6   Recommendations

6.0   Introduction

The twelve recommendations that constitute the sections of this chapter are based on the findings from this project and reflect the ideas, issues, and innovations raised by case study communities. They reflect a wide range of approaches, issues, and policies, and are addressed, to a degree, to broad audiences. Some targeted recommendations, such as the adoption of social media or youth programs, are directed towards local communities. Other broader policy recommendations, such as those related to LDD assessments or broadband expansion, are intended for public agencies, including the ARC.

Section	
6.1	The ARC should encourage a dialog among the ten project counties and create opportunities for shared learning and the exchange of ideas.
6.2	Communities should embrace the Internet and social networking to promote tourism, build community, encourage local buying, and increase government services and transparency.
6.3	The ARC should evaluate the existing Local Development District network, assess its effectiveness, and develop new and uniform performance standards.
6.4	Supported by state and federal agencies, including the ARC, local and county governments should form partnerships with academic institutions.
6.5	Community organizations and agencies at all levels of government throughout Appalachia should make broadband access and adoption a priority.
6.6	Communities should develop youth leadership programs and encourage youth participation in entrepreneurship, college mentoring, and planning projects.
6.7	Small counties should consider shared government services and combined marketing and development programs.
6.8	ARC should assist counties with the redevelopment, repurposing, or adaptive reuse of vacant industrial sites and underutilized industrial parks.
6.9	Remote counties should focus on strategies that grow local jobs through entrepreneurship, education, and the leveraging of local assets.
6.10	As infrastructure improves, more resources should be devoted to education, leadership development, and entrepreneurship programs.
6.11	Communities and agencies, including ARC, should do more to promote diversity and racial tolerance throughout the region.
6.12	As Appalachian counties expand tourism, they must also devote resources to marketing, training, and the development of hospitality services.

6.1   The ARC should encourage dialog among the ten project counties and create opportunities for shared learning and the exchange of ideas.

The ten communities profiled as case studies in this report are, in many respects very representative of Appalachia as a whole. They represent the geographic, racial, and cultural diversity of the region. At the same time, they include important common issues. These include isolation, youth retention, substance abuse, and barriers to entrepreneurship. Emerging issues, such as hydrofracking and broadband access are also represented. As such, these communities, and their experiences, are important research subjects in the field of rural development.

From the outset, the ten project communities have expressed considerable interest in both the project outcomes and in the other project communities. Common questions from community members during site visits and focus group included, "What are the other communities like?" "Do they have these same problems?" and "What kinds of things are they doing?" Multiple communities suggested a conference to share information or a return site visit to discuss results.

Given the investment made in creating this network, collecting data, and establishing contacts, it would seem wasteful to end this research with this report. This network of communities, now established, has considerable value for a future ARC conference. These counties have much to teach each other, the entire Appalachian region, and beyond.

To this end, the ARC should host a meeting of community representatives to share information, recognize best practices, and explore future collaborative research and funding opportunities. The meeting should be conducted at a central location, perhaps a project community, and should include ARC representatives and members of the project team. Results of the conference could be compiled and shared with other communities throughout the region.

6.2 Communities should embrace the Internet and social networking to promote tourism, build community, encourage local buying, and increase government services and transparency.

Many communities in this study are embracing social media networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, to help promote economic and community development. Greene County, PA, Noxubee County, MA, and Avery County, NC, are among the counties that are now using these important new tools to grow businesses and attract visitors. Greene County officials have gone a step farther, also using Facebook to help connect county government with local residents.

The use of the communications tools are often free to use and can be inexpensive to maintain with the participation of the right community organizations. The benefits can be remarkable, efficiently communicating and raising awareness of local issues and community events. Also, while many rural residents may lack themselves the wired and wireless broadband infrastructure to fully benefit from social media, many of the same communities rely on tourism as their economic strategy. It is important for these communities to realize that many of the visitors they want to attract plan their vacations online and need a positive online presence.

As use of these networks become more common, the importance of maintaining a viable presence will grow. Yet, while use of social media creates significant opportunities, it also creates new risks. Negative comments, poor reviews, or a lack of site updates can damage public perception and discourage visitors. Poorly constructed or unmonitored pages can do more harm than good. As such, communities that enter the world of social networking must also commit to remain there.

