3 UNIFIED REGIONAL VOICE RECOMMENDATIONS

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The need for a unified regional voice to advocate for resources, policies, and solutions that benefit the Blue Ridge Parkway corridor was a common theme from the community leaders within the Parkway communities and the steering committee. The Unified Regional Voice strategy had a designated action team, with community members who specialize in public policy, to further develop the initiative by determining realistic goals and key next steps.

UNIFIED REGIONAL VOICE RECOMMENDATIONS

FIRST TIER

- FUNDING FOR PARKWAY OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE
- DEVELOP ALLIANCE FOR UNIFIED REGIONAL VOICE

SECOND TIER

- FACILITATE AGENCY-COMMUNITY COMMUNICATIONS
- WINTER USE OF PARKWAY
- PERIODIC VEHICLE CLOSURES ON PARKWAY

ADDITIONAL CALLS TO ACTION

- SPECIAL EVENT PERMITTING
- TRAFFIC COUNTS

3.1 FUNDING FOR PARKWAY OPERATIONS AND MAINTENANCE

Pursue legislative support for funding to maintain and improve Parkway resources. As noted previously, local residents recognize that poor conditions on the Parkway can negatively impact Parkway-related tourism and spending, so they want to see the Parkway properly sta□ed and maintained. While the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation and its donors have provided much needed financial support for more than 200 Parkway projects and programs, the core operations and permanent sta□ng of the Blue Ridge Parkway and the maintenance of the roadway and other infrastructure remain the responsibility of the federal government. Currently, the Parkway is sta□ed well below its needs, but it's worth noting that every $1 appropriated for Parkway operations (approximately $17 million per year) correlates with $100 in economic impact on local communities ($1.7 billion per year). More than $200 million from the Great American Outdoors Act has been awarded to the Parkway for road and bridge projects, but another $347 million is still needed to address the rest of the Parkway's maintenance backlog.

12-MONTH GOAL:

Encourage additional funding to support core Parkway operations and to reduce the Parkway's $347 million maintenance backlog.

Funding Examples:

- Shenandoah National Park Trust: https://bit.ly/42zdtUo
- National Parks Conservation Association: https://bit.ly/3OFlGAB
- The Conservation Alliance: https://conservationalliance.com/priority-campaigns/

KEY STEPS:

- Increase public awareness and understanding of the Parkway's funding needs.
- Discuss these funding needs with appropriate elected o□cials.
- Monitor legislation that could provide additional funding to boost the Parkway's core operations or address the Parkway's maintenance backlog, such as the proposed renewal of the Great American Outdoors Act.

GREAT AMERICAN OUTDOORS ACT

Thousands of nonprofit organizations, businesses, and other organizations, including the outdoor-industry-led Conservation Alliance, worked hard to secure passage of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA), which, in part, provides $9.5 billion over five years ($1.9 billion annually) to address maintenance backlogs at U.S. federal land agencies. Efforts to renew GAOA hold great promise for the Blue Ridge Parkway and other nearby federal parks and forests.

3.2 DEVELOP ALLIANCE FOR UNIFIED REGIONAL VOICE

Organize Blue Ridge Parkway corridor communities to speak with a unified voice regarding federal, state, and local funding, laws, policies, and regulations related to resource protection, economic development, and related matters in the Parkway corridor.

12-MONTH GOAL:

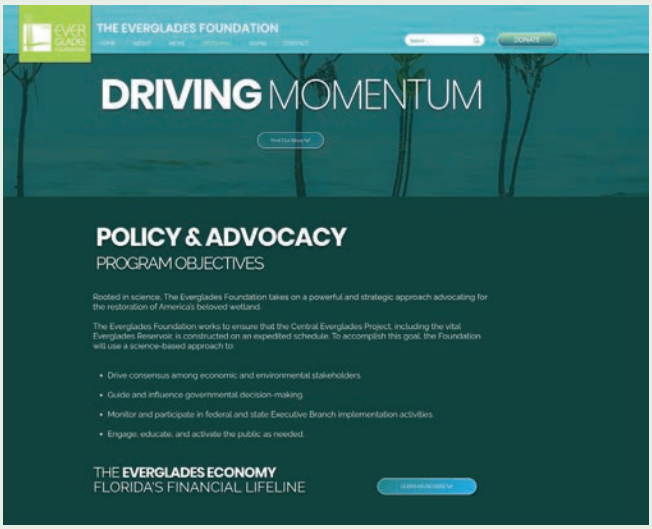
Establish a Parkway alliance composed of elected officials and community and business leaders, with representatives from the entire Blue Ridge Rising region.

Examples of a Unified Regional Voice Alliance:

- Chesapeake Bay Foundation (Maryland): https://www.cbf.org/
- Everglades Foundation (Florida): www.evergladesfoundation.org/advocacy
- Northern Forest Center (New Hampshire): https://northernforest.org/our-work/providing-leadership/advocating-for-the-region/

KEY STEPS:

- Strengthen existing partnerships with elected officials and community leaders at the local, state, and federal levels.
- Identify business leaders with influence and interest in advocacy for the region.
- Invite elected leaders for participation in the alliance.
- Align platforms and issues for the entire region.



