

Virginia's Coal Community Development Platform

A COMMUNITY-LED APPROACH TO CREATING A DIVERSIFIED, MODERN ECONOMY IN SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA

facilitated by Appalachian Voices
October 2025



INTRODUCTION

In Southwest Virginia, the nationwide shift away from fossil fuels is unmistakable. Our communities continue to contend with economic and environmental hardships, exacerbated by declining jobs and tax revenue from fossil fuel production. At this critical moment, these communities have chosen to forge new, innovative futures centered around resiliency, sustainability, and their desire to thrive.

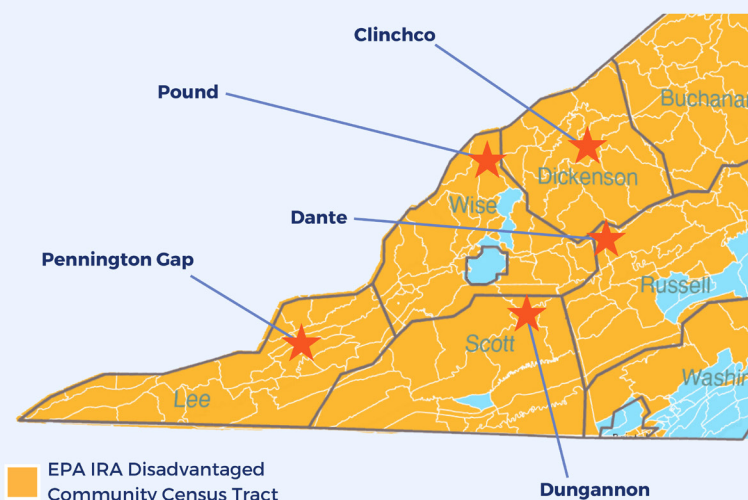
In 2023, five coalfield communities partnered with Appalachian Voices to embark on the new Community Strong initiative. The first stages included over a year of deep community listening, prioritizing and designing projects, and technical assistance to realize the community's visions.

The five participating communities — **Clinchco, Dante, Duggannon, Pennington Gap, and Pound** — are taking charge of shaping their own futures. The **Community Strong program**, led by our **New Economy team**, works alongside these communities and their residents to identify priorities, facilitate planning, and provide technical assistance for project development. The program's goal is to create locally driven initiatives that strengthen economies, address environmental challenges, and improve quality of life.

Through the Community Strong program, these communities have prioritized their needs to help create a just transition to a diversified, modern economy that's ready for the challenges of climate change. State policy and invest-

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PARTICIPATING COMMUNITIES



ments should ensure that Southwest Virginians are not left behind or left out of the planning. **The communities identified the following solutions:**

- Workers and frontline communities who are vulnerable to economic and environmental shifts caused by increasing weather disasters have access to decent work and sustainable livelihoods.
- Community members have a meaningful role in local decision-making processes about how new infrastructure and projects are developed.

- The process takes a holistic approach that examines how healthy air and water, energy industries, a strong workforce, and the needs of communities intersect.

Like our Community Strong program, this Coal Community Development Platform was created by the foremost experts in community needs: the impacted community members themselves. The following five policy priorities and specific recommendations — on energy, healthcare, resiliency, economic development, and abandoned buildings — come from years of community conversations and organizational policy work at the local, state, and federal levels.



This platform is based on goals and concerns shared by approximately 370 local residents and community leaders with Appalachian Voices at 24 listening sessions in five communities starting in 2023.

INVESTING IN APPALACHIAN COMMUNITIES

A major goal of our Virginia Coal Community Development Platform is to diversify Southwest Virginia's economic revenue and help our struggling communities thrive and invest in healthy infrastructure. A healthy economy must include profitable, safe, and reliable jobs, but a lack of employment opportunities has contributed to a decline in population and created an overall economic stagnation in these communities. A lack of basic infrastructure prevents new business investments from coming to the area, and a lack of relevant workforce training, start-up capital, and viable real estate creates barriers for workers who do live in these communities.