Agencies, including the ARC, should provide training opportunities and technical assistance to help communities develop and manage social networking resources. Counties and communities should designate officials or staff to monitor and maintain these resources and establish processes and guidelines for their management and maintenance.

6.3 The ARC should evaluate the existing Local Development District network, assess its effectiveness, and develop new and uniform performance standards.

Local Development Districts (LDDs) are a vital component in ARC's development network. LDD personnel often serve as the agency's front line, working directly with communities to prepare proposals and develop projects. They also function as the eyes and ears of the region, reporting issues and needs to ARC representatives.

For the majority of communities in this study, local development districts are viewed as vital partners and allies in the development process. Most LDDs appear to perform admirably, even heroically to assist rural county with development issues. In some cases, however, three problems were noted with the LDD system:

1. Inconsistent services – While most LDDs provide support for planning and proposal development, others provide a wider or, at times, reduced range of services. Some, for example, manage senior care or youth programs. One county in this study reported that until recently, its LDD provided no grant development assistance.

2. Agency politicization – Development districts are usually governed by local elected officials and work closely with both state and federal agencies. As such, they are inherently political. In some cases, counties that lack political power, due to low population or party affiliation, may be a lower priority for LDD staff than larger or more politically powerful areas.

3. Lack of capacity in new or emerging areas – Most LDDs appear to be well equipped to develop proposals for traditional projects, such as road construction, community facilities, or water and sewer extensions. Some might benefit from additional training, however, in new or emerging funding areas, such as sustainability plans, energy projects, or telecommunications improvements.

It is difficult to gauge the scope or genuineness of these issues based on these ten case studies. Discussions with stakeholders and community leaders in some communities, however, raise important concerns. Given the significance of the LDD network, ARC should conduct an assessment of the LDD system to gauge its effectiveness, identify current issues, increase training opportunities, and develop uniform guidelines and performance standards.

6.4 Local and county governments should form strong partnerships with academic institutions.

One of the strongest findings from this study is the importance of academic partnerships in the economic and community development process. Communities that enjoy strong, equitable, and sustained partnerships with colleges and universities are more successful, more creative, and enjoy a higher capacity for development and governance.

These partnerships take many different forms. In some cases, as in Ohio, it involves assistance from major state universities. In other cases, as in Pike County, KY, and Greene County, KY, it is a historical partnership with a small local college. Community colleges are also becoming vital partners, especially in the realm of workforce development.

County extension offices are also a vital academic resource. Extension personnel, who live and work in their assigned counties, are often among the most knowledgeable about local conditions and resources. They are in a unique position to provide needed services, such as local planning efforts, but often lack the funding, time, or training to provide them.

Academic partnerships also reap benefits for the participating institutions. They provide important research, outreach, and service opportunities for faculty and students and help with the recruitment of students from distressed areas. Yet, while these partnerships are essential, they are becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. Budget cuts and conflicting demands threaten these relationships and make them difficult to maintain over time.

The ARC, state governments, and other agencies should support academic partnerships through dedicated programs and funding streams. ARC staff should also increase efforts to engage extension personnel and provide them with training opportunities in project development, planning, and community development.

6.5 Broadband infrastructure and utilization should be a priority of communities and all levels of government.

Broadband access is a top issue with the majority of study counties, especially in communities outside county seats and population centers. Rural communities lack the communications resources to bridge distances and minimize long-held feelings of isolation. Businesses are leaving, youth are underprepared for an increasingly connected workforce, and the general rural public is missing out on the security and conveniences that their more urban counterparts are experiencing. Time and time again people remarked that "a new kind of infrastructure is needed." Clearly, a digital divide exists in Appalachia.

The ARC continues to be integral in the building of public infrastructure that provides the important, and often critical, access to our rural communities. History will remember the transformative ARC investments in infrastructure and economic development throughout Appalachia. Now, Appalachia needs to catch-up with much of the country in broadband infrastructure, wired and mobile, and increase digital literacy.

