



SMITH OEDC IMPACT REPORT 5 YEARS OF THE COLLABORATIVE AND 2024 REVIEW



Table of Contents

- 2** Purpose/Vision/Mission
- 3** Letter from Leadership
- 5** Special Thanks
- 6** OEDC Timeline
- 7** Five Years of Outdoor Economy, Community & Infrastructure
- 8** Infrastructure Development & Projects
- 14** Trail Training & Education
- 16** Grants & Research
- 17** Outdoor Non-Profit Hub
- 18** Outdoor Business Development
- 19** Talent Attraction & Retention
- 28** Youth Initiatives
- 32** Meet the Team
- 33** Acknowledgment of Partners & Collaborators





PURPOSE

Address population loss

VISION

A West Virginia where all of our communities are vibrant and thriving

MISSION

Empower West Virginia's communities and partners to advance the state's economy and enhance quality of life through outdoor recreation

**WHAT AN
INCREDIBLE
FIVE YEARS
IT HAS BEEN.
TIME TRULY
DOES FLY
WHEN YOU
ARE HAVING
FUN—AND
MAKING
AN IMPACT.**

When this office began in January 2020, we all understood the need and saw the opportunity. Still, none of us could have predicted the level of support we would receive or the magnitude of what this team would accomplish in such a short time.

What began as an idea sketched on easel pad paper—taped to the walls of a Snowshoe hotel room during West Virginia’s first UCI World Cup event—has grown into a purpose-driven team who is humble, hungry, honest, smart and fully committed to turning West Virginia’s potential into tangible progress. Fueled by their fervor, this team has built partnerships and collaborations with national agencies and organizations, state offices, local communities, nonprofits and networks across the WVU ecosystem.

Through these collaborations, the vision we shared has taken shape through meaningful, impactful programs—initiatives that are tackling the state’s most pressing needs, empowering communities to realize their dreams and elevating the incredible assets that make West Virginia the premier place to live, work, play, study, and build a business.

Over the past five years, the Talent Attraction & Retention Team—through Ascend West Virginia, First Ascent, and its support of Teachers Ascend and Vantage Ventures—has shown the nation what we as Mountaineers already know: that West Virginia’s community spirit, sense of purpose and unmatched outdoor experiences are strategic advantages that are hard to imitate in today’s world.

Our Outdoor Economy, Community and Recreation Infrastructure Development Team has taken a truly statewide approach, working to support and empower all 55 counties. From providing over 5,500 hours of technical assistance for trail and recreation projects, to launching the Trail Training & Education Resource Center, to laying the groundwork for the West Virginia Outdoor Business Alliance and Outdoor Nonprofit Hub—this team is building the foundation for long-term, outdoor-driven economic development focused on enhancing the quality of life for all West Virginians.



Meanwhile, the Youth Initiatives Team—through Science Behind the Sport, Science Adventure School, and Youth Cycling Programs—is introducing the next generation of West Virginians to the wonders of their home state. By combining adventure activities with positive youth development, environmental and STEM education, this team has reached youth in 14 counties and forged lasting partnerships with schools, nonprofits and educational groups throughout the state and beyond.

This report offers a look back at our first five years and a deeper dive into 2024. As you read, remember that none of this would be possible without our dedicated team, the willing collaboration of our partners, Brad and Alys Smith, and the leadership of our state’s flagship institution—West Virginia University.

Each day, we strive to fulfill WVU’s land-grant mission by delivering programs that promote education, health, prosperity and purpose.

Let’s go,

DANNY TWILLEY, PHD



Assistant Vice President
Community and
Economic Development

A SPECIAL THANKS TO BRAD AND ALYS SMITH AND PRESIDENT GORDON GEE.



BORN AND RAISED IN KENOVA, WEST VIRGINIA,

Brad D. Smith left the state to pursue his professional aspirations—but quickly realized that the roots he had in West Virginia were his greatest strength. While his career took him to the top as Executive Chairman of Intuit, his heart never left the Mountain State.

Together with his wife Alys, Brad recognized that West Virginia's quality of life, close-knit communities, and rich outdoor recreation opportunities weren't just special—they were powerful tools to attract and retain talent. That belief gave rise to the Wing 2 Wing Foundation and launched a shared mission to give back to the state they love.

Now, as President and First Lady of Marshall University, Brad and Alys continue their legacy of leadership, service, and statewide impact. The progress and momentum you will read about in this report would not be possible without their vision, trust, and unwavering support through the Wing 2 Wing Foundation.



PRESIDENT E. GORDON GEE HAS SERVED

as President of West Virginia University across two impactful tenures, most recently since 2014. Widely regarded as one of the nation's leading voices on the role of land-grant institutions, President Gee has championed a bold vision—one that places prosperity, education, health and purpose at the heart of WVU's mission to serve the people of West Virginia.

Under his leadership, the University has not only embraced but operationalized its land-grant mission, applying its intellectual and social capital to some of the state's most pressing challenges. Recognizing the power of West Virginia's natural assets, President Gee was instrumental in the creation of the Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative—a forward-thinking initiative that leverages the outdoors to improve quality of life, attract and retain talent, and drive economic growth across the Mountain State.

The entire Smith OEDC team extends our deepest appreciation to President Gee for his unwavering support, visionary leadership and enduring commitment to West Virginia University and the communities we serve.

5 YEARS OF THE OEDC

SPRING

- / In partnership with W2W Foundation, State of WV Dept of Tourism, and WVU launched Ascend WV with the announcement of three locations Morgantown Area, Greenbrier Valley, and Eastern Panhandle.

2021

SUMMER

- / Launch of First Ascent to retain our talented students and fill jobs in WV
- / Launch of Ascend WV New River Gorge
- / Ascend Greenbrier Valley opens its coworking space to local community members and nonprofit groups for free coworking, meeting space, and networking events

FALL

- / ARC POWER Planning Grant to develop the strategy for a Community-driven Outdoor Economy Initiative

2023

2020

WINTER

- / WVU Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative was formed

FALL

- / Announced the 4th largest gift in WVU's history from Brad and Alys Smith's Wing 2 Wing Foundation. Renaming it to the Brad and Alys Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative.
- / Formed a strategic partnership with the state of WV to launch the remote worker program.

