

# **Strategic Planning for Downtown Revitalization and Outdoor Recreation on the Clinch River**

**February 9, 2011**

**Oxbow Center, St. Paul, Virginia**

## **Meeting Summary**

**Facilitated by the Institute for Environmental Negotiation, University of Virginia**

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### **Executive Summary**

Fifty-four people gathered at the Oxbow Center in St. Paul on February 9, 2011. They endorsed a collaborative effort to begin strategic planning for downtown revitalization and outdoor recreation on the Clinch River. Several preliminary goals were identified for the effort including exploring developing a linear state park that would attract tourists and support entrepreneurial businesses, provide recreational opportunities for the region, and protect the water quality and the world-class biodiversity of the Clinch. Participants enthusiastically agreed to meet again, likely in April or May of 2011, to develop more details of a plan that would bring these goals into being.

### **Introduction**

Fifty-four people gathered at the Oxbow Center in St. Paul on February 9, 2011 for a lively meeting on Strategic Planning for Downtown Revitalization and Outdoor Recreation on the Clinch River. The meeting was facilitated by Frank Dukes and Christine Gyovai of the Institute for Environmental Negotiation at the University of Virginia. This meeting was held as a follow-up to the September, 28<sup>th</sup> 2010 Building Local Economies in Southwest Virginia meeting, as well as additional conversations with local project partners (contact us for a copy of the meeting summary from the September 28<sup>th</sup> meeting).

Glen “Skip” Skinner, Director of the LENOWISCO Planning District Commission, and Jim Baldwin, Director of the Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commission, welcomed participants to the meeting and discussed opportunities for the Clinch River planning effort.

Frank Dukes and Christine Gyovai provided background for the effort and then outlined the agenda for the meeting. The focus of the meeting was to discuss the need for the strategic planning process and to identify potential goals, information needs and gaps, opportunities, additional participants and next steps for the strategic planning process.

During introductions, several participants identified their goals for the meeting, which included:

- Publicize regional events taking place as part of National Trails Day on June 4<sup>th</sup>.
- Provide many opportunities and different ways to enjoy the Clinch River.

- Exploring business incubation opportunities in Dungannon and potential partnerships with St. Paul.
- Exploring how various communities and counties fit into the effort, including Scott County, the Pinnacles, and others.
- Meeting project partners and hearing others ideas was important.
- Learn, listen and understand from other meeting participants.
- The Dept. of Forestry and the VA Dept. of Game and Inland Fisheries offered to help with the effort, as well as other state agencies.
- Promote the assets of the river.
- Take a broad and inclusive approach to the effort, involving multiple stakeholders, agencies, and consider the environment and the economy, in the planning effort.
- Use a consensus-based approach to protect the gem of the Clinch River; use it for revitalization.
- Explore opportunities for tying in downtown revitalization to Clinch recreation.
- Support local, responsible asset-based development.
- Explore ways to add economic values through the river resource.
- Involve more citizens and residents in the effort.
- Promote tourism in the National Forests.
- Educate and involve students in the effort.

Brad Kreps, Director of The Nature Conservancy's Clinch Valley Program, gave a presentation on the ecological assets of the Clinch River. Highlights from the presentation included:

- Location of the Clinch River and its connection to Tennessee River system.
- The recreational uses of the river, such as canoeing and kayaking.
- Wildlife in river: Clinch River is the #1 river in North America for rare species.
  - The river has more than 40 freshwater mussels; more than 100 species of fish; and more than two-thirds of the diversity in the Tennessee River system.
  - Freshwater mussels are very important to the health of the river system as they filter and clean the waterway.
- There has been significant use of conservation agreements to protect lands along the river.

Todd Christensen, Director of the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Commission, then gave a presentation discussing the strategic planning efforts of the Commission. One of the main goals of the Commission is to establish a creative economy in Southwest Virginia. Additionally, the Commission seeks to further brand the region by identifying a common cultural heritage. Additional strategies include helping to facilitate recreational opportunities, developing entrepreneurship and outfitter opportunities, and focusing on marketing Southwest Virginia.

Mr. Christensen described a similar strategic planning effort currently underway on the New River. In describing the parallels between the efforts, he stated that the first priority for the effort should be to save local assets—not diminish them. To do this, Mr. Christensen stated that the effort could focus on enhancing the physical and economic infrastructure of the area, and increasing marketing efforts.

