2 VISITOR EXPERIENCE RECOMMENDATIONS

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Enhancing recreation and tourism resources to improve the visitor experience is the overall goal of this theme. Top priorities include expanding trails and greenways and improving bicycle safety and access. Both the Trails/ Greenways and Bicycle Safety/Access initiatives had a designated action team, composed of subject-matter experts, engaged citizens, and community leaders, to further develop each strategy and identify key steps to mvove it forward.

VISITOR EXPERIENCE RECOMMENDATIONS

FIRST TIER

- TRAILS/GREENWAYS
- PARKWAY MAINTENANCE
- BICYCLE SAFETY AND ACCESS
- ARTISANS AND MUSICIANS
- STORYTELLING

SECOND TIER

- VOLUNTEER SUPPORT
- OUTDOOR RECREATION PARTICIPATION
- ACCESSIBILITY INFRASTRUCTURE, PROGRAMS, AND SERVICES
- ELECTRIC VEHICLE CHARGING NETWORK

ADDITIONAL CALLS TO ACTION

- GEOREFERENCED MAPS
- PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION
- MULTILINGUAL COMMUNICATIONS
- REGIONAL WELCOME CENTER

2.1 TRAILS AND GREENWAYS

Support development of new and existing trails and greenways to connect gateway communities to the Blue Ridge Parkway corridor, adjoining public lands, and each other. In addition, work with National Park Service and the Blue Ridge Parkway to facilitate community trail connections with, through, and across the Blue Ridge Parkway.

12-MONTH GOAL:

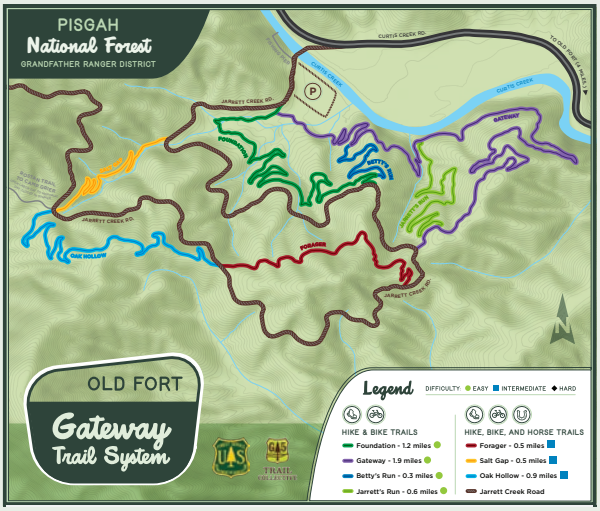
Complete an inventory of existing and planned regional trails and trail projects to gain a detailed picture of trails in the region. Develop a regional trails guide that can be distributed to visitors and residents. Identify National Park Service goals and standards for possible community connector trails. Identify two to four regional trail projects to help complete with funding and/or other assistance.

Examples of Trails and Greenways:

- G5 Collective (North Carolina): www.g5trailcollective.org/
- Appalachian Trail (Virginia): https://appalachiantrail.org/
- Fonta Flora State Trail (North Carolina): www.trails.nc.gov/state-trails/fonta-flora-state-trail

KEY STEPS:

- Determine parameters to classify a trail or greenway as a regional trail for inclusion in the inventory.
- Research and catalog regional and local trails that currently exist or are planned.
- Develop a regional trails guide for digital and/or print distribution.
- Work with the National Park Service (NPS) to identify community connector trail goals and standards that address natural resource protection, visitor safety, and other NPS priorities.
- Rank the needs and feasibility of regional trail projects to identify two to four projects to support through funding or other assistance, with a priority placed on trails linking the Parkway with nearby communities.



OLD FORT GATEWAY TRAIL SYSTEM

The G5 Collective is a nonprofit initiative powered by Camp Grier in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, local communities, and recreational trail user groups. G5 was conceived as a solution to the lack of funding for trail maintenance and trail development projects in the USFS Grandfather District. The working group recognized that the district is a tremendous asset and could be a driving force to help build healthy and economically vibrant rural communities. Their developing trail network has the potential to connect the Blue Ridge Parkway with the town of Old Fort, North Carolina.