2022

SUMMER

- / Launched Ascend WV Eastern Panhandle
- / EDA Funding for Cacapon State Park to support 30+ miles of new destination worthy multi-use and mountain bike optimized trails
- / EDA Funding for Mylan Action Sports Complex and Bike Park in partnership with Mylan Park Foundation
- / Opening of our demonstration trail and learning laboratory at West Run Woods

FALL

- / Launch of Ascend WV Greater Elkins
- / EDA Build Back Better Regional Challenge Grant Award and Partnership

2024

SPRING

- / Ascend Morgantown Area opens its local coworking space to local community members and non-profit groups for free coworking, meeting space, and networking events through formalized Friends of Ascend Program
- / Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation Grant to support further investment in the development of local outdoor organizational and community capacity

SUMMER

- / Launch of Trails Training and Education Resource Center to educate and train local stewards and land managers to protect the future of trails in West Virginia
- / Partner with WVPEC and WVDE to launch pilot Teachers Ascend program in Monongalia and Preston Counties
- / DOT Thriving Communities Program Grant in collaboration with the Fayette-Raleigh MPO to support developing 11 outdoor economic development projects across 18 counties in WV

FALL

- / \$1.7M ARC POWER Implementation Grant, C.O.R.E. Initiative to support Trail, Nonprofit, and Outdoor Business Development across the state
- / Ascend WV announces Homeownership Incentive to encourage long-term retention of program members
- / Ascend WV partners with WVU's Vantage Ventures to provide community programming and coworking space to WV startups in VV Boost Startup Accelerator Program

5 YEARS OF OUTDOOR ECONOMY, COMMUNITY & INFRASTRUCTURE

Since its inception, the Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative has believed in one simple, transformative truth: West Virginia's rivers, ridgelines, and recreation assets aren't just beautiful—they're powerful drivers of economic development, attraction of talent, public health, and community pride. Over the past five years, the Collaborative's Outdoor Economy, Community & Infrastructure (OEI) Team has worked to turn that belief into statewide momentum.

FORMED IN 2020, the Smith OEDC emerged from a vision to leverage the state's outdoor potential through intentional partnerships and smart investments. That vision quickly evolved into hands-on work—grant writing, trail development, volunteer coordination, strategic planning, coalition-building, and community coaching—delivered in lockstep with local leaders and grassroots champions across all 55 counties.

From opening West Virginia University's demonstration trail system at West Run Woods to helping partners secure millions in infrastructure investments, the OEI team has laid down literal and figurative groundwork to grow West Virginia's outdoor economy. The work spans hundreds of trail miles—from the Mountaineer Gravel network to shared-use singletrack in the New River Gorge—and includes support for community-led



revitalization through the U.S. Dept of Transportation's "Thriving Communities Program", capacity-building resources for outdoor nonprofits, and the launch of the Trail Training & Education Resource Center.

It's not just about building trails—it's about building capacity to support the future growth of the outdoor economy. Through strategic support for planning, compliance, workforce development, and nonprofit resilience, the Smith OEDC is equipping communities with the tools to make outdoor infrastructure a long-term asset, not just a one-time investment.

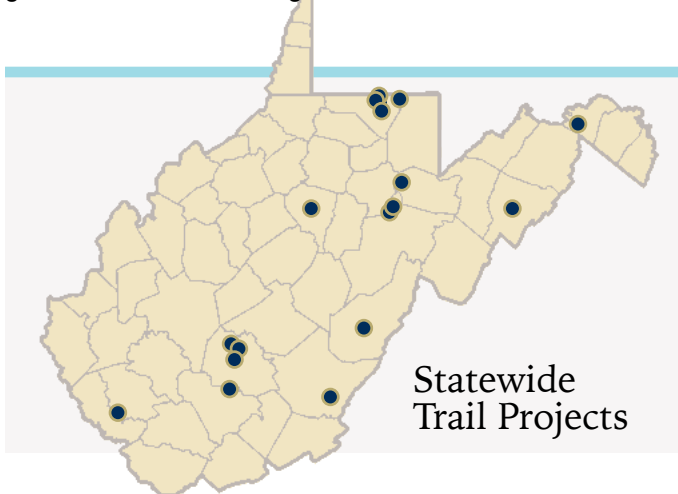
As you'll see in the pages ahead, the OEI team's work is setting a new standard for what's possible when place-based investment, community vision, and strategic collaboration align.

INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT & PROJECTS

From the Ground Up: Building an Outdoor Future

THE SMITH OUTDOOR ECONOMIC Development Collaborative's Outdoor Economy, Community, and Recreation Infrastructure Development Team works across West Virginia to elevate outdoor access as a driver of economic growth, wellness, and community pride.

In 2024, the team provided hands-on support and technical expertise to over two dozen trail and infrastructure projects. This included everything from grant writing and concept planning to boots-on-the-ground assistance during construction.



120+
*miles of trails planned
by project partners*

86+
miles designed

31+
miles built

5,500+
*hours of technical assis-
tance and volunteer co-
ordination*

7+
*major regions supported
through trail system
development*

PROJECT SNAPSHOTS

Each project supported by the Smith OEDC team reflects a unique collaboration, community vision, and commitment to quality.

NEW RIVER GORGE

Smith OEDC led the design process, contractor selection, and quality assurance for the construction of more than 6 miles of new shared-use and bike-optimized trail in Needleseye Park, Oak Hill. The team supported trailhead design, National Environmental Policy Act compliance, and stormwater permitting, and helped expedite the creation of the state's only paved pump track, now located in Fayetteville.

The team also prepared construction documents and RFPs for a new skills trail at Fayetteville Town Park and led the trail design for the WV Land Trust's Piney Creek Preserve in Beckley—continuing to strengthen access and expand the region's nationally recognized outdoor recreation infrastructure.

