



# 2 0 2 5 REGIONAL IMPACT & ANNUAL REPORT

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







WILDERNESS ROAD BLOCKHOUSE  
AT NATURAL TUNNEL



# Table of Contents

<b>2025 In Review.</b>	4
<b>Organizational Background</b>	
Who Are We.	7
Organizational History	8
Organizational Overview	9
<b>Boards &amp; Governance</b>	
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
Crooked Road Mission & Board of Directors Listings.	13
<b>Our Work - Creative Economy Development</b>	
Creative Economy Strategy	15
Capacity Building and Partnership Initiatives	16
Creative Economy Planning Initiatives.	18
Creative Economy Infrastructure Projects	20
<b>Our Work - Regional Tourism &amp; Destination Marketing</b>	22
<b>Southwest Virginia Cultural Center &amp; Marketplace.</b>	26
<b>'Round the Mountain Artisan Network</b>	28
<b>The Crooked Road: Virginia's Heritage Music Trail.</b>	30
<b>Contact Us</b>	32

*Cover Photo: Whitetop Mountain*

# 2025 - Year in Review

Dear Friends,

As I look back on 2025, I am both humbled and honored to serve as Executive Director of Friends of Southwest Virginia, 'Round the Mountain, and the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation. Every day, I am reminded of the important role Friends plays in helping our region tell its story, strengthen its communities, and create new opportunities. It is a privilege to be part of this work alongside so many dedicated partners and leaders.

This year has also left me in awe of the resilience and determination across Southwest Virginia. In the wake of Hurricane Helene last year and the devastating floods we faced in February and July, I have seen firsthand the hard work and perseverance of our communities. The way people have come together, supporting one another, rebuilding with grit, and pushing forward with hope, has been nothing short of inspiring.

Amidst these challenges, 2025 has also been a year of tremendous accomplishments. We celebrated the 20th anniversary of 'Round the Mountain Artisan Network, honoring artisans who have carried on traditions that are the heart of our culture. The Community Mural Initiative launched in six Southwest Virginia communities, turning walls into canvases of pride and storytelling. Our partnership with the Virginia Main Street Project proved a resounding success, helping communities reimagine their downtowns with new energy and investment. And for me personally, breaking ground on the Big Stone Gap Pump Track was a highlight of the year. Seeing a project that has been years in the making finally come to life was a moment of joy and pride for all of us.

On the tourism front, Friends and our partners expanded the visibility of Southwest Virginia through national public relations campaigns, media tours, and a new regional photography and videography effort. The Southwest Virginia Cultural Center and Marketplace welcomed visitors from across the United States and around the world, serving as both a gateway to our region and a celebration of who we are.

As I reflect on all that has been accomplished this year, I am deeply grateful for our artisans, musicians, community leaders, local officials, and every partner who contributes to this vision. Together, we are proving that Southwest Virginia's story is one of resilience, creativity, and opportunity.

Looking ahead, I am filled with both hope and determination. I know the challenges we have faced have made us stronger, and the work we are doing today will shape an even brighter tomorrow for every community in this region we love.

Sincerely,

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

**Kim Davis**

**Executive Director**

*Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation, Friends of Southwest Virginia, and 'Round the Mountain Artisan Network*



# TOP ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN 2025

## Community Development:

- Successful partnership with the Virginia Main Street Program to help 10 Main Street communities develop a Downtown Inventory and Real Estate Redevelopment Strategy, reimagining their downtowns with new energy, investment, and opportunity.
- Groundbreaking for the Big Stone Gap Pump Track, a long-awaited recreation project that will serve residents and visitors alike.
- Completing the *Gateways of Southwest Virginia Outdoor Recreation Planning Initiative* for the LENOWISCO and West Piedmont Planning District regions.

## Marketing:

- Expanded regional visibility through national public relations campaigns and media familiarization tours.
- Launched new photography and videography initiative to capture four-season imagery across Southwest Virginia for use by localities and partners.

## Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace:

- Welcomed thousands of visitors from across the United States and around the world, serving as the gateway to the region.
- Installed new SWVA LOVEwork signs, creating a fresh and modern photo opportunity for travelers.
- Hosted signature community events including the Valentine's Father/Daughter Dance, Artisan Conference, RTM 20th Anniversary Reception, and Christmas in SWVA celebrations.

## 'Round the Mountain Artisan Network:

- Celebrated 20 years of artisan leadership with a marketing campaign featuring thirteen artisans, videos, blogs, and social media storytelling.
- Expanded Community Mural Initiative, bringing residents and artists together to create vibrant, place-based public art.
- Hosted signature events including the Artisan Conference, 20th Anniversary Reception for 'Round the Mountain Artisan Network and two Made in SWVA Artisan Markets.

## The Crooked Road:

- Continued to elevate Southwest Virginia's music traditions through performances, venues, and partnerships that attract national and international recognition.
- Strengthened community engagement with affiliate venues and partners, highlighting the living legacy of Appalachian music across the region.
- Launched an updated website and new mobile app to better serve travelers visiting the region.

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

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BALD 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 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 borders 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.

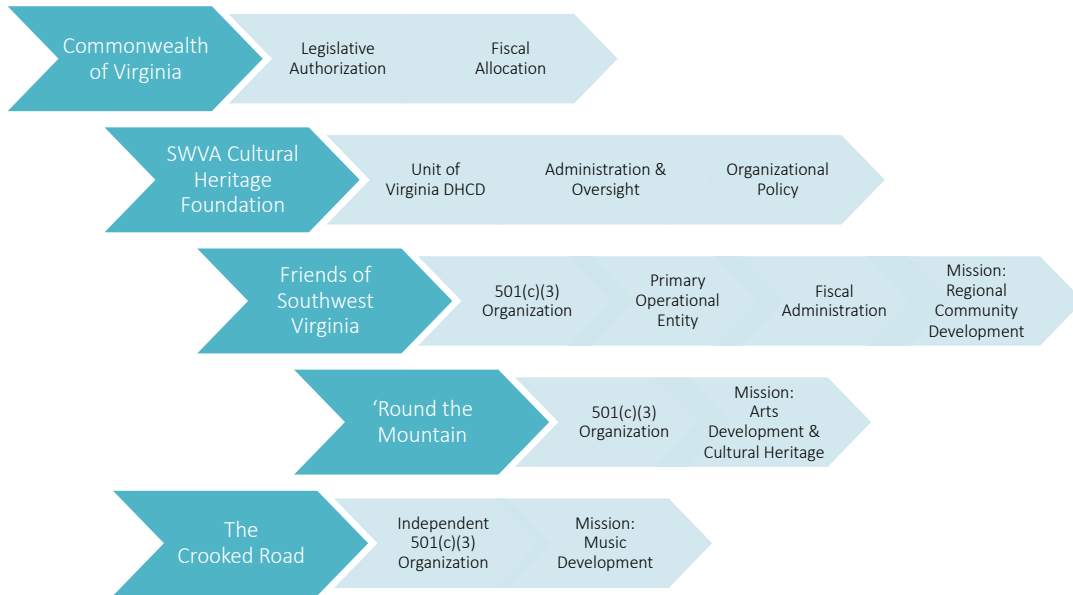
A multifaceted plan identifies the cultural and natural assets of the region; coordinates initiatives, organizations, and venues engaged in cultural and natural heritage toward more efficient operations for all partner organizations; and develops a comprehensive strategy and capital improvements plan 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 & 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	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
Hayley Allison	Trustee, Virginia Commission for the Arts	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia Commission for the Arts
Becky Nave	Trustee, Round the Mountain	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia Tourism Corporation
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	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
Dr. Adam 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
Maggie Beal	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 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 Administration
Shannon Blevins	Director	Wise County	The University of Virginia's College at Wise
Michael Armbrister	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.
Maggie Beal	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	Chair	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	Smyth 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
Becky Nave	Director	Commonwealth of Virginia	Virginia Tourism Corporation
Julie Walters Steele	Director	Patrick County	Reynolds Homestead
Glen Thomason	Director	Washington County	Artisan
Nancy Carver	Director	Buchanan 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	Business / Organization	Locality	Position
Leah Ross	Birthplace of Country Music Museum	Bristol	President
AJ Robinson	Tazewell County Tourism	Tazewell County	Vice-President
Matt Hubble	Powell Valley National Bank	Abingdon	Treasurer
Daniel Pinard	Town of Rocky Mount	Rocky Mount	Secretary
Rita Surratt	Dickenson Country Tourism	Dickenson County	Past-President
Marianne Kovatc	Blue Ridge Music Center	Galax	
Scotty Wampler	Cumberland Plateau Planning District	Lebanon	
Jeff Hess	Heart of Appalachia	St. Paul	
Jim Archer	Blue Ridge Beverage	Salem	
Bethany Worley	Blue Ridge Institute & Farm Museum	Ferrum	
Kim Davis	Virginia Department of Housing & Community Development & Friends of Southwest Virginia	Abingdon	
Becky Nave	Virginia Toursim	Bristol	
Katy Clune	Virginia Folklife	Charlottesville	
Jim Lloyd	Junior Appalachian Musicians	Rural Retreat	
Dylan Locke	Floyd Country Store	Floyd	

