



Braiding the Way for Outdoor Recreation in the Rockbridge Area

# Rockbridge Area Outdoor Recreation and Trail Plan – Executive Summary



Prepared by the

**Rockbridge Area Outdoors “Braiding the Way” Steering Committee**  
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Southern Inn  
Twin River Outfitters  
Walkabout Outfitter  
CornerStone Bank

# ***Braiding the Way for Outdoor Recreation in the Rockbridge Area*** **Rockbridge Area Outdoor Recreation and Trail Plan**

## **Executive Summary**

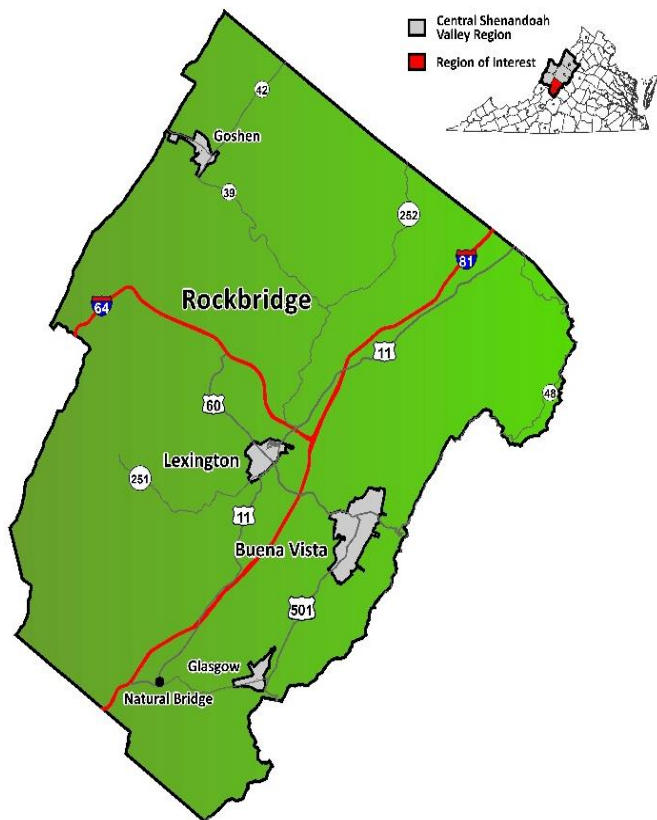
### **I. Introduction**

Located in the scenic Shenandoah Valley, the Rockbridge area is blessed with a diverse array of recreational assets. With over 100,000 acres of public forests, parks and recreation areas, there are numerous opportunities to camp, hike, bike, float, fish and hunt. The area also has hundreds of miles of designated bike routes for bike touring, and access to navigable waterways for river-based recreation. Complementing the region's natural and recreational features are historic sites and cultural experiences that showcase local crafts, music, art, and food.



Outdoor recreation and heritage tourism are popular in Virginia. Each year over 45 million people visit the Commonwealth, to enjoy its history, culture, natural areas, and outdoor attractions. Statewide, \$21.9 billion is spent in Virginia on outdoor recreation, annually, including gear,

supplies, and travel related expenses, which supported 197,000 jobs and generates tax revenues to help drive local economies.<sup>1</sup> However, many travelers in Virginia and even local residents are unaware of what the parks and open space in the Rockbridge area have to offer. Various surveys have noted the need for improved wayfinding signage, maps, and support infrastructure to improve access to outdoor recreation sites.



In addition to their economic potential, parks, trails, and water trails can help address concerns related to cardiovascular disease and other health-related problems due to inactivity. Parks and recreation providers play a critical role in addressing these public health issues by providing the “health infrastructure” that enables people to be physically active outdoors. With over 32% of residents in Rockbridge County reporting high blood pressure, promoting

<sup>1</sup> [The Outdoor Recreation Economy, Virginia State Report](#), Outdoor Industry Associates, 2017

the health benefits of outdoor recreation, along with cultivating a healthy active lifestyle, is critically important.<sup>2</sup>

## **II. Braiding the Way for Outdoor Recreation in the Rockbridge Area**

In response to evolving community trends, needs, and interests, Rockbridge County, the Cities of Lexington and Buena Vista, and the Towns of Glasgow and Goshen decided to work together to advance outdoor recreation opportunities. The goal was to craft a vision and strategies that “braided together” various trail, water trail and greenway efforts into an interconnected network.



