

MERCER COUNTY

Comprehensive Plan



December 2018

WVULAW

Land Use and Sustainable Development Law Clinic

Mercer County Comprehensive Plan, adopted December 2018.

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CHAPTER 1: THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN PROCESS

West Virginia Code Section 8A-1-2(c) defines a comprehensive plan as “a plan for physical development, including land use, adopted by the governing body, setting forth guidelines, goals and objectives for all activities that affect growth and development in the governing body’s jurisdiction.” The comprehensive plan is not an ordinance, but instead is a policy guidance document that should be consistent with other county ordinances and land use controls.

The comprehensive plan is often called a “living document,” meaning the plan should be continually utilized, reviewed, and updated by the community. As needs change, so should the recommendations in the comprehensive plan. Mercer County’s comprehensive plan has been carefully drafted to ensure the plan can be utilized as a living document, providing guidance to the county commission, planning commission, county employees, and citizens over the next 5 to 10 years.

Statement of Purpose

We plan when we go on vacation and we plan how we are going to spend our paycheck. The community is no different—if we fail to plan, we plan to fail.

Mercer County, like most other jurisdictions in West Virginia, has limited resources to deal with day-to-day governmental functions. In order to utilize these limited resources efficiently, the county must systematically plan for future growth and development. The comprehensive plan process provides a platform for the community to think critically about top goals and objectives for the next 10 to 15 years. The comprehensive plan becomes a detailed roadmap for how the community is going to achieve the identified goals.

The Process

Mercer County established a process for the creation of this comprehensive plan. The process has spanned several months and has been transparent, open, and encouraging of public input.

The previous comprehensive plan was adopted in 1999 with assistance from Dr. Michael Dougherty of the WVU Extension Service. The 1999 Comprehensive Plan was reviewed extensively during the current comprehensive plan drafting process.

In 2014, the Mercer County Commission reconstituted the County Planning Commission, which had been inactive for several years. The original purpose of reactivating the planning commission was to create an updated comprehensive plan.

The County Commission asked the Land Use and Sustainable Development Law Clinic at West Virginia University College of Law to assist with the development of a new comprehensive plan. The Land Use Clinic works with communities across the state to provide land use technical assistance, including assistance with the development of comprehensive plans. Mercer County's comprehensive plan process formally began in late 2015. Over the past three years, the planning commission has met regularly to address the required components of a comprehensive plan and analyze land use issues in the county.

Acknowledgements

The Mercer County Comprehensive Plan is the community's plan. Ownership of the plan is not limited to any person or group of people. However, some individuals and groups should be recognized for having spent countless hours analyzing data, reviewing reports, understanding laws and statutes, reaching out to citizens, and ensuring the process was transparent.

Planning commissions are tasked with preparing the comprehensive plan under West Virginia statute. The Mercer County Planning Commission has been instrumental in ensuring the various required components and objectives were adequately addressed.

While the planning commission is tasked with preparing the comprehensive plan, the Mercer County Commission is responsible for the plan's adoption. The County Commission's input, guidance, and support in the development of the comprehensive plan has been essential.

Ms. Vicky Reed has been another essential contributor to the comprehensive plan. Ms. Reed was responsible for posting the notice and agenda, taking notes during meetings, and making sure the process ran smoothly. This new comprehensive plan would not have been possible without the support of Ms. Reed and many other Mercer County employees.

Because the comprehensive plan is the community's plan, the Planning Commission encouraged public input throughout the process. Hundreds of people gave input. Citizens participated by attending meetings and open houses, filling out stakeholder surveys, and providing other forms of input. The county similarly received input from small business owners, elected officials, trade organizations, school officials, and property owners. The planning commission analyzed input from all of these various sources and integrated thoughts and ideas into the comprehensive plan.

