



10. RURAL ECONOMIES

THE NEED of rural regions for help in harnessing their recreation assets for economic development.

Many of Tennessee’s rural counties are lagging behind the rest of the state economically. Most of the counties with the highest poverty rates or lowest median household incomes happen to lie within the regions that are the richest in natural and historic resources. These assets give them the potential for development and diversification of their local economies.

The last ten years have seen an increasing convergence, both nationally and in Tennessee, among the fields of conservation, tourism, and economic development. The conservation community, long focused narrowly on resource protection and environmental quality, is now embracing the concept that protected lands are also valuable economic assets, especially for the rural counties where these resources most often occur. The tourism sector is diversifying into nature-based and heritage-based tourism, a market niche that is growing rapidly. In the field of rural economic development, emphasis is shifting from building industrial parks and

new highways to “asset-based” development, which seeks to use a region’s natural and historic resources to attract visitors and new businesses. These evolutions are good for conservation because they give natural and historic resources greater value in the eyes of the business community, government officials, and local residents.

The nature and heritage visitor market has the advantage of being relatively resilient in the face of travel constraints such as economic downturns, epidemics, or terrorist concerns. Such constraints can severely depress long-distance travel while making closer-to-home trips by automobile more appealing.

This planning process has identified three strategies for rural economic development that show promise for their ability to help protect valuable resources while harnessing them as engines of economic growth. These are:

- State Heritage Areas,
- State Recreation Areas,
- State Scenic Byways.

State Heritage Areas

The heritage corridor concept, the most significant and far-reaching of these regional strategies, has already taken firm root in Tennessee. Five regions now have organized heritage area initiatives:

- **Tennessee Overhill**, 3 counties of southeast Tennessee
- **Blount County**
- **Cumberland Plateau**, 21 counties of the plateau region
- **Tennessee River Trails**, 9 counties bordering the Tennessee River/Kentucky Lake
- **Mississippi River**, 6 counties bordering the river

Four of these, Blount County, Tennessee Overhill, Cumberland Plateau, and Mississippi River, have completed feasibility studies to qualify them for eventual National Heritage Area designations.

These heritage areas are all grassroots efforts that have emerged from local commitments to protect the region's natural, historic, and cultural resources and to market them as economic development assets. This local focus has been the real strength of the movement, as it has encouraged a sense of enterprise and initiative on the part of the leadership.

Economic impact research involving several National Heritage Areas has found that every 25,000 visitors to such areas contributes \$2.5 million per year to the local economy.

TDEC has recognized that it can encourage and assist these initiatives by providing a formal designation accompanied by a set of uniform standards or guidelines. Formal designation as a State Heritage

Area can give the region a stronger position both in negotiating cooperative partnerships with government entities and in appealing to the visitor market. Standards can protect the “brand” of the Tennessee State Heritage Area designation by ensuring that all areas bearing it can satisfy visitor expectations. The new State Heritage Areas program is currently under development at TDEC, following the well-established model of the National Heritage Areas program. The department plans to introduce legislation to establish the program in 2010.

In the next ten years, it is anticipated that Tennessee's State Heritage Area movement will be seen increasingly as a proven strategy for regional cooperation, rural conservation and economic growth.

State Recreation Areas

The 2003 State Recreation Plan proposal to acquire high-priority conservation lands led to the creation of the Heritage Conservation Trust with dedicated funding of \$30 million from bond issues. Creative leveraging of these funds through various partnerships and agreements meant that much of the land acquired is owned jointly and managed by multiple entities. Such a situation does not make these lands candidates for becoming new State Parks, but that would not prevent their being enjoyed for dispersed, nature-based recreation.

At the time of these acquisitions, some concern was expressed in the affected counties that the lands were simply being “locked up”, making them off-limits for future economic development. The state's response was that the depressed economies of those counties would benefit from the increased visitation these outstanding parcels would attract.

Realizing the economic development potential of newly acquired conservation lands calls for a new mechanism to manage these lands for multiple-use outdoor recreation opportunities and to make the public aware of these opportunities. One solution would be for the state to adopt a new formal State Recreation Area designation for multiple-ownership lands.

The prime candidate for such a designation would be the large area acquired within the last five years in the North Cumberland Plateau. The Royal Blue and Sundquist Wildlife Management Areas and two other parcels, the Emory and Brimstone tracts, comprise a total of 127,000 acres, making them the largest land acquisition in Tennessee since the purchase of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Since these areas are some of the highest land in the east-central part of the state, they comprise the headwaters of many rivers, including the Sequatchie River, the Collins River, the New River, the Big South Fork of the Cumberland River (federally designated as a National River and Recreation area and an Outstanding National Resource Water), and the Obed River (designated as a National Wild and Scenic River.)

These properties were selected as high-value conservation lands for acquisition because of their globally significant biodiversity, which makes them especially well-suited to provide the kinds of public recreation that can only occur in large, pristine forests. While hunting now occurs on these lands under TWRA management, they are not currently managed for non-

game recreation such as hiking, camping, and wildlife observation. A State Recreation Area designation and joint management partnership would open these lands up to other kinds of recreation. As components of the regional Cumberland Plateau Heritage Corridor, these lands have the potential to become valuable assets for the local economy as well.