Around the country, public-private partnership models have worked well in rural areas, and ConnectKentucky is lauded in this report. Realizing the public-private conundrum, recent strides in broadband deployment strategies from ARRA stimulus funding through the US Department of Commerce and the US Department of Agriculture placed a priority on public-private partnerships. The FCC's National Broadband Plan continued to show importance for middle and last mile infrastructure, and furthered the idea and importance of private service providers working more closely with public sector institutions.

Indeed, a new kind of infrastructure is needed. For sweeping change to occur, the ARC should take the lead in bringing together public institutions throughout Appalachia, such as fire departments, libraries, schools, and health clinics; and community stakeholders like chambers of commerce, industrial boards, community centers, and neighborhoods. All should be targeted as community anchor institutions in support of regional middle and last mile broadband initiatives.

The ARC can play a unique and important role in fostering organizational relationships throughout the Region focused on connecting anchor institutions for local and regional broadband strategies. The ARC, together with existing federal partners like the FCC, DOC/NTIA, USDA, and U.S. UCAN can uniquely engage community stakeholders and service providers to bring broadband and all its benefits to rural Appalachia.

Lastly, connectivity is not enough. For communities throughout Appalachia to realize the desired economic development outcomes promised through broadband, ARC should support existing efforts throughout the region to increase digital literacy skills and broadband adoption. The ARC should work with the established network of development districts, higher education outreach and university extension services, and broadband planning efforts throughout the Region. These organizations can work local and regional stakeholders to identify gaps in organized broadband efforts and initiate effective digital literacy and digital workforce programs. As with the Kentucky counties in this report, just because broadband is available, it doesn't mean people and communities are realizing economic benefits.

6.6 Communities should develop youth and youth leadership programs and encourage youth participation in entrepreneurship, college mentoring, and planning projects.

All ten case study communities identified youth as a major concern. Youth retention, schools, recreation programs, and substance abuse were among the issues that emerged from focus groups and discussions with local stakeholders. Communities also provided important examples of programs to assist youth and promote youth welfare.

These discussions also made it clear that youth play a vital role in developing local economies. Young people provide the workforce, energy, and innovation that allow communities to grow and prosper over time. They also play a role in maintaining the healthy and stable families essential for local prosperity. As such, programs that promote youth development and invest youth in community leadership are important in developing strong local economies.

Communities should invest in youth by creating leadership and entrepreneurship programs, such as those found in Bell and Morgan counties. They must also recognize young people's stake in the community and give them an active voice in planning and community development programs.

Communities should also work with regional colleges and universities to help prepare youth for the academic and social demands of college life through mentoring programs through middle and high school. In doing so, local officials recognize the importance of post-secondary education for young people, and helps school-age youth be mindful of higher education throughout their middle and high school years, ultimately providing rural youth a better chance at success once they move away to college.

6.7 Small counties should consider shared government services and combined marketing and development programs with neighboring counties.

The county unit is an important element in Appalachia's political history and the basis for many of ARC's data sets. Increasingly however, many Appalachian counties are becoming difficult to justify as administrative units. Many counties were formed centuries ago and reflect eighteenth century transportation constraints or outmoded security concerns. Others, created in mid-nineteenth century or later, are the result of long-past political battles over representation or slavery.

Today, few residents travel by horseback to register a deed and Native American uprisings are, thankfully, nonexistent. Many Appalachian communities, however, still exist in an administrative environment developed to address these past needs. The results are clusters of small remote counties that lack the population or tax base to support required services, leading to needless redundancies and inefficiencies.

In response to this issue, some states have considered county consolidation programs. Among Appalachian communities, however, this approach seems impractical and unfeasible. The loss of county status would likely devastate many viable towns and kill remaining businesses. Consolidations would probably also meet stiff political and community resistance, as many residents identify strongly with their county and local school identities.

Some case study communities show, however, the value of shared multi-county services. Avery County, NC, shares a library and other services with neighboring small counties, and Calhoun County, WV, shares economic and community development activities with neighboring Wirt County. Counties and public agencies, including ARC, should investigate the value of such shared services and help develop models and processes to assist communities with shared governance programs.

6.8 The ARC should assist counties with the redevelopment, repurposing, or adaptive reuse of vacant industrial sites and underutilized industrial parks.