In December 2015, a Steering Committee was formed and the “*Braiding the Way for Outdoor Recreation*” project was initiated. The project is a collaborative effort of more than 20 organizations that served on the Steering Committee, with expertise in various aspects of outdoor recreation planning, river access and trail development, marketing and tourism promotion. The goal of the Steering Committee was to assess existing conditions, identify gaps in the system and develop an overall conceptual master plan including early action pilot projects. The Steering Committee also evaluated various implementation options and developed recommendations on next steps.

## **III. Rockbridge Area Outdoor Recreation Survey, 2017**

In early 2017, the Steering Committee with support from the Washington and Lee University Venture Club, initiated a web-based community survey to better understand perspectives and needs related to outdoor recreation. Two survey instruments were administered: one for local residents and one for visitors to the area. Information was collected from January 20, 2017 to July 31, 2017. Both residents and visitors identified walking, day hiking/trail running, and nature/wildlife viewing as top outdoor recreation pursuits. Residents also noted the importance of water/paddle sports; and visitors noted the importance of cultural/historical sites. Both residents and visitors recommended expansion of existing recreational offerings, as well as easier access, and improvements in directional and wayfinding signage.



The second step in the process was to assess the economic impact of outdoor recreation to the Rockbridge area economy. A total of 384 individuals completed the economic portion of the survey (328

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<sup>2</sup> Rockbridge Area Community Health Improvement Plan, 2012, p.13

residents; 56 visitors). The survey results showed that residents spent, on average, \$292 for equipment, \$134 for transportation, \$49 for event fees and \$82 for other expenses during 2016. Data on visitor expenditures including food, lodging, transportation and supplies, was forwarded to the Roanoke Valley Alleghany Regional Commission, who used IMPLAN (Impact Analysis for PLANning) software to estimate the amount of economic activity. Resident spending was not included in this analysis since it is not “new money” coming into the local economy.

In 2016, an estimated 31,286 overnight visitor parties travelled to the region with the primary purpose of outdoor recreation activities. Each overnight party was estimated to have spent \$577 on various services and products, resulting in \$10.7 million in direct spending, which supported 209 jobs. Overall, the economic impact of these overnight visitors including direct, indirect, and induced spending, resulted in \$14.8 million in economic output and supported 245 jobs.

#### **IV. Rockbridge Area Outdoor Recreation and Trail Plan**

In October 2017, the Rockbridge Area Outdoor Recreation and Trail Plan was completed. The Plan is the result of that collaborative effort by the Steering Committee that engaged public and non-profit interests, key community leaders, agency staff, businesses, economic development and tourism, health, universities, and technical advisors. The Plan incorporates and expands upon the various regional, local, and trail-specific plans completed over the past 15 years, providing a comprehensive approach to outdoor recreation planning and promotion.

The Plan highlights existing conditions, as well as opportunities for new trail connections, and prioritizes actions to establish a phased approach to filling in “gaps” in the trail network. Nineteen projects were identified by the Steering Committee to improve trail connectivity and/or expand river access for water trail development, as well as next steps needed to implement the projects. In addition, the Plan recommends greater coordination among recreation, education, youth and community health partners, improved branding and wayfinding and other marketing and outreach activities to promote current offerings.



The Plan also recommends a more coordinated approach to implementation that focuses on partnerships and improved communication among the various jurisdictions, interest groups and land managers in the region.

##### **A. Trail and Water Trail System Planning**

The Steering Committee identified 19 projects, as depicted in Figure 1, to improve trail connectivity and/or expand river access for water trail development. Ten projects have been identified as Phase 1, Early Action projects to be initiated in the next 1-2 years. They are smaller, less complex projects that could be undertaken with volunteers, or are already underway by project partners. Nine projects are listed as Phase 2, Mid-Long-Term projects

that will require additional research, coordination, negotiation for access, cost/funding analysis, design and engineering. These projects are targeted for the next 3-10 years. One additional trail project (#9, Elephant Mountain) was not selected for further consideration due to maintenance and funding concerns. A map of the proposed priority project locations follows the list.