Members of the County Commission and County Planning Commission (as of January 2018):

County Commission:

- Hon. Gene Buckner, County Commissioner, President
- Hon. Greg Puckett, County Commissioner
- Hon. Bill Archer, County Commissioner

Planning Commission (as of January 2018)

- Ms. Janet Bailey
- Mr. Phillip Ball
- Mr. Morris Clyburn
- Mr. Skip Crane
- Mr. Robert Farley
- Mr. Bill Hopkins
- Ms. Jamie Null
- Mr. Greg Puckett
- Mr. John Scott, Jr., Vice-President
- Mr. William Stafford
- Mr. Chandler Swope, President



Legal Requirements

While comprehensive plans should be unique to each community's needs, certain legal thresholds must be met by all comprehensive plans in West Virginia. Chapter 8A of the West Virginia Code, enacted in 2004, overhauled West Virginia's land use statutes. Chapter 8A delineates required aspects of a comprehensive plan document and the drafting and adoption process. According to the West Virginia Code, the comprehensive plan should "be the basis for land development and use, and be reviewed and updated on a regular basis," at least every 10 years. W. Va. Code §§ 8A-1-1(b)(3), 8A-3-11(a).

One requirement for creating or updating a comprehensive plan is that the locality must have a planning commission created by the governing body. Once established, the planning commission must adopt procedures for public input under West Virginia Code Section 8A-3-6(c). Public input procedures provide a formalized statement of how the planning commission intends to obtain public input.

Every comprehensive plan must meet several objectives and required components identified in West Virginia Code Section 8A-3-4. The Mercer County Planning Commission has worked hard to ensure that all required components and objectives have been met in the comprehensive plan.

After the planning commission completes the comprehensive plan draft, several steps are required to adopt the plan. A public hearing must be held after publication in a Class I legal advertisement. After holding the public hearing, the planning commission may recommend the draft comprehensive plan to the county commission.

At the next regularly scheduled county commission meeting, the planning commission presents the recommended comprehensive plan to the county commission. Once the county commission has possession of the draft comprehensive plan, another public hearing is required after publication in a Class I legal advertisement. The county commission must then act by adopting the plan, rejecting the plan, or amending the plan.

Public Input

One of the most important aspects of the comprehensive plan process is obtaining public input. Ideally, individuals and groups outside of the planning commission and governing body participate in the comprehensive plan process. The Mercer County Planning Commission greatly valued public input and established input procedures well beyond the minimum requirements in the state code. These processes were put in place to provide citizens and entities within Mercer County multiple opportunities to give insight and help identify current issues in the county.

The Land Use Clinic and the planning commission made sure to properly notice all meetings and post agendas. The meetings were open to the public and participation was encouraged throughout the process.

The planning commission surveyed several key stakeholders, including large employers, service organizations, institutions of higher learning, municipalities, utility companies, and a host of others. Stakeholders were mailed an individualized survey, many of which were filled out and returned.

One age cohort often overlooked during local government functions is the community's youth. However, the Mercer County Planning Commission actively sought input from the county's youth for the comprehensive plan because youth are the future of the community. In 2016, a group of Mercer County Planning Commissioners and staff from the Land Use Clinic visited with four civics classes at Pikeview High School. The group heard from hundreds of students about students' views of future growth and development in Mercer County. The group engaged students using mapping exercises and asked students about their vision for Mercer County looking forward 10 years. The valuable input obtained from the high school students was packaged and provided to the entire planning commission.