# Creative Economy Development

## INTRODUCTION AND IMPACT OF THE CREATIVE ECONOMY

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 \$1.38 billion in 2024.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, local tourism-related tax revenues totaled \$66.2 million in Southwest Virginia in 2024.<sup>1</sup> The upward trend in these travel-related tax revenues has an impact at the local level through increased meals and lodging tax revenues. Overall employment for tourism-related jobs in SWVA is 12,379.



### FOOTNOTE

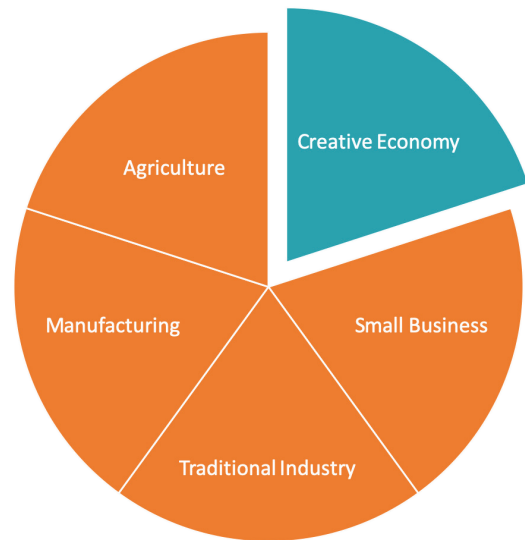
<sup>1</sup> Direct Economic Impact and Spending Shares by Industries, 2024 by Tourism Economics

# 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.



### 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:



### 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 exploring new avenues for economic development along the Blue Ridge Parkway, with a focus on Southwest Virginia's gateway communities. As part of this collaboration, Friends co-hosted the *Blue Ridge Rising Summit* in Roanoke, Virginia, bringing together community leaders, regional partners, and stakeholders from across Virginia and North Carolina to celebrate progress and plan next steps for the Parkway corridor's growth and resilience.

### CLINCH RIVER VALLEY INITIATIVE (CRVI)

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.



HIGH KNOB  
TOWER

### 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

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.



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.



SAND CAVE



# 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

In 2025, two regions of Southwest Virginia completed bold new roadmaps to grow their outdoor recreation economies over the next 15 years. **The Foothills of the Blue Ridge Plan** (Patrick and Henry Counties, City of Martinsville) and the **Powell and Clinch Plan** (Lee, Scott, Wise Counties, City of Norton) were developed with extensive community input and support from the Appalachian Regional Commission and the Tobacco Regional Revitalization Commission.