In addition to newly acquired properties, there are many other state-owned lands whose recreation potential is constrained by various factors. The Department of Agriculture owns 159,737 acres of State Forests, but managing these forests for recreation falls outside the department's mission. The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency manages a total of 475,372 acres in the state for hunting and fishing, but the agency's priorities do not include non-game recreation.

Off-highway vehicle use offers one example of how State Recreation Areas might provide more recreation opportunities while benefiting the local economies. A 2002 study estimated over 500,000 OHV owners in Tennessee. Judging from responses to this plan's online survey, many are frustrated by a lack of places to ride. Certain locations that have catered to this demand,



such as the Hatfield-McCoy Trail in West Virginia, have found that the OHV niche is a relatively upscale demographic that can have a significant impact on the local economy. While concerns have been raised about water quality and other impacts from OHV riding, standards are now well established for engineering trails to avoid such impacts.

Other recreation activities that might take place on these lands could include hiking, camping, wildlife observation, horseback riding, and mountain biking, assuming trails were developed.

The concept of a State Recreation Area designation is patterned after the model of the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area (BSF). The Park Service chose the National Recreation Area designation for this unit to allow a broader range of activities, including OHV use, than would be allowed in a National Park. At least 22 states also have State Recreation Areas, which provide outdoor recreation opportunities in locations that do not fit the definition of a state park.

As envisioned, the formal State Recreation Areas designation would be approved through a legislative act. Owing to the complexities of multiple management and ownership, each individual unit's framework, specific legal agreements and constraints would be negotiated and defined among the participating agencies at the administrative level. These collaborative agreements would reach across agency lines and might even extend to private and NGO landowners.

The option of allowing these areas to charge user fees needs is an important one that needs to be explored. If the owner of a large tract of forest could receive a revenue stream from allowing his property to be managed as a SRA, it could help keep the land economically viable as a working forest. In such a case, landowner liability could be an issue, one which might be addressed by a limited liability clause in the enabling legislation.

The public would benefit from having the SRAs provide a seamless approach to management where multiple parties are involved. While an SRA might

include compartments owned and managed by different agencies, it would be presented to the public as a single recreation area with different areas zoned for different types of uses. SRAs could then be marketed to state residents and out-of-state visitors for recreation use.

State Scenic Byways

Scenic byways have proven in many cases to be a very successful way to help rural economies realize the potential of their scenic, natural, historic, and cultural resources. They can encourage regional approaches to planning, provide incentives for managing growth, help communities better appreciate and preserve their valuable resources, attract visitors that contribute to local economic development, and qualify the region for public funding and private investment. Recognizing that byways and heritage areas share many of the same methods and goals, five of the most recent byway initiatives in Tennessee are implementation projects of the locally organized heritage areas described earlier in this chapter.

In the last four years, six corridors in Tennessee have applied for and received federal grants for byway corridor management plans, and two have been designated as National Scenic Byways, as noted below:

- **East Tennessee Crossing National Scenic Byway** (US 25E) and US 321 in East Tennessee,
- The **North Cumberland Plateau Byway** and the **Walton Road Byway** on the Cumberland Plateau,
- The **Tennessee River Trails Byway** in the counties bordering the Tennessee River/Kentucky Lake,
- The **Tennessee Great River Road National Scenic Byway** encompassing six counties that border the Mississippi River.

The Tennessee Department of Transportation could play a key role in supporting these and other locally organized byway initiatives, but unfortunately their State Scenic Highways/Tennessee Parkways program has been dormant for many years. The department is now planning to revitalize the State's byways program using a federal grant to develop a new State Scenic By-

ways Plan, with completion expected in 2011. Many of Tennessee's rural counties desperately need the kinds of benefits that an effective state byways program would provide. Accordingly, the department is encouraged to assign this plan a high priority. A critical principle that this plan must emphasize is that local grassroots control and initiative are essential for any byway to be sustainable and successful in the long run.

Conclusions

These three strategies show great promise for increasing recreation opportunities for Tennesseans. All are cost-effective as economic development strategies because they leverage existing natural, historic, and cultural resources to provide significant returns to the state. It is appropriate for this plan to encourage the State to pursue each of them.

2015 Action Plan

TDEC should complete development of program guidelines for the Tennessee State Heritage Areas program and introduce legislation to have the designation formally established.

TDEC, TWRA, the Department of Agriculture, and non-profit organizations should partner to develop a framework for a State Recreation Areas designation and seek legislation to establish the designation. The newly acquired North Cumberland Plateau lands of the Sundquist, Royal Blue, Emory River and Brimstone tracts should be designated as a State Recreation Area pilot project under this program.

TDOT should proceed immediately with development of a Tennessee State Scenic Byways Plan, with an emphasis on local control and initiative.

2020 Vision

Tennessee's rural regions will gain significant economic benefits from their rich heritage of natural, historic, and cultural, resources; will view them as valuable assets; and will take steps to preserve and protect them.

Coordination Links

Recreation One-Stop: This website can help heritage areas, State Recreation Areas, and scenic byways reach a wider visitor market, making them more effective as economic development strategies.

Quality Growth: The Quality Growth regional partnership model shares many of same the conservation and economic development perspectives.

Recreational Waters: Development of regional Blueways can turn neglected rivers into attractive destinations, adding to a region's portfolio of economically productive recreation assets.