**Figure 1: Rockbridge Area Outdoors “Braiding the Way” Priority Projects**

	Map ID#	Project Name and Location	Description	Phase	Type of Activity
<b>Southwestern Trail System</b>	1	Moore's Creek (Collierstown)	Increase public access and awareness for horse travel, mountain biking and hiking with multi-use trail development at Moore's Creek State Forest. Investigate reestablishing connection to North Mountain trail network. Gain public access and parking from Moore's Creek Road.	Phase 2- Mid-Long Term, Land Trail Projects	TRAILS: Hiking/ Walking, Biking, Equestrian
	2	Lake Robertson (Collierstown)	Increase public awareness and multi-use trail development within Lake Robertson Recreation Area.	Phase 2- Mid-Long Term, Land Trail Projects	TRAILS: Hiking/ Walking, Biking, Equestrian
	3	North Mountain to Blacks Creek (Collierstown)	Explore trail head parking area and extend existing forest service road/trail connection from Blacks Creek Road (VA 655) to North Mountain Trail.	Phase 1- Early Action, Land Trail Projects	TRAILS: Hiking/ Walking, Biking; Connectivity
	4	Short Hills Wildlife Management Area (Collierstown)	Explore outdoor recreation opportunities for hiking, horseback riding and mountain biking.	Phase 2- Mid-Long Term, Land Trail Projects	Various/ Development

<b>Brushy Blue Greenway</b>	5	Chessie Trail to Buena Vista Flood Wall (Buena Vista)	Improved trail connection from the last Chessie Trail gate at Stuartsburg Road under Rt 60 bridge, to the upstream end of the flood wall.	Phase 1- Early Action, Land Trail Projects	TRAILS: Hiking/ Walking; Connectivity
	6	Brushy Hill Connector Trail (Lexington)	New trail to connect the upstream end of Woods Creek Trail to Brushy Hills (city-county cooperative project).	Phase 1- Early Action, Land Trail Projects	TRAILS: Hiking/ Walking; Connectivity
	7	Chessie Trail South River Bridge (Lexington/ Buena Vista)	A bridge across the South River to replace the old railroad bridge that was destroyed in a flood.	Phase 1- Early Action, Land Trail Projects	TRAILS: Hiking/ Walking; Connectivity
	8	Chessie Trail-Woods Creek Trail Connection (Lexington)	Currently funded project. VMI, Lexington, and Rockbridge County working on this.	Phase 2- Mid-Long Term, Land Trail Projects	TRAILS: Hiking/ Walking
	9	Elephant Mountain Trail (Buena Vista)	Restore Elephant Mountain Trail.	Not selected for further consideration	TRAILS: Hiking/ Walking; Development
	10	Buena Vista-USFS Connector Trail (Buena Vista)	Explore new trail opportunities on USFS lands east of Buena Vista to create a connection to the Blue Ridge Parkway and hiking/biking loop trail opportunities with Reservoir Hollow Trail (FT #509).	Phase 2- Mid-Long Term, Land Trail Projects	TRAILS: Hiking/ Walking
<b>Maury River Corridor</b>	11	Rockbridge Baths (Rockbridge Baths)	Explore formalizing boating access at this traditional put in/take out. Establish signage, parking and kiosk information for users.	Phase 1 – Early Action, Water Trail Projects	WATER TRAIL/ River Access