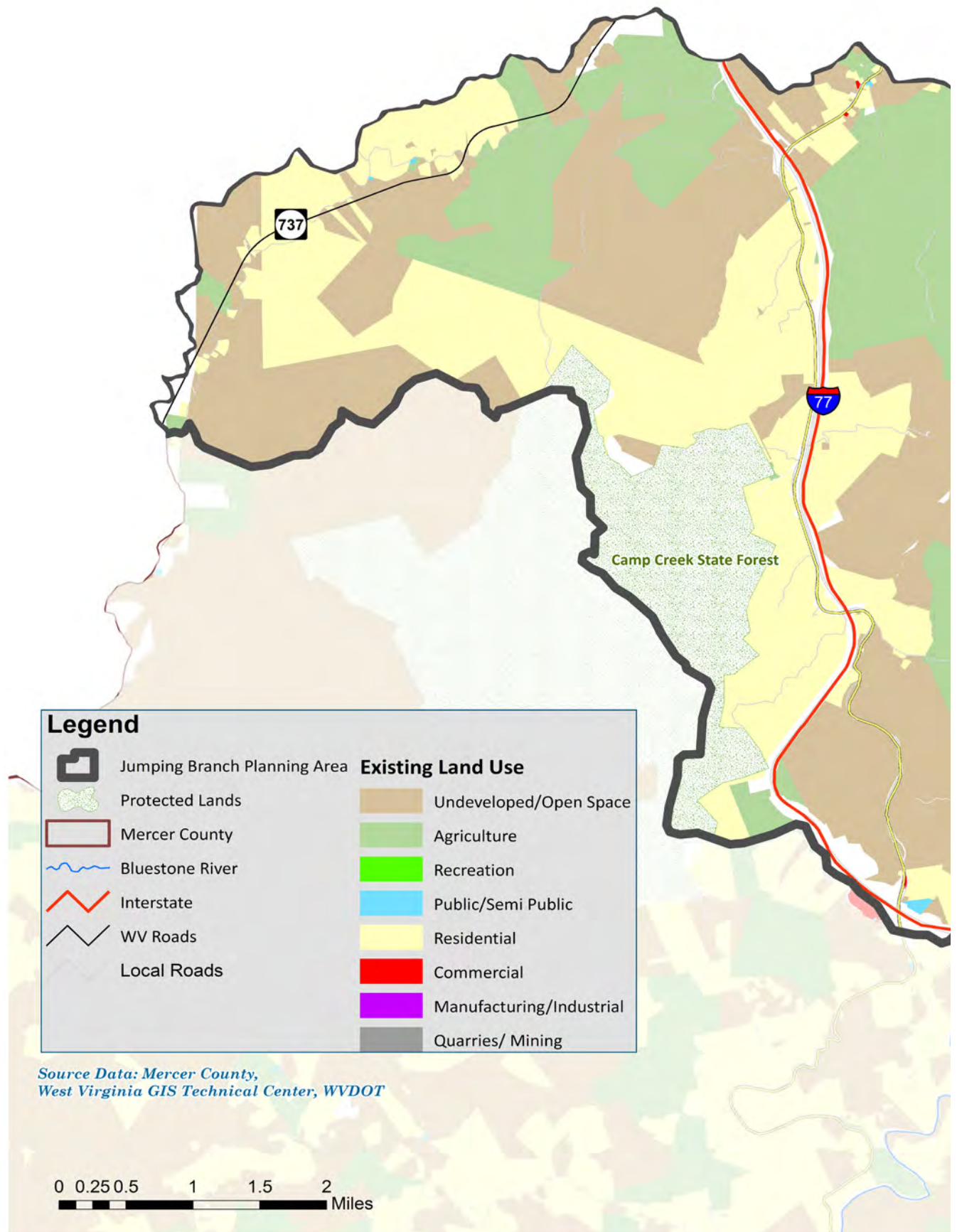


In January 2017, the planning commission hosted a series of five open house meetings, located in various parts of the county: Oakvale, Princeton, Bluewell, Spanishburg, and Athens. At least one meeting was in the western, northern, southern, and eastern part of the county. These meetings were widely publicized and held on different days to provide for maximum flexibility. Well over 100 people attended the five open house meetings and provided input.