Since the 1970s, counties across the region have invested significant resources in industrial infrastructure, including industrial parks and turnkey sites and structures. These sites, often incorporated into regional strategies, proved effective at creating jobs for many years. Since the 1990s, however, the industrial landscape of the region has changed. Globalization and increased energy costs have undermined this strategy, particularly in the most rural and remote areas.

As a result, these industrial sites have - in many cases - changed from assets to liabilities. Rural counties now find themselves burdened with the upkeep of empty structures designed to accommodate businesses that, in all likelihood, will never return. The costs associated with these structures drain dwindling local coffers and draw resources away from other critical growth areas, such as tourism development, job training, or entrepreneurship programs. These fiscal constraints also prevent local officials from redeveloping industrial sites or adapting them for current needs.

With modest assistance, communities can adapt these sites for other uses. By dividing or remodeling these structures communities could readily convert them into incubator space, vocational training centers, or even recreational facilities. Redevelopment could also increase the energy efficiency of these sites, making them more viable, more attractive to prospective tenants, or easier to sell or transfer ownership.

The ARC and other state or federal agencies should provide financial or technical support to assist with the redevelopment of vacant industrial sites in rural areas. They should also conduct additional research into this problem to identify best practices for the re-use of vacant sites in post-industrial Appalachia.

6.9 Small remote counties should focus on strategies that grow local jobs through entrepreneurship, education, and the leveraging of local assets.

For decades, regional development strategies have often relied on industrial development and attracting manufacturers to Appalachian communities. Yet, while this approach benefits larger or more urban areas, it appears to be less beneficial for small remote areas. These communities are less able to attract or retain manufacturing plants in today's global economy and often benefit little from regional growth.

Rather than try to attract outside employers, these communities may be better served by growing their own local businesses. Small communities can foster local growth by creating an environment that encourages business development through education, entrepreneurship, and asset-based growth strategies.

Local growth strategies should emphasize educational attainment though improved schools, support for local businesses, and assistance with new business development, all in attempt to leverage local human, natural, and cultural resources. Business incubators, small business loan programs, "buy local" campaigns, and inclusive planning processes should be included in these development strategies.

Figure 6-1:   Responses to the question, "Rate the performance of community organizations your county?" (Scoring: Poor=-1; Inadequate=-.5; Adequate=.5; Excellent=1)
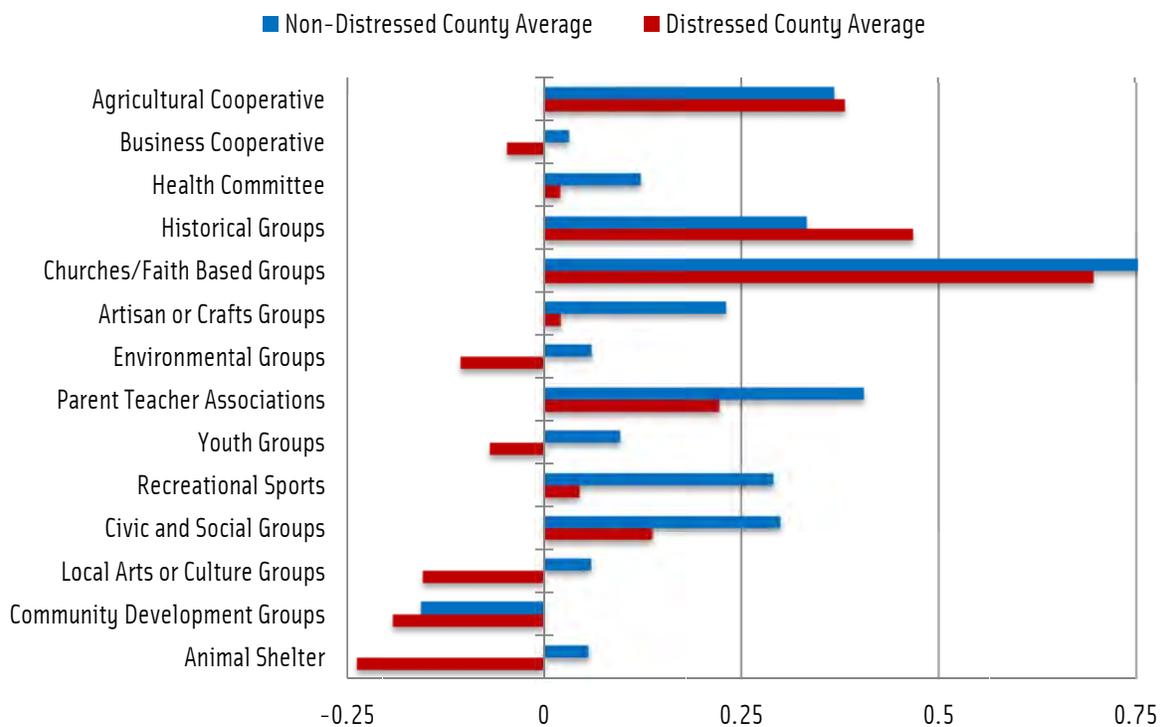
6.10 As infrastructure improves, more resources should be devoted to education, leadership development, and entrepreneurship programs.