CACAPON RESORT STATE PARK

The Smith OEDC played a key advisory role in developing a cost-saving, phased trail development strategy for Cacapon Resort State Park, a \$3.5 million project in the Eastern Panhandle. The team provided technical assistance throughout the design process, led kickoff meetings, and supported construction phases with on-the-ground training for Department of Natural Resources staff.

In total, The Smith OEDC provided technical support for 5 miles of completed trail and 30 miles in design for this \$3.5 million project.



PROJECT SNAPSHOTS

GREENBRIER VALLEY

In support of partners in White Sulphur Springs and Greenbrier State Forest, the team helped secure a \$2.6M Congressionally Directed Spending grant, completed a regional trail plan, and achieved approval from the WV Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife, and Division of Forestry for 20+ miles of trail.

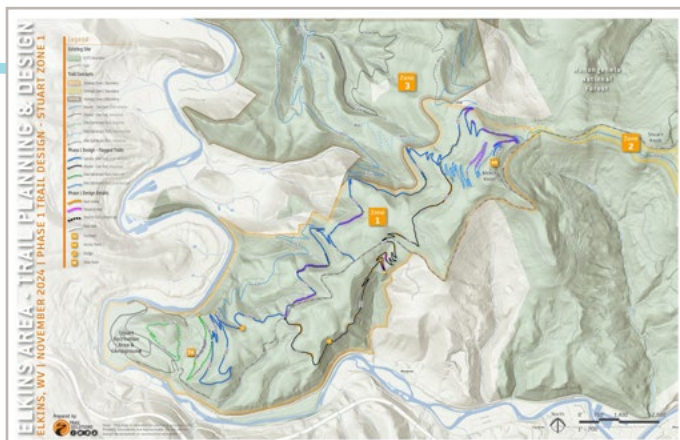
The White Sulphur Springs 'Bike Hatchery' is now under development, West Virginia's first paved bike park that honors the historic use of the land in Greenbrier Valley.



ELKINS AREA SHARED TRAILS, MONONGAHELA NATIONAL FOREST

With support from Smith OEDC, the Elkins Area Shared Trails (EAST) group secured an IMBA Trail Accelerator Grant to plan and design what will become the largest purpose-built trail system in Monongahela National Forest history. The team helped fund, coordinate, and manage a collaborative effort that includes:

- / 100+ miles of trail planning
- / 15 miles of detailed trail design
- / Stakeholder coordination with IMBA Trail Solutions, Mon National Forest, and local nonprofits



MOUNTAINEER GRAVEL, NORTH CENTRAL WEST VIRGINIA

Smith OEDC supported the development of Mountaineer Gravel, a growing network of 25+ gravel cycling routes ranging from 5 to 75 miles across Monongalia, Preston, and Taylor counties. Working alongside Visit Mountaineer Country CVB, the team provided strategic guidance to help identify and organize routes, promote accessibility, and establish the region as a gravel riding destination.

From rail trails to rugged climbs, Mountaineer Gravel showcases the diverse riding experiences of North Central West Virginia.



TRAIL INNOVATION AT WVU: THE WEST RUN SYSTEM

THE WEST RUN TRAILS ARE becoming a nationally recognized model for shared-use trail design. What started as a 3-mile demonstration site has grown into 15+ miles of progressive trail experiences with future plans to add black diamond and skill-specific zones.

The site blends campus connectivity, student engagement, and community recreation into one vision.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2024:

- / 2,059 volunteer hours from WVU students and local residents
- / \$300,000 Recreation Trails Program grant awarded to continue trail system improvements
- / New gravity flow trail (518) and blue-rated jump line upgrade
- / Professional skill features installed at trailhead
- / Design phase begun for advanced and technical trail zones



Δ Trailhead kiosk and student volunteers in action



THRIVING COMMUNITIES: REVITALIZATION THROUGH RECREATION



IN 2024, the Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative & Partners proudly launched the Thriving Communities Program (TCP), a transformative initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Transportation to support community-driven trail and transportation projects across West Virginia. In partnership with the Fayette-Raleigh Metropolitan Planning Organization, Regional Planning and Development Councils for Regions I, IV, and VII, and the Mon Forest Towns Partnership, this program aims to build long-term capacity in under-resourced, coal-impacted communities by advancing outdoor recreation infrastructure as a driver of economic

revitalization and quality of life. Eleven projects—ranging from Richwood and Elkins to Clear Fork and Glenville—were selected across an 18-county region for their potential to grow through trail-based tourism and connectivity.

THE SMITH OEDC & PARTNERS PROVIDES:

- / On-the-ground technical support
- / Strategic planning and community workshops
- / Webinars and trainings
- / Partnership development
- / Shovel-ready project preparation

ONE GOAL: THRIVING THROUGH TRAILS.



- Camp Creek Trail – Mercer County
- Clear Fork Trail – Raleigh County
- Cranberry Tri-Rivers Rail Trail – Nicholas & Webster County
- Davis-Thomas Connector Trail – Tucker County
- Elkins Area Share Trails Connectivity Plan – Randolph County
- Fayetteville Greenway – Fayette County
- Glenville Riverfront Park – Gilmer County
- Great Eastern Trail – Summers County
- Summersville Sports Complex – Nicholas County
- White Sulphur Springs Connectivity Plan – Greenbrier County



WHAT'S NEXT: 2025 AND BEYOND

The momentum continues. In 2025, Smith OEDC plans to:

- / Continue improvements at the West Run Trails and adopt Bakers Ridge at the WVU Woodlot as a connected trail system
- / Advance all 11 TCP community projects toward funding readiness
- / Support 30+ miles of new trail development across the state
- / Advise on gravel route expansion in Charleston, Mon Forest Towns, and New River Gorge
- / Provide compliance and fundraising support for large-scale projects at Greenbrier State Forest and Monongahela National Forest
- / Assist partners in envisioning the next impactful outdoor infrastructure projects across the state