Planning Areas

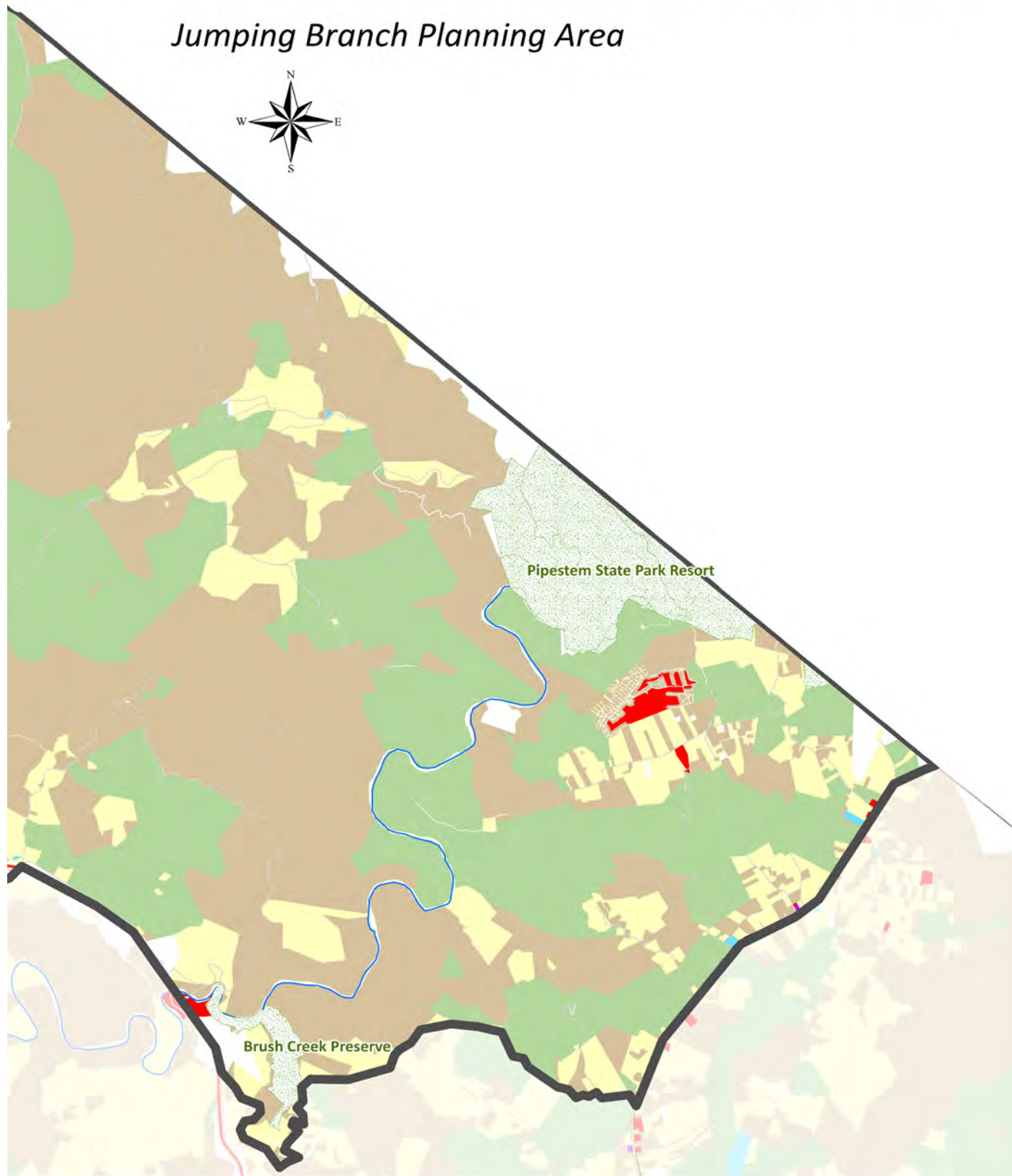
Mercer County not only has one of the larger populations in West Virginia, but the county is also geographically large and diverse. Recognizing that these qualities would result in different portions of the county facing different issues, the planning commission divided the county into “planning areas.” The planning areas were not intended to have any force of law but instead aimed to ensure input was based on a thorough study of the land and relevant issues. The planning areas helped ensure that each part of the county, not just certain portions of the county, were analyzed and discussed. Initially, planning areas followed the magisterial districts because most planning commissioners felt those districts reflected natural breaks in demographics, issues, and topography.

