of bike infrastructure presents challenges for residents and tourists. In the survey and public meeting, citizens commented on the lack of shoulders along area roadways and the limitation that

creates for bicycling. There is also limited service from on-demand transit services. With an aging population, the demand for alternative transportation options will continue to grow.

Traffic and road safety:

Traffic was a common theme from public feedback. With increased demand on area roads from agri-businesses, residents believed there was inadequate planning to address road capacity and maintenance. Residents also had concerns about the high levels of truck traffic along Route 151 and Route 6. With two-lane country roads characterized by extensive horizontal and vertical curves, motorists generally feel that the corridor is unsafe. VDOT's roadway data supports the perception of high truck traffic.

Additional commentary:

While VDOT's traffic data does not show high levels of congestion, those traffic counts reflect mid-week traffic patterns and do not account for weekend or peak season traffic levels.

Access to nature:

Residents enjoy abundant scenery of the area's beautiful natural resources, such as streams, valleys, and mountains that surround their homes. However, there is limited access to these resources, other than a relatively small number of trailheads along the Blue Ridge Parkway which provide access to the Appalachian Trail and George Washington National Forest. Survey respondents and meeting participants consistently noted their preference for environmental protection and for increased access to public lands and outdoor recreation amenities.

Undiversified economic base:

While the Rockfish Valley is the economic engine for Nelson County, it depends almost entirely on resort and agri-tourism businesses. Without diversifying the economic base, the County is exposed to potential threats such as any weakness in the Wintergreen resort or real estate markets, or any fluctuation in the craft beverage markets.

Action items to address weaknesses:

- Conduct a code audit to evaluate whether local ordinances effectively preserve Nelson County's rural character and scenic vistas.
- Update the County's Comprehensive Plan, to establish a holistic and up-to-date growth management strategy for the area and larger community.
- Coordinate a meeting with JAUNT to determine opportunities for increasing service within the Rockfish Valley.
- Coordinate with VDOT to conduct additional traffic counts on weekends and peak season.
- Coordinate with VDOT to implement transportation recommendations from the Route 151 Corridor Study.
- As part of the Comprehensive Plan, conduct an assessment on opportunities for parks and recreation facilities in the Rockfish Valley.
- Explore opportunities for the County to hold conservation easements or engage in other land preservation practices which would preserve the area's rural character.
- Hold an annual meeting with property owners, with conservation easement programs and other land preservation programs, to market preservation options.
- Develop an asset-based development strategy which provides updated economic development priorities for supporting existing businesses and recruiting additional investment, and which

identifies community development goals and objectives. The strategy should establish a balance between growth and development, preservation of rural character, and roadway capacity.

Opportunities

Unlike strengths and weaknesses, opportunities are more forward-looking and deal with larger forces. These are future prospects that could help a community realize its goals. A community should consider ways to strategically take advantage these opportunities.

Broadband/internet services:

While residents want to preserve and enjoy a rural lifestyle, local respondents would generally like improved access to internet. Local businesses also require fast and affordable internet services. With national investment in broadband for rural communities, the County could continue to successfully utilize state and federal resources to improve service.

Local economic development:

Residents are proud of their local businesses and hope to see expanded and new local businesses, as opposed to national chains which commonly do not “fit” harmoniously with the local character.

Agri-business:

While some identify agri-business as a weakness or threat, others see these operations as an asset that brings in tourism, amenities, and resources. With a growing market for these operations (especially the craft beverage industry, including wineries, breweries, cideries, and distilleries) the Rockfish Valley is well positioned for continued success. Throughout the public engagement process, members of the public have emphasized a desire to see commercial growth be better managed.

Action items to take advantage of opportunities:

- Coordinate with local service providers and the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) to explore additional coverage from previous broadband installations.
- Develop an asset-based development strategy which provides updated economic development priorities for supporting existing businesses and recruiting additional investment, and which identifies community development goals and objectives. The strategy should establish a balance between growth and development, preservation of rural character, and roadway capacity.