2.2 PARKWAY MAINTENANCE

Support maintenance and improvement of Blue Ridge Parkway facilities, programs, and visitor amenities (e.g., visitor centers, restrooms, picnic areas, campgrounds, overlooks, and events). While this planning e□ort has consistently focused on needs and opportunities in the communities beyond the Parkway boundary, the local communities clearly recognize that if the Parkway is not maintained well, then tourism will decline, which in turn, will negatively impact Parkway communities. The two main avenues to maintain and improve Parkway resources include grants and fundraising, discussed below, and legislative appropriations, discussed in the next theme, Unified Regional Voice.

12-MONTH GOAL:

Raise funds to help conserve Parkway resources, educate visitors, protect historic buildings and cultural history, support recreation (including scenic views, trails, picnic areas, and campgrounds), and enhance the visitor experience.

KEY STEPS:

- The Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation will continue its work as the Blue Ridge Parkway's nonprofit philanthropic partner, raising funds from a wide variety of sources to protect Parkway resources and enhance the visitor experience. The Foundation will continue to work with the Parkway leadership to identify needs and opportunities, raise funds, and complete projects.
- Individuals, companies, foundations, tourism agencies, and other agencies and organizations throughout the region are all invited and encouraged to contribute to these e□orts.

BLUE RIDGE MUSIC CENTER

Since its founding in 1997, the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation and its donors have provided more than $22 million to support more than 200 Parkway projects and programs, including facility improvements and programming at the Blue Ridge Music Center near Galax, Virginia. The Foundation's interactive project history Story Map can be found at: https://bit.ly/brpf-story-map

Parkway Maintenance Examples:

- Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation general website: https://www.brpfoundation.org/
- Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation community partners page: https://www.brpfoundation.org/parkway-partners
- National Park Service Blue Ridge Parkway Partners Page: https://www.nps.gov/blri/getinvolved/supportyourpark/partners.htm

2.3 BICYCLE SAFETY AND ACCESS

Improve bicycle and pedestrian safety along the Parkway and major corridors connecting to gateway communities. The Parkway and nearby roads are very popular with a wide range of cyclists, and there are ample opportunities to grow bicycle tourism in the region. Work with partners to identify and promote the best cycling routes, to connect popular routes while improving resource protection and visitor safety, and to enhance safety signage and messaging for all road users.

12-MONTH GOAL:

Identify and share 10 to 12 preferred routes throughout the region for road, gravel, and/or mountain biking. Look for opportunities to connect nearby routes, while also meeting public land agency goals. Evaluate safety messaging and signage on site, online, and in print, and recommend improvements as appropriate.

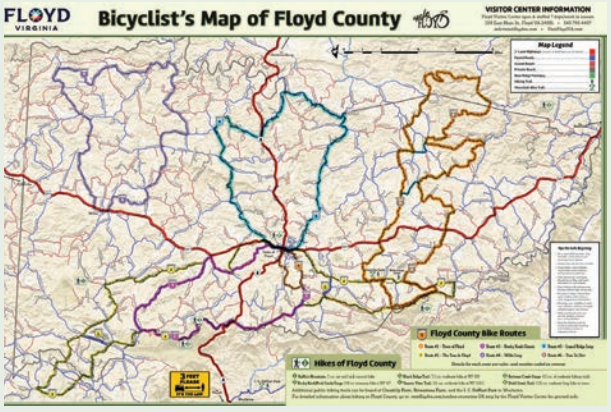
Examples of Bicycle Safety and Access:

- Cycle Floyd (Virginia): https://visitfloydva.com/cycle-floyd/
- Wilkes County (North Carolina): https://wilkesboronc.org/visitors/attraction-maps/wilkesboro-bike-route-map
- Visit Nelson County (Virginia): https://www.nelsoncounty.com/outdoor-adventures/biking/

KEY STEPS:

- Determine categories and criteria for identifying cycling routes in the region, such as length of route, type of cycling, and geographic area.
- Identify 10 to 12 preferred routes that meet the criteria and showcase the region.
- Create maps and directions for the identified routes and share via digital and print resources.
- Work with NPS, U.S. Forest Service, and others to identify locations to improve bicycle access between the Parkway and other public land roads and trails, while also addressing natural resource protection, visitor safety, and other agency priorities.
- Work with NPS, DOTs, and local partners to assess current bicycle safety messaging and signage on and near the Parkway, on the web, and in print; suggest changes as appropriate.

CYCLE FLOYD



Visit Floyd welcomes cyclists with details about recommended cycling routes, two self-service bike repair stations, and upcoming events.

