

VCE Smyth County Situational Analysis Report 2023



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Key Issues

Strengthening Smyth County families

A growing number of children in Smyth County Schools live in single parent homes, foster homes or are being raised by grandparents. Over the last decade, a growing number of children have no father listed on their birth certificate (Smyth County Schools). Strengthening families in Smyth County is difficult if our future parents have no real experience with families of their own.

Protecting Smyth County's largest industry: Agriculture

While Smyth County remains a strong county for agriculture, our farm land, like many areas across the nation, is changing hands. By 2050, the amount of U. S. farmland that will transition to new ownership will equal in acreage to the land of the original Louisiana Purchase. Not only do we need consumers that understand modern agricultural practices, we need to continue to educate current landowners how to successfully plan their estate to preserve the family farm.

Improving nutrition and disease prevention in Smyth County

Every single student in Smyth County Schools receives free meals at school. As mentioned earlier in the "Strengthening Families" issue, many of our students do not have a stable home life and as a result suffer from hunger and poor food choices. Efforts to teach both adults and youth to make wise food choices and properly and safely prepare meals are greatly needed.

Improving job opportunities for Smyth County residents

Smyth County businesses are struggling to find competent employees who understand not only the tasks that need to be performed but the soft skills that allow them to remain on the job. While recruiting businesses with high paying jobs is a great goal, it is only sustainable if a supply of motivated employees with good "people skills" are available to keep the doors open and customers satisfied.

Substance abuse is a crippling problem among youth and adults

Smyth County has a high number of citizens addicted to controlled substances. The local hospital has a taskforce in place to battle opioid issues but other drugs such as alcohol, fentanyl, and methamphetamines continue to control and end lives in Smyth County.

Unit Profile

General

Smyth County is located in the Southwestern part of the state, a mountainous region that includes the highest point in Virginia on Mount Rogers. Smyth County is divided into three distinct valleys separated by mountains, with Interstate 81 running the length of the middle valley. We are blessed with an abundance of water with one of the three forks of the Holston River running the length of each valley and various streams and springs located throughout the county. The population of the county has not changed significantly over the past 20 years, which hovers around 32,000. There are three major population centers in the county, Marion and Chilhowie on the Middle Fork of the Holston River and Saltville on the North Fork. The average rainfall is about 42 inches, the average last frost date is May 15 and the average first frost date is October 15. This can vary as much as 10 days from different elevations in the county.

Demographics

The situation analysis in 2018 found Smyth County had a declining and aging population; this trend has stabilized somewhat in 2023. Our population saw a reduction in the total numbers within each age group in every age range with the exception of 10 - 14-year olds. While demographic data may suggest a possible rebound the local school system reports a decline of over 500 students overall enrolled in county schools over the past decade. Our most steady age demographic is in our population over the age of 65. This phenomenon creates an issue with care of elderly people spread across fewer wage earning and able-bodied citizens in the County.

Racial demographics are virtually unchanged from the findings in 2018. The percentage of people reporting their race as being White is 93.8% with the next largest group being those reporting black or African American at 2.02%. The percentage of Hispanic citizens increased and the number of children enrolled in ELL classes in Smyth County has increased as well. In fact the only two groups within radical categories that saw growth were among persons identified as two or more races and Hispanics. Given the homogeneity of the population, one strong point among Extension educational offerings is the parity of programming inviting participation among racial groups. The office strives to always seek and serve underserved audiences and we seek to enlist volunteers that can speak to the needs of citizens regardless of race.

Education

The 2023 situation analysis found some interesting differences between Smyth County and Virginia statistics in the area of education. While still below state and national numbers, we commend the efforts of our public-school system in helping close the gap. In Smyth County, the percentage of citizens with a high school diploma is higher than the state average; however, it should be noted that our percentage of citizens over 25 without a HS diploma is also higher. The percentage of people with college degrees is significantly lower than the state average. We feel that the reason behind this is that few of our industries in the county require advanced degrees.

Personal Income

Economically, Smyth County has experienced growth in both the extreme upper end of the wage scale and the number of households making less than \$15,000 decreased. While the number of households with incomes over \$200,000 increased by nearly 76%, the median household income increased nearly \$2000,

and in comparison with state numbers is only slightly over 55% of the income of the average household in the Commonwealth. We have had some expansions of local businesses and a new industry settle in the county as of late, but their numbers will hardly compensate for the jobs that have been lost to closings and industries moving overseas.

Economics

Smyth County is home to 1,540 businesses and those businesses employ 11,560 people. Service and manufacturing continue to be leading non-agriculture industry sectors in the County. Between the two facets of our local economy, over 64% of Smyth County citizens are employed. Retail and Government sectors add another 36% to the total employment picture. Among the Ag and Mining sector, the implosion of the dairy industry and the decline in coal mining have dealt blows to county residents involved in those enterprises.

Agriculture

The sale of beef cattle continues to be the driving force behind successful agricultural operations in Smyth County. The number of surviving dairies has slipped into single digits and the local DHIA record keeping cooperative has merged with Wythe County in order to stay viable. Newcomers and young farmers continue to have limited success seeking out alternative crops and marketing schemes, largely because the local population and economic data does not support direct to public ventures. One telling fact regarding the consolidation of agribusinesses and suppliers is that Smyth County now has no tractor dealers within its county borders. The lone dealership left in the county was absorbed into outlets in Wythe and Washington Counties in the final quarter of 2023.

The time between the 2018 and present Situational Analysis also saw a consolidation of supply providers in the county. Our local Southern States Cooperative was sold to a firm in the Shenandoah Valley. Lime spreading firms continue to be in short supply as well.