TRAIL TRAINING & EDUCATION

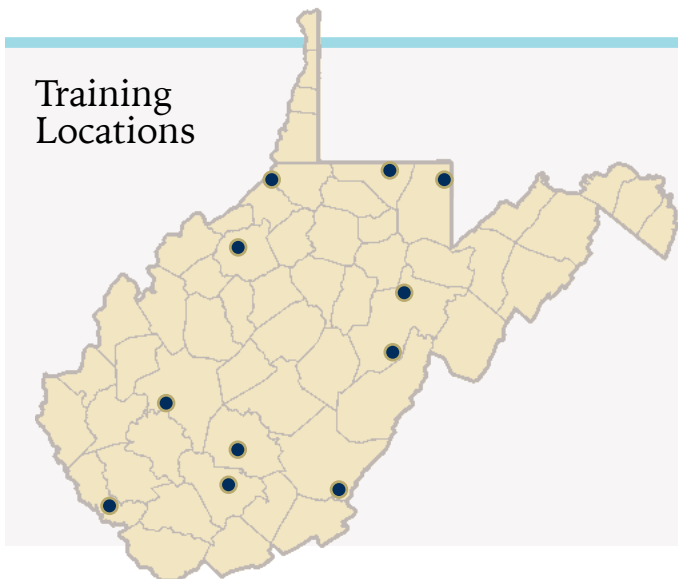
Equipping West Virginians to build and sustain our state's outdoor future.

TO GROW A SUSTAINABLE OUTDOOR ECONOMY, West Virginia needs a workforce equipped with the skills to build, maintain and expand the state's trail systems. The Smith OEDC's Trail Training & Education Resource Center is at the heart of this effort—mobilizing communities, nonprofits, and public land managers to steward and improve their local trail networks.

In 2024, the Center soft-launched its hands-on trail education initiative, offering three Intro to Trail Building workshops in Elkins, Morgantown and at Stonewall Resort State Park. These trainings introduced fundamental trail construction and maintenance techniques, empowering 36 participants to contribute 108 hours of direct trail improvement collectively.

This hands-on training effort is complemented by a formal academic pathway through West Virginia University's Davis College of Agriculture and Natural Resources. The Sustainable Trails Development Graduate Certificate is a six-course, 18-credit program that blends theory with practical skills. Courses cover topics like GIS, community development, trail design and activation, with students concluding the program through a practicum experience.

Training Locations



3
Intro to Trail Building Classes

36
West Virginians

108
Volunteer hours

18
Credit Sustainable Trails Graduate Certificate developed

OEDC Impact to Sustainable Trails Development Graduate Certificate Since 2021

83
Students Enrolled

249
Student Credit Hours Generated



LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

IN 2025, the Trail Training & Education Resource Center will expand its offerings significantly. Plans include ten additional Intro to Trail Building workshops and the introduction of specialized courses in rock armoring, rigging, trail assessment, maintenance and sawyer safety. A growing network of partners—including WVDNR, The Nature Conservancy, Fayette Trails Coalition, Greenbrier Valley Off-Road Biking Association and more—will help bring these trainings to communities across the state.

A full advanced course catalog is also in development, with phased rollout beginning in 2025 and continuing into 2026. The Center remains focused on meeting the evolving needs of West Virginia's trail stewards and outdoor workforce.

GRANTS & RESEARCH

Fueling West Virginia's Outdoor Economy Through Strategic Investment

GRANTS ARE MORE THAN FUNDING STREAMS— they're catalysts for community transformation. The Smith OEDC approaches grants and research as tools to scale ideas, accelerate place-based impact and build the infrastructure needed to grow West Virginia's outdoor economy.

In 2024, grant funding from state, federal and philanthropic partners helped expand programs and deepen impact across the state.

Additional grant-supported highlights included

- / Restoration of community buildings in Martinsburg and Fayetteville as Basecamp hubs for the Ascend WV program
- / Technical assistance grants for 11 outdoor infrastructure projects statewide
- / Partnership with Vantage Ventures, a business start-up accelerator program at West Virginia University, to support outdoor innovation and entrepreneurship in the Morgantown area
- / Expansion of internal capacity with new roles focused on trail education, business support, community development and grants management

KNOWLEDGE IS A CORNERSTONE OF TRANSFORMATION. Through peer-reviewed publications, technical reports, and invited presentations, Smith OEDC research translates local lessons into resources that strengthen communities across the Mountain State and beyond.

Smith OEDC Research Highlights

- / 7 peer reviewed journal articles published
- / 4 co-authored technical reports
- / 2 book chapters written
- / 70+ invited presentations and panels

IN THE FIRST 5 YEARS...

\$70.2M
in total funding initiated

\$48.4M
in funding secured

\$11.8M
in match funding generated

In 2024 Alone

- / \$7.06 million in new grant awards.
- / Funding secured from:
 - U.S. Department of Transportation
 - Appalachian Regional Commission (POWER)
 - WV Water Development Authority
 - Richard King Mellon Foundation
 - WV Department of Highways – Recreational Trails Program
 - Benedum Foundation
 - U.S. Economic Development Administration
- / \$9.5 million in pending applications (as of year-end)

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

THE SMITH OEDC will continue building its grants and research capacity through:

- / Development of grant-focused webinars, workshops and a statewide resource library
- / Ongoing support for community organizations pursuing outdoor recreation and infrastructure funding
- / Collaboration with WV Grant Centers to align outdoor-specific projects with funding opportunities
- / Strategic pursuit of additional investment to expand Smith OEDC's ability to serve West Virginia's growing outdoor economy

OUTDOOR NON-PROFIT HUB

Strengthening the Backbone of West Virginia’s Outdoor Economy.

THE SMITH OEDC’S Outdoor Non-Profit Hub is committed to standing up and supporting the local organizations that drive outdoor recreation opportunities across West Virginia. Through strategic training, resources and guidance, the Hub empowers outdoor-focused nonprofits to expand their capacity, maximize their impact and contribute meaningfully to the growing outdoor economy.

In 2024, the Hub delivered critical capacity-building services including the launch of an Outdoor Non-Profit Resource Library, virtual trainings, strategic planning assistance, community coaching, volunteer management support and funding guidance. These services ensure that nonprofits have the tools they need to thrive as West Virginia’s outdoor economy continues to expand.