These plans outline transformative projects for trails, parks, and tourism infrastructure, complete with renderings, master site plans, and clear implementation strategies. With towns and cities just steps away from breathtaking natural assets, the region is poised to strengthen local businesses, boost quality of life, and position itself as a premier outdoor destination.



### VIRGINIA MAIN STREET DOWNTOWN INVENTORY INITIATIVE

This project was developed in response to a pressing need for more strategic, data-driven approaches to downtown revitalization and regional economic development across Main Street communities in the Virginia ARC region. With support from ARC funding, Friends partnered with Place + Main Advisors to work with ten Virginia Main Street communities: Buena Vista, Bristol, Covington, Galax, Marion, Pulaski, St. Paul, Tazewell, Wytheville, and the City of Martinsville.

Through surveys, property inventories, and walking visioning tours, local leaders and residents came together to share priorities and uncover opportunities for growth. These efforts are giving communities the data and tools they need to attract investment and spark redevelopment. The insights gathered reduce risk for developers, guide strategic investment, and set the stage for long-term economic vitality. Just as importantly, the project has built stronger relationships within each downtown, paving the way for future collaboration.





# Creative Economic Development

## CREATIVE ECONOMY PLANNING INITIATIVES

### SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA CREATIVE ECONOMY AND TOURISM WORKFORCE INITIATIVE

Friends is leading a three-year initiative to strengthen the region's creative economy by investing in workforce development, tourism research, promotion, and community revitalization. This project, the ARC Power Initiative is designed to leverage tourism as a driver of economic growth and community resilience building on a sustainable economy rooted in the region's cultural heritage and natural resources. The initiative is projected to support 300 tourism-related businesses, retain 9,800 jobs, create 75 new jobs, and increase local revenues by at least \$3.8 million.



### SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA CREATIVE ECONOMY ASSESSMENT AND DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

This initiative is designed to inventory, evaluate and strengthen the region's cultural and outdoor recreation assets while measuring the economic impact of Southwest Virginia's creative economy. Through asset mapping, economic analysis, and the creation of a Creative Economy Dashboard, the project will identify key opportunities for growth and development ultimately producing a Strategic Roadmap to guide the next decade of creative economy work.

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.

### GROWTH & OPPORTUNITY GRANT - GOVA

Friends of Southwest Virginia has received a \$250,000 GO Virginia Helene Business Recovery Initiative grant to support tourism and small-business recovery in 23 Hurricane Helene-impacted communities. The Southwest Virginia Creative Economy & Tourism Recovery Initiative will deliver workforce training, digital visibility tools for tourism businesses, and marketing campaigns to bring visitors back to Main Street. Leveraging assets like VisitSWVA.

org, the project will launch the Outdoor Recreation to Downtown initiative, linking downtowns to nearby outdoor assets through coordinated storytelling and digital engagement. With support from local governments and statewide partners, this effort will create jobs, increase visitor spending, and strengthen Southwest Virginia's long-term resilience.



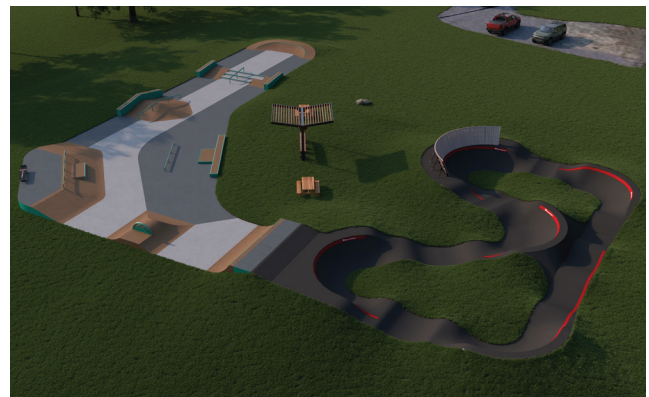
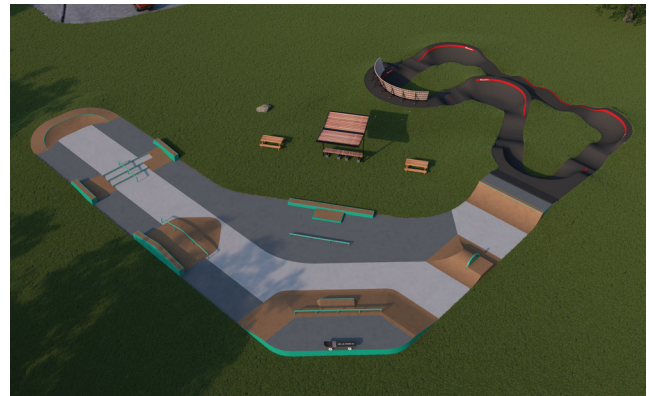
# Creative Economic Development