However, the planning commission decided against strictly following magisterial districts because demographics were easier to obtain with the county divided into planning areas by Census Block Groups, guided by magisterial districts. The planning areas (which are not identical to the magisterial districts) are Jumping Branch, Rock, Beaver Pond, East River, and Plymouth.



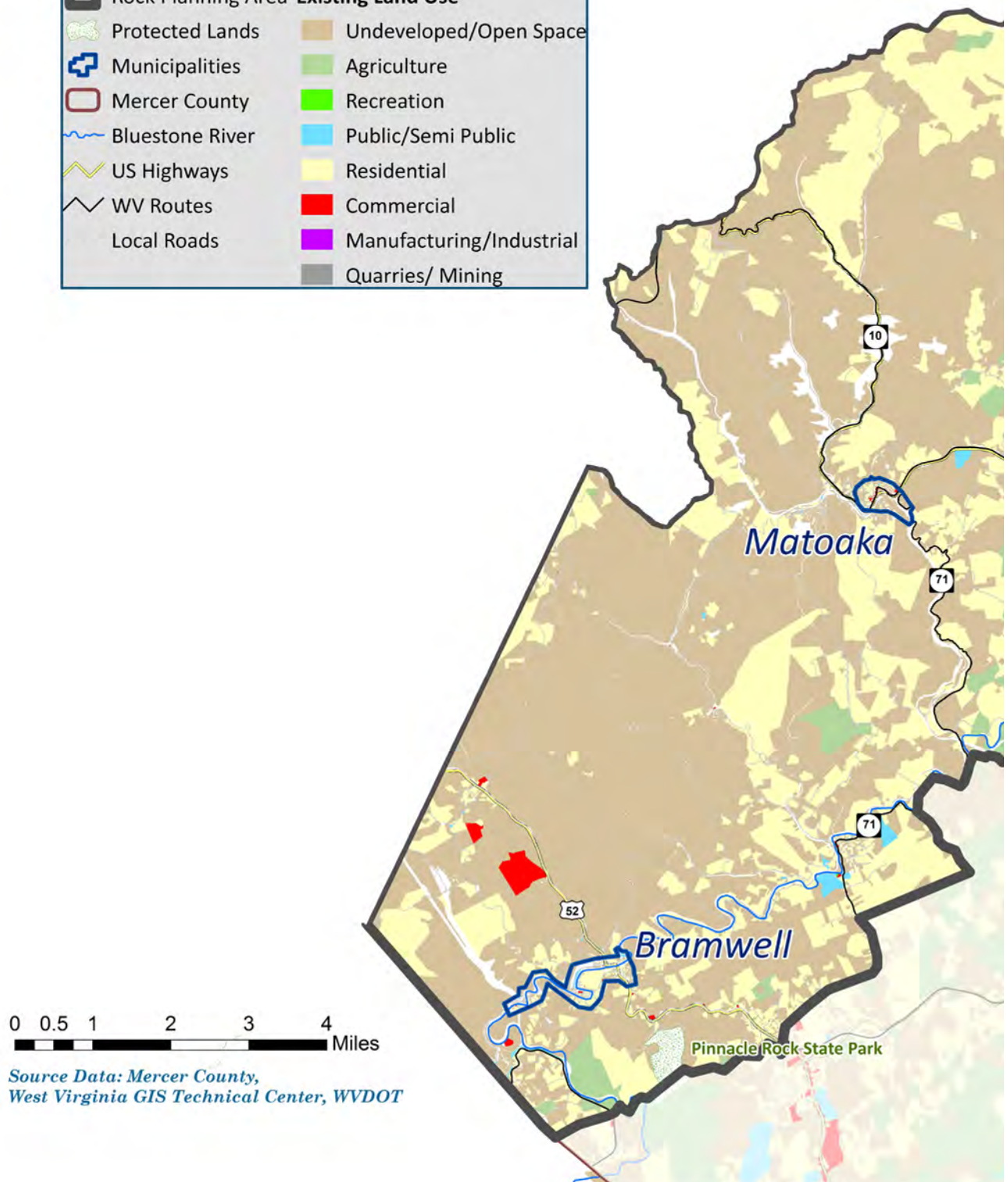
Mercer County Comprehensive Plan

Jumping Branch Planning Area

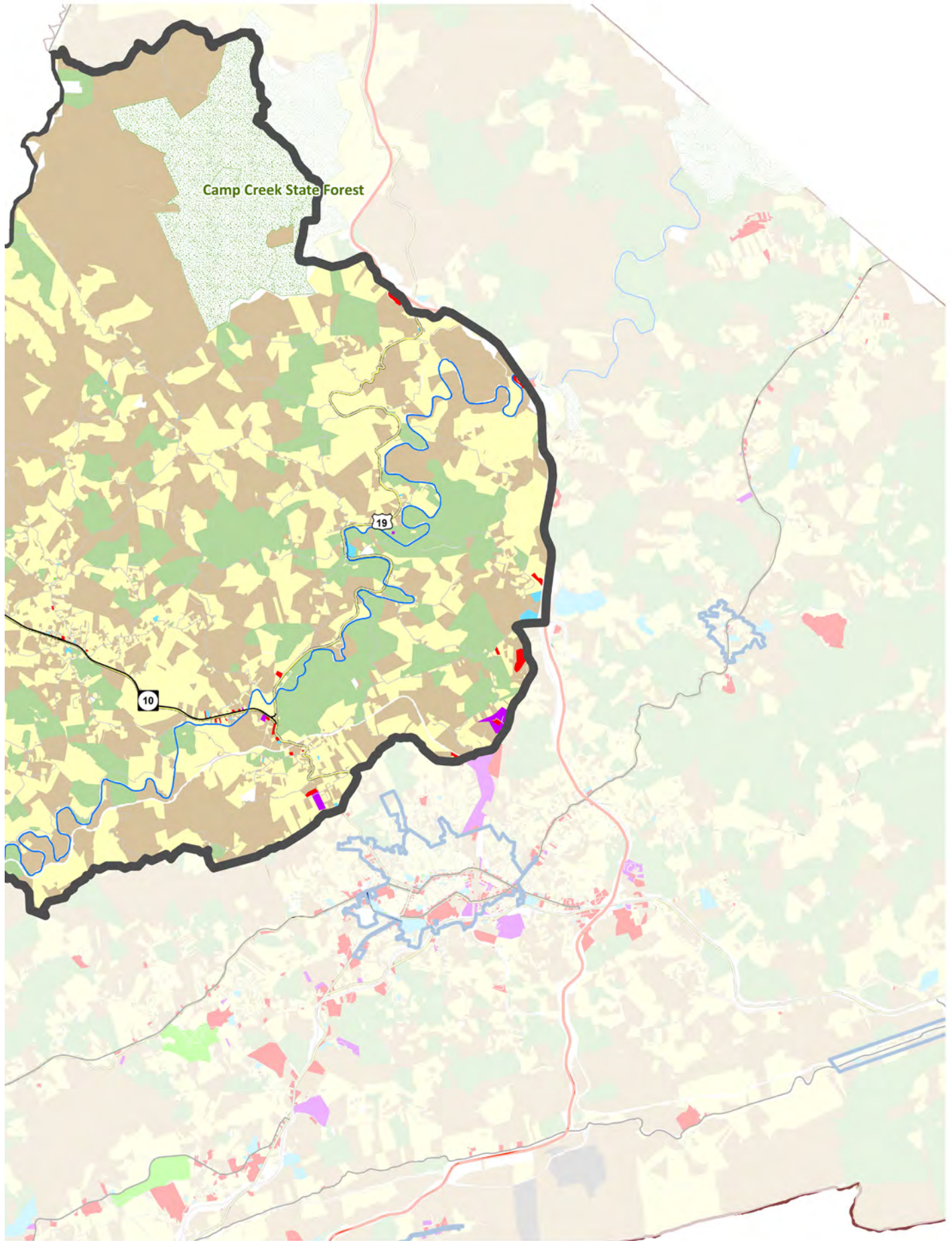