Threats

Like opportunities, threats are more forward looking than strengths and weaknesses. These future challenges could hinder the community from realizing its goals. A community should consider ways to avoid or mitigate threats.

Pipeline:

Many residents feel that the proposed Dominion Pipeline will harm the area’s incredible scenery, impair surface waterways, threaten groundwater resources, and harm other natural resources – all of which are critically important assets to the area. While the Pipeline is not part of the Rockfish Valley planning effort, this was a common concern from survey respondents and meeting attendees.

Diminished scenic resources:

As one of its greatest strengths, scenic vistas define the Rockfish Valley area. Many residents are concerned that new development and signage would diminish vistas and viewsheds of the Blue Ridge Mountains and surrounding rural landscapes, ruining what makes the area unique.

Unplanned development:

Residents generally fear unplanned development that will diminish scenic vistas negatively alter the special rural character of the community. While many members of the public noted that they do not oppose all new development, they feel growth and development must be done in a thoughtful way. The existing Comprehensive Plan also emphasizes growth management and preservation of rural areas.

An aging population:

Like many rural counties in Virginia, Nelson County is an aging population. After high school, graduates either leave for college or move to areas with more career opportunities. Most of those native residents do not return or remain away until retirement age. While younger residents are migrating out, retirees are migrating into Nelson County. Since the aging population generates fewer children, the County will grow increasingly dependent on the influx of older households in order to maintain a stable population. For example, the Rockfish Valley population remains flat despite the new businesses. The demographic situation may threaten economic development efforts, as the local workforce will be increasingly limited. The County will need to address the demands and specific challenges of an aging community.

Additional commentary:

An aging population is not necessarily a threat to the community. For example, with fewer children, the County will have less pressure for certain services (such as school investments). The changing demographics may be a strength – if the County can embrace those trends, prepare proactively, and build its services around those specialized needs of seniors.

Action items to prepare for threats:

- Conduct a code audit to evaluate whether local ordinances effectively preserve Nelson County's rural character and scenic vistas.
- Update the County's Comprehensive Plan, to establish a holistic and up-to-date growth management strategy for the area and larger community.
- In the Comprehensive Plan, develop strategies for embracing the aging population.

Action Items

The following is a summary of action items, along with details on proposed timelines, deliverables and stakeholders.

Action	Description	Deliverable	Timeline
Comprehensive Plan	Update the Plan to establish a holistic and up-to-date growth management strategy.	Plan Update	Short-term
Aging Population	Develop strategies for embracing the County's aging population.	Plan Update	Short-term
Asset-Based Development Strategy	Develop an asset-based development strategy to maximize and synchronize economic development priorities and community development goals.	Plan Update	Short-term
Parks and	Conduct an assessment of opportunities for parks and	Plan Update	Short-term

Recreation	recreation facilities in the Rockfish Valley.		
Code Audit	Evaluate effectiveness of ordinances at preserving rural character and scenic vistas.	Report Document	Short-term
Traffic Counts	Coordinate with VDOT to conduct additional traffic counts on weekends and peak season.	Data	Short-term
Conservation Easements	Explore opportunities for the County to hold conservation easements.	Memo Report	Mid-term
Conservation Easements	Hold an annual meeting with property owners, to market preservation options.	Community Meeting	Mid-term
Rural Programs	Conduct research on best practices for permanent programs that incentivize rural protection.	Memo Report	Mid-term
Farm Programs	Identify best practices for programs that support local farmers.	Memo Report	Mid-term
On-Demand Transit	Coordinate with JAUNT to determine opportunities for increasing service within the Rockfish Valley.	Memo Report	Mid-term
Transportation Improvements	Coordinate with VDOT to implement transportation recommendations from the Route 151 Corridor Study.	Construction	Long-term
Broadband	Coordinate with the DHCD to explore additional coverage from previous broadband installations.	Exploratory Report	Long-term