A just transition also requires deep community involvement and leadership in realizing their own vision for their future. Empowering communities to participate in their own comprehensive planning will require investments in local leadership and their access to the tools needed to represent their communities. To address barriers to economic development in the coalfield counties, Virginia should take the following actions:

- **Increase incentives for local businesses:**

Necessary infrastructure to attract local businesses includes available housing, affordable healthcare and childcare, high-speed

internet, and reliable cell service. Successful small business development in rural communities will create tax revenue that can address these critical gaps. However, initial investments in infrastructure and downtown revital-

ization are needed in order to jumpstart the development. The state should continue to fund downtown revitalization and business start-up grant programs, emphasizing those with low matching requirements. Additionally, the state should focus on tax credits for small businesses creating jobs, including those employing fewer than the 50 workers required in the Major Business Facility Job Tax Credit. This approach would ultimately generate municipal revenue and reduce the state's burden of funding these projects in the future.

- **Invest in rural workforce development:** The state should commit additional funding and resources to vocational training, transitional training programs, and workplace development centers in the coalfield counties, focusing

on programs that create benefits and incentives for individuals seeking retraining and further education. Miners and other workers who lose work during industrial transitions deserve options that sustain their families during the transition. The state should consider developing requirements or tax incentives for industries to offer paid training programs for local workers when a regional branch is developed.

All seven coalfield counties' demographics rank in the 33-55% range for labor force participation rates as of 2023.

** Virginia Works Economic Impact and Analysis*

- **Develop community**

leadership training programs: In small, rural communities, elected officials and town leaders often work as unpaid volunteers or for a small stipend, balancing the full-time duties of representing a town with the responsibilities of a full-time job and family. Many have had no formal training in leadership or local politics, and lack the capacity and technical skills to apply for and implement grants that would address barriers to economic development. Virginia should invest in Southwest Virginia's community leaders by offering free training on council procedures, grant writing, grant reporting, best practices, and more.

- **Develop supportive grant guidelines for small, resource-strapped localities:** Current state grant guidelines should be revised to be inclusive of small town governments by decreasing matching requirements and introducing a sliding-scale system based on municipality income, offering technical assistance for the grant reporting process, and developing next-step procedures for the end of state grant cycles to help local leaders move forward.

MINING EMPLOYMENT IN VIRGINIA

2012: 94,366 miners

2023: 48,244 miners

*Source: Miners Safety and Health Administration Mine Data Retrieval System



ENSURING ENERGY AFFORDABILITY AND COMMUNITY BENEFITS

As the national energy transition continues, Southwest Virginia remains significantly impacted by utility rate increases, barriers to developing renewable energy, and further extractive energy buildouts. At the same time, Virginia's demand for electricity is increasing, fueled largely by new data centers and the growth of artificial intelligence. While increases in demand have already been observed in recent years, the extent of future additional increases remains unclear: projections of data center energy demand remain highly uncertain due to market and technological factors.

The coalfield region has steadily embraced renewable energy options, with assistance from various coalitions. Recently, the Securing Solar partnership of the Solar Workgroup of Southwest Virginia has installed solar panels on 14 schools throughout Lee and Wise counties — totalling 4.6 megawatts of renewable energy generation.

However, Southwest Virginia continues to face difficulties in fully realizing the economic, environmental, and social benefits of investments in renewable energy and energy storage projects. To ensure that the region is not left behind in the energy transition, the state should:

- **Ensure early community engagement for energy project siting:** A lack of transparency and public engagement during the initial conception phase of energy projects of all kinds has bred public distrust, which in turn creates barriers such as public opposition to projects that might provide significant local benefits. However, studies have shown that early engagement with community members can result in fewer delays and project cancellations.¹ The state should require energy project developers to conduct meaningful community engagement—including an opportunity for residents to comment on any pending siting agreement—in order to create stronger projects with fewer roadblocks. This includes projects sited on brownfields, which are often situated directly adjacent to vulnerable communities still impacted by prior extractive activities that occurred on those sites.
- **Ensure that residents are not forced to shoulder rate increases to subsidize large corporations:** Southwest Virginians suffer from some of the highest rates of energy burden in the state, meaning that people struggling

with higher poverty rates also spend a higher percentage of their income on utility bills. With additional data centers and other potential “hyperscale” projects on the horizon, customers could face even more of a financial burden if appropriate guardrails are not in place. To protect residents, the state should ensure new, large energy users pay their own way; in other words, large energy users like data centers should absorb all of the cost of additional infrastructure that can be attributed to their energy demand.