All of the case study communities have benefitted from improved infrastructure over the past half century. In some cases, such as Bell and Pike County, KY, these improvements are outright monumental. Today, water and roads are at worst, adequate and, in some cases, world class. Community facilities have also improved and are, for the most part, on par with those in any community in the nation.

While these investments have led to improvements in both income and the local quality of life, evidence shows that infrastructure alone cannot address the issues confronting rural Appalachian communities. As we continue to improve the "hardware" of Appalachia, we must also address important "software" issues.

These "software" issues include the educational and cultural barriers that continue to plague many communities. Aversion to risk, fear of failure, isolation, lack of broadband adoption and utilization, and poor leadership all remain significant obstacles to growth and prevent infrastructure investments from reaching their full potential.

As these physical "hardware" improvements reach completion, they should be accompanied by "software" reforms in education, leadership development, and entrepreneurial initiatives to help address these persistent and significant cultural issues.

6.11 Communities and agencies, including ARC, should do more to promote diversity and racial tolerance throughout the region.

Racial issues continue to plague many communities throughout the region and may play a role in deterring growth and investment. In some cases, as in Southern Appalachia, these issues are the result of age-old racial traditions and practices. In other regions, such as Central and North Central Appalachia, they result from long-held beliefs and a lack of contact and diversity.

Outmoded racial beliefs and policies undermine the region's competitiveness in an increasingly diverse business and tourism environment. Visitors, investors, and prospective residents represent a wide range of races, ethnicities, and belief systems. In order to grow and prosper, communities need to be welcoming and tolerant of this diverse business and professional landscape.

The ARC and other agencies should assist communities in addressing racial tolerance and improving regional diversity. Educational programs, public dialogs, and diversity training should be made available to rural communities, particularly those with small minority populations. Steps should also be taken to discourage de facto segregation, including the creation of incentives and disincentives for communities that continue to promote institutionalized segregation.

6.12 As Appalachian counties expand their tourism industries, they must also devote additional resources to marketing, training, and the development of hospitality services.

Almost every county in this study viewed tourism as an important component of their future development strategy. For some, such as Avery County, it is already a major industry. For others, it is growing in importance and scale. The growth of tourism, however, is often constrained by a lack of competitive services, poor awareness of local assets, and a lack of training among local providers.

This deficiency was made evident during many site visits. Project counties often had no visibility at state welcome centers, lodging and dining options were limited, and knowledge of local attractions was sometimes surprisingly low. Project staff encountered hotel clerks who could not recommend a local restaurant, waitresses who could not name a local attraction, and there was often a lack of signage related to important tourist sites.

Training opportunities in these fields are also limited. While young people in some communities often enjoy access to training or associate degree programs in industrial, construction, or health care trades, few have ready access to hospitality or culinary arts programs. There is not, for example, a single culinary arts training program in eastern Kentucky despite the growing emphasis on tourism in the region.

Even when available, business owners sometimes fail to take advantage of training programs. Communities should do more to persuade businesses to train workers, such as making participation mandatory for inclusion in local marketing materials and websites. Local businesses must also increase their awareness of social media and online review sites, and make efforts to address negative comments.

State and federal agencies, including ARC, should encourage the development of training programs and expand and promote existing programs. They should also identify existing best practices and expand marketing efforts through websites, social media, and visitor centers.