<b>Maury River Corridor</b>	12	Alone Mill (North of Lexington)	Explore formalizing boating access at this traditional put in/take out. Establish signage, parking and kiosk information for users. Expand parking/ pull out for pick up or drop off and clarify any property boundaries.	Phase 1 – Early Action, Water Trail Projects	WATER TRAIL/ River Access
	13	Bean's Bottom (Lexington)	Establish signage, parking and kiosk information for users.	Phase 1 – Early Action, Water Trail Projects	WATER TRAIL/ River Access
	14	Millers Dam (Buena Vista)	Explore formalizing boating access at this traditional put in/take out. Establish signage, parking and kiosk information for users.	Phase 1 – Early Action, Water Trail Projects	WATER TRAIL/ River Access
	15	Quarry Falls (Glasgow)	Explore formalizing boating access at this traditional put in/take out. Establish signage, parking and kiosk information for users.	Phase 2- Mid-Long Term, Water Trail Projects	WATER TRAIL/ River Access
<b>James River Corridor</b>	16	Ruritan Tract- James River (Glasgow)	USFS proposed river access site. Needs partnership agreement for maintenance.	Phase 2- Mid-Long Term, Water Trail Projects	WATER TRAIL/ River Access
<b>Other Projects</b>	17	Virginia Horse Center River Trail (Lexington)	Could expand trail system with a public trail down to the Maury River at Horseshoe Bend.	Phase 2- Mid-Long Term, Land Trail Projects	TRAILS: Hiking/ Walking
	18	Natural Bridge State Park Trail System (Natural Bridge)	The new Natural Bridge State Park will offer access to hiking and possibly horseback riding and mountain biking in the future.	Phase 1- Early Action, Land Trail Projects	TRAILS: Hiking/ Walking; Various/ Development

<b>Other Projects</b>	19	Cornwall; South River Flood Mitigation Park (Various/ South River)	The County should consider the possibility of developing some of their properties in the floodplain along South River.	Phase 2- Mid-Long Term, Land Trail Projects	Development of property, multiple uses
<b>Road Biking</b>	20	Additions to Bike the Valley (Various)	Expand Bike the Valley ( <a href="http://www.bikethevalley.org">www.bikethevalley.org</a> ): Lexington-Brushy Hill Loop Route; Lexington-Goshen Loop Route; Buena Vista-South River Out & Back Route; Buena Vista-Blue Ridge Parkway North Route.	Phase 1- Early Action, Land Trail Projects	Bike routes on road and bike trails