THE EVERGLADES FOUNDATION

The Everglades Foundation uses a science-based approach to drive consensus among economic and environmental stakeholders, guide and influence governmental decision-making, and monitor federal and state executive branch implementation activities.

3.3 SECOND TIER

FACILITATE AGENCY-COMMUNITY COMMUNICATIONS

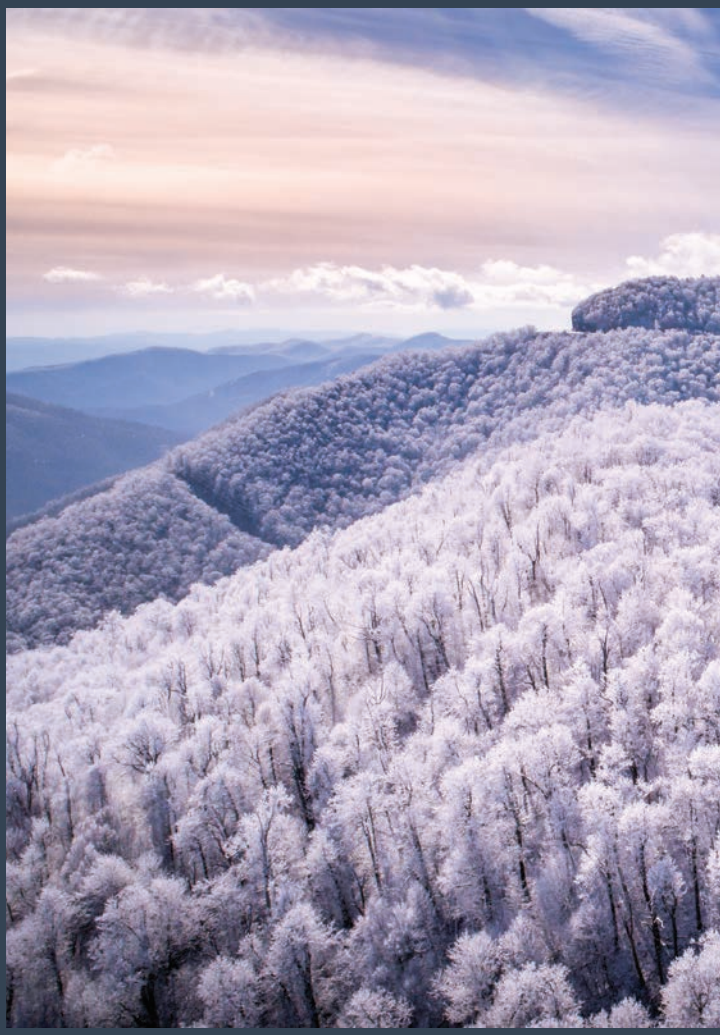
Facilitate improved communication and collaboration between gateway communities and key federal and state agencies, including the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, and State O□ces of Outdoor Recreation. Although communication channels do currently exist, many community leaders expressed a desire for increased and more targeted communication and stronger relationships with NPS leaders and with each other. This is especially important regarding Parkway projects that impact the visitor experience and the gateway communities, such as road closures and maintenance of assets such as campgrounds, restrooms, trails, and overlooks.

WINTER USE OF PARKWAY

Encourage management practices of the Parkway to allow for increased winter use and tourism opportunities in the winter season. Many sections of the Parkway are gated during the winter months, which limits access to the higher elevation areas that receive larger snowfall amounts and are more suitable for winter activities. With increased access, tourists and residents could visit the region and participate more in outdoor recreation activities, such as cross country skiing, snowshoeing, winter hiking, and ice climbing.

VEHICULAR CLOSURES

Endorse periodic or annual Blue Ridge Parkway vehicular closure events to enable bicycle- and/or pedestrian-only events and activities. During the pandemic, when sections of the Parkway were closed during warm weather months, residents and tourists flocked to the Parkway for the opportunity to cycle, walk, and run on the Parkway. An example of this type of policy is the vehicle-free days at Cades Cove in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.



3.4 ADDITIONAL CALLS TO ACTION

SPECIAL EVENT PERMITTING

Advocate for a streamlined process to permit special events, such as cycling and running races, that utilize the Parkway. The current permitting process is difficult to navigate and limits the types of events that can utilize the Parkway. These types of outdoor recreation events bring tourism and overnight visitors to the Parkway communities.

TRAFFIC COUNTS

Support efforts to improve understanding of traffic flows at key Parkway access points. This data is crucial for assessing visitation totals and trends, the effectiveness of local marketing initiatives, and the overall economic impact of Parkway visitors on the surrounding communities. Several factors make it very difficult to determine Parkway visitation, including its 200 road intersections, differences in vehicle occupancy, and high volumes of commuter traffic in urban locations like Roanoke and Asheville. Both the Parkway and local communities want to improve traffic data collection and analysis at specific intersections and for the Parkway overall. The Blue Ridge Parkway has secured departmental funds to improve its analysis of traffic flows, and that work is ongoing as of the writing of this plan in March 2024. Project partners will pursue opportunities to enhance future data collection and analysis as needs and opportunities arise.