- **Expand access to affordable solar projects:** Many Virginians face multiple challenges to solar installation: many folks do not own their homes, so they cannot choose to install solar; many homes and buildings need structural repairs before solar could be installed; and with federal incentives about to expire, small rooftop solar systems are about to get more expensive. Fortunately, there are some state and utility programs that can help. Virginia should increase investments in energy savings and distributed solar energy programs immediately to address the growing affordability crisis. These programs should come with clear deadlines to prevent delayed implementation, so that residents can begin to benefit.



INCREASING ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE HEALTHCARE

Community partners recognized that affordable and accessible healthcare is key to a just transition, especially in rural areas that face high rates of addiction, poverty, and disability. Southwest Virginia is impacted by an aging population, long travel distances to existing healthcare services, and a lack of options for healthcare providers. Furthermore, according to March of Dimes, five out of the seven coalfield counties of Southwest Virginia have maternity care deserts.² Solutions desperately needed to address these issues include:

- **Increase funding for rural emergency response centers:** A significant number of rural residents live over an hour's drive away from a hospital. Local emergency response centers face a yearly struggle to retain volunteer responders, and maintain their vehicles and equipment. State investments in local emergency response centers and training for first responders and volunteers would help alleviate that burden.
- **Build out emergency communication infrastructure:** Coalfield residents often struggle to obtain cell signal or broadband service. Programs like FirstNet, a public safety broadband communications network, are already working to increase communication accessibility, but gaps in coverage remain across the region. State funding is needed for connectivity infrastructure and vocational workforce training in this field to ensure safe and healthy communities.
- **Develop a robust network of local clinics:** A dearth of accessible care facilities forces Southwest Virginia residents to seek care at the nearest emergency department or forgo treatment altogether. This problem negatively impacts public health, increases financial burdens, and discourages relocation to the



area, which in turn stunts economic growth. The state should focus on developing more Federally Qualified Health Centers, which provide a wide spectrum of care to residents of all backgrounds

- **Invest in holistic treatments for people struggling with addiction:** Southwest Virginia continues to struggle to support community members impacted by addiction. With the latest rollback of federal funds to aid families and individuals in recovery, it's more important than ever for the state to provide support. State-run grant opportunities, preferably with no match requirement, can allow our communities to replicate models like Mountain Empire Community College's Project Amelioration, which provides workforce training, transportation, peer-to-peer counseling, and meals to assist individuals trying to re-enter the workforce during their recovery process.

AGING AND HEALTH IN APPALACHIA

	Southwest Virginia counties	Statewide
% of the population over 60	29.6%	22.5%
% of people over 60 with disabilities	46.8%	27.0%

* Data from the Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, <https://www.coopercenter.org/virginia-aging-data>

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY RESILIENCY

All seven of the coalfield counties in Virginia have experienced an increase in the frequency of consequential storms and flooding in the last few years. With this comes the need for updating emergency infrastructure, investing in proactive environmental protections, and developing emergency plans and communication networks. A history of extractive industry such as surface coal mining, timber harvesting, and natural gas extraction in Southwest Virginia has contributed to the severity of flooding events by removing stormwater-absorbing vegetation, destabilizing slopes, and artificially routing water drainage.

Many of the towns in the coalfield counties are remote and lack emergency infrastructure such as backup power sources and generators, access to healthcare facilities, public transportation, and reliable cell and internet services. This isolated nature, combined with high rates of poverty, unemployment, and lower fixed incomes means that families face increased food insecurity during power outages. To counteract these concerns, the state should:

- **Invest in flood prevention funding:** Preventative measures by the state to invest in flood-mitigating infrastructure, nature-based solutions, and flood prevention studies could prevent more devastating and costly disasters in the future. These measures include the research, planning and development of resiliency hubs in underserved communities, rejoining the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (revenues from the program fund flood resilience projects), and requiring more frequent updates of stormwater infrastructure such as culverts, pipes, storm drains, etc.
- **Develop state funding for emergency management:** As federal funding decreases under the current administration, the Federal Emergency Management Agency will continue to have limited capacity. The state should increase Virginia Department of Emergency Management money to be deployed immediately after disasters for on-the-ground response, emergency supplies and public infrastructure repair. Additionally, increasing resource capacity for individual counties to administer these funds would create the structure needed to respond to emergencies as they arise more frequently.
- **Recalculate the costs for mineland reclamation:** Unreclaimed surface mines in Virginia contribute to the frequency and severity of flooding, such as the August 2021 and July

