



2 0 2 3 REGIONAL IMPACT & ANNUAL REPORT

Friends of SWVA | 'Round the Mountain | The Crooked Road
Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation





FLOWERS AT HIGH KNOB

Table of Contents

2023 In Review4

Organizational Background

- Who Are We?7
- Organizational History8
- Organizational Overview9

Boards and Governance

- Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation
Mission & Board Of Directors Listings 10
- Friends Of Southwest Virginia
Mission & Board Of Directors Listings 11
- ‘Round The Mountain Mission &
Board Of Directors Listings 12
- The Crooked Road Mission & Executive Board Listings 13

Our Work - Creative Economy Development

- Creative Economy Strategy 14
- Capacity Building and Partnership Initiatives 16
- Creative Economy Planning Initiatives 18
- Creative Economy Infrastructure Projects 22

Our Work - Regional Tourism & Destination Marketing26

Regional Marketing & Branding 29

Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace 30

‘Round The Mountain Artisan Network 32

The Crooked Road: Virginia’s Heritage Music Trail 38

Contact Us 40

Cover Photo: Grayson Highlands State Park

2023 - Year in Review

Friends,

Welcome to the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation and Friends of Southwest Virginia's 2023 Regional Impact and Annual Report. As we reflect on the past year, I am filled with a sense of pride and gratitude for the remarkable journey we have embarked upon and the incredible achievements we've accomplished together.

One of the most exciting developments in 2023 has been the progress made in our ongoing construction projects. The High Knob Destination Center, the New River Center, and the Haysi Riverwalk project are all near completion, each one a testament to our region's commitment to creating vibrant, engaging destinations for both our residents and visitors. These projects not only enhance the beauty of our region but also bolster our local economy, creating opportunities for growth and prosperity.

Our Power 18: Bridge Builders Interstate Collaborative plan, completed in 2023, marks a significant milestone in our efforts to bridge communities in Southwest Virginia and adjoining states and foster collaboration. We understand that the true strength of our region lies in the connections we build, and this initiative has laid the foundation for a more united and resilient Southwest Virginia.

One of our key marketing accomplishments this year was the successful implementation of a robust national public relations campaign. This campaign launched in July 2023 and has secured earned media placements in national publications, shining a spotlight on the unique culture, traditions, and opportunities that our region has to offer. We believe that by sharing our story with a wider audience, we can continue to attract visitors and investment to Southwest Virginia.

At the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center, we're thrilled to report that our artisan inventory has increased by an impressive 30%. This growth reflects the talent, creativity, and dedication of our local artisans. In addition to expanding our inventory, we welcomed 26 new juried artisans into the Cultural Center, providing a platform for these talented individuals to showcase and sell their crafts.

Our commitment to fostering connections within the artisan community remains strong. In 2023, we reached over 200 members in the 'Round the Mountain Artisan Network. This organization serves as a powerful resource for artisans to learn, collaborate, and grow, and we are proud to see it flourishing.

We also celebrated the kick-off of the 20th Anniversary of the Crooked Road in September. This milestone is a testament to the enduring legacy of our musical heritage and the tireless efforts of those who have worked to preserve and celebrate it.

None of these achievements would have been possible without the unwavering support of our partners and region. We extend our deepest gratitude to each and every one of you for your continued support and dedication to our mission. Together, we are making Southwest Virginia a place of innovation, culture, and opportunity.

In the coming year, we look forward to even more exciting developments and new opportunities. With your support, we will continue to create a bright and prosperous future for Southwest Virginia.

Thank you for being a vital part of our journey. We can't wait to see what the future holds, and we are excited to share it with you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kim Davis".

Kim Davis
Executive Director

*Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation and
Friends of Southwest Virginia*

TOP ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN 2023

Community Development:

- The New River Destination Center, the High Knob Destination Center, and the Haysi Riverwalk are on track for construction completion in Spring 2024.
- Power 18: Bridge Builders Interstate Collaborative Plan completed.
- Finalized the Breaks Interstate Park Hospitality Study - The Breaks Commission adopted the plan as official operating procedures for the Park.

Marketing:

- Created and implemented a strategy for a region-wide marketing plan, including updated shared videography and photography assets.
- Implemented a robust public relations campaign to secure earned media placements in national publications.
- We hosted the Southwest Virginia Tourism Awards, celebrating the outstanding work of our tourism partners across the region, presenting a total of 38 awards

Southwest Virginia Cultural Center:

- Experienced a 41% increase in facility rentals of the Cultural Center throughout the year.
- Artist inventory increased by 30% from 2022.
- Facilitated special events at the Cultural Center, such as the Father/Daughter Dance, Halloween Event, and Breakfast with Santa.
- Launched a wholesale program for selling SWVA merchandise.

'Round the Mountain Artisan Network:

- Obtained more than 200 RTM members.
- Juried in 26 new 'Round the Mountain members into the Cultural Center.
- Hosted an RTM member networking event.

The Crooked Road:

- Created and distributed The Crooked Road Quarterly Magazine.
- Hosted our 20th Anniversary Kickoff in conjunction with Friends of Southwest Virginia and revealed a new 20th Anniversary celebratory logo.
- Continued to directly support musicians of the region with The Crooked Road on Tour program.



NEW RIVER



VIEW FROM HIGH KNOB

Who Are We?

Tucked in the ancient Appalachian Mountains of Southwest Virginia (SWVA) is a vibrant culture of tradition, food, music, and craft. It's a region of spectacular views, abundant outdoor recreation, and rich natural resources. Rooted deep in history, this culture is authentic... distinctive... alive.

Together with the 19 counties, four cities, and 53 towns of the region, Friends of Southwest Virginia [501(c)(3)] and the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation (State Foundation) are building a sustainable creative economy that preserves, protects, and interprets our rich heritage and natural resources creates jobs and welcomes both visitors and new businesses to our region every single day.

CULTURAL HERITAGE: From the route of westward expansion along The Great Road to becoming the cradle of America's tobacco and coal industries, the region has a vibrant and rich place in American history.

NATURAL RESOURCES: We are enhancing opportunities for outdoor recreation in our mountains, forests, rivers, and lakes and for the appreciation of the incredible diversity of plants and animals that make SWVA home.

DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT: We are revitalizing our downtowns with artisan studios, coffee shops, community centers, gift, specialty, antique shops, and more. There are cultural centers where people can hear live music, find one-of-a-kind treasures, talk to interesting folks, and get a home-cooked meal.

ARTS AND CRAFTS: An integrated organization, the 'Round the Mountain artisan network helps craftspeople build their business, learn new skills, and share their inspiration. The network promotes and markets artisans, studios, craft shops, farms, wineries, and more throughout the region.

MUSIC: Another key partner and separate 501(c)(3) organization, The Crooked Road: Virginia's Heritage Music Trail, connects nine major sites and dozens of affiliate venues where the region's unique music can be heard.

STORYTELLING: For a long time, Southwest Virginia had gone without a unified brand. Through a highly detailed branding process, the region is sharing the refreshed brand with the world.

As an introduction to it all, the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace {formerly Heartwood}, is a 54,000-square-foot regional gateway to the region for the world and serves as a visitor center, retail center for local crafts, music venue, and community space.

Organizational History

Southwest Virginia includes 19 counties, four independent cities, and 53 towns located on the southern and western border of Virginia.

Its 8,600 square miles – more than a fifth of Virginia's total and larger than eight U.S. states – are located along mountain ridges and in fertile valleys, with two national parks, 11 state parks, and over a thousand square miles of national and state forests.

It's where you'll find a culture of music and craft that is authentic, distinctive, and alive. A natural landscape that is breathtaking in its magnitude and scope. A place where the pace of life is slower, and people are more friendly, and a premier location for outdoor recreation of all kinds.

By capitalizing on the unique qualities of our region, Southwest Virginia utilizes its cultural and natural assets to build a comprehensive, long-term, sustainable economy through a variety of initiatives. The Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace (formerly Heartwood), The Crooked Road, and 'Round The Mountain are a few that promote entrepreneurial and employment opportunities.

With the decline of the traditional industries of Southwest Virginia – agricultural tobacco, coal mining, and manufacturing – the Commonwealth of Virginia recognized the need for an organization to lead one aspect of the redevelopment of the region through a new focus on the creative economy. The General Assembly authorized the Foundation in 2008 to serve as this leader and coordinator of the creative economy.

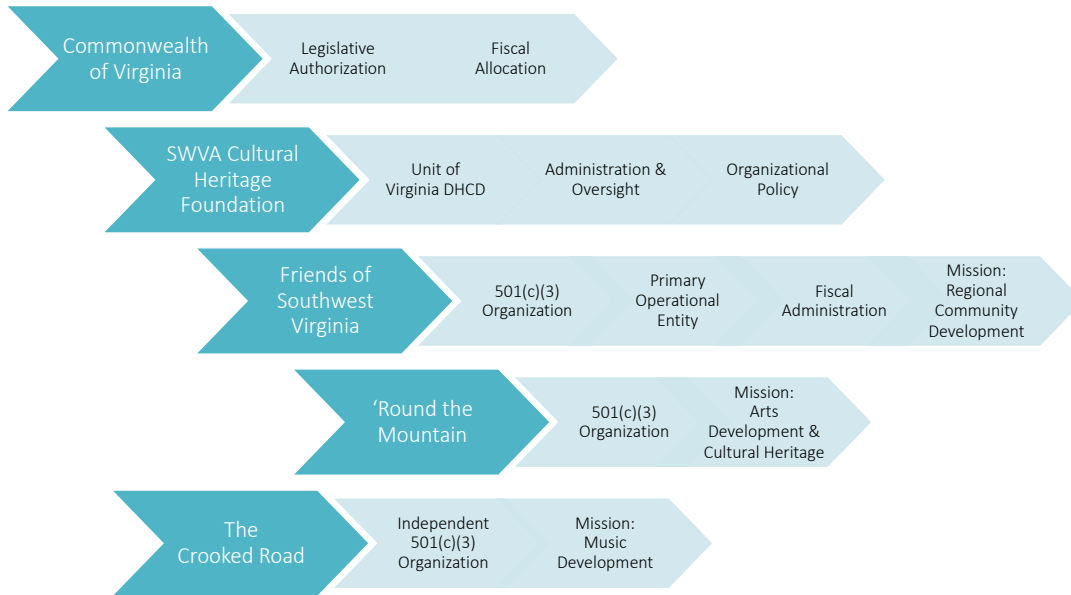
The Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Commission, established in 2008 by the Virginia General Assembly and transitioned to the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation in 2011, works as the lead in developing and coordinating the creative economy in Southwest Virginia. Through a supporting nonprofit, Friends of Southwest Virginia, businesses and individuals help artists, craftspeople, localities, nonprofits, and entrepreneurs mobilize and succeed.

A multifaceted plan identifies the cultural and natural assets of the region; coordinates initiatives, organizations, and venues engaged in cultural and natural heritage toward more efficient operations for all partner organizations; and develops a comprehensive strategy and capital improvements plan to maximize the impact of state investments in this significant restructuring effort.

Key initiatives include:

- Branding and marketing Southwest Virginia to the world as a distinct culture and destination
- Developing and sustaining the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace (formerly Heartwood)
- Expanding outdoor recreation development initiatives and marketing throughout the region
- Planning and implementation of downtown revitalization throughout the region to instill a high quality of life within our communities and promote them to the world for a broad spectrum of economic development opportunities

Organizational Overview



Four independent but interconnected organizations make up the creative economy of Southwest Virginia.



The **Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation** was established in 2008 to provide the overarching strategy and direction for creative economy development. The Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development serves as the administrator for the Foundation, employs the key leadership of both organizations, provides fiscal oversight of state funds, and provides additional support for organizational success. The Foundation operates with a full Board of Trustees consisting of Governor-appointed leadership from throughout the 19 counties and four cities of the region.



Friends of Southwest Virginia, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, was established in 2011 to operate alongside the Foundation and serve as the primary fiscal and operational body. The two organizations work in tandem under the leadership of a single Executive Director, reporting to two separate boards that oversee their individual authorizations. The majority of organization employees, grant development programs, and all operations of the SWVA Cultural Center & Marketplace are housed within this nonprofit.



'Round the Mountain (RTM) (RTM) began in the fall of 2004 when former Governor Mark Warner's Virginia Works Initiative designated funds to develop Southwest Virginia as a major cultural and heritage tourism destination and to begin an artisan and craft advocacy organization. The group received nonprofit status in March 2006. Previously, RTM operated independently of the other organizations, but to reduce overhead costs and better align programs, Friends now staffs the organization under the leadership of the still independent RTM Board of Directors.



The Crooked Road: Virginia's Heritage Music Trail is an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 2004 whose mission is to support economic development in Southwest Virginia by promoting the region's rich heritage of traditional music. The organization has an Executive Committee, Executive Board, Board of Directors, and many committees made up of representatives from throughout the 19 counties and four cities of Southwest Virginia.

Organizational Background

SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA CULTURAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

BOARD OF DIRECTORS



Mission: The purpose of the Foundation is to encourage the economic development of Southwest Virginia through the expansion of cultural and natural heritage ventures and initiatives related to tourism and other asset-based enterprises. These include the SWVA Cultural Center & Marketplace (formerly Heartwood), The Crooked Road, 'Round the Mountain, and other related cultural and natural heritage organizations and venues that promote entrepreneurial and employment opportunities.

Name	Serving As	City/County	Position
Delegate James Will Morefield	Chair & Trustee, House of Delegates	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia House of Delegates
Senator Todd E. Pillion	Vice Chair & Trustee, Senate	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia Senate
Senator T. Travis Hackworth	Trustee, Senate	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia Senate
Delegate Marie March	Trustee, House of Delegates	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia House of Delegates
Delegate Sam Rasoul	Trustee, House of Delegates	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia House of Delegates
Kevin Byrd	Trustee, Planning District	Floyd, Giles, Montgomery, and Pulaski Counties, and the City of Radford	New River Valley Regional Commission
Sharon Buchanan	Trustee, 'Round the Mountain	Russell County	Virginia State Parks
Michael Cochran	Trustee, Town of Abingdon	Washington County	Town of Abingdon
Saul Hernandez	Trustee, Washington County	Washington County	Washington County Board of Supervisors
Josh Hess	Trustee, Citizen	Montgomery County	Congressman H. Morgan Griffith (VA-09)
Deborah Milton	Trustee, 'Round the Mountain	Russell County	Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commission
Amanda Pillion	Trustee, Virginia Commission for the Arts	Washington County	Virginia Commission for the Arts
Sandy Ratliff	Trustee, 'Round the Mountain	Washington County	Locus (Virginia Community Capital)
Ruby Rogers	Trustee, Citizen	Scott County	Resident of Southwest Virginia
Scotty Wampler	Trustee, Planning District	Buchanan, Dickenson, Russell, and Tazewell Counties	Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commission
Julie Walters Steele	Trustee, 'Round the Mountain	Patrick County	Reynolds Homestead (Virginia Tech)
John Kilgore, Jr.	Ex-Officio - Friends of Southwest Virginia Chair	Scott County	Scott County Economic Development Authority
Ellen Reynolds	Ex-Officio - 'Round the Mountain Chair	Wythe County	Artisan / Beagle Ridge Herb Farm & Environmental Education Center
Dylan Locke	Ex-Officio - The Crooked Road Chair	Floyd County	Floyd Country Store
Adam C. Hutchison	Ex-Officio - President, Virginia Highlands Community College	Washington County	Virginia Highlands Community College
David Matlock	Ex-Officio - Executive Director, Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center	Washington County	Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center
Bryan Horn	Ex-Officio - Director, Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia Department of Housing & Community Development
Rita McClenny	Ex-Officio - President, Virginia Tourism Corporation	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia Tourism Corporation

FRIENDS OF SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA

BOARD OF DIRECTORS



Mission:

- To preserve, promote, and present the cultural and natural assets of Southwest Virginia.
- To work in partnerships in the region to generate economic development through these efforts.
- To provide educational and cultural opportunities for the general public and students of the region.
- To showcase the cultural assets of SWVA at the SWVA Cultural Center & Marketplace.

Name	Serving As	City/County	Position
John Kilgore, Jr.	Chair	Scott County	Scott County Economic Development Authority
Aaron Sizemore	Vice Chair	Bland, Carroll, Grayson, Smyth, Washington, and Wythe Counties & Cities of Bristol and Galax	Mount Rogers Planning District Commission
Fred Ramey	Secretary	City of Norton	City of Norton
Stephen (Steve) Lawson	Treasurer	Wise County	Town of Big Stone Gap
Jimmy Adkins	Director	Lee, Scott, and Wise Counties and City of Norton	LENOWISCO Planning District Commission
Shannon Blevins	Director	Wise County	The University of Virginia's College at Wise
Amanda Livingston	Director	Smyth County	Smyth County Tourism Association
Lydeana Martin	Director	Floyd County	Floyd County
Allison Mays	Director	Washington County	Southwest Center at Virginia Tech
Bryce Simmons	Director	Patrick County	Town of Stuart
Todd Wolford	Director	Wythe County	Downtown Wytheville Inc.
Kristie Eberly	Director	Franklin and Patrick Counties	West Piedmont Planning District Commission
Bryan Horn	Ex-Officio - Director, Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia Department of Housing & Community Development
Rita McClenny	Ex-Officio - President, Virginia Tourism Corporation	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia Tourism Corporation
Delegate Will Morefield	Ex-Officio, Chair of SWVA Cultural Heritage Foundation	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia House of Delegates

Boards & Governance

'ROUND THE MOUNTAIN

BOARD OF DIRECTORS



Mission: The mission of 'Round the Mountain: Southwest Virginia's Artisan Network is to promote the sustainable economic development of the region's communities by assisting local artisans with marketing, educational, and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Name	Serving As	City/County	Position
Ellen Reynolds	President	Wythe County	Artisan / Beagle Ridge Herb Farm & Environmental Education Center
Sandy Ratliff	Secretary	Washington County	Locus (Virginia Community Capital)
Martha Biggar	Director	Pulaski County	Artisan
Anna Buchanan	Director	Washington County	William King Museum
Sharon Buchanan	Director	Russell County	Virginia State Parks
Sarah Gillespie	Director	Smythe County	Smyth County Chamber of Commerce
Lora Mahaffey	Director	Patrick County	Artisan / Bull Mountain Arts
Debbie Milton	Director	Russell County	Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commission
Amanda Lee Slaughter	Director	Wythe County	Artisan / Virginia Tourism Corporation
Julie Walters Steele	Director	Patrick County	Reynolds Homestead
Glen Thomason	Director	Washington County	Artisan
Kim Davis	Ex-Officio, Friends of SWVA	Washington County	Friends of SWVA SWVA Cultural Heritage Foundation
Heather Stanley	Ex-Officio, Virginia Tourism Corporation	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia Tourism Corporation

THE CROOKED ROAD

EXECUTIVE BOARD



Mission: As the designated trail for the growth of heritage music and music enthusiasts, The Crooked Road is Virginia's beacon for heritage music, engaging musicians, tradition-keepers, their communities, and audiences from around the world to share, inspire, and celebrate the cultural heritage while positively impacting the local economies in Southwest Virginia.

Name	Serving As	Community, County	Business / Organization
Dylan Locke	President	Floyd County	Floyd Country Store
Leah Ross	Vice President	City of Bristol	Birthplace of Country Music
Larry D. Yates	Past President	Dickenson County	Town of Haysi
Daniel Pinard	Secretary	Franklin County	Rocky Mount Tourism
David Reemsnyder	Treasurer	Montgomery County	At Large
Jim Archer	Director	City of Salem	At Large
John Kilgore	Director	Scott County	Scott County Economic Development Authority
Marianne Kovatch	Director	City of Galax	Blue Ridge Music Center
Jim Lloyd	Director	Wythe County	Junior Appalachian Musicians
AJ Robinson	Director	Tazewell County	Tazewell County Tourism & Communications
Kim Smith	Director	Russell County	Heart of Appalachia
Rita Surratt	Director	Dickenson County	Dickenson County Tourism
Scotty Wampler	Director	Russell County	Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commission
Bethany Worley	Director	Franklin County	Blue Ridge Institute and Museum
Kim Davis	Ex Officio	Commonwealth of Virginia	Friends of Southwest Virginia / Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development
Bill Kornrich	Ex Officio	Hancock County, TN	At Large
Becky Nave	Ex Officio	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia Tourism Corporation

Creative Economy Development

CREATIVE ECONOMY INTRODUCTION AND IMPACT

Serving Southwest Virginia's 19 counties and four cities, Friends of Southwest Virginia is fostering a transformative movement where cultural heritage and economic innovation converge to shape the Central Appalachian Creative Economy. This dynamic approach unites artists, entrepreneurs, and innovators, celebrating traditions while propelling economic growth.

OUR CREATIVE ECONOMY FOCUS

- **Cultural Heritage Tourism:** Preserving and promoting Appalachian traditions, setting an enduring example of economic development. Through national and international marketing and public relations campaigns, Friends of Southwest Virginia promotes travel to the region.
- **Community Collaborations:** Friends of Southwest Virginia works to bring localities together to foster mutual support and progress.
- **Outdoor Recreation:** A catalyst for growth, with several major infrastructure projects under construction in 2023, Friends of Southwest Virginia showcases the region's natural resources and tourism opportunities.

REGIONAL ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

In response to declining employment in Southwest Virginia's historically prominent industries of farming, mining, and manufacturing, stakeholders around the region began to invest in developing the creative economy two decades ago.

Since the start of the Crooked Road in 2004 and 'Round the Mountain Artisan Network in 2005, travel expenditures in the region have increased from \$648.9 million to \$1.2 billion in 2022.¹ Additionally, local tourism-related tax revenues totaled \$59.5 million in Southwest Virginia in 2022.¹ The upward trend in these travel-related tax revenues has an impact at the local level through increasing meals and lodging tax revenues in the region's towns.

Overall employment in SWVA has dropped since 2001, but employment in the leisure and hospitality industry sector has increased to 11,499 employees have tourism-supported jobs in Southwest Virginia in 2022.¹



FOOTNOTE

¹ *Direct Economic Impact and Spending Shares by Industries, 2022 by Tourism Economics*

Creative Economy Development

CREATIVE ECONOMY STRATEGY

OUR WHY

As Southwest Virginia underwent a transformative economic shift away from traditional industries like tobacco, coal, and labor-based manufacturing in the early 2000s, the Commonwealth of Virginia proactively collaborated with various organizations to delineate potential avenues for economic advancement. This collaborative effort, driven by multiple stakeholders, gave rise to a comprehensive economic strategy that seeks balance across diverse sectors, ranging from agriculture and manufacturing to small business and tourism development.



OUR VISION

Friends of Southwest Virginia is committed to fostering the creative economy, marked by innovation and place-based experiences, aligning with community, tourism, and economic development.

Strategic Pillars:

1. Community Development:

- Connecting assets to a community's core.
- Facilitating community capacity building.

2. Economic Development:

- Facilitating new business development and connectivity.

3. Tourism Development:

- Engaging in product development, planning, and marketing throughout Southwest Virginia.



Our Work - Creative Economy Development

CONCLUSION

As we continue to champion the cause of the creative economy, we recognize its pivotal role in steering Southwest Virginia towards a resilient, diversified, and thriving future. Friends of Southwest Virginia and its partners remain dedicated to the comprehensive development of an economy that is not just economically robust but also culturally vibrant and sustainable.

Creative Economy Development

CAPACITY BUILDING AND PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVES

In our dedication to community development and regional partnerships, Friends of Southwest Virginia actively engages in capacity-building and support initiatives. These efforts play a pivotal role in shaping the cultural, recreational, and economic landscape of Southwest Virginia. Here are updates on key initiatives:



CLINCH RIVER VALLEY INITIATIVE

As a key partner in CRVI, we focus on building regional capacity to preserve and celebrate the unique ecological and recreational elements of the Clinch River Valley. Our efforts center on Environmental Education and the Hometowns of the Clinch program. This collaborative initiative is gaining momentum as a newly established non-profit in the region prioritizes collaboration and communication in all aspects of its work. Our focus remains on sustainable development and environmental stewardship, fostering a vibrant and resilient Clinch River Valley.

FOREST RECREATION OUTDOOR GROUP (FROG)

FROG unites over 30 organizations with a shared commitment to the well-being of the region. Focused on the High Knob area, FROG collaborates to enhance recreational opportunities, strengthen community connections, and support vital infrastructure for trail development, campground maintenance, hunting and fishing access, habitat preservation, and more. The mission is to collectively impact and improve the economic, educational, and physical aspects of the region by leveraging ideas and resources.



HIGH KNOB ENHANCEMENT CORPORATION

This collective of three counties and one city surrounding the High Knob region focuses on community outreach and signage needs. Under new leadership, the group is focused on collaborative projects that aim to create recreational opportunities, protect natural habitats, and boost tourism, contributing to the well-being of the community.

Creative Economy Development

CAPACITY BUILDING AND PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVES



MENDOTA TRAIL CONSERVANCY

In 2023, the Mendota Trail Conservancy celebrated the completion of the recreational trail system. Friends of Southwest Virginia actively collaborates with volunteers to ensure that the trail is building sustainable support and provides a scenic and accessible outdoor experience for residents and visitors alike.



OPPORTUNITY SWVA AND RALLY RE-UNITE

Integral components of our regional development strategy, these initiatives focus on community engagement, economic revitalization, and fostering collaboration to unlock the full potential of Southwest Virginia.



BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY FOUNDATION'S BLUE RIDGE RISING INITIATIVE

Friends of Southwest Virginia is honored to partner with the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation's strategic planning initiative, Blue Ridge Rising. This partnership is dedicated to the exploration of avenues for the generation of enhanced economic development opportunities along the Blue Ridge Parkway, specifically in Southwest Virginia communities along the Parkway.

Our engagement in these capacity building and partnership initiatives reflects our commitment to building a resilient, vibrant, and interconnected Southwest Virginia. Through collaborative efforts, we aim to create lasting positive impacts on the cultural, economic, and environmental aspects of the region.

Creative Economy Development

CREATIVE ECONOMY PLANNING INITIATIVES

Effective regional planning is pivotal for guiding impactful projects and ensuring their success. Friends of Southwest Virginia, in collaboration with stakeholders, has spearheaded several noteworthy projects, each contributing to the economic prosperity of Southwest Virginia. Here are updates on key projects:



BREAKS INTERSTATE PARK HOSPITALITY STUDY

Derived from recommendations in the Cumberland Plateau Outdoor Industry Assessment, this study advocates for public and private investment to support operational changes at Breaks Interstate Park, enhancing financial sustainability and underscoring the broader economic value the park brings to the region. This project was completed in 2023, and the plan was adopted by the Breaks Interstate Park Commission.



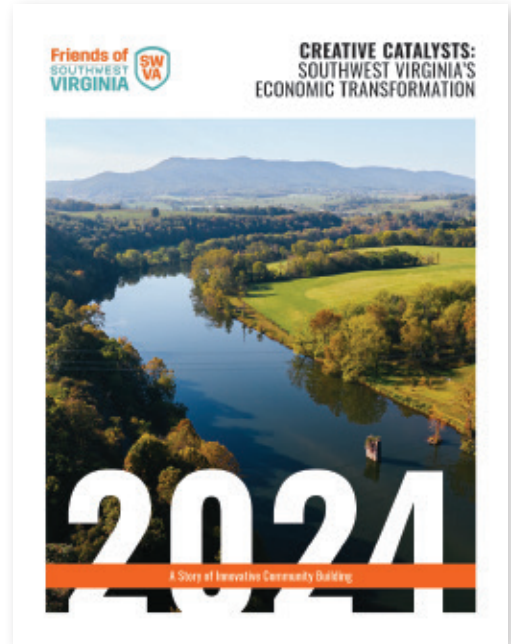
Creative Economic Development

CREATIVE ECONOMY PLANNING INITIATIVES

BRIDGE BUILDERS INTERSTATE COLLABORATIVE PLAN

This collaborative initiative reflects the shared vision and ambitions of partners dedicated to shaping a vibrant creative economy across Southwest Virginia. Rooted in the three-year Bridge Builder project, funded by the Appalachian Regional Commission and Americorps, the plan places a high emphasis on catalytic projects aimed at continually advancing the economic transformation of Central Appalachia.

The initiative has established a strategic framework that fosters effective communication among both for-profit and not-for-profit organizations spanning Southwest Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, Tennessee, Western North Carolina, and Southern West Virginia. Through the exchange of best practices and collaborative inspiration, this effort has underscored the resilience of the creative economy and the paramount significance of nurturing interstate cooperation. This project was completed in December 2023.



CUMBERLAND PLATEAU OUTDOOR INDUSTRY ASSESSMENT PLAN

Launched in early 2023, this plan functions as a roadmap for growing the outdoor recreation economy in Buchanan, Tazewell, Dickenson, and Russell counties. In partnership with SE Group, a planning firm specializing in recreation tourism communities, the plan conducts an analysis of existing conditions, engages stakeholders, explores partnerships, and creates a roadmap for the Cumberland Plateau. The primary goal was to identify new economic opportunities and encourage smart investment in recreational tourism assets. Deliverables included guidance for residents interested in starting small businesses leveraging existing assets, as well as a development prospectus for resort developers to attract new visitors to the region.



Our Work - Creative Economy Development

Creative Economic Development

CAPACITY BUILDING AND ENGAGEMENT SPOTLIGHT

OUTDOOR RECREATION DEVELOPMENT IN THE COALFIELDS PLAN

This strategic initiative concentrated on enhancing Outdoor Recreation Access in the Coalfields of Virginia, enriching the region's recreational opportunities and economic prospects. The project's primary focus encompassed Lee County, Wise County, as well as the Towns of Big Stone Gap and Pound. It involved an extensive review of more than 13 potential boat launch sites along the Powell River, the development of an Outdoor Recreation Plan for the Town of Pound, and the identification of a compelling need for a Pump Track and Skate Park in the Town of Big Stone Gap. The project's next phase aims to complete these endeavors, with a target date set for early 2025 in Big Stone Gap.



The creative economy is a dynamic fusion of culture and economic innovation, where tradition and innovation converge to drive economic growth. It serves as a resilient hub of creativity, preserving the region's unique identity while fostering progress. The creative economy is deeply embedded in culture, fostering economic growth, and embracing creativity as a catalyst for transformation. It adapts to the nuances of regions, reflecting their unique histories and cultural identities.

These planning projects symbolize a commitment to community revitalization and sustainable growth, positioning Southwest Virginia as a premier destination for tourism, outdoor recreation, and community engagement. They encapsulate the promise of a revitalized, vibrant future for the region.

NATURAL
TUNNEL



Creative Economic Development

CREATIVE ECONOMY INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

Over the past year, Friends of Southwest Virginia has worked alongside our regional partners to complete several infrastructure projects in the region. These projects will not only provide new outdoor recreation opportunities for residents, but will serve as destination experiences for visitors to Southwest Virginia. These projects include:

HIGH KNOB DESTINATION CENTER

The High Knob Destination Center, funded by a 2016 Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) POWER grant, will establish a visitor center at the entrance to the High Knob in the City of Norton, Virginia. The center, including parking, interpretive displays, and wayfinding amenities, restrooms and a dump station and will be owned and maintained by the Norton Industrial Development Authority (IDA).



HAYSI RIVERWALK PROJECT

Funded by a 2016 Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) POWER grant, the Haysi Riverwalk Project is set to enhance the town's pavilion area, create a new trailhead within the town, and offer improved access to the surrounding trails and natural attractions along the Russell Fork River. This initiative not only benefits both residents and visitors but also connects to various entrepreneurial opportunities while enhancing wayfinding for the Town of Haysi and its visitors. Additionally, it will enable the town to host a Night Market.



Creative Economic Development

CREATIVE ECONOMY INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

GILES COUNTY TRAIL CENTER AT MOUNTAIN LAKE LODGE



The Giles County Trail Center, will serve as an adventure hub and the trailhead to Bald Knob, is poised to connect visitors to the region's businesses and natural attractions. Beyond its role as a gateway to adventure, the center will offer essential amenities such as public restrooms and changing facilities, enhancing the overall experience for those exploring Giles County's diverse natural and cultural treasures.



BULLIT PARK

BIG STONE GAP PUMP TRACK

The Big Stone Gap Pump Track, situated in Bullitt Park in the town of Big Stone Gap, is a project with the goal of constructing a state-of-the-art pump track and skate park. As an integral part of Southwest Virginia, this facility aims to serve as a premier outdoor recreational hub, offering a dynamic space for individuals to engage in thrilling activities and fostering a sense of community in the region.

TAZEWELL TRAILS

The Tazewell Trail collaborative brings together a dynamic group of partners and funders working in unison to develop world-class recreational assets. With the overarching objective of enhancing community connectivity, this effort, in conjunction with Tazewell County, is dedicated to identifying long-term strategies that weave together existing recreation amenities, creating a robust network for the community and visitors to enjoy.

Collectively, these groundbreaking projects represent a significant shift, positioning Southwest Virginia as a premier destination for tourism, outdoor recreation, and community engagement. Within the annual report, these initiatives embody more than just physical structures; they symbolize the promise of a revitalized and vibrant future for the region.



LOVE

#LOVEVA VIRGINIA IS FOR LOVERS



Regional Tourism & Destination Marketing

The Southwest Virginia brand is becoming one of the most recognizable brands across the Commonwealth. The promotion of the natural and cultural assets across the region’s 19 counties and four cities has shaped the immersive, authentic experience visitors look forward to when traveling. New marketing, public relations, and branding initiatives have helped raise awareness toward the goal of establishing Southwest Virginia as a world-class tourism destination. Below, we outline several regional tourism and destination marketing initiatives that Friends of Southwest Virginia has prioritized for 2023:

SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA TOURISM AWARDS



Friends of Southwest Virginia hosted the Southwest Virginia Tourism Awards at the Celebrate Tourism Summit in the Wytheville Meeting Center. This event celebrated the outstanding contributions of our tourism partners in the region, with 38 awards presented across various categories encompassing tourism marketing, visitor services, special events, and tourism leadership. These awards were open to tourism organizations, individuals in tourism and economic development, and tourism-related businesses located within the 19 counties and four independent cities of Southwest Virginia.



For a complete list of winners visit www.celebrateswvatourism.com/winners.

Regional Tourism & Destination Marketing

NATIONAL MARKETING CAMPAIGN

Southwest Virginia, spanning 8,600 square miles of stunning mountains, valleys, rivers, and lakes, is set to launch an extensive national marketing campaign showcasing the region's natural beauty, music, and artisans contributing to the creative economy.

The campaign, inspired by the storytelling traditions of the Appalachian Mountains, utilizes captivating imagery, sound, and depth. Videography and photography, funded by local, state, and federal partners, are being collected in phases and added to an open-source tourism database for regional partners to bolster their social media and marketing efforts.



Our Work - Regional Tourism & Destination Marketing



MOUNTAIN LAKE LODGE

Regional Tourism & Destination Marketing

NATIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN

Southwest Virginia is home to dozens of hidden gems. As much of the region is continuing to build and strengthen their local tourism programs, our organization is working to identify assets and attractions that can contribute to enjoyable and sustainable travel experiences.

In 2023, we partnered with Laurie Rowe Communications to provide additional support in leveraging relationships with travel journalists. The Laurie Rowe team spent several days visiting local partners to experience the activities and attractions that draw visitors to our region.

Over the next few years, the Laurie Rowe Communications team will host and vet travel journalists, assist in planning itineraries, record earned media value, and promote our Southwest Virginia localities on the Travel Media Press Room.

Furthermore, we've established strong relationships with local media outlets, ensuring monthly interviews for community updates and coverage of significant events, groundbreaking, and attractions.



Regional Tourism & Destination Marketing

SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA BRAND

Southwest Virginia strongly represents some of the greatest natural and cultural assets in the world, with its beautiful assets, legacies in craft and music, and is home to some of the most hard-working, resilient, and kind people. Friends of Southwest Virginia continues to promote and build awareness for this brand and its representation to future visitors.

The visibility of the SWVA badge has become more popular in recent years, and we continue to look for ways to partner and promote the communities it helps support.

The SWVA logo was prominent this year at regional attractions and events, like the at the Birthplace of Country Music for the Smithsonian exhibit I've Endured: Women in Old-Time Music, Bristol Rhythm & Roots Reunion, Wytheville Wine Festival, Blue Highway Fest, Front Porch Fest, Blue Ridge FolkLife Festival, and SWVA Tourism Summit and Awards.



AXE HANDLE DISTILLING



Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace

The Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace is one of the most dynamic destinations in the region. In 2023, this facility truly became a welcoming community space for those who live in Southwest Virginia and all around the world.

SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA VISITOR CENTER

The Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace is the primary gateway to the 19 counties and four independent cities in the region. In 2023, our frontline staff warmly welcomed visitors and saw a remarkable 58% increase in summer visitation compared to 2022. Our team not only distributes brochures and offers itineraries and activity recommendations for those seeking an authentic experience in Southwest Virginia but also introduced a touch of Southern hospitality this summer by providing complimentary sweet tea in commemorative cups.



ARTISAN RETAIL CENTER

The 'Round the Mountain Artisan Network represents some of the highest quality heritage craft throughout Southwest Virginia. Our dedicated staff passionately promotes artisan goods, shares their unique stories, and fosters customer loyalty. Throughout the past year, our frontline sales team maintained strong communication with our artisans, celebrating numerous sales achievements. In 2023, we achieved remarkable sales growth, culminating in a 58% increase in sales for the final quarter of the previous fiscal year.



**SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA
CULTURAL CENTER AND
MARKETPLACE**



Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace



FATHER DAUGHTER DANCE

EVENT VENUE

The Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace warmly welcomes both our local community members and visitors, providing a space for cultural immersion and showcasing the growth of local organizations and businesses.

In 2023, the Cultural Center hosted various special events such as a Valentine's Father/Daughter Dance, a Halloween Event, and Christmas in SWVA events, including Breakfast with Santa.

Additionally, we accommodated numerous community groups, organizations, and local businesses for their events and corporate meetings. Our versatile facility, offering rental options for gathering spaces and conference rooms, exemplifies its practicality and flexibility.



ARC EVENT



BREAKFAST WITH SANTA EVENT

2023 TRAILBLAZER AWARD BY VIRGINIA TOURISM

The Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace was honored in early 2023 by the Virginia Tourism Corporation with the 2022 Trailblazer Award for its success on the LOVE SWVA Concert Series that brought in guests from at least 10 states to visit for live music.



'Round the Mountain Marketing Artisan Network



'Round the Mountain: Southwest Virginia's Artisan Network is a nonprofit organization dedicated to fostering sustainable economic development within the region's communities by harnessing the potential of regional art and craft as an economic driver. The organization is committed to supporting local artisans in their entrepreneurial journey through marketing, education, and various business opportunities.

FOCUS AND STRATEGY

In 2023, 'Round the Mountain introduced a comprehensive five-pronged strategy to rejuvenate and propel the network into a post-COVID era. This approach encompasses strategic planning, a feasibility study, a regional artisan conference, capacity-building training series, and marketing efforts. After formulating the strategy, grant funding was diligently pursued and successfully obtained, including support from the Appalachian Regional Commission, the Virginia Commission for the Arts, and Virginia Tourism Corporation. Planning for each of these initiatives is well underway, with the full rollout expected in 2024.

JURIED ARTISANS

During the two juries in 2023, 'Round the Mountain experienced a significant increase in submissions, marking a level of interest not seen in nearly a decade. The Spring 2022 Jury, held in March, received 20 submissions, of which 17 were selected, leading to the welcoming of 15 new members. The Fall jury brought in 13 submissions, with 12 being selected, and an additional seven new artisans joined.

SPECIAL EVENTS

'Round the Mountain hosted several special events in 2023. Two larger events included:

Made in Southwest Virginia Event

This family-friendly event provided visitors with the chance to explore the creative process of our Southwest Virginia artisans and engage directly with them. In 2023, 'Made in SWVA' occurred in both July and November, involving a total of 37 artisans in these two events. The November holiday market experienced a notable increase in the number of guests compared to the previous year.

Artisan Networking Evening

In July, we organized an Artisan Networking Evening to inform members about the available benefits, resources, and ways to actively participate in our programs. An impressive number, nearly one-third of our membership, attended, fostering connections among artisans specializing in various mediums. A quilt for a customer in Germany, thanks to VTC marketing efforts and our online store.



MEMBER STATISTICS

Total Members - 207

Juried Artisans - 181

Members by Medium

- Basketry - 6
- Fiber - 32
- Glass - 7
- Graphic Design - 2
- Jewelry - 19
- Leather - 7
- Literary - 3
- Metal - 7
- Mixed Media - 16
- Natural Materials - 6
- Painting - 19
- Photography - 11
- Pottery / Ceramics - 12
- Two-Dimensional - 10
- Wood - 34
- Partners/Supporters - 10
- Other - 6

Members by Community

(number of artisans)

- Bland - 0
- Bristol - 13
- Buchanan - 3
- Carroll - 8
- Dickenson - 4
- Floyd - 12
- Franklin - 6
- Galax - 3
- Giles - 2
- Grayson - 6
- Lee - 6
- Montgomery - 12
- Norton - 1
- Patrick - 9
- Pulaski - 2
- Radford - 1
- Russell - 9
- Scott - 6
- Smyth - 14
- Tazewell - 11
- Washington - 41
- Wise - 9
- Wythe - 14
- Other - 15

'Round the Mountain Marketing Artisan Network

E-COMMERCE

Since its launch in October 2022, shop.swvaculturalcenter.com has garnered 18,000 visits, attracting shoppers not only from the United States but also from countries as far-reaching as Germany, Singapore, Canada, and China. Notably, the majority of users accessed the site via their mobile devices. The retail team demonstrated exceptional efficiency by consistently fulfilling online orders within a remarkable 36-hour timeframe. The professional photography of both new and existing inventory further showcased the artists' creations with high-quality images, capturing the true beauty of their work.

ARTISAN MARKETING

To focus on promoting artisan stories and expanding the 'Round the Mountain brand, we initiated a monthly Featured Artisan series in 2023. These articles capture the artisan's passion and craft knowledge, providing valuable marketing material for artisans and empowering them to share their stories on their own platforms. This series featured artisans from across the region, representing various mediums such as fiber, basket-weaving, Fraktur, woodworking, painting, and jewelry-making. Their stories highlight the rich heritage of the region. In 2023, we featured artisans like Barbara Holbrook, Amanda Sprinkle, Mary Lucy Bivins, Nicholas Barnes, Aria Asbury, and Paula & Robert Kahn.

GIFT GUIDES

The 'Round the Mountain gift guides are a deliberate attempt to curate a shopping experience, showcasing artisan products available both in the online store and at the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace. These guides are designed to encourage the support of local artisans during key consumer shopping holidays and seasons, including Valentine's Day, Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and Christmas.



The Crooked Road 2023 in Review

2023 IN REVIEW



The Crooked Road: Virginia's Heritage Music Trail serves the Southwest Virginia region by marketing traditional music experiences, supporting the region's old-time and bluegrass artists, and generating economic activity related to music tourism. Since its designation as Virginia's Heritage Music Trail by the Virginia General Assembly in 2004, this 330-mile long driving route has connected visitors with ten major music venues and over 50 affiliated venues and festivals. Each partner showcases the diverse and authentic music that is closely intertwined with Southwest Virginia's identity.

The major venues of The Crooked Road span the Southwest Virginia region, including the Carter Family Fold, Country Cabin, Ralph Stanley Museum, Blue Ridge Institute & Museum, Birthplace of Country Music Museum, Floyd Country Store/County Sales, Blue Ridge Music Center, Rex Theater, Galax Old Fiddler's Convention, and the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace.

The Crooked Road is built upon generations of musical legacy in the mountains of Southwest Virginia. From the homespun to the professional, the region has spawned countless artists whose impact extends well beyond the ridges, including the Carter Family, Ralph Stanley, and bluegrass duo Jim & Jesse. Visitors travel from across the world to experience vibrant musical performances and dance floors filled with cloggers.

In 2023, The Crooked Road continued to grow its presence in the region. The organization added new programs, continued its commitment to regional venues and artists, and began preparations for its 20th Anniversary in 2024.

The Crooked Road partnered with the Birthplace of Country Music Museum to host a stage at this year's Bristol Rhythm and Roots Reunion. The stage featured the Mustard Cutters, Loose Strings Band, Orchestra Appalachia, Addie Levy, and the Whitetop Mountain band, each performing a diverse array of old-time and bluegrass music to a standing-room-only audience. The Crooked Road also hosted an official showcase room at this year's International Bluegrass Music Association conference in Raleigh, NC, where regional artists performed, and listeners could access informational material for The Crooked Road.

The Crooked Road officially began celebrating its year long 20th Anniversary in September 2023 with a kickoff concert and celebration in conjunction with Friends of Southwest Virginia at the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center. The evening featured musical performances by participants in the Junior Appalachian Musicians (JAM) program and the New Ballard's Branch Bogtrotters. A celebratory logo was unveiled by fiddler and graphic design artist Gina Dilg of Radford, VA.

The Crooked Road Jams continued monthly at the

The Crooked Road 2023 in Review

2023 IN REVIEW

Crooked Road Major Venues

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Ralph Stanley Museum | 6. Rex Theatre |
| 2. Country Cabin | 7. Old Fiddlers Convention |
| 3. Carter Family Fold | 8. Blue Ridge Music Center |
| 4. Birthplace of Country Music Museum | 9. Floyd Country Store & County Sales |
| 5. Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace | 10. Blue Ridge Institute & Museum |



Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace. The Crooked Road expanded programming to include a Third Thursday Cultural Series featuring a square dance with Tyler Hughes, musical performances by higher educational traditional music programs from Ferrum College and Mountain Empire Community College, contra dancing with Warren Doyle, and the finalist round of The Crooked Road's First Annual Songwriting Competition.

The Crooked Road on Tour program continued to feature Southwest Virginia musicians on stages across the Commonwealth. In 2023, Martha Spencer, Jim Lloyd, Jackson Cunningham, and the Yates Family Band were all featured performers at the Virginia State Fair.

The Crooked Road's Artist-In-Residence program continued to support regional musicians. The selected artist serves as an ambassador for The Crooked Road by producing an original piece of music or a new interpretation of an existing traditional piece of music for The Crooked Road's use, conducting workshop/master classes, and participating in concerts. Johnny Williams completed his year in residence, and Jared Boyd of Galax, VA was selected as the 2023 Artist-In-Residence. Selected as this year's Best All-Around Performer and 1st place in Clawhammer Banjo at the Galax Old Fiddlers Convention, Boyd has a long history with old-time music in Southwest Virginia and is a regular performer at The Crooked Road's major venue, the Floyd Country Store.

Additionally, The Crooked Road continued its dedication to music education through the Traditional Music Education Program (TMEP). In May 2023, The Crooked Road held its Youth Music Festival & Competition. The event featured workshops aimed at strengthening the skills of young musicians and attracted over 70 contestants from across Central Appalachia. Over \$1,200 was awarded in prize money.

Marketing outreach continued through The Crooked Road's quarterly magazine, sponsorships with local festivals, and an expanded presence on social media. The Crooked Road continues to reach visitors through its website, Facebook, and Instagram.

The Crooked Road has a bright future ahead as it looks toward celebrations of its 20th Anniversary in 2024. Special events and concerts will be held across the region and the Commonwealth, including at Wolf Trap National Park for the Performing Arts in Vienna, Virginia. The Crooked Road plans to design traveling exhibits that feature Southwest Virginia's musical history, and new banners featuring the 20th-anniversary logo will be distributed to each venue in the region.



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Partner Website: friendsofswva.org
Consumer website: visitswva.org



VIRGINIA IS FOR LOVERS



A different side of Virginia