Outdoor Non-Profit Hub Services Menu



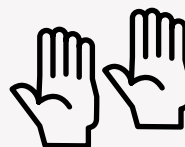
Resource Library



Virtual Training & Workshops



Strategic Planning Support



Volunteer Management Tools



Funding and Grant Guidance

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

BY EQUIPPING OUTDOOR NONPROFITS with the right expertise and resources, the Smith OEDC is laying the foundation for a thriving, resilient outdoor sector. As more organizations strengthen their leadership and operations, communities across West Virginia will be better positioned to deliver recreation opportunities that benefit residents, attract visitors and protect natural assets.

Through continued collaboration with nonprofits, professional partners, elected leaders, and community members, we are building a sustainable future in which outdoor recreation drives economic growth and environmental stewardship.

OUTDOOR BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Catalyzing Growth in West Virginia's Outdoor Industry

IN 2024, THE SMITH OEDC launched its effort to build an Outdoor Business Alliance—a statewide initiative designed to accelerate the growth of West Virginia's outdoor economy by equipping businesses and the ecosystems that support them with data, capacity and strategic resources.

This emerging program will provide:

- / Workshops and trainings tailored specifically for outdoor-focused businesses
- / Networking and collaboration events to connect businesses to resources, local partners, nonprofits, funders and public agencies.
- / Technical assistance to support outdoor business formation and growth
- / Capacity and resources to build the West Virginia Outdoor Business Alliance

In partnership with the WVU Regional Research Institute, the Smith OEDC is also laying the groundwork for a biennial Outdoor Business Census to better understand the needs and impact of the sector. Additional research efforts include a first-of-its-kind West Virginia Outdoor Economic Impact Report that will quantify outdoor recreation's contribution at a more local level, and the development of the state's first outdoor business database to track engagement, trends and success stories.

This work marks a foundational step in building a more connected, supported and visible outdoor business community across the Mountain State.



5 YEARS OF TALENT ATTRACTION & RETENTION

Over the past five years, the Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative's Talent Attraction & Retention (TAR) team has worked to answer one essential question: What does it take not just to bring people to West Virginia, but to help them stay, engage, and thrive?

WHILE MANY COMMUNITIES ACROSS the country have initiated remote worker relocation incentives, the Smith OEDC has taken a distinctly West Virginian approach—grounded in community, guided by purpose, and powered by the outdoors. From the flagship Ascend WV program to new initiatives like First Ascent, Teachers Ascend, and Friends of Ascend, the TAR team has built a nationally recognized portfolio that goes far beyond relocation. These programs don't just attract talent—they build belonging.

What began with a vision to attract remote workers has grown into a movement to retain mission-driven professionals, support young graduates, and strengthen the workforce across sectors. Whether helping entrepreneurs find startup support, connecting early-career teachers to local mentors, or creating coworking hubs that double as community anchors, TAR's work demonstrates how lifestyle, career, and community integration can come together to create lasting impact.

This approach is already bearing fruit. Newcomers are launching businesses, joining town boards, and investing in their communities. Students are choosing to stay in-state after graduation. Employers are gaining access to passionate, place-based talent. And across the board, people are discovering that West Virginia is not only a beautiful place to live, work, and play—it's a place to build a life.

The following pages showcase how the TAR team is turning talent attraction into long-term retention, while redefining what it means to grow a people-powered economy in the Mountain State.



ASCEND WEST VIRGINIA: 2021-2024 OVERVIEW



NOW OPERATING IN FIVE REGIONS across the state, Ascend West Virginia continues to attract individuals and families who are looking for more than a change of scenery—they're looking for meaning, connection and room to grow. The program offers remote workers and entrepreneurs a unique blend of relocation incentives, outdoor recreation access, coworking space amenities, and community-building programming.

58,000+
applications received

428
*members have relocated
or are in the process*

809
*total individuals moved (including
spouses and dependents)*

96%
*Retention in the state after 2
years*

52
*completed the program and are
now Alumni in the growing
Ascend network*

46/7
*Participants from 46 states
and 7 countries*

1,200+
*programs focused on the pillars
of Community, Purpose, and Out-
doors.*

*Applications remain open on a
rolling basis in all five regions.*

ASCEND COMMUNITY HIGHLIGHTS: MORGANTOWN AREA

CENTERED IN MORGANTOWN, the Ascend Morgantown Area is making an impact in Monongalia, Preston, Marion, Taylor and Harrison counties. Program members have gotten involved in many ways, including volunteering with Libera WV and the Friends of Deckers Creek, joining local non-profits and boards, starting businesses and coaching youth lacrosse.



MEMBER STATS

OVER 22,000
Applications received

150
Ascend Members

322
New WV residents including household members

36
Ascend Alumni

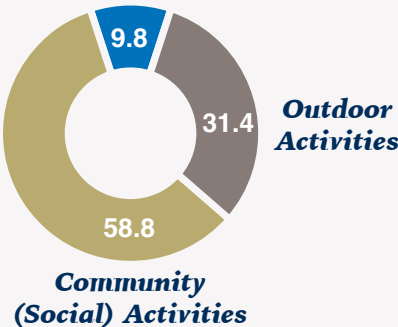
17%
WV Born

35%
Purchased Homes



PROGRAMMING

*Purpose
(Volunteerism)
Activities*



“There is a wonderful embrace of art here in Morgantown. The local arts scene has been so welcoming, and the natural beauty here inspires me to continue creating. I feel like I have more financial freedom to take breaks and explore new career journeys because it’s so affordable to live here.”

— Emma Crow-Willard



ASCEND COMMUNITY HIGHLIGHTS: GREENBRIER VALLEY

CENTERED IN LEWISBURG, Ascend Greenbrier Valley is making an impact in Greenbrier, Monroe, Summers and Pocahontas counties. Program members have gotten involved in many ways, including volunteering with Habitat for Humanity and the Humane Society, joining local boards and non-profits, and creating the Greenbrier Valley Off Road Biking Association.