2022 floods in Buchanan County. But due to insufficient reclamation bonds, self bonds and pool bonding, regulators often lack the leverage necessary to compel coal companies to clean up and repair mines. The Joint Legislative Audit Review Commission and Virginia Department of Energy should conduct an analysis of the roughly 53,000 acres of currently permitted coal mines in Virginia in order to estimate the costs of outstanding reclamation and inform additional policy changes to ensure timely mine cleanup. These policy changes should include the elimination of pool-bonding and the last remaining self bonds in the state. The state should also require all coal mines to have full-cost surety or collateral bonds.



- **Reduce barriers to homeowner conservation practices:** Programs such as Virginia Conservation Assistance Program and Virginia Agricultural Cost-share Program are essential for including private landowners in the shift to green infrastructure in the commonwealth. But barriers such as the rising costs of development due to increased disasters make these programs more difficult to access for regional farmers and landowners in small, capacity-strapped communities. The state should grant more funding to VCAP and VACP to lower the cost-share requirements for landowners. Revised reporting and procedural requirements for VCAP should be developed to reduce the administrative workload and entice more Soil and Water Conservation Districts to participate. The state should also reduce the VACP acreage requirement so small farms and agricultural businesses can benefit.

ADDRESSING ABANDONED BUILDINGS

Communities in Southwest Virginia continue to deal with an abundance of abandoned and dilapidated buildings, both residential and commercial. These structures pose safety and health risks to town residents, compound environmental issues facing nearby waterways, and hinder development by contributing to negative images of the towns.

In the Town of Pound, a community-led study with the West Virginia University Brownfields, Abandoned and Dilapidated (BAD) Buildings Program and the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality identified more than 50 blighted properties in 100-year flood plains. Notable structures include a building in downtown Pound that has fallen into the Pound River, an asbestos-laden grocery store in Pennington Gap that is regularly flooded, and historical coal company buildings in Dante and Clinchco falling into disrepair.

Addressing blighted properties can be difficult due to restrictions around rebuilding in flood plains, lack of funding for renovation and demolition, limited capacity for town leaders to explore and implement grant options, and uncooperative owners. These structures contribute to a cycle of inaction, as their existence decreases municipal revenue due to lowered property taxes, making the purchase and revitalization of blighted properties less financially feasible for a town with limited income. To help towns address these numerous abandoned and dilapidated properties, the state should enact policies that:

- **Create a general fund for land and property acquisition and demolition:** The cost of obtaining and revitalizing or demolishing abandoned or dilapidated properties is prohibitive to rural town budgets. The state should invest in funds that are accessible to rural communities, with an emphasis on opportunities with a lower or scaled match requirement. West Virginia Housing Development Fund Property Rescue Initiative is an example of a program that allocates funds to acquire and demolish these blighted properties, both of which the state should support in Southwest Virginia.
- **Establish a land bank:** Local residents have prioritized the creation of green spaces, event spaces, resiliency hubs, and business-ready infrastructure in their communities. A land bank, which is an entity that helps manage underused or abandoned properties, for the region would create a mechanism through which brownfields are revived for these purposes. The state should also consider amending the land bank

model with small communities in mind — decreasing the number of board members and formal processes required in order to form a land bank, and creating avenues for coalfield counties to obtain tax-delinquent properties for future community use.

Since 2009, a land bank established in Huntington, West Virginia, has acquired and redeveloped over 70 properties, the sale of which will benefit the local revenue.

