Tennessee Regions’ Roundtable Network

Though quiet, hilly Cheatham County sits just down the road from Nashville, its towns and residents might as well be a world away. Rich in scenic beauty and blessed with numerous natural and cultural resources, the county has maintained its essentially rural character to this day, and boasts a relatively small population of about 40,000 people.

Due to its geographic isolation, rural setting, small population, and lack of large employers, Cheatham County faces unique economic challenges. The county has the highest external commuting rate in the state of Tennessee, at 82.5%, with only 3,300 of the approximately 21,000 skilled workers in Cheatham County employed within the county.

The county’s low daytime population puts economic stress on businesses and restaurants: Cheatham County has the highest retail leakage rate of any county in Tennessee, with a current rate of 68%.

With so many workers and so much consumer spending headed elsewhere, community leaders recognized the need for ways to bring revenue into the county. Seeking to generate more economic development opportunities, local business leaders funded and launched Cheatham Vision in 2010 with the intent to improve Cheatham County’s economy and overall quality-of-life. Later that year, Cheatham Vision released Open for Business, a three-year economic, business, and workforce development strategy.

One of the specific strategies outlined in the plan was to identify, develop, and market Cheatham County’s outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational assets. By developing the county’s tourism industry and targeting specific new businesses, the community hoped to create local jobs and new business development opportunities. In addition, new tourist spending would boost revenues at local businesses such as restaurants, service stations, shops, and lodging. Increased sales taxes would help schools and public services while reducing the need for property tax increases.

In early 2012, the Cheatham County Chamber of Commerce formed a partnership with Cumberland Region Tomorrow (CRT) and with their assistance secured a Rural Business Enterprise Grant through the Tennessee Rural Development Program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The RBEG grant provided funding to inventory, access, and document all existing and potential tourism and recreation resources in Cheatham County and to develop a Sustainable Tourism Plan.

The development of the Cheatham County Sustainable Tourism Plan was broken down into five main tasks:

- **Task One:** Inventory, document, and assess the natural, cultural, and recreational resources in Cheatham County to develop a sustainable tourism plan.
- **Task Two:** Determine realistic economic enhancement strategies based on existing and potential attractions.
Task Three: Identify specific businesses to be targeted to provide for additional tourist and recreational use of the county’s resources, and develop detailed demographic and usage data to enable local business leaders to recruit such businesses and generate new jobs.

Task Four: Identify economic development incentives from local, regional, state, and federal sources that can help existing and new businesses that will be targeted through Task Three.

Task Five: Generate a written sustainable tourism plan for economic and community development implementation. Provide businesses and other organizations with marketing and outreach materials, photography, graphic icons, and links for tourism cluster promotion.

CRT was contracted to provide consulting services to complete needed resource assessment, technical analysis, perform gap business and incentive analysis, coordinate community engagement, and generate the final deliverable: the Sustainable Tourism Strategy. In addition, CRT agreed to coordinate with state-level Rural Economic Development partner agencies including the Tennessee Departments of Agriculture, Tourist Development, Wildlife Resources, and Economic and Community Development to ensure that Cheatham County objectives aligned with state objectives and incentives to ensure successful implementation.

Led by the Chamber of Commerce, CRT worked with Pawpaw Partners, a Nashville-based natural and cultural resource planning firm, and other business leaders to look at each of the county’s four incorporated communities and determine recommendations for place-specific marketing strategies. Ashland City would be promoted as a recreational center, Kingston Springs for its historic character, and Pleasant View for its agricultural heritage.

Pegram, just west of the Bellvue section of Nashville, would be marketed as a center for local crafts and music.

The Cheatham County Sustainable Tourism Plan will be completed in the winter of 2013. In addition to business recruitment, the plan will provide the Chamber and Economic Development leaders with new marketing tools for the Vision Cheatham Tourism Cluster, along with new watchable wildlife and motorcycle tours, enhanced ecotourism, and a new arts initiative. Possibilities also include the county’s first high-end hotel, incubator spaces for artists, outdoor outfitters, and agritourism resources. Thousands of new visitors will soon discover this quiet county on Nashville’s urban edge and support local economic and community development objectives thanks to innovative planning and marketing strategies completed through this first-ever Tennessee project.

“This is a true rural economic development project aimed at improving the Cheatham County economy by developing and enhancing a tourism and recreation industry based on its unique natural, cultural, and recreational resources.”

Gary Scott, Cheatham Business Leader