## 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:

### OUTDOOR RECREATION DEVELOPMENT IN THE COALFIELDS PLAN - BIG STONE GAP PUMP TRACK

The Big Stone Gap Pump Track and Skatepark, funded by an Appalachian Regional Commission POWER Grant, along with funding from the Cumberland Forest Community Fund, the Gene and Anne Worrell Foundation, as well as funds provided by the Town and raised by the Jordan Family in honor of their son Tyler, began construction this fall. This community supported project, located within Bullitt Park, will be fun for all ages and biking or skating abilities. Once completed, the pump track will be a certified Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI) rated track, perfect for daily enjoyment by residents and visitors or used for intense biking competitions. Construction is expected to be complete by early spring of 2026. Friends of Southwest Virginia is very grateful for all of the financial and community support for this project.





# Creative Economic Development

## CREATIVE ECONOMY INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECTS

### BIG CHERRY LAKE BOAT LAUNCH AND ADA-COMPLIANT FISHING PIER

Big Cherry Lake, in Wise County Virginia, owned by the Town of Big Stone Gap received funding from the Virginia Outdoors Foundation to improve their existing boat launch and to install a courtesy pier and dock for boat and to develop an ADA-compliant fishing pier with accessible admission adjacent to the ramp. The addition of a fishing pier will allow increased fishing access for bank fishermen and boaters alike. The fishing pier will also allow ADA-compliant fishing access to individuals with decreased mobility. Additionally, the improvements listed in this project will enable the DWR easier access to the lake, giving them better opportunities to monitor and enhance the fisheries and recreation opportunities. These additions and improvements to the current facilities available at Big Cherry Lake will significantly enhance recreational opportunities in various ways and will contribute to additional work that the Town is planning for at the lake.



### STRATEGIC RECOVERY PLANNING FOR SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA'S OUTDOORS

Following the impacts of Hurricane Helene, Friends of Southwest Virginia launched a comprehensive recovery initiative to assess and plan for the restoration of outdoor recreation assets across the region. This work includes a 160-mile High Definition Stream Survey of the New River conducted by Trutta Environmental Solutions, capturing high-resolution geospatial, video, and sonar data to document conditions, identify vulnerabilities, and guide informed decision-making for repairs and long-term resiliency. In parallel, Friends entered into a formal partnership with the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission to evaluate major trails across the region using field-based GIS data collection, photographic documentation, and condition assessments. Together, these coordinated projects are creating an unprecedented inventory of post-storm impacts from river corridors to trail systems, ensuring that future infrastructure investments are strategic, data driven, and responsive to the needs of local communities, outdoor recreation users, and regional partners.



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.



# Regional Tourism & Destination Marketing

The Southwest Virginia brand has become one of the most powerful and recognizable in the Commonwealth, celebrating the region's breathtaking landscapes, rich cultural traditions, and vibrant communities. By showcasing the unique character of our 19 counties and four cities, Friends of Southwest Virginia continues to grow tourism, strengthen regional identity, and share our story with the world.

In 2025, targeted marketing campaigns, national media coverage, and a refreshed brand strategy propelled Southwest Virginia into the spotlight as a premier travel destination. From captivating outdoor adventures to authentic music and artisan experiences, our efforts inspired new audiences to visit, stay longer, and invest in the communities that make this region so special.