MEMBER STATS

OVER 14,000
Applications received

74
Ascend Members

127
New WV residents including household members

16
Ascend Alumni

5%
WV Born

30%
Purchased Homes

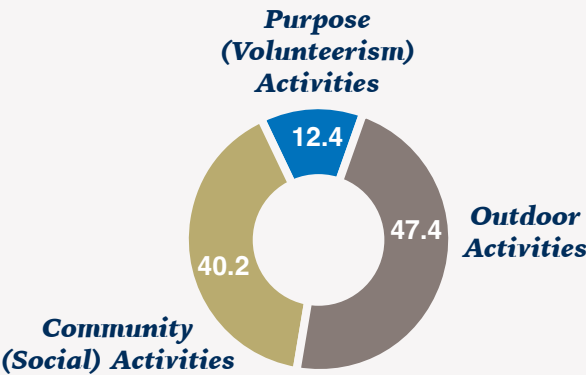


“Moving to the Greenbrier Valley has been one of the best decisions for our family. The people are warm and generous, the pace of life is manageable, and the natural beauty is unmatched. Ascend and the local community have been incredibly welcoming.”

— Morgan Croft Schornak



PROGRAMMING



ASCEND COMMUNITY HIGHLIGHTS: EASTERN PANHANDLE

CENTERED IN MARTINSBURG, Ascend Eastern Panhandle is making an impact in Morgan, Berkeley, and Jefferson counties. Program members have gotten involved in many ways including volunteering with the City of Martinsburg and the Tuscarora Trail, joining local boards and non-profits, and providing concerts at Shepherd University and The Barn in Harpers Ferry.



MEMBER STATS

OVER 14,000
Applications received

110
Ascend Members

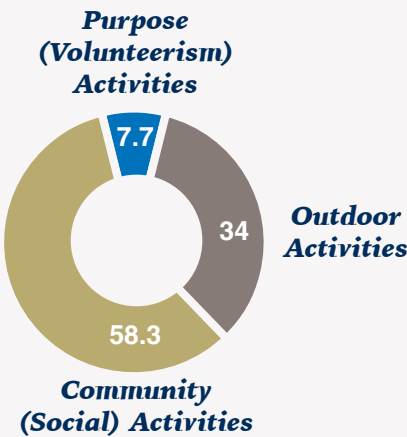
200
New WV residents including household members

6%
WV Born

48%
Purchased Homes



PROGRAMMING



“I grew up in the Eastern Panhandle and returned through the Ascend program. Since moving back, I’ve been involved in the community and was recently voted onto the Charles Town Parks and Rec Board. I’m excited to be part of the decision-making body that manages outdoor activities in our town and to help shape the future of recreation here.”

— Alden Roth



ASCEND COMMUNITY HIGHLIGHTS: GREATER ELKINS

CENTERED IN ELKINS, Ascend Greater Elkins is making an impact on Randolph, Barbour, Tucker, and Upshur counties. Program members have gotten involved in many ways including volunteering with Toys for Tots and the Randolph County Humane Society, joining local boards and non-profits, starting new businesses and teaching adjunct courses at Davis & Elkins College.



MEMBER STATS

OVER 9,500
Applications received

44
Ascend Members

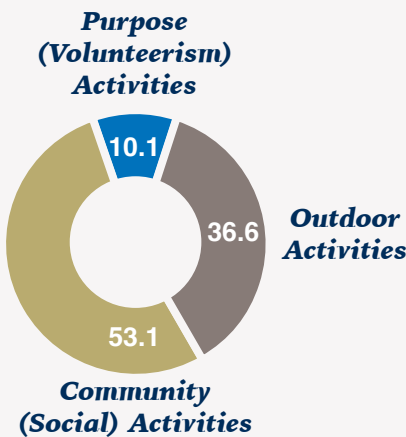
77
New WV residents including household members

11%
WV Born

33%
Purchased Homes



PROGRAMMING



“When I moved to Elkins, I was a remote worker with a desire to connect more deeply to a community. Once in WV, I met another Ascend member whose professional background and interests aligned with mine. Together, we launched a new business: KX Strategies. In our first year, we built something from the ground up, and now we’re focused on growth and hiring local talent right here in Elkins.”

— Leon Kaye



ASCEND COMMUNITY HIGHLIGHTS: NEW RIVER GORGE

CENTERED IN FAYETTEVILLE, Ascend New River Gorge is making an impact on Fayette, Raleigh, Nicholas, and Kanawha counties. Program members have gotten involved in many ways including volunteering with Active SWV and the Fayette County Trail Coalition, joining local boards and non-profits, and cleaning up after storm damage at Babcock State Park.



MEMBER STATS

OVER 6,200
Applications received

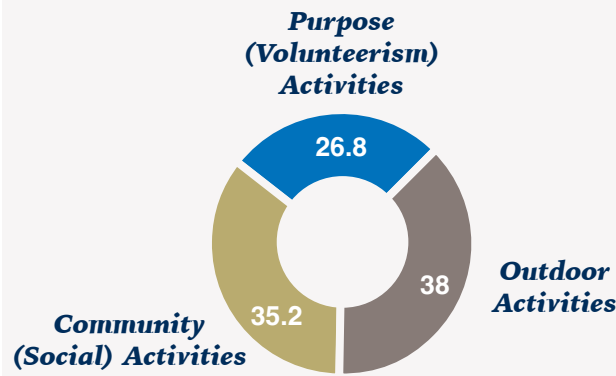
51
Ascend Members

74
New WV residents including household members

6%
WV Born

28%
Purchased Homes

PROGRAMMING



“Access to outdoor recreation is a top priority in my life and Ascend made that access even more attainable. Through gear rentals, enthusiastic program coordinators, and a like-minded community, I found new ways to enjoy the outdoors and connect with people who share my values.”

— Kate Dubickas



FIRST ASCENT

Creating Career Paths That Lead Home

BUILT ON THE FOUNDATION of Ascend WV, First Ascent is designed to retain West Virginia's brightest minds by offering graduating university students a reason—and a pathway—to stay. Launched in 2023, the program supports early-career professionals with remote, hybrid, and entrepreneurial job opportunities, helping them plant roots and thrive right here in the Mountain State.