- **Invest in funding opportunities for local property owners:** Many of the holders of blighted properties in Southwest Virginia are absentee owners or are unable to maintain the property due to high costs. In addition to enforcing the local ordinances, the state should take advantage of loan and grant programs such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Virginia Home Repair Loan and Grant Program and address the following issues:
 - ◊ Advocate for lowering the median household income for the USDA grant program for the seven coalfield counties, to account for the lack of suitable housing options in the region and the high costs of repairing blighted properties.
 - ◊ Advocate for adjusting the age requirements for the region — currently set at 62 years of age or more — or create a similar program to incentivize young Southwest Virginians to stay and invest in their hometowns.
 - ◊ Prioritize additional state-funded opportunities that are accessible for a greater number of Southwest Virginia residents.
- **Create a statewide initiative to support local revitalization efforts:** The West Virginia University Brownfields, Abandoned, and Dilapidated (BAD) Buildings program is a statewide initiative to help communities assess, inventory, and address blighted properties. Currently, the Department of Environmental Quality is working on a pilot initiative in tandem with WVU to complete similar work in Virginia. The state should fund this approach, specifically targeted to communities with limited resources.

THIS PLATFORM WAS SHAPED BY PARTICIPANTS FROM:



Pennington Gap — pop. 1575: Officially incorporated in 1891, the town of Pennington Gap is leading Lee County in sustainable development and economic diversification. As a community affected by periodic flooding, higher-than-average levels of air pollution, and a historical dependence on extractive industries, many residents have expressed interest in investing in flood-mitigating green infrastructure, clean energy jobs, and equitable development models.



Pound — pop. 840: The newly elected town council of Pound in Wise County is working to rebuild its government after the state almost revoked the town's charter in 2022. Pound has been troubled by both acute and systemic environmental issues for years, and it is at high risk for flood-related disasters, with the town sitting at the intersection of several 100-year floodplains. The town is moving forward on a flood-mitigating riverwalk and is creating a small park in place of a hazardous building and old mine remnant.



Dungannon — pop. 251: The small community of Dungannon is at the convergence of a broadband desert, food desert, and medically underserved region in Scott County. Town council members and the mayor are unpaid volunteers working to strengthen Dungannon economically and environmentally. The town has undergone downtown master planning, but did not include strategic planning centered around energy resiliency and climate disaster mitigation, and needs the resources to ensure community revitalization. Dungannon hopes to leverage its proximity to the Clinch River and its immense outdoor economic potential.

Potential projects include creating a resilience hub in the current community center in a historic train depot so that residents can access electricity, food, and medical supplies during emergencies, and a community riverwalk and wellness park to support residents.



Clinchco — pop. 230: Situated in the heart of Dickenson County, this once-thriving coal town hosted the county's most prominent African-American community. Today, Clinchco is working to restore the sense of community that has eroded over the decades. Like other Community Strong localities, the town sits in a broadband desert and is medically underserved. The surrounding area contains an unsafe waste impoundment, mine portals, abandoned hazardous equipment and facilities, and two storage sites for coal waste known as gob, a dangerous bituminous coal byproduct. Clinchco urgently seeks more capacity to

plan and implement effective resiliency strategies. The community no longer has safe outdoor parks and hopes to address periodic flooding with greenspace, emergency shelters and improved road infrastructure.



Dante — pop. 588: The tiny, unincorporated coal camp community of Dante is located in Russell County, near the Dickenson County border. Parts of Dante are in the 97th percentile for flood risks, and the town falls in the 99th percentile for unemployment rates. In 2016, a group of residents, organizations, and businesses formed the Dante Community Association, striving to transform the town. Appalachian Voices has worked closely with Dante and the Russell County Board of Supervisors to actualize Dante's Downtown Master Plan, which has five key elements: 1) cleanup and beautification, 2) infrastructure, 3) parks and recreation, 4) preservation, and 5) tourism and economic development.

Completed projects include the redevelopment of a brownfield site into a campground, the closure of mine portals, the development of mountain bike trails, and the repurposing of an old train depot.



Appalachian Voices: Appalachian Voices is a leading nonprofit advocate for a healthy environment, clean energy future, and just economy in the Appalachian region. Since 2015, Appalachian Voices' Norton office has engaged with Southwest Virginia communities to advance on-the-ground solutions and create regional opportunities through state and federal policies.

Endnotes:

- 1 <https://docs.nrel.gov/docs/fy23osti/87113.pdf>
- 2 <https://www.marchofdimes.org/maternity-care-deserts-report>