The facilitators described the next steps for the strategic planning effort, which will likely include a series of stakeholder interviews, holding a planning meeting to develop a draft strategic plan and an action plan (building on the results of this meeting), and then project identification, implementation and evaluation. Funding will be sought to support the effort, and ideas, input and suggestions are welcome at any point in the process.

The group discussed overall considerations as the effort moved forward including:

- Looking at River Place on the Clinch (in Tennessee) and develop more areas such as this.
- Explore expanding the DCR Clinch River State Park Feasibility Study from Dungannon to Wise (including potential bluway trips).
- Explore how to involve other watersheds and tributaries in the effort including the Guest and Powell Rivers, as well as Copper Creek.
- Protect the headwaters of the waterway.
- Clean the Clinch, and identify areas to clean up along the river. Develop incentives to clean the river up; doing so will likely increase tourism. People will appreciate the river more once they are out on it.

### **Goals, Information Needs, and Opportunities**

After a brief break, the group broke into four smaller groups for focused conversations to identify goals, information needs and gaps, and opportunities for the Clinch River planning effort. A summary of each group's conversation is below, as well as the top three to four goals, gaps or opportunities each group identified and presented to the larger group after the small group conversations took place.

#### **Small group discussion 1**

The first group identified three goals as their top priorities:

1. Linear State Park: putting the Clinch River on the map and tying many local efforts and activities together.
2. Marketing: increasing awareness of existing assets.
3. Supporting local entrepreneurs: supporting the people who are willing to take risks.

The first group began their discussion by identifying local assets. The assets identified were:  
Information needs:

- Stream miles
- Put-ins
- Fishing holes
- Trails
- Existing plans for recreation
- Economics
- Ecology
- Infrastructure

The group also identified constraints. Two constraints were listed: the price of land use, and the different vision property owners have of how their land should be used near the river. The group then listed a common vision for the Clinch River. They arrived at three items of importance:

1. Developing a state park
2. Preserving biodiversity
3. Communication while planning this effort, especially for identifying partners

The group also decided that marketing what each location within the region has to offer was a good idea. Three ideas of what to market were:

1. Networks—web links, but phone apps with Clinch River offerings would be useful as well
2. Partnership with Heartwood
3. 3-7-10 day set itineraries for potential visitors to the area.

Other ideas discussed by the group include: breaking down the project into scalable projects; identifying how each locality, business, community, and organization see themselves in the big plan; and, the need for real, tangible actions and successes (e.g. supporting entrepreneurs).

## **Small group discussion 2**

The second group listed four goals as their top priorities:

1. Annual Clinch River clean-up event
2. “Pearls of the Clinch”: creating interest via trails to destination points and towns along the Clinch River
  - a. Use this term as a branding or marketing term. This refers to the towns and special places on the river.
3. Tourism infrastructure
  - a. Improving and expanding entrepreneurship opportunities with increased local lodging and recreational businesses in the area (especially to service visitors and tourists).
4. Merge all the various studies, reports, marketing tools, etc. related the Clinch River into one “overview” document. Identify funding sources for various efforts, especially at educational funding opportunities.

The goals the group discussed included:

1. Annual river clean-up event with an event and a pre-event publicity.
2. Development/ utilization of a regional Clinch River marketing and promotional website.
3. Better publicity and coordination of existing river-related events.
4. Aggregate the regional Clinch River related assets, studies and activities to better market and promote region and its various communities.
5. Provide links from the river and recreation trails to town commercial centers (i.e. spur trails, etc.).

The opportunities the group identified included:

1. Increasing interest and developing in a trail parallel to the river.
2. “Pearls of the Clinch” (branding or marketing strategies).
3. Exploiting various local events and festivals already connecting with the river or region.
4. Increase utilization of the Heartwood website.
5. Utilize the Wetlands Estonia Center at St. Paul High School.
6. Development of local business incubators (this may also be a gap).
7. Utilize abandoned rail bed along Lewis Creek for a “Rails to Trails” project. There may be other abandoned rail beds that can also be used in this manner.
8. Development of more recreational activities on tributary streams.
9. Promote regional fishing and water-based events and initiatives.