Color coding

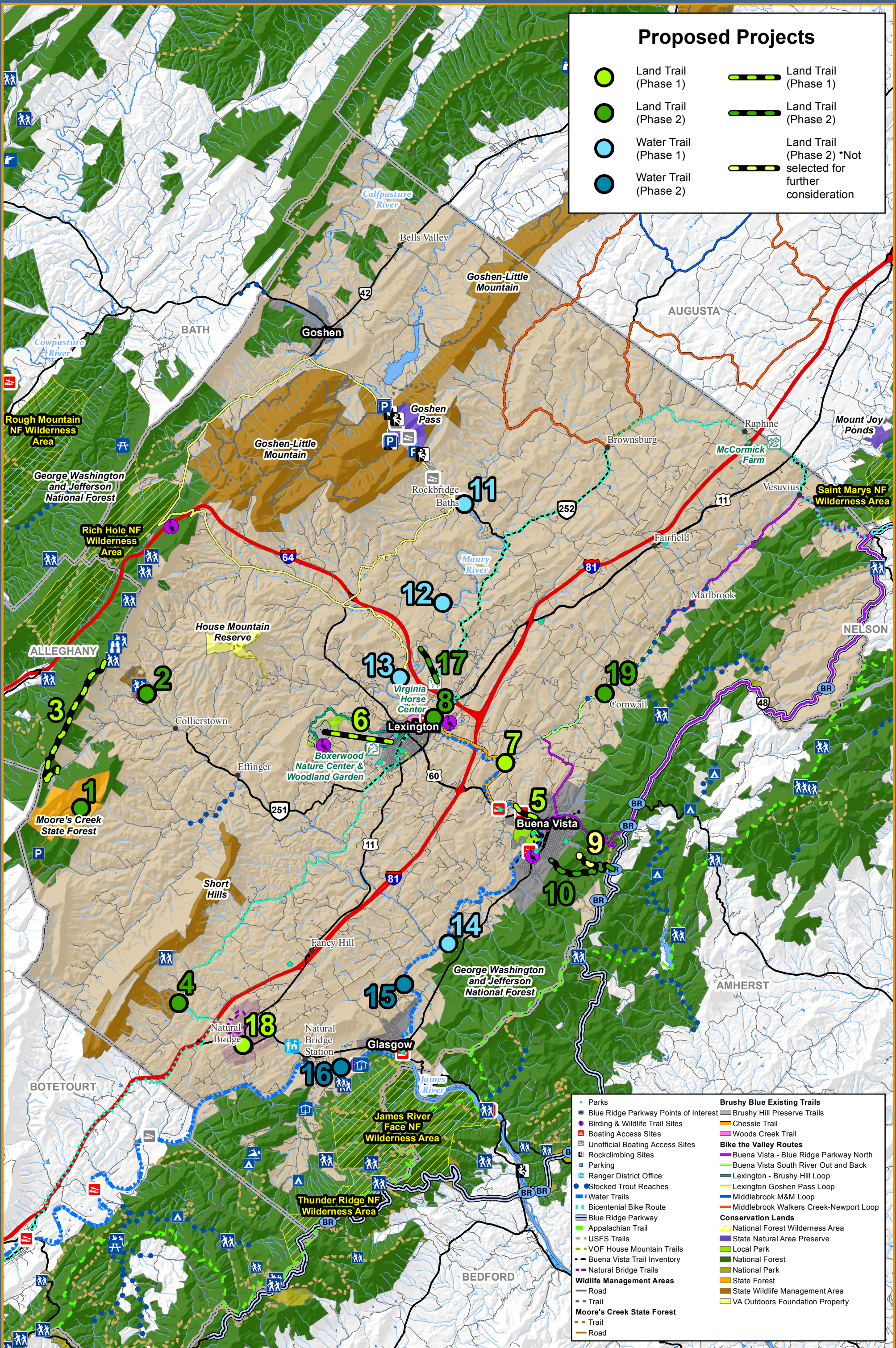
Green = trails for walking/hiking

Purple = trail for walking/hiking, equestrian and mountain biking

Blue = water trail access sites

Orange = multiple uses/activities

Grey = On-road biking



### Proposed Projects

	Land Trail (Phase 1)		Land Trail (Phase 1)
	Land Trail (Phase 2)		Land Trail (Phase 2)
	Water Trail (Phase 1)		Land Trail (Phase 2) *Not selected for further consideration
	Water Trail (Phase 2)		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Parks</li><li>Blue Ridge Parkway Points of Interest</li><li>Birding &amp; Wildlife Trail Sites</li><li>Boating Access Sites</li><li>Unofficial Boating Access Sites</li><li>Rockclimbing Sites</li><li>Parking</li><li>Ranger District Office</li><li>Stocked Trout Reaches</li><li>Water Trails</li><li>Bicentennial Bike Route</li><li>Blue Ridge Parkway</li><li>Appalachian Trail</li><li>USFS Trails</li><li>VOF House Mountain Trails</li><li>Buena Vista Trail Inventory</li><li>Natural Bridge Trails</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Wildlife Management Areas</li><li>Road</li><li>Trail</li><li>Moore's Creek State Forest</li><li>Trail</li><li>Road</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Brushy Blue Existing Trails</li><li>Brushy Hill Preserve Trails</li><li>Chessie Trail</li><li>Woods Creek Trail</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Bike the Valley Routes</li><li>Buena Vista - Blue Ridge Parkway North</li><li>Buena Vista South River Out and Back</li><li>Lexington - Brushy Hill Loop</li><li>Lexington Goshen Pass Loop</li><li>Middlebrook M&amp;M Loop</li><li>Middlebrook Walkers Creek-Newport Loop</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Conservation Lands</li><li>National Forest Wilderness Area</li><li>State Natural Area Preserve</li><li>Local Park</li><li>National Forest</li><li>National Park</li><li>State Forest</li><li>State Wildlife Management Area</li><li>VA Outdoors Foundation Property</li></ul>	

## **B. Youth Engagement, Education and Stewardship**

The Steering Committee suggests that actions be taken to support and expand opportunities for youth engagement, education and stewardship, including:

1. Collaborate with local university outdoor clubs to explore opportunities for outdoor nature-base recreation that engages the community and provides leadership development opportunities for college students, such as organizing field trips and outings, local stream clean-ups, or other service-learning projects.
2. Initiate dialogue with K-12 teachers to discuss club or classroom projects or research related to the region's natural or historic resources. High school students, required to complete community service hours, could be enlisted for riparian buffer plantings, stream clean-ups, and other conservation work.
3. Explore opportunities with Scouts or other youth programs to support trail development projects such as installing trailhead signs, building benches or other recreational amenities, assisting with maintenance tasks.
4. Work with local schools through the Jon Jarvis Legacy Fund to support development of Trails to Every Classroom Programs in the Rockbridge area.
5. Work with local partners such as the James River Association, to engage youth in healthy outdoor recreation that connects them to the stories and heritage resources of the James River watershed.



## **C. Community Health and Wellness**

The Steering Committee suggests that actions be taken to support and expand opportunities for physical activity, social wellness, fun, and health promotion in parks and on trails, including:

1. Work with health professionals to conduct an analysis of current offerings and service providers, and identify potential programs needed within the Rockbridge area, including programs that can expand park and trail use to a wider audience.

2. Collaborate with Live Healthy Rockbridge Kids, local schools and youth organizations to host outdoor classes or activities for students during or after school in a park or on a trail.
3. Evaluate the potential for initiating a Park Prescription program in which local physicians prescribe outdoor activity in parks and on trails.
4. Work with private and public organizations that promote physical fitness to schedule fitness classes (by age and ability), walking clubs or other fitness programs that could take place in a park or on a trail.
5. Expand use of parks and trails to a larger audience through art in the park events, musical performances, festivals, theater in a park or on a trail.
6. Organize events, walks, bike rides, health festivals, or other community events in partnership with philanthropic, local business, and/or health promotion organizations that utilize a park or trail.
7. Consider incentive programs such as prizes for youth and/or family outdoor adventures in a park or on a trail.



#### **D. Outdoor Recreation and Heritage Tourism Promotion**

The Steering Committee suggests that actions be taken to support and expand opportunities for outdoor recreation and heritage tourism promotion, including:

1. Brand Strategy: Develop a brand strategy that unifies the Rockbridge area as a connected, regional asset, helping to support further outdoor recreation investment, tourism, entrepreneurship, and community building.
2. Signage and Wayfinding: Develop a Signage and Wayfinding Plan that helps to advance the brand and ensures sites are easily accessible to visitors.



3. Communication:
  - a. On-line Communication: Update and expand website to include additional activities and venues, a map and a blog. Include information in eNewsletters and via online calendars. Utilize social media platforms to raise public awareness and program messages.
  - b. Public Relations: Distribute press releases to media outlets.
4. Partnership Development and Event Promotion:
  - a. Facilitate relationships between event organizers and venues.
  - b. Promote festivals and wellness events such as healthy recreation walks and bike rides; elderly/senior and workplace wellness initiative; and youth and community service projects.
  - c. Promote events associated with national, regional and local outdoor recreation, conservation, and stewardship programs (for example: Bike My Park Day, National River Cleanup Day, and/or National Trails Day).