First Ascent members receive two years of benefits, including:

- / Access to coworking spaces
- / Mentorship and career guidance
- / A free outdoor gear library
- / Free outdoor recreation experiences throughout West Virginia
- / Invitations to outdoor, community and purpose-driven programs
- / Professional development and networking support

“I think this state gives me more reasons to stay than reasons to leave. It has given me so much over the years, and I feel it’s only right to give back. I wish more people recognized all it has to offer.”

— Ian Thayer,
First Ascent Member



MEMBER STATS

61

First Ascent Award Winners

48

Recent Graduates Placed in Jobs

152

Networking & Social Events Hosted

SUPPORTING BELONGING THROUGH CAREER & COMMUNITY

Through three innovative pilot programs—Teachers Ascend, Vantage Ventures Startup Accelerator, and Friends of Ascend—the Smith OEDC is expanding its impact. These efforts focus on creating pathways for belonging, leadership and community engagement that reach beyond talent attraction to long-term retention.

TEACHERS ASCEND

Launched in Monongalia and Preston Counties, this two-year pilot program pairs early-career teachers with dedicated local mentors, while connecting them to events, neighbors and local culture. The goal is to build deeper ties and help new educators feel supported, both in and out of the classroom.

Program Highlights:

- / 9 teachers currently participating
- / Each paired with a local mentor
- / Ongoing community-building programs

“Since coming to live and teach in WV, I’ve been feeling much more at peace and happy here... I’ve been impressed by how wonderful this program is and how quickly we were able to build relationships.”

— Jessica Willis,
Teachers Ascend Member

VANTAGE VENTURES PARTNERSHIP

Through this partnership, Smith OEDC supports founders participating in the Vantage Ventures Startup Accelerator (VV Boost), offering professional development, coworking access and community engagement for this innovative cohort of entrepreneurs accelerating and scaling their startups.

Program Highlights:

- / 5 founders in the Fall 2024 cohort
- / Access to coworking spaces
- / Community-building programs throughout the state
- / With 16% of Ascend WV members identifying as self-employed this partnership bridges emerging entrepreneurs to West Virginia’s entrepreneurial ecosystem.

FRIENDS OF ASCEND

Friends of Ascend opens Ascend WV coworking spaces, meeting rooms, and events to a broader audience—supporting nonprofits, students and remote workers across the state. The program fosters grassroots collaboration and access to shared resources.

Program Highlights:

- / 263 local participants enrolled
- / 94 meetings hosted in 2024
- / Free coworking day passes, events and newsletter access

LOOKING AHEAD

AS THE MOMENTUM behind the Smith OEDC’s Talent Attraction & Retention efforts continue to grow, 2025 will focus on deeper integration, geographic expansion, and connecting talent to opportunity.

New coworking spaces are slated to open in Martinsburg and Fayetteville in 2025

Elkins is on deck for a 2026 coworking space launch

The team is exploring new initiatives to close the gap between job seekers and employers across West Virginia

5 YEARS OF YOUTH INITIATIVES

Building the Next Generation of Outdoor Leaders

Since 2019, the Smith Outdoor Economic Development Collaborative's Youth Initiatives team has been dedicated to strengthening the future of West Virginia—by creating powerful outdoor learning experiences for its youngest residents.



SCIENCE BEHIND THE SPORT

BRINGING ADVENTURE AND STEM TO COMMUNITIES ACROSS WEST VIRGINIA

THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE SPORT (SBS) program brings STEM to life for K–12 youth through hands-on educational experiences rooted in adventure sports. By blending science principles with real-world applications, the program drives engagement through meaningful partnerships, hands-on programs and local outreach

SBS Highlights

SUMMIT BECHTEL RESERVE INITIATIVE

One of our largest programming partners is the Scouting operations since its inception:

- / Engaged youth from across the globe during the 2019 World Scout Jamboree
- / Delivered programming at the **2023 National Scout Jamboree, where:**
 - **14,000+ Scouts** checked into at least one of five adventure-based program areas (Skateboarding, Archery, Paddling, Biking, and Climbing)
 - **1,350 Scouts** completed all five areas, each logging over 2.5 hours of learning to earn a coveted patch set
- / STEM Scouts
 - Developed SBS stem kits for youth across the US
- / **Merit Badge University** at WVU,
 - Serving **300 Scouts annually**

Youth Cycling Impact Pedaling Progress

1,150+
*bikes donated through
FreeBikes4Kids with
Youth Initiatives' support*

\$6,000
*raised for to provide bikes
to WV students*

\$60,000
bike tech classroom donation

3
*Little Bellas
chapters launched*

\$300,000
*invested in NICA
trail infrastructure*



YOUTH OUTREACH

The SBS team served WV K-12 youth annually through classroom visits, field trips, summer camps, STEM festivals, exhibitions, fairs and various community-based events. Some examples of this include:

- / In partnership with Safe Routes and USA BMX, SBS hosted a learn-to-ride and STEM Day at Mylan Park Elementary school.
- / Hosted Remake Learning Events teaching families how to maintain their bicycles and ride safely



YOUTH CYCLING PROGRAMS

By building on West Virginia's growing network of cycling trails and resources and collaborating with some of the nation's leading youth cycling organizations, SBS was able to establish partnerships and a permanent state-wide presence of these incredible organizations, efforts, and accomplishments:

- / Being selected as the #1 town (out of 30) as a pilot program for 10 different youth cycling organizations
- / Supported the donation of over 1,150 bikes to low-income West Virginia youth
- / Raised over **\$6,000 at the UCI World Cup** to provide bikes for West Virginia students
- / Facilitated a \$60,000 donation from Rad Power Bikes to the Mon County Board of Education, to establish a new bike tech classroom
- / Partnered with Little Bellas to establish three chapters in West Virginia: Monongalia, Fayette, and Putnam Counties
- / Assisted the WVU Landscape architecture program with a \$10,000 grant for Safe Routes
- / Received a \$10,000 grant from the Morgantown Board of Realtors to buy bikes
- / Facilitated a \$300,000 donation to build a new West Virginia NICA course



SCIENCE ADVENTURE SCHOOL

FOUR DAYS THAT CHANGE A SIXTH GRADER'S YEAR

SCIENCE ADVENTURE SCHOOL (SAS) is a four-day, three-night learning experience that integrates outdoor recreation with standards-based science learning, teamwork, and confidence-building. The program serves 6th-grade students during a pivotal moment in their academic and emotional development.