2.4 ARTISANS AND MUSICIANS

Develop educational programming and resources that promote local artisans and musicians at Parkway events and other locations near the Parkway. Many visitors travel to the region for the rich history and current o□erings in arts, crafts, culture, and music. Providing and promoting opportunities for visitors to see, experience, and learn about art and music helps to enrich the visitor experience, while also supporting local artists and musicians and encouraging longer visits.

12-MONTH GOAL:

Identify two to four unmet needs and implement related strategies to promote local musicians and artisans that are unique o□erings and promote longer stays for visitors.

KEY STEPS:

- Hold discussions and/or conduct surveys with artisans, musicians, and other interested people and organizations in the region to determine the greatest unmet needs and opportunities.
- Develop and implement two to four strategies to address those needs and opportunities.
- Highlight artisans and musicians in other action plan strategies, such as events on the Parkway celebrating local communities (e.g., a Plein Air event featuring local artists) and curated travel itineraries.

Examples for Artisans and Musicians:

- Visit Patrick County (Virginia): https://visitpatrickcounty.org/culture-and-history/local-arts/
- The Crooked Road (Virginia): https://thecrookedroadva.com/
- Blue Ridge Craft Trails (North Carolina): www.blueridgeheritage.com/blue-ridge-craft-trails/

THE CROOKED ROAD

The Crooked Road is a 330-mile driving trail through the mountains of Southwest Virginia that connects nine major music venues and more than 60 affiliated venues and festivals that visitors can enjoy every day of the year.

2.5 STORYTELLING

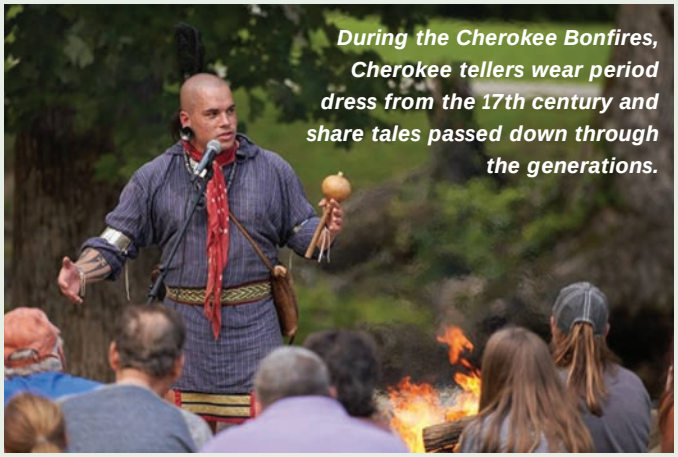
Promote, support, and fill gaps in storytelling about the region, such as Appalachian heritage, the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, Black history, and Blue Ridge mountain music. The Parkway and Parkway communities have a wealth of cultural history that many visitors are interested in learning about and exploring. Rich and immersive programming for children and adults helps the region come alive in a unique way, connects visitors more deeply to the Parkway and Parkway communities, and encourages longer stays in the region, as well as return visits. At the same time, many important stories remain untold or are inaccurately told.

12-MONTH GOAL:

Identify three to four storytelling priorities, such as geographic area, type of content, or groups to feature, and then develop content, programs, events, or platforms to promote and foster related storytelling within the region.

Examples for Storytelling:

- Sounds of the Mountains Story Festival (Virginia): www.soundsofthemountains.org/
- Cherokee Bonfire (North Carolina): https://visitcherokeenc.com/play/outdoor-adventure/bonfire/
- Blue Ridge Institute and Museum (Virginia): https://blueridgeinstitute.org/



During the Cherokee Bonfires, Cherokee tellers wear period dress from the 17th century and share tales passed down through the generations.

KEY STEPS:

- Identify existing groups, events, platforms, and programming that encourage and showcase storytelling in the region.
- Based on that inventory, determine needs, gaps, and opportunities in regional storytelling, by culture, region, topic, media platform, research needs, or other considerations.
- Establish three to four areas of focus (e.g., specific populations, geography, types of stories, audience experience) to prioritize for program development.
- Develop specific content, programs, events, training, grant programs, or other opportunities to address the focus areas.
- Promote and support storytelling and storytellers by highlighting storytelling in other action plan strategies, such as curated travel itineraries and the event calendar.

CHEROKEE BONFIRE STORYTELLING

Drawing from a rich oral tradition, the Cherokee Bonfires provide great opportunities to interact with the history of the Cherokee people and their stories.