Reporting for the 2012 Census was more complete than in years past, as witnessed by the jump in overall farm numbers and total number of cattle in inventory and sold. In contrast, reporting for 2017 was less complete. Personal inquiries by the ANR Agent found that three of our largest beef operations did not report at all on the 2017 Census of Agriculture and those three operations lowered the number of beef cattle reported in the county by over 15,000 head!

Community and Resident Perspectives

The Smyth County ELC represents a cross section of the population and demographics of Smyth County. Representatives from county leadership, agriculture, youth, education, health care and ethnic groups came together with the VCE Unit Office to share their ideas and glean thoughts from others within their circles of influence. That said, our main source of information was a customized survey approved by the VA Tech IRB offered both on-line and via hardcopies offered mainly to Agriculture groups. Our survey was offered via the office iPad and also advertised on social media. It was also translated to Spanish with the help of our County ELL director, Hillary Snodgrass.

Below is a compilation of the approximately 110 survey responses as well as conversations with Community members and key informants. Survey takers were encouraged to write in opinions they felt were omitted by the survey choices.

General

Overall, citizens feel that Smyth County has a bleak future. They acknowledged that the local paper is poorly read and that topics covered within local media outlets are largely negative.

Jobs

The need for living wage jobs continues to be a major focus of the citizens of the county. Residents also acknowledge that the inability for many working aged adults to pass a drug test is a huge deterrent to many seeking employment. Entrepreneurship is a trend among citizens but declining population figures and lower disposable income totals limit self-employment opportunities.

Labor

Similar to the “Jobs” heading above, employers are finding that windows of opportunity close on them quickly in our county because they are unable to attract and retain competent workers who can provide services their industries require.

Family

Many people feel that the lack of family structure is taking its toll on Smyth County. The number of children being raised by grandparents or single parents continues to grow.

Schools

Citizens feel that our county school system overall is a great asset, but schools are not without their challenges. A growing number of students are homeschooled and the pay scale and benefit packages offered by our public schools make it more and more difficult to hire and retain top flight classroom teachers. Most school employees are lifelong residents of the county with values that go beyond pay bands.

Crime

While our overall crime rate is low, citizens are concerned about the upward trends of drug abuse and the accompanying violent and property crime that travels with the rate of drug use. Our local hospital has secured one of only 12 grants nationwide to combat the opioid use epidemic in our county.

Agriculture

Several themes under agriculture were recognized by our farm groups (AFCA, Smyth Washington Cattlemen Association, Farm Bureau and Farm Management Group.) They felt that too much emphasis is being placed on niche marketing at the expense of traditional farming enterprises, especially livestock-based agriculture.

Farm Transitions and Estate Planning

Estate planning workshops continue to be very popular across all sectors of farm owners. Calls to the Extension office bear this trend out as people seek ways to make their farms work for them following a transition of ownership.

Overall Farm Profitability

Farmers continue to seek new ways to generate money either from new crops or by adding value to products they are currently selling. An example of added value would be the VQA Program.

Identify Issues

As stated above, our data collection process was mainly done via a modified version of the State Survey offered by campus. Frankly, many of our paper survey filers felt that the survey was not specific enough to our region and county to capture the issues going on. Future SAs (2028 being the next scheduled one and the final one Andy Overbay will be associated with) will be done by key informant interviews so a richer picture of issues relevant to our county will be discovered.

Programming Response to Priority Issues

In review, as stated on Page 2 of this report our priority issues in Smyth County are:

1. Strengthening Smyth County families
2. Protecting Smyth County's largest industry: Agriculture
3. Improving nutrition and disease prevention in Smyth County
4. Improving job opportunities for Smyth County residents
5. Substance abuse is a crippling problem among youth and adults

Strengthening Smyth County families

While our office cannot “fix” all of the domestic issues of the County, we will continue to offer youth programming that helps direct children to a more stable life. A large emphasis is being placed on “Character Counts” and the entire office staff engages children and adults with our own success stories as examples.

Many of the social issues of the citizens stem from a lack of personal responsibility and morality. Setting an example, especially around youths, is a priority for all staff and faculty.

Protecting Smyth County's largest industry: Agriculture

Agricultural literacy continues to be a high priority for our office and like the “Strengthening Families” issue, the approach is very much interdisciplinary. Production practices need to be understood and improvements, where possible, need to be implemented, but true sustainability is not about production practices. True farm sustainability involves the preservation of both profits and people who farm professionally. Several farmers were concerned about the lack of Vocational Ag in the public schools and while that is somewhat outside the ability of our office to affect, we can and do promote the importance of Agriculture as the economic engine of our County and region. Our new tractor club is focused on the need for support enterprises and future agribusinesses needed by farmers around the county and region.

Improving nutrition and disease prevention in Smyth County

Our Snap Ed programmers are simply the best. They work very hard to reach as many people as possible with healthy eating choices; our 4-H and ANR Programming back up these lessons with hands-on learning, especially in the arena of gardening and food production.

Improving job opportunities for Smyth County residents

Once again, youth programming is helping to tackle this issue both directly and indirectly. All programming involves aspects of leadership, public speaking, decision-making, civic engagement and parliamentary procedure to develop a well-rounded individual that any business could mold to fit their needs. On the adult side, programs like the VQA put more money in the pockets of our beef producers,

who in turn spend that money at local businesses. In the past year, the value of calves from 2023 over 2022 is \$1.8 million!

Substance abuse is a crippling problem among youth and adults

While our in-house faculty and staff are less equipped to tackle this issue head-on, our district does have faculty aligned with the local healthcare providers to combat opioid abuse. In the future, we hope to include other illicit substances that are just as deadly to our citizens.

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