Hosted at high-capacity venues like WVU Jackson's Mill, Heritage Farm, the West Virginia Botanic Garden, and the Summit Bechtel Reserve, SAS immerses students in trail-based activities, STEM labs, and social-emotional reflection.

Students leave SAS with stronger friendships, deeper curiosity, and a more powerful sense of what they're capable of—both in and out of the classroom.



Science Adventure School Impact Since 2019

3,271
students served

106,308
hours of outdoor-based instruction delivered

43
schools across 14 counties

285
teachers engaged in outdoor education

4
permanent programming sites established across the state

LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

IN 2024, the Youth Initiatives team paused active outreach to reimagine its programs and design a more accessible pathway forward. Its goal is to make the programs more geographically available, increase capacity to inspire more youth, and create long-term solvency.

Looking ahead, the Youth Initiatives unit and team will transition to a new home within WVU for expanded youth engagement. In doing so, the team will develop collaborations and efficiencies as they strive to impact more of WV's youth.

MEET THE TEAM

LEADERSHIP



GREG CORIO
Assistant Vice President
for Outdoor Youth
Advocacy and Initiatives



DANNY TWILLEY, PH.D.
Assistant Vice President of
Economic, Community and
Asset Development

SUPPORT



BETHANY BAILEY
Administrative Assistant



NICK MORALES
Outdoor Marketing
and Communications
Coordinator



JESSE CECIL
Grants and Research
Coordinator

OUTDOOR ECONOMY, COMMUNITY & INFRASTRUCTURE



LOGAN CHAPMAN
Trails Training And Education
Coordinator



RICH EDWARDS
Outdoor Recreation
Infrastructure Coordinator



COREY LILLY
Outdoor Community
Development Manager



JESSICA SUTTON
Outdoor Community
Development Manager



CHRIS ZANDRON
Outdoor Recreation
Infrastructure Manager



ANDY WILLIAMSON
Director of Outdoor
Economic Development

TALENT ATTRACTION & RETENTION



TRAVIS HINES
Eastern Panhandle
Program Coordinator



EMILY HUGUENIN
Director of Talent
Attraction & Retention



MADISON HUTCHINSON
First Ascent Career
Specialist and Huntington
Area Coordinator



CALLIE ISENBERG
Assistant Director of Talent
Retention & Workforce
Development



CHRIS LEE
Greater Elkins
Program Coordinator



RYAN RATCLIFF
Morgantown Area
Program Coordinator

YOUTH INITIATIVES



PARIS WINFREY
Assistant Director of
Program Operations



COTE WOMACK
New River Gorge
Program Coordinator



ALI JENEV
Director
Science Adventure School

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF PARTNERS & COLLABORATORS

We are grateful to the many partners who we have collaborated with to improve West Virginia's outdoor economy and quality of life. Your support has been critical to our success. If we happen to miss you, please send us a message.

ACT Now Coalition
Appalachian Forest National
Heritage Area
Appalachian Headwaters
Appalachian Regional Commission
Augusta Heritage Center
Beckley Outdoors
Beckley-Raleigh County Chamber
of Commerce
Benedum Foundation
Berkeley County CVB
Canaan Valley US Fish and
Wildlife Refuge
City of Beckley
City of Elkins
City of Lewisburg
City of Martinsburg
City of Morgantown
City of Oak Hill
City of Ronceverte
City of White Sulphur Springs
Davis and Elkins College
Elkins Area Shared Trails
Elkins-Randolph County Chamber
of Commerce
Elkins-Randolph County CVB
Envision Elkins
Fayette Raleigh Metropolitan Planning
Organization
Friends of the Cacapon River
Friends of the Cheat
Generation West Virginia
Greenbrier Valley Chamber of Commerce

Greenbrier Valley CVB
Greenbrier Valley Economic
Development Corporation
Greenbrier Valley Off-road Bicycle
Association
Huntington Area Chamber of Commerce
Huntington Area CVB
International Mountain Bike Association
Jefferson County CVB
Jefferson County Parks and Recreation
Leadership West Virginia
Libera
Local and State Boards of Realtors
Mainstreet Martinsburg
Marshall University
Martinsburg Stormwater Department
Mon Forest Towns
Morgantown Area Mountain Bike Alliance
Morgantown Area Partnership
Mountaineer Trail Network
Mylan Park Foundation
New River Gorge Regional Development
Authority
NPS New River Gorge National Park
and Preserve
Outdoor Alliance
Outdoor Recreation Roundtable
Pantry Plus – Morgantown
PocaTrails
Potomac Appalachian Trail Club
Potomac Conservancy
Potomac Valley Audobon Society
Region 1 Planning & Development Council

Region 4 Planning & Development Council
Region 7 Planning & Development Council
Region 9 Planning & Development Council
Richard King Mellon Foundation
Shepherd University
Snowshoe Highlands Area Recreation
Collaborative
Summit Bechtel Reserve
The Nature Conservancy in West Virginia
Town of Fayetteville
USFS Monongahela National Forest
Vantage Ventures
Village to Village Trails
Visit Mountaineer Country
Visit Southern WV CVB
Woodlands Development Group
WV Community Development Hub
WV Department of Commerce
WV Dept of Forestry
WV DNR
WV First Foundation
WV Hive
WV Interscholastic Cycling Association
WV Jobs Network
WV Land Trust
WV School of Osteopathic Medicine
WV State Parks
WV Tourism
WV TRAIL
WV Wildlife
WVU Davis College of Natural Resources
WVU Extension
Yew Mountain



Office of the Provost
PO Box 6905
Morgantown, WV 26506

oedc@mail.wvu.edu

oedc.wvu.edu