2.6 SECOND TIER

VOLUNTEER SUPPORT

Support volunteer e□orts to maintain and improve trails and clean up trash along trails and roadways. Many of the trails on and near the Parkway receive a significant number of annual visitors and require regular maintenance to prevent trail erosion. Many trails and roads also collect damaging and unsightly litter. There are currently multiple volunteer groups that maintain the trails on the Parkway and in Parkway communities and do trash clean-up. A more regional and collaborative e□ort and/or dedicated funding could help focus the e□orts and better leverage the impact of volunteers.

OUTDOOR RECREATION PARTICIPATION

Encourage residents in the gateway communities to participate in local and regional outdoor recreation opportunities. First-hand experience with these recreational assets and programming enables local residents to promote these options with family, friends, and other potential visitors to the region. Active use of these resources also fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to the natural and recreation resources available along the Parkway and in the neighboring communities, while also supporting the health and well-being of the residents in Parkway communities. Promotions such as Year of the Trail or proclaiming a Blue Ridge Parkway Day in each community can help increase local residents' awareness, use, and appreciation of the Parkway and other regional resources.

ACCESSIBILITY INFRASTRUCTURE, PROGRAMS, AND SERVICES

Develop, improve, and promote infrastructure, facilities, equipment, trails, programs, and services along the Parkway and in the gateway communities that welcome and meet the needs of people with disabilities, including hearing, vision, mobility, and self-care di□culties. In the United States, 13% of people have a disability, and 26% of households have at least one person with a disability (American Community Survey data). Laws such as the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have encouraged or required many accessibility improvements. Universal design concepts provide more comprehensive opportunities to create and promote facilities and experiences that are welcoming to everyone. Through ABA, ADA, universal design, and inclusivity, businesses, agencies, and organizations can make the region more inviting, more welcoming, and more satisfying to a significant number of people and households, including visitors, workers, local residents, and their support networks.

ELECTRIC VEHICLE CHARGING NETWORK

Develop and promote an electric vehicle (EV) charging station network in the Blue Ridge Rising region to attract and serve visitors traveling on the Parkway and within the wider Parkway corridor. As the popularity of electric vehicles increases, more people will be seeking out routes, businesses, and communities with convenient charging stations, but “range anxiety” presents an obstacle to attracting these EV tourists and workers. Identifying and solving these gaps in charging services will help attract and serve this growing segment of the driving public. Hosting EV charging stations will also encourage spending at nearby businesses while vehicles are charging. In addition, electric vehicles can help preserve the long-term quality of the region’s natural resources.

2.7 ADDITIONAL CALLS TO ACTION

GEOREFERENCED MAPS

Support the development of interactive georeferenced PDF maps, such as Avenza, for trails in the Blue Ridge Rising region. Hikers and travelers often utilize georeferenced PDF maps to locate trails and plan trips. Having more maps and resources available in this format will help attract more visitors interested in outdoor recreation. Georeferenced maps are also easier to keep updated and distributed versus printed maps.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Support development and promotion of group and public transportation options to, from, and between the gateway communities and the Parkway, such as shuttles, group driving tours, or train services. Transportation services allow residents and visitors without a vehicle to travel between the Parkway and gateway communities and also reduce the number of vehicles on the roads and in congested parking areas.

MULTILINGUAL COMMUNICATIONS

Incorporate multilingual wayfinding signage, interpretive materials, and related information along the Parkway and in the gateway communities. A major goal of Blue Ridge Rising is to make the region more welcoming to all potential tourism audiences. Multilingual signage, materials, website content, and programming can help make the resources and opportunities on the Parkway and in Parkway communities more accessible and inviting to visitors and residents. Language considerations could include, but are not limited to American Sign Language and Cherokee.

REGIONAL WELCOME CENTER

Support development of a regional welcome center near Milepost 0 in Virginia in collaboration with regional agencies and nonprofit organizations. This unique location at the nexus of the Blue Ridge Parkway, Shenandoah National Park, the Appalachian Trail, and George Washington and Je□erson National Forests makes it an ideal location to build a visitor center that can serve the entire region, including nearby gateway communities. The multi-agency, multi-partner Moab Information Center in Utah provides an instructive example: https://www.discovermoab.com/visitor-center/. It's worth noting that this regional visitor center suggestion received votes from both Virginia and North Carolina participants.

Photo by Mike Duncan