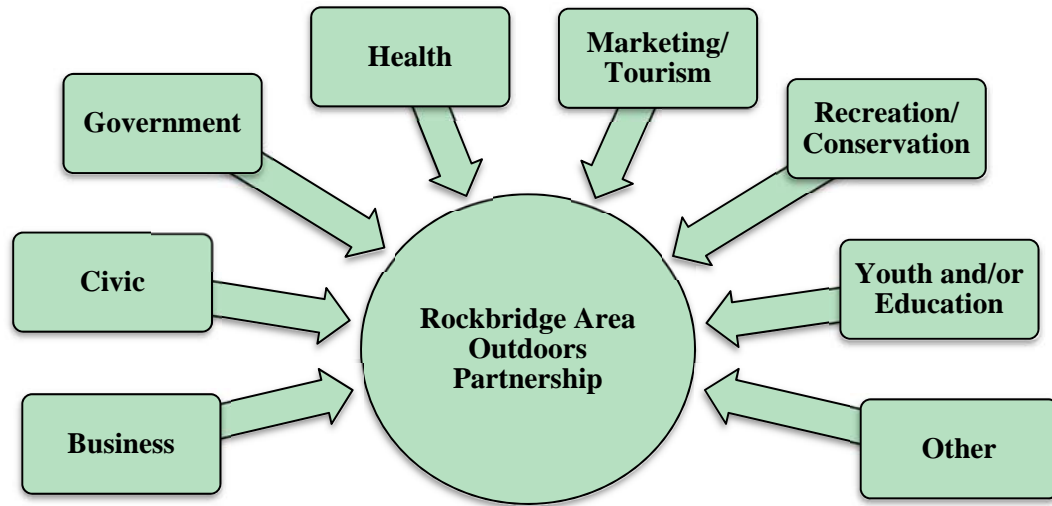
#### **E. Rockbridge Area Outdoors Partnership**

It is recommended that the Steering Committee transition to the “Rockbridge Area Outdoors Partnership” for continued collaboration, networking, project development and promotion. The Partnership will serve as a coordinating entity and forum among interested public, private, and non-profit organizations, with an interest in or expertise in trails, park planning, river stewardship, tourism, outdoor recreation marketing, and resource management topics. The mission of the Rockbridge Area Outdoors Partnership is to work collaboratively to advance a network of trails, parks, water trails, bikeways and other outdoor recreational activities for the Rockbridge Area that supports economic, stewardship, and community health and wellness goals. The Partnership will serve as a forum for sharing information, coordination, and supporting the promotion and maintenance of the network.

The geographic area of focus is Rockbridge County, the Cities of Lexington and Buena Vista, and the Towns of Glasgow and Goshen. Over 25 organizations have committed to membership in the Rockbridge Area Outdoors Partnership as depicted in Figure 2 and Figure 3. The Partnership is open to all and new members can join at any time upon completion of a Partner Profile Agreement.



**Figure 2 – Rockbridge Area Outdoors Partnership, Members**



**Figure 3 – Rockbridge Area Outdoors Partnership, Membership Roster**

Rockbridge Area Outdoors Partnership Membership Roster	
Bob’s Up the Creek Outfitter	Natural Bridge State Park
Boxerwood Nature Center & Woodland Garden	Rockbridge Area Conservation Council
Celebrate Buena Vista	Rockbridge Area Health Center
Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission	Rockbridge Area Hospice
City of Buena Vista	Rockbridge Area Recreation Organization
City of Lexington	Shenandoah Rides and Rentals
County of Rockbridge	Town of Glasgow
Fine Arts in Rockbridge	Twin River Outfitters
Friends of Brushy Hills	U.S. Forest Service, Glenwood & Pedlar Ranger District
Friends of the Chessie Trail	Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries
Lexington-Rockbridge Area Tourism	Virginia Military Institute
Lexington-Rockbridge Chamber of Commerce	Virginia Tech – Virginia Cooperative Extension
Lime Kiln Theater	Walkabout Outfitter
Live Healthy Rockbridge Kids	Washington and Lee University
National Park Service, Blue Ridge Parkway-Ridge District	

## V. Next Steps

It is intended that the Rockbridge Area Outdoor Recreation and Trail Plan serve as a decision-making tool to help guide the Rockbridge Area Outdoors Partnership, citizens, community leaders and agency staff in making wise capital and operating investment decisions related to recreational facilities over the next 1-10 years. The Plan, endorsed through a Resolution of Support by the localities, provides an overall strategy for public and private partners to leverage resources by working collaboratively on trail and water trail development projects.

Working together by identifying projects, establishing an expectation and culture of cooperation, and initiating the Partnership, this Plan establishes the pathway forward in the creation of a first-class “braided” trail and water trail network. Full development of an interconnected network offers the potential of many new economic opportunities as well as positively impacting community health in the Rockbridge area.