The gaps the group identified included:

1. Increased and coordinated public relations and marketing effort in the Clinch River area.
2. More and better communication among the various people and organizations involved in local towns and communities along the Clinch River. Local governments need to continue to be represented at the meeting and communicate better amongst each other.
3. The compilation of various studies, maps, reports, marketing strategies in the Clinch River region into a single “overview document”.
4. Funding for planning and implementation.
5. Tourism Infrastructure
  - a. Lodging
  - b. Shops to support tourist activity (i.e. bike)

### **Small group discussion 3**

The third group identified four goals as their priorities:

1. Promote more public access, especially by working towards a linear state park and brokering easements with landowners.

2. Water quality improvement and litter clean up.
3. Develop the ability to market *when ready*.
4. Develop a core/central information center for the region.

The third group discussed several suggestions for goals, opportunities, and information gaps for the effort. Several obstacles for each point were also acknowledged by the group. The following are the issues discussed:

- Goals:
  - Create itineraries and/or guides to the entire waterway from the start of the Clinch through Virginia. Guides should include information about trails, lunch spots, licenses, and boating launches -- essentially eco tour guides by county. It was noted that Scott County has created exemplary resources in this vein.
    - Information Gap: Does a website already exist that compiles this kind of information?
  - Build places for public access:
    - Develop public campgrounds.
    - Develop a public anchor point.
    - Create a linear State Park.
    - It was noted that Damascus is a success story of developing public access.
      - Information need: What are the steps to attaining State Park status? Suggestions offered include: securing funds, developing bipartisan support, and finding the right sponsors.
  - Assess the people and structures needed to move this process forward. Ensure that we are not re-inventing the wheel.
    - Facilitate focus groups to determine additional goals and strategies.
    - Need to work together as a region, “as one.”
  - Foster entrepreneurship.
    - Facilitate focus groups to determine additional goals and strategies.
    - Promote Adventure Tourism. It was noted that a database of entrepreneurs currently exists, and there may be funding to support this.
    - Focus on Town-based development projects, such as outfitters in towns.
  - Achieve private landowner involvement towards the creation of campgrounds, public access points, and a State Park. Work with easements.
    - Obstacles include the risk of liability and the difficulty of engaging private landowners.
  - Ensure environmental quality by building litter awareness at the county level and assessing/improving/protecting water quality.
    - The Keep Southwest Virginia Beautiful campaign was mentioned.
    - The availability of health department data was noted.
  - Get the message out about this process

- Opportunities
  - Stock fish in the headwaters of the Clinch to promote fishing recreation.
    - One suggestion was to stock trout to create a market to attract fly fishermen.
    - Another suggestion was to stock small mouth fish that are native to this area instead of trout.
  - Build a hiking trail at the headwaters region.
    - It was noted that Cedar Bluff has no trail--only St. Paul has a trail.
  - Develop educational programs about the river's biodiversity.
    - Information need: Request for a detailed blow-up map of the biodiversity hot spots in the Clinch itself. For example, where are the biggest concentrations of mussels?
  - Create a Visitor / Education / Interpretive Center
    - Suggestion that there be spaces like this in different localities.
    - Suggestion that there be observation points.
    - Suggestion to include offerings like kayak training.
  - Create a centralized Interpretive Center for the region.
    - Suggestion that this center for environmental tourism be located in St. Paul.
    - Offer bus tours to other sites in the regions, particularly if they are not readily accessible to tourists (due to bad local roads).
    - St. Paul would divert tourists to other localities so that everyone "shares the dollar."
    - Described as a "Spoke of a Wagon Wheel" or a "Mothership".
  - The Spearhead Trails study was noted as a resource for this project.
  - It was noted that there are opportunities beyond the river itself, such as building trails beyond the river and encouraging use of local caves, enjoyment of native fauna, etc.
- Gaps
  - There is a need to learn more about the whole community as part of the process of moving forward.

#### **Small group discussion 4**

The fourth group identified three priority areas:

1. Focusing on a set of issues that are specific to each locality—look at each locality and extrapolate the important issues from each.

2. Finding access points approximately every 4 hours along the Clinch River.
  - a. Significant communication and collaboration with local landowners would be needed in this effort as many potential areas for access points are privately owned.
3. Update the state park feasibility study to include the other Clinch River counties (other than Russell county, which it currently only focuses on).

The group discussed a variety of issues, focusing specifically on goals, needs, and opportunities including:

- Goals
  - Hardening the shorelines in order to clearly show the physical boundaries of the river along camp grounds
  - Create/increase infrastructure on campgrounds
    - Make locations more attractive to tourists
  - Ongoing maintenance of sites
  - Creating more points of entry/exit into the river
    - One person noted that the next take out point from St. Paul was in Dungannon
- Information needs or gaps
  - Lack of critical mass and natural resource businesses
  - A lack of lodging, especially at campgrounds but also in downtown St. Paul.
    - Group expressed an interest in “encouraging people to come”
    - Explore building a hostel in downtown in St. Paul
  - Education to visitors on “hiking or river etiquette.” For example, some visitors unknowingly walk into private property or leave trash behind
  - Need for funding
    - Identification of private landowners who are interested in funding development along the Clinch River
  - Information: gathering addresses for pinpointing specific locations
  - Detailed study of good locations along the river; locations that should be added or developed as access points
  - Repairing signage along the river
    - One participant said many of the signs along river are old and some are unreadable
- Opportunities
  - Localities purchasing land for access points
    - This would make it easier to introduce new access points
  - Master Plan across the entire Clinch River watershed
  - User fees on sites should be considered as a potential source of funding.

## Moving Forward

After the small groups presented their priorities, there was additional discussion about potential next steps. In general, participants determined that the points below were commonly held as important priorities in moving forward with the strategic planning effort:

- Explore developing a linear Clinch River State Park
- Identify and develop multiple access points along the river
- Expand the Dept. of Conservation and Recreation Clinch River State Park feasibility study
- Develop a unified regional marketing strategy (at a later point)
- Develop trails and campgrounds adjacent to the river
- Develop places to stay along the river; focus on base camps
- Focus on water quality in the Clinch, and use water quality as a catalyst for networking and building momentum for the effort

Additional information needs that were discussed included determining whether Copper Creek was open to the public, and ways to remove abandoned cars in the town of Cleveland.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the group discussed points that went well during the meeting as well as opportunities for change. Several additional potential participants were identified as well including: youth, National Forests, Upper Tennessee River Roundtable, US Fish and Wildlife Service, economic development groups, Trout Unlimited, Fish Virginia First, local legislators, Board of Supervisors and representatives from the town of Norton, private sector, more residents and citizens, National Park Service River and Trails Program. The next meeting of the Strategic Planning for Downtown Revitalization and Outdoor Recreation on the Clinch River will be decided at a later date (planned for late April or May). For any additional ideas, questions or input, please contact Christine Gyovai at [christineg@virginia.edu](mailto:christineg@virginia.edu) or 434-982-6464.

### List of Participants

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|----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Allen Combs       | 10. Craig Seaver   |
| 2. Bill Dungus       | 11. Debbi Hale     |
| 3. Bill Smith        | 12. Denise Ambrose |
| 4. Bob Harrison      | 13. Doris Fletcher |
| 5. Brad Kreps        | 14. Duane Miller   |
| 6. Chris Clark       | 15. Ed Stoots      |
| 7. Chris Thompson    | 16. Ernie Roberts  |
| 8. Christine Gyovai  | 17. Frank Dukes    |
| 9. Claiborne Woodall | 18. Frank Kilgore  |

19. Glen "Skip" Skinner
20. Greg Bailey
21. Hannah Wright
22. Jack McLanahan
23. Jeff Cochran
24. Jennifer Puckett
25. Jim Baldwin
26. Jim Wallace
27. Joy Rumley
28. John Kilgore
29. Karen Powers
30. K.D. Cook
31. Keith Sherrill
32. Kitty Barber
33. Kyle Fletcher
34. Kristina Nell Weaver
35. Linda Tate
36. Lou Ann Wallace

37. Mark Hill
38. Monty Salyer
39. Pam Vance
40. Pete Guzman
41. Paul Revell
42. Phyllis Hinch
43. Radfert M. Rhea
44. Robert Jones
45. Stephen Kesler
46. Steve Brooks
47. Suzy Harrison
48. Tammy Dotson
49. Terry Vencil
50. Todd Christensen
51. Travis Perry
52. Tyler Elmore
53. William Ickes
54. William Miller