



2024 REGIONAL IMPACT & ANNUAL REPORT

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





BIRCH KNOB,
DICKENSON COUNTY, VA

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Cover Photo: East River Mountain

2024 - Year in Review

Dear Friends,

As we reflect on 2024, we're reminded of the resilience, creativity, and unique spirit that define our region. This year has been a testament to Southwest Virginia's incredible journey toward a sustainable, creative economy rooted in our traditions, landscapes, and, most importantly, our people.

Together, we've made tremendous strides in leveraging our cultural and natural assets to fuel economic growth and enrich community life. The Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation and Friends of Southwest Virginia, in partnership with 'Round the Mountain Artisan Network and The Crooked Road, have proudly led efforts that celebrate our region. From the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace, which welcomed a growing number of visitors this year, to transformative investments in outdoor recreation and downtown revitalization, our work is a testament to the power of place-based development.

One of our proudest achievements this year has been advancing our creative economy focus. Collaborating with regional partners, we opened two new destination centers, completed a riverwalk, and began construction on a new competition-grade bike and skate park. Additionally, through national and international marketing and public relations campaigns, we've shared Southwest Virginia's story with the world—drawing visitors to our mountains, music, and artisan traditions, while bolstering local businesses and supporting regional job growth. The Crooked Road and 'Round the Mountain Artisan Network, our key partners, have continued to shine, elevating the visibility of our unique music and craft and drawing visitors to our towns - especially in celebrating The Crooked Road's 20th Anniversary.

Our ongoing partnership with the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation and the Clinch River Valley Initiative reflects our commitment to enhancing outdoor access and promoting sustainable tourism. These collaborations

have not only enriched local recreation but also empowered communities with new resources and economic opportunities.

The success of the third annual Southwest Virginia Tourism Awards, along with new initiatives like the Artisan Conference and the Stories from Southwest Virginia podcast, highlights the deep pride and passion we share for our region's heritage and innovation. Together, we've demonstrated that our identity—authentic, distinctive, and alive—remains our greatest asset in building a bright and prosperous future for Southwest Virginia.

As we move forward, we are committed to furthering our mission with a clear vision: a vibrant, creative economy that respects our roots while welcoming new possibilities. Thank you for your continued support, partnership, and shared belief in the potential of this beautiful place we call home. We look forward to another year of growth, discovery, and community.

With deep appreciation,



Kim Davis

Kim Davis

Executive Director

Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation and Friends of Southwest Virginia

TOP ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN 2024

Community Development:

- **Destination Centers Completed:** Completed construction on the High Knob Destination Center (Norton), Giles County Trail Center, and Haysi Riverwalk, boosting tourism and community engagement in these areas of the region.
- **Gateways to Southwest Virginia: Outdoor Economy Recreation Plan:** Initiated the Powell & Clinch Outdoor Recreation Plan and the Foothills of the Blue Ridge Outdoor Recreation Plan to develop a comprehensive master plan for enhancing outdoor recreation in the LENOWISCO and West Piedmont planning district regions of Southwest Virginia.
- **Big Stone Gap Pump Track:** Began construction of a new pump track and skate park, connecting biking enthusiasts to local trails and events. Construction is scheduled for 2025.

Marketing:

- **Southwest Virginia Tourism Awards:** Held the third annual tourism awards ceremony recognizing excellence in tourism and promoting travel to Southwest Virginia.
- **National PR Campaign:** Expanded national media presence, boosting awareness and attracting new visitors. In 2024, Southwest Virginia was highlighted in 428 published articles, garnering an impressive 75.3 billion total impressions and an estimated media value of \$696.5 million, underscoring our region's growing prominence as a premier travel destination.
- **Stories from Southwest Virginia Podcast:** Launched Season 3 of the podcast, celebrating regional culture and engaging a wide audience..

Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace:

- **Visitor Engagement:** Welcomed in thousands of visitors, showcasing regional crafts and music.
- **Special Events:** We hosted arts workshops and performances, fostering regional engagement and celebrating our region's cultural heritage.

'Round the Mountain Artisan Network:

- **Artisan Conference:** Hosted the inaugural event for artisans, offering training on branding and business growth.
- **Training Programs:** Provided workshops on essential skills and business acumen for artisans.
- **Storytelling Campaign:** Launched to share artisans' stories, enhancing visibility and connecting with audiences.

The Crooked Road:

- **20th Anniversary:** Celebrated two decades of promoting heritage music with nearly 45 special events across the region.
- **Expanded Crooked Road on Tour:** Featured regional artists at notable venues, with workshops led by the Artist-In-Residence.
- **Music Education:** Strengthened partnerships to support youth music education programs and events like the Youth Music Festival and competition.

These achievements showcase Southwest Virginia's commitment to cultural preservation, economic growth, and community vitality.



FLY FISHING

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, specialty gift shops, antique stores, 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.

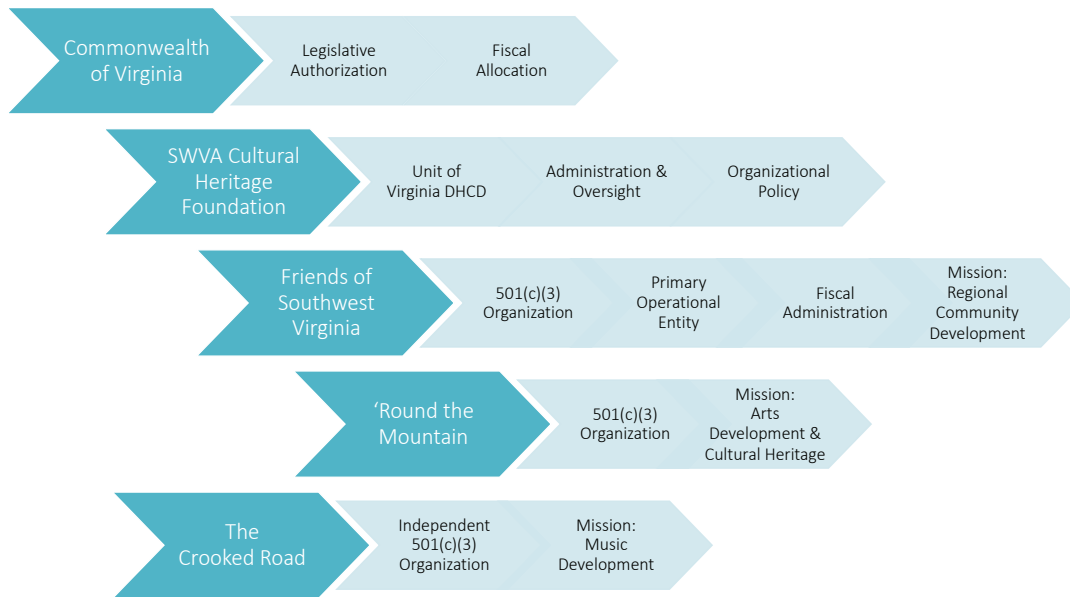
The Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Commission, established in 2008 by the Virginia General Assembly and transitioned to the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation in 2011, works as the lead in developing and coordinating the creative economy in Southwest Virginia. Through a supporting 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) 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.

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 and Trustee, Senate	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia Senate
Senator T. Travis Hackworth	Trustee, Senate	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia Senate
Delegate Sam Rasoul	Trustee, House of Delegates	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia House of Delegates
Delegate Amy Laufer	Trustee, House of Delegates	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia House of Delegates
Sharon Buchanan	Trustee, Round the Mountain	Russell County	Virginia State Parks
Kevin Byrd	Trustee, Planning District	Floyd, Giles, Montgomery, and Pulaski Counties, City of Radford	New River Valley Regional Commission
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
Ruby Rogers	Trustee, Citizen	Scott County	Southwest Virginia Resident
Julie Walters Steele	Trustee, Round the Mountain	Patrick County	Reynolds Homestead (Virginia Tech)
Scotty Wampler	Trustee, Planning District	Buchanan, Dickenson, Russell, and Tazewell Counties	Cumberland Plateau Planning District Commission
Aaron Sizemore	Ex-Officio - Friends of Southwest Virginia Chair	Bland, Carroll, Grayson, Smyth, Washington and Wythe, Counties and Cities of Bristol and Galax	Mount Rogers Planning District Commission
Ellen Reynolds	Ex-Officio - Round the Mountain Chair	Wythe County	Artisan / Beagle Ridge Herb Farm & Environmental Education Center
Leah Ross	Ex-Officio - The Crooked Road Chair	City of Bristol	Birthplace of Country Music
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
Aaron Sizemore	Chair	Bland, Carroll, Grayson, Smyth, Washington and Wythe, Counties and Cities of Bristol and Galax	Mount Rogers Planning District Commission
Stephen (Steve) Lawson	Vice Chair	Wise County	Town of Big Stone Gap
Jimmy Adkins	Secretary	Lee, Scott, and Wise Counties, City of Norton	LENOWISCO Planning District Commission
Amanda Livingston	Treasurer	Smyth County	Smyth County Tourism Association
John Kilgore, Jr.	Past Chair	Scott County	Scott County Economic Development Authority
Larry Barton	Director	Dickenson County	Dickenson County
Shannon Blevins	Director	Wise County	The University of Virginia's College at Wise
Kristie Eberly	Director	Franklin and Patrick County	West Piedmont Planning District Commission
Lydena 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.
Bryan Horn	Ex Officio - Director, Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia Department of Housing and 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

'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
Martha Biggar	Director	Pulaski County	Artisan
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 Commission	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

Boards & Governance

Creative Economy Development

INTRODUCTION AND IMPACT OF THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

Serving 19 counties and four cities across Southwest Virginia, Friends of Southwest Virginia leads a transformative movement at the intersection of cultural heritage and economic innovation. By shaping the Central Appalachian Creative Economy, we bring together artists, entrepreneurs, and innovators to celebrate local traditions while fostering economic growth.

OUR CREATIVE ECONOMY FOCUS

- **Cultural Heritage Tourism:** Through national and international marketing and public relations campaigns, Friends of Southwest Virginia showcases the region's rich Appalachian heritage. By promoting travel to Southwest Virginia, we set a sustainable example of how preserving tradition can drive economic development.
- **Community Collaborations:** Friends of Southwest Virginia actively unites localities across the region, cultivating a spirit of mutual support and collective progress that strengthens our communities and amplifies regional impact.
- **Outdoor Recreation:** Outdoor recreation is a powerful catalyst for growth. With several major infrastructure projects underway in 2024, we are enhancing access to Southwest Virginia's stunning natural resources and expanding tourism opportunities that celebrate our unique landscapes.

REGIONAL ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

The challenges posed by declining employment in traditional industries such as farming, mining, and manufacturing spurred the region to explore new avenues for economic growth. Recognizing the potential of arts, music, and cultural heritage to drive economic renewal, the region began investing in creative and tourism-based industries nearly two decades ago.

Initiatives like The Crooked Road, launched in 2004, and the 'Round the Mountain Artisan Network, established in 2005, have significantly bolstered tourism. These efforts have contributed to substantial economic growth, with travel expenditures in Southwest Virginia rising from \$648.9 million in 2004 to \$1.3 billion in 2023.⁽¹⁾ This increase not only reflects a heightened interest in the region's unique cultural offerings but also underscores the value of a diversified economic strategy centered on creativity and heritage.

The impact of this growth resonates across local economies, with tourism-related tax revenues reaching \$62.9 million in 2023, benefiting communities through increased meals and lodging taxes.⁽¹⁾ While Southwest Virginia has seen a decline in overall employment since 2001, the leisure and hospitality sector has demonstrated resilience and growth, with 12,092 individuals now holding tourism-supported jobs as of 2023.⁽¹⁾ This shift highlights the creative economy's role in sustaining jobs, supporting local businesses, and attracting visitors who contribute to the region's economic vitality. The success of this regional strategy underscores the importance of continued investment in Southwest Virginia's cultural and natural assets as essential to economic resilience and growth.



FOOTNOTE

¹ *Direct Economic Impact and Spending Shares by Industries, 2023 by Tourism Economics*

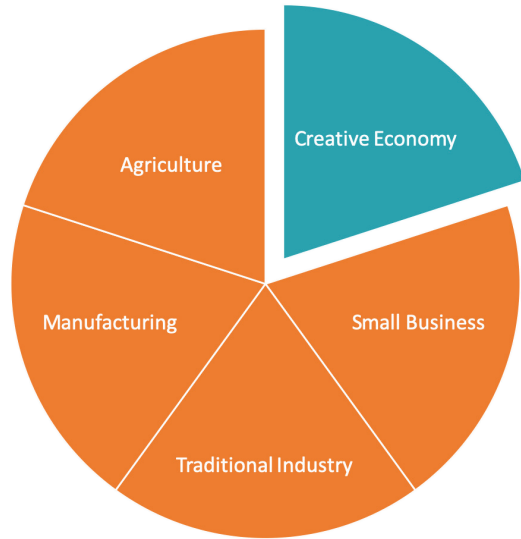
Creative Economy Development

CREATIVE ECONOMY STRATEGY

OUR WHY

Our "why" is simple: Southwest Virginia deserves a thriving economy that celebrates our unique heritage and natural beauty. As the region moved away from coal and manufacturing, we saw an incredible opportunity to transform our cultural strengths into economic drivers. Friends of Southwest Virginia is leading this charge, championing a creative economy that blends innovation, arts, and local experiences to fuel growth and pride across our communities.

By investing in place-based tourism, small businesses, and the arts, we're redefining what's possible for Southwest Virginia.



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 champion the creative economy, we see it as the driving force behind a resilient, diverse, and thriving future for Southwest Virginia. Friends of Southwest Virginia, alongside our partners, is dedicated to building an economy that's not only strong but also culturally rich and sustainably rooted in our region's unique heritage. Together, we're shaping a future where economic vitality and cultural vibrancy go hand in hand.

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:



BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY FOUNDATION'S BLUE RIDGE RISING INITIATIVE

Friends of Southwest Virginia is honored to partner with the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation on its strategic initiative, *Blue Ridge Rising*. This collaboration focuses on expanding economic development opportunities for Southwest Virginia communities along the Parkway. Together, Friends and the Foundation are pursuing a multi-state grant to support the potential implementation of the *Blue Ridge Rising* Strategic Plan.

CLINCH RIVER VALLEY INITIATIVE (CRVI)

As a key partner in CRVI, we work to preserve and promote the unique ecology and recreation of the Clinch River Valley. CRVI's efforts include environmental education and the Hometowns of the Clinch program. Now supported by a new regional nonprofit, this initiative prioritizes collaboration and sustainable development, helping to build a vibrant and resilient future for the 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.

Creative Economy Development

CAPACITY BUILDING AND PARTNERSHIP INITIATIVES

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.



OPPORTUNITY SWVA AND RALLY RE-UNITE

Friends of Southwest Virginia supports the Opportunity SWVA and RALLY Re-Unit initiatives by fostering collaboration and providing resources to drive community engagement and economic revitalization. Through the Rally SWVA mini-grant program, Opportunity SWVA helps empower local leaders to strengthen their communities and create opportunities for small businesses. By aligning resources and promoting entrepreneurial efforts, Friends works alongside Opportunity SWVA to build thriving communities, encourage innovation, and accelerate sustainable economic growth across the region.



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.

Our Work - Creative Economy Development

MOTORCYCLES ON THE BACK OF THE DRAGON



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:

GATEWAYS TO SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA: OUTDOOR ECONOMY RECREATION PLAN

Friends of Southwest Virginia launched the *Gateways to Southwest Virginia: Outdoor Economy Recreation Plan*, funded by the ARC Area Development Grant and the Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission, to create a master plan enhancing outdoor recreation in Southwest Virginia. Focusing on the Lenowisco and West Piedmont regions, this project aims to improve connectivity, expand outdoor amenities like blueways, trails, and adventure sports, and stimulate economic growth. Objectives include forming sustainable working groups, securing diverse funding, fostering regional partnerships, and encouraging new business development. Key needs involve activating river trails, supporting outdoor economy businesses, expanding gateway programming, enhancing natural-downtown connectivity, and exploring rail-to-trail expansions. Project Consultant is Destination by Design.

POWELL & CLINCH OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN

The Powell and Clinch Outdoor Recreation Plan is a community-driven, 15-year roadmap to enhance outdoor recreation, connectivity, and sustainability across Lee, Scott, and Wise Counties and the City of Norton. The plan aims to expand recreational opportunities, strengthen the outdoor economy, and foster strategic partnerships. By promoting responsible growth, it seeks to elevate existing assets, improve residents' quality of life, and boost long-term economic impact.



FOOTHILLS OF THE BLUE RIDGE OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN

The Foothills of the Blue Ridge Outdoor Recreation Plan is a community-driven, 15-year roadmap to enhance outdoor recreation, connectivity, and sustainability across Patrick County, Henry County, and the City of Martinsville. The plan aims to expand recreational opportunities, strengthen ecotourism, and foster strategic partnerships. By promoting responsible growth, it seeks to elevate existing assets, improve residents' quality of life, and boost the region's long-term economic impact.

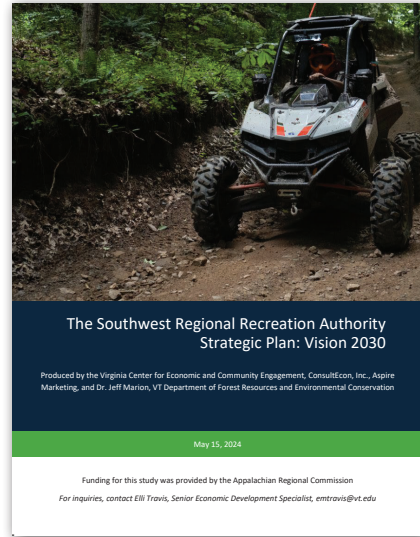


Creative Economic Development

CREATIVE ECONOMY PLANNING INITIATIVES

SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA REGIONAL RECREATIONAL AUTHORITY - STRATEGIC PLAN VISION 2030

Friends of Southwest Virginia, in collaboration with the Southwest Regional Recreation Authority (SRRRA), successfully oversaw the creation of a comprehensive business and strategic plan for Spearhead Trails, encompassing a seven-county area. Partnering with Virginia Tech's Center for Economic and Community Engagement (VTCECE), Friends guided the development of strategic initiatives to enhance the Spearhead Trails through operational reviews, stakeholder input, and benchmarking against other motorized trail systems. Looking ahead, SRRRA plans to integrate this strategy into its operations and invest in data collection and analysis to support a future economic impact study.



ASSESSMENT AND RECOVERY PLANNING FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION ASSETS POST-HURRICANE HELENE

In response to Hurricane Helene, Friends of Southwest Virginia launched the Assessment and Recovery Planning Project for Outdoor Recreation Assets. This project focuses on restoring essential outdoor infrastructure across 17 counties and 4 cities, including trails, river access points, and parks. Supported by a \$1.3 million Appalachian Regional Commission grant, the initiative will assess hurricane damage, estimate rebuilding costs, and prepare construction plans to accelerate recovery efforts. Collaborating with local Planning District Commissions (PDCs), Friends of Southwest Virginia aims to strengthen natural resources and boost the region's outdoor economy, driving sustainable tourism and community revitalization. This project is expected to conclude in Summer 2025, ensuring a resilient future for Southwest Virginia.



RURAL ROAD FLOODED IN GRAYSON COUNTY, VA FROM HURRICANE HELENE

Our Work - Creative Economy Development

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, was completed this year and will serve as a visitor center at the entrance to the High Knob in the City of Norton, Virginia. The center, complete with parking, interpretive displays, wayfinding amenities, restrooms, and an RV dump station, will be owned and maintained by the Norton Industrial Development Authority.



HAYSI RIVERWALK PROJECT

The Haysi Riverwalk Project, funded by a 2016 Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) POWER grant and completed this year, enhances the town's pavilion area, establishes a new trail-head, and improves access to trails and natural attractions along the Russell Fork River. This initiative not only benefits residents and visitors but also opens entrepreneurial opportunities and strengthens way-finding within the town. Additionally, it enables Haysi to host a Night Market, enriching the town's community and tourism offerings.



Creative Economic Development

CREATIVE ECONOMY INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

GILES COUNTY TRAIL CENTER AT MOUNTAIN LAKE LODGE



Opened in April 2024, the Giles County Trail Center serves as an adventure hub and trail-head to Bald Knob, connecting visitors to the region’s businesses and natural attractions. Beyond its role as a gateway to outdoor exploration, the center provides essential amenities like public restrooms and changing facilities, enriching the experience for those discovering Giles County’s diverse natural and cultural treasures.



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. In 2024, the Project Management Team chose American Ramp Company to oversee the design-build project, which is scheduled for completion in 2025.

BIG CHERRY LAKE - TOWN OF BIG STONE GAP, WISE COUNTY

Friends of Southwest Virginia is partnering with the Town of Big Stone Gap on an exciting new development project at Big Cherry Lake. This project includes building a fishing pier, boat launch, and courtesy pier, creating more opportunities for fishing, boating, and enjoying nature. These new features aim to make Big Cherry Lake a top destination for locals and visitors alike. Funded by the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, this initiative supports the growth of outdoor recreation in Southwest Virginia.



Our Work - Creative Economy Development

Regional Tourism & Destination Marketing

The Southwest Virginia brand is one of the most recognizable across the Commonwealth, capturing the essence of the region's stunning natural landscapes and rich cultural heritage. By showcasing the unique assets of Southwest Virginia's 19 counties and four cities, we've crafted an immersive, authentic experience that continues to attract travelers. Through marketing, innovative national public relations campaigns, and strategic branding, awareness of Southwest Virginia as a world-class tourism destination is reaching new heights.

Below are some of the key regional tourism and destination marketing initiatives that Friends of Southwest Virginia has prioritized for 2024, each designed to further elevate our presence on the world stage.

SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA TOURISM AWARDS



In August 2024, over 200 tourism professionals gathered at the Wytheville Meeting Center for the fifth annual Celebrate Tourism Summit, presented by Visit Wytheville, Virginia Tourism Corporation, and Friends of Southwest Virginia. A key feature of the summit was the Southwest Virginia Tourism Awards Ceremony, hosted by Friends of Southwest Virginia to honor outstanding contributions in tourism marketing, visitor services, events, and leadership throughout the region. The awards recognized the achievements of tourism organizations, businesses, and individuals from the 19 counties of Southwest Virginia.



With over 65 nominations submitted, winners were selected by a panel of tourism industry professionals from across the Southeastern United States. This event underscored the vital role of tourism in Southwest Virginia's economy and celebrated the remarkable efforts of industry leaders dedicated to promoting the region to travelers.

For a complete list of winners visit <https://celebrateswvatourism.com/winners>.

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, groundbreakings, and attractions.



Our Work - Regional Tourism & Destination Marketing

Regional Tourism & Destination Marketing

SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA BRAND

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During the 2024 fiscal year, Southwest Virginia was highlighted in **428 published articles**, garnering an impressive **75.3 billion total impressions** and an estimated **media value of \$696.5 million**, underscoring our region's growing prominence as a **premier travel destination**.

STORIES OF SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA - PODCASTS

In 2024, Friends of Southwest Virginia successfully oversaw the third season of the Stories from Southwest Virginia podcast, capturing the vibrant stories, culture, and heritage of the region. This season brought together local voices, from artisans and musicians to outdoor enthusiasts and historians, showcasing the unique character and community spirit of Southwest Virginia. Friends played a key role in coordinating interviews, curating episode topics, and promoting the podcast across platforms to reach a wider audience. Through thoughtful storytelling, the season highlighted the area's creative economy and natural assets, strengthening the connection between residents and their heritage while inspiring new visitors to explore Southwest Virginia.



Regional Tourism & Destination Marketing



EO CAREER COMMONS

Friends of Southwest Virginia has launched a hands-on tourism and hospitality experience at EO Career Commons, providing K-12 students from Southwest Virginia with year-round, immersive career simulations. This workforce exploration center, anticipated to attract 30,000 students annually, aligns with Virginia's 17 career clusters to spark interest in fields like manufacturing, STEM, and regional culture. Featuring a replica of the SWVA Cultural Center, students enjoy interactive arts and outdoor recreation experiences.

Our Work - Regional Tourism & Destination Marketing



GRAYSON HIGHLANDS

Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace

The Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace stands as the premier gateway to the region's 19 counties and four independent cities. In 2024, our dedicated front-line staff warmly welcomed visitors, contributing to an impressive 6% growth in visitation. Our team proudly showcases the heart of Southwest Virginia, not only through brochures but also by sharing in-depth knowledge, crafting personalized itineraries, and providing activity recommendations to visitors seeking a genuine experience. The Cultural Center continues to be a vital resource, connecting travelers to the rich heritage and authentic experiences that define our region.



SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA
Cultural Center
& MARKETPLACE

ARTISAN RETAIL CENTER

The 'Round the Mountain Artisan Network highlights some of the finest heritage crafts Southwest Virginia has to offer. Our dedicated team actively promotes these artisan goods, sharing the unique stories behind each piece and fostering strong customer connections. Once a year, we celebrate our artisans at the Cultural Center's popular "Made In SWVA" event, where artisans connect directly with local residents and build lasting relationships within the community. This event also strengthens the collaboration between our sales team, administration, and artisans, creating an experience eagerly anticipated by all involved!



'ROUND THE MOUNTAIN
Southwest Virginia's Artisan Network

**SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA
CULTURAL CENTER AND
MARKETPLACE**



Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace



FATHER DAUGHTER DANCE

EVENT VENUE

The Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace proudly offers a welcoming space for both local communities and visitors! This past year, the venue has been alive with a diverse array of events, from healthcare meetings and collegiate gatherings to round tables, preservation receptions, financial meetings, bus tours, leadership institutes, anniversaries, summits, and festivals. In 2024, we hosted special community events such as a Valentine's Father/Daughter Dance, a Mother's Day Mother/Son Dance, and Christmas in SWVA celebrations, including Breakfast with Santa. We are delighted to support various community groups, organizations, and local businesses, providing adaptable rental spaces and conference rooms that make the Cultural Center a go-to venue for events and corporate gatherings.



ARC EVENT



BREAKFAST WITH SANTA EVENT



MOTHER SON DANCE



VIRGINIA HOUSE APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE VISIT TO CULTURAL CENTER

Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace

'Round the Mountain Marketing Artisan Network



MISSION AND OVERVIEW

'Round the Mountain (RTM) is a nonprofit organization devoted to driving sustainable economic development in Southwest Virginia through art and craft. The organization supports local artisans by offering marketing, educational resources, and business opportunities to enhance their entrepreneurial journeys.

2024 STRATEGY AND IMPACT

In 2024, RTM advanced its mission through a five-part strategy to empower the artisan network and promote sustainable growth. The year began with strategic planning, assessing long-term goals and aligning initiatives with regional economic priorities. A feasibility study identified new opportunities for artisans to expand market access, leading to the launch of the inaugural Southwest Virginia Artisan Conference—a three-day event providing professional growth, networking, and practical business insights for artisans. The capacity-building training series offered artisans essential skills, from pricing and digital marketing to wholesale sales, with one-on-one coaching tailored to their specific business needs. Enhanced marketing efforts further increased artisan visibility both regionally and beyond, supported by funding from the Appalachian Regional Commission, Virginia Commission for the Arts, Virginia Tourism Corporation, Virginia Humanities, and Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission.



SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA ARTISAN CONFERENCE

Southwest Virginia Artisan Conference attracted artisans from across the region, featuring keynote speakers on Appalachian arts and breakout sessions on branding, sales strategies, and financial topics. Highlights included sessions on taxes and selling techniques for creatives, which provided artisans with valuable insights into managing their businesses.



JURIED ARTISANS

Round the Mountain Artisan Network held two successful juried sessions this year, welcoming 14 talented new artisans into the network. These additions bring fresh perspectives and skills, enriching the diversity of crafts represented. By expanding its membership, Round the Mountain continues to strengthen Southwest Virginia's artisan community and cultural heritage.



CAPACITY-BUILDING TRAINING SERIES

In March, RTM launched a capacity-building training series to equip artisans with practical business skills. The series included workshops such as *Profit is Not a Dirty Word*, focusing on pricing strategies, and *From Craft Hobby to Business*, helping artisans make the transition from hobbyists to business owners. The series concluded with strategic planning sessions, empowering artisans to set achievable goals, with personalized coaching available throughout.

MEMBER STATISTICS

Members by Medium

- Basketry - 6
- Fiber - 35
- Glass - 10
- Graphic Design - 2
- Jewelry - 19
- Leather - 8
- Literary - 3
- Metal - 8
- Mixed Media - 15
- Natural Materials - 7
- Painting - 23
- Photography - 11
- Pottery / Ceramics - 12
- Two-Dimensional - 14
- Wood - 36
- Partners/Supporters - 9
- Other - 4

Members by Community

(Number of artisans)

- Bland - 0
- Bristol - 14
- Buchanan - 4
- Carroll - 7
- Dickenson - 4
- Floyd - 11
- Franklin - 6
- Galax - 5
- Giles - 2
- Grayson - 4
- Lee - 6
- Montgomery - 14
- Norton - 1
- Patrick - 10
- Pulaski - 2
- Radford - 1
- Russell - 9
- Scott - 7
- Smyth - 17
- Tazewell - 13
- Washington - 40
- Wise - 10
- Wythe - 15
- Other - 12

'Round the Mountain Marketing Artisan Network



SIGNATURE EVENTS AND ARTISAN MARKETING

The annual "Made in SWVA" event drew increased attendance, allowing visitors to engage with artisans directly and explore their craft processes. RTM also partnered with Friends of SWVA to produce artisan profile videos featuring Walter Shoyer and Jen Otey, amplifying their stories and showcasing Appalachian artistry to a broader audience.



'Round the Mountain Marketing Artisan Network

MEMBER STATS

214
Total Members

188
Juried Artisans

Top Mediums
Wood (36), Fiber (35), Painting (23)

Largest Community Representations
Washington (40), Smyth (17), Wythe (15)

The Crooked Road 2024 in Review

2024 IN REVIEW



The Crooked Road: Virginia's Heritage Music Trail serves the Southwest Virginia region by promoting traditional music experiences, supporting local old-time and bluegrass artists, and driving economic growth through music tourism. Established by the Virginia General Assembly in 2004, this 330-mile driving route connects visitors with ten major music venues and over 50 affiliated venues and festivals, each offering the diverse and authentic music that defines Southwest Virginia's cultural identity.

Major venues along The Crooked Road include the Carter Family Fold, Country Cabin, Ralph Stanley Museum, Blue Ridge Institute & Museum, Birthplace of Country Music Museum, Floyd Country Store, Blue Ridge Music Center, Rex Theater, Galax Old Fiddler's Convention, and the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace. Built on generations of musical heritage, The Crooked Road celebrates local icons like the Carter Family, Ralph Stanley, and Jim & Jesse, attracting visitors from around the world to experience this vibrant tradition.

In 2024, The Crooked Road celebrated its 20th anniversary as Virginia's Heritage Music Trail with nearly 45 events across the region, showcasing hundreds of musicians and dancers. This milestone year also saw Governor Glenn Youngkin declare 2024 as the Year of Country Music in Virginia, recognizing multiple anniversaries: 10 years of the Birthplace of Country Music Museum in Bristol, 20

years of the Ralph Stanley Museum in Clintwood, 40 years of the Floyd Country Store's Friday Night Jamboree, and 50 years of the Carter Family Fold in Hiltons.

As part of its commitment to Southwest Virginia's music venues, The Crooked Road hosted 25 concerts at affiliated sites, from festivals like the Radford Paw Paw Festival to events like the Blacksburg Square Dance. They celebrated with concerts at each of the ten major venues, including a reunion show with legendary string band Wry Straw at the Carter Family Fold and a special performance by Ralph Stanley II at the Ralph Stanley Museum.

In partnership with the Moss Arts Center at Virginia Tech, The Crooked Road hosted a major anniversary concert in summer 2024. The event, attended by over 600 people, featured 30 musicians from across Southwest Virginia and included a traditional square dance, much to the audience's delight.

The Crooked Road also participated in the International Bluegrass Music Association conference in Raleigh, NC, hosting an official showcase room for regional artists. The highlight included a brief appearance by international touring artist Sierra Ferrell. The Crooked Road Jams, held at the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center, attracted larger crowds in 2024, and the Third Thursday Cultural Series continued with dance workshops, storytelling, and concerts by area artists.

The Crooked Road 2023 in Review

2023 IN REVIEW

Crooked Road Major Venues

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ralph Stanley Museum 2. Country Cabin 3. Carter Family Fold 4. Birthplace of Country Music Museum 5. Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Rex Theatre 7. Old Fiddlers Convention 8. Blue Ridge Music Center 9. Floyd Country Store & County Sales 10. Blue Ridge Institute & Museum
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The Crooked Road on Tour program expanded in 2024, featuring artists like the Earl White String Band, New Ballard's Branch Bogtrotters, and Junior Sisk, performing at venues such as Radford University, the Moss Arts Center, and the Virginia State Fair. The Artist-In-Residence program also thrived, with Jared Boyd serving as ambassador by producing original music and conducting workshops; Boyd, who won "Best All-Around Performer" and first place in Clawhammer Banjo at the Galax Old Fiddlers Convention, regularly performs at venues like the Floyd Country Store.

In addition to supporting regional musicians, The Crooked Road focused on music education through the Traditional Music Education Program (TMEP) and the annual Youth Music Festival & Competition. They began working closely with Junior Appalachian Musicians, Inc., to expand after-school music education for youth.

Marketing efforts continued through a quarterly magazine, local festival sponsorships, and an expanded social media presence. Following the devastation of Hurricane Helene in September, The Crooked Road partnered with local venues and community groups to assess and address damage to cultural institutions, connecting partners with state and federal resources.

Looking ahead, The Crooked Road aims to build on its anniversary momentum, with plans for a new strategic

plan, mobile app development, and an economic impact study in 2025. The organization will expand The Crooked Road on Tour program and explore partnerships with international festivals, setting the stage for another impactful year of preserving and promoting Southwest Virginia's musical heritage.



Round the Mountain Marketing Artisan Network



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



VIRGINIA IS FOR LOVERS



A different side of Virginia