Looking ahead, Friends is building on this momentum with clear tourism and destination marketing priorities designed to elevate visibility, drive visitor spending, and ensure lasting economic benefits for every corner of Southwest Virginia. The result is a stronger, more connected region where culture and adventure come together to create unforgettable experiences.

## SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA TOURISM AWARDS



In August 2025, nearly 200 tourism professionals gathered at the Wytheville Meeting Center for the sixth annual Celebrate Tourism Summit, presented by Visit Wytheville, Virginia Tourism Corporation, and Friends of Southwest Virginia to honor outstanding contributions in tourism marketing, visitor services, events, and leadership throughout the region.

The 42 awards recognized the achievements of tourism organizations, businesses, and individuals from the 19 counties and four cities of Southwest Virginia.

For a complete list of winners, visit [www.celebrateswvatourism.com/winners](http://www.celebrateswvatourism.com/winners)



# Regional Tourism & Destination Marketing

## NATIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN

Southwest Virginia is filled with hidden gems, and in 2025 we made sure the world took notice. As local tourism programs continued to grow, Friends of Southwest Virginia worked to amplify their stories through dynamic social media, targeted advertising, and a robust national public relations campaign.

Building on the success of our two-year partnership with Laurie Rowe Communications, we extended our collaboration to expand regional visibility and build stronger connections with travel journalists. Together,

we crafted custom itineraries for writers and publications eager to explore the authentic experiences our region has to offer.

This year, media familiarization trips brought journalists face-to-face with the music, art, culture, and outdoor adventure that define Southwest Virginia. Their stories, shared across national outlets, introduced new audiences to the region and reinforced its reputation as a world-class travel destination.



# Regional Tourism & Destination Marketing

## SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA BRAND

### PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEOGRAPHY

Recognizing the need for high-quality media that reflects the natural beauty and cultural heritage of our region, Friends of Southwest Virginia launched a year-long photography and videography initiative. The project is capturing all-season imagery across the region, ensuring a diverse library of assets. Once complete, these assets will be available for use for all 19 counties and four cities through a new digital asset management (DAM) system, supporting their marketing and promotional efforts

### MARKET RESEARCH STUDY

After identifying a regional need for deeper visitor insights, Friends of Southwest Virginia launched efforts to better understand who our visitors are, where they are coming from, and what activities they engage in while in Southwest Virginia. In addition to those metrics, we are also collecting qualitative data to learn why visitors chose Southwest Virginia, what other destinations they considered, and other valuable information to guide future tourism strategies.

### ENHANCING SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA'S DIGITAL PRESENCE

Friends of Southwest Virginia will launch four newly designed websites that will enhance the region's digital presence and storytelling. The updated sites for Southwest Virginia, Friends of Southwest Virginia, 'Round the Mountain: Artisan Network, and the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace will provide a cohesive and modern user experience that reflects the region's natural beauty, cultural heritage, and creative economy. Each website will feature improved functionality, refreshed branding, and interactive tools designed to better serve visitors, artisans, partners, and community stakeholders. Together, these platforms will advance the organization's mission to connect people with the places, products, and stories that define Southwest Virginia.

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During the 2023-2025 public relations campaign, Southwest Virginia was highlighted in **686 published articles**, garnering an impressive **89,344,640,829 billion total impressions** and an estimated **media value of \$825,523,624**, underscoring our region's growing prominence as a premier travel destination.

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**686**  
PUBLISHED  
ARTICLES

**89,344,640,829**  
BILLION  
TOTAL  
IMPRESSIONS

**\$825,523,624**  
MEDIA VALUE



MOUNT ROGERS



# Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace

The Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace is one of the most dynamic destinations in the region. In 2025, the facility continued to be 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 known across the Commonwealth as the “Gateway to Southwest Virginia”. In 2025, our frontline staff welcomed thousands of visitors to the region from across the United States and around the world. Monthly tracking showed consistent engagement from nearby states such as North Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky, alongside frequent visitors from Virginia’s own communities. Notably, the center also reached international travelers from Canada, Mexico, Spain, Italy, England, Australia, and Nicaragua. This broad geographic spread demonstrates both the region’s strong local appeal and its growing recognition as a destination on the national and global stage.

Earlier this year, the Southwest Virginia LOVEwork signs outside of the center were replaced due to unsafe conditions. New signs were designed and installed with a more modern, updated look. Our SWVA LOVEworks serve as a promotional hub for the region, offering a truly one-of-a-kind photo opportunity before visitors leave to explore our region.

## 'ROUND THE MOUNTAIN ARTISAN NETWORK

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, offering support, promotion, and communication help while celebrating numerous sales achievements.



# 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 2025, the Cultural Center hosted various special events such as a Valentine's Father/Daughter Dance, 'Round the Mountain's 20th Anniversary reception, the Southwest Virginia Artisan Conference, 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.





# '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.

## 2025 STRATEGY AND IMPACT

In 2025, 'Round the Mountain celebrated a milestone year by advancing programs that honored tradition while embracing innovation. The Southwest Virginia Artisan Conference and virtual Capacity-Building Training Series gave artisans access to essential business tools, peer networks, and one-on-one guidance to grow their enterprises. The 20th Anniversary Marketing Campaign elevated regional visibility with artisan stories, photography, videos, and a commemorative logo and timeline highlighting two decades of impact. The Community Mural Initiative expanded across new towns, bringing residents and artists together to create vibrant public art that reflects local heritage and drives tourism.

These initiatives were made possible through the support of the Appalachian Regional Commission, Virginia Commission for the Arts, Virginia Tourism Corporation, Virginia Humanities, and the Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission. The addition of an Artisan Engagement Specialist has further amplified these efforts, helping connect makers to training, resources, and markets that value handcrafted excellence.



## SPECIAL EVENTS

### SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA ARTISAN CONFERENCE & TRAINING SERIES:

A three-day gathering of makers for workshops and inspiration, featuring breakout sessions on photography, pricing, website design, and marketing. Complemented by a virtual training series with accessible, skill-focused sessions like Writing an Artist Bio, Getting the Grant, and Holiday Marketing.



### 20TH ANNIVERSARY MARKETING CAMPAIGN:

Celebrated the diversity and talent of 13 artisans through photography, interviews, blogs, and video features, while honoring RTM's legacy with a commemorative logo and historical timeline.

### COMMUNITY MURAL PROJECT INITIATIVE:

A place-making program engaging residents and professional muralists to design and install site-specific works of public art. These murals, set to be completed in 2026, celebrate local culture and strengthen community identity while enhancing tourism.



## MEMBER STATISTICS

**Total Members: 235**  
**Juried Artisans: 172**

### Members by Medium

- Basketry - 6
- Brooms - 2
- Fiber - 34
- Glass - 15
- Graphic Design - 3
- Jewelry - 24
- Leather - 4
- Literary - 4
- Metal - 5
- Mixed Media - 28
- Natural Materials - 6
- Painting - 26
- Photography - 16
- Pottery / Ceramics - 15
- Two-Dimensional - 11
- Wood - 36
- Partners/Supporters - 7
- Other - 7

### Members by Community

*(Number of artisans)*

- Bland - 1
- Bristol - 19
- Buchanan - 5
- Carroll - 7
- Dickenson - 5
- Floyd - 8
- Franklin - 5
- Galax - 6
- Giles - 1
- Grayson - 4
- Lee - 6
- Montgomery - 10
- Norton - 1
- Patrick - 10
- Pulaski - 2
- Radford - 2
- Russell - 10
- Scott - 7
- Smyth - 17
- Tazewell - 12
- Washington - 47
- Wise - 10
- Wythe - 24
- Other - 16



## MEMBER STATS

**235**  
Total Members

**172**  
Juried Artisans

### Top Mediums

Wood (36), Fiber (34), Mixed Media (28)

### Largest Community Representations

Washington (47), Wythe (24), Bristol (19)

# The Crooked Road 2025 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 so closely intertwined with Southwest Virginia's identity.

Spanning across the Southwest Virginia region, the major venues of The Crooked Road include the Ralph Stanley Museum, the Country Cabin, the Carter Family Fold, the Birthplace of Country Music Museum, the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace, the Rex Theatre, the Galax Old Fiddler's Convention, the Blue Ridge Music Center, the Floyd Country Store, and the Blue Ridge Institute & Museum.

The Crooked Road is built upon generations of musical legacies hailing from 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 across the world to immerse themselves in Appalachian culture, experiencing vibrant musical performances and dance floors filled with cloggers.

After its 20th anniversary in 2024, The Crooked Road continued to grow in 2025. The organization made multiple technological advancements to make The Crooked Road more accessible to travelers, unveiling a new website and mobile app. Sponsored by the Virginia Tourism Corporation, the app features a listing of venues, a calendar of events, and a variety of local dining and lodging options for visitors to explore while on their musical road trip. Additionally, the app includes an itinerary building feature. Users of the app can select their areas of interest, and the app will map out their road trip for them, suggesting other attractions and accommodations along the way. Lastly, users of the app can utilize their "digital passport," checking in to major venues to become eligible for Crooked Road merchandise and prizes. The app can be downloaded for free via the App Store and Google Play Store.

The Crooked Road executed a robust marketing campaign to support visitation to the website and downloads of the mobile app. Various marketing materials, such as pop up banners and flyers, were placed at major and affiliate venues to promote the mobile app. The organization engaged in a strategic partnership with Hotel Floyd, located in Floyd, VA, where guests are just blocks away from the Floyd Country Store. In addition, The Crooked Road promoted the mobile app in multiple online and print publications regarding traditional music. The organization also handed out promotional products to travelers visiting major venues, promoting engagement with the mobile app.



# The Crooked Road 2025 in Review

## Crooked Road Major Venues

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



The Crooked Road continued its efforts to support regional venues and music festivals through sponsorships, strategic planning services, and presentations of bands. Primary sponsorships include the Acoustic Arbor stage at Gathering in the Gap in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, and the Youth Stage at the annual Blue Ridge Folklife Festival in Ferrum, Virginia. The Crooked Road presented four bands at the 24th annual Bristol Rhythm and Roots Reunion.

The Crooked Road grew its programming efforts with the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center & Marketplace and Round the Mountain. The monthly jam sessions evolved into "First Thursdays at the Cultural Center." The event features local bluegrass musicians, a cake walk, artisan demonstrations from Round the Mountain artisans, and local food trucks. In further programming efforts, The Crooked Road presented a free concert featuring bluegrass duo Compton and Newberry, with the support of the Cultural Center.

The Crooked Road on Tour program continued to feature musicians from Southwest Virginia on stages across the Commonwealth. Performances featured musicians such as luthier and banjo player Mac Traynham, and IBMA award winning artist Junior Sisk.

The Crooked Road continued its dedication to music education through the Traditional Music Education Program (TMEP). In May 2025, The Crooked Road hosted its annual Youth Fiddler's Convention at the Southwest Virginia Cultural Center. The organization was proud

to partner with the Library of Congress Folklife Center to present the winner of the Old Time Fiddle Category, Sterling Hollifield, at the 2025 Smithsonian Folklife Festival in Washington D.C.

The Crooked Road continues to promote Southwest Virginia as a world-class destination for fans of traditional music. The organization looks forward to continued growth and the announcement of new affiliate venues in early 2026.







(276) 492-2400  
One Heartwood Circle  
Abingdon, VA 24210

Partner Website: [friendsofswva.org](http://friendsofswva.org)  
Consumer website: [visitswva.org](http://visitswva.org)



**VIRGINIA IS FOR LOVERS**



*A different side of Virginia*

**THE CHANNELS NATURAL  
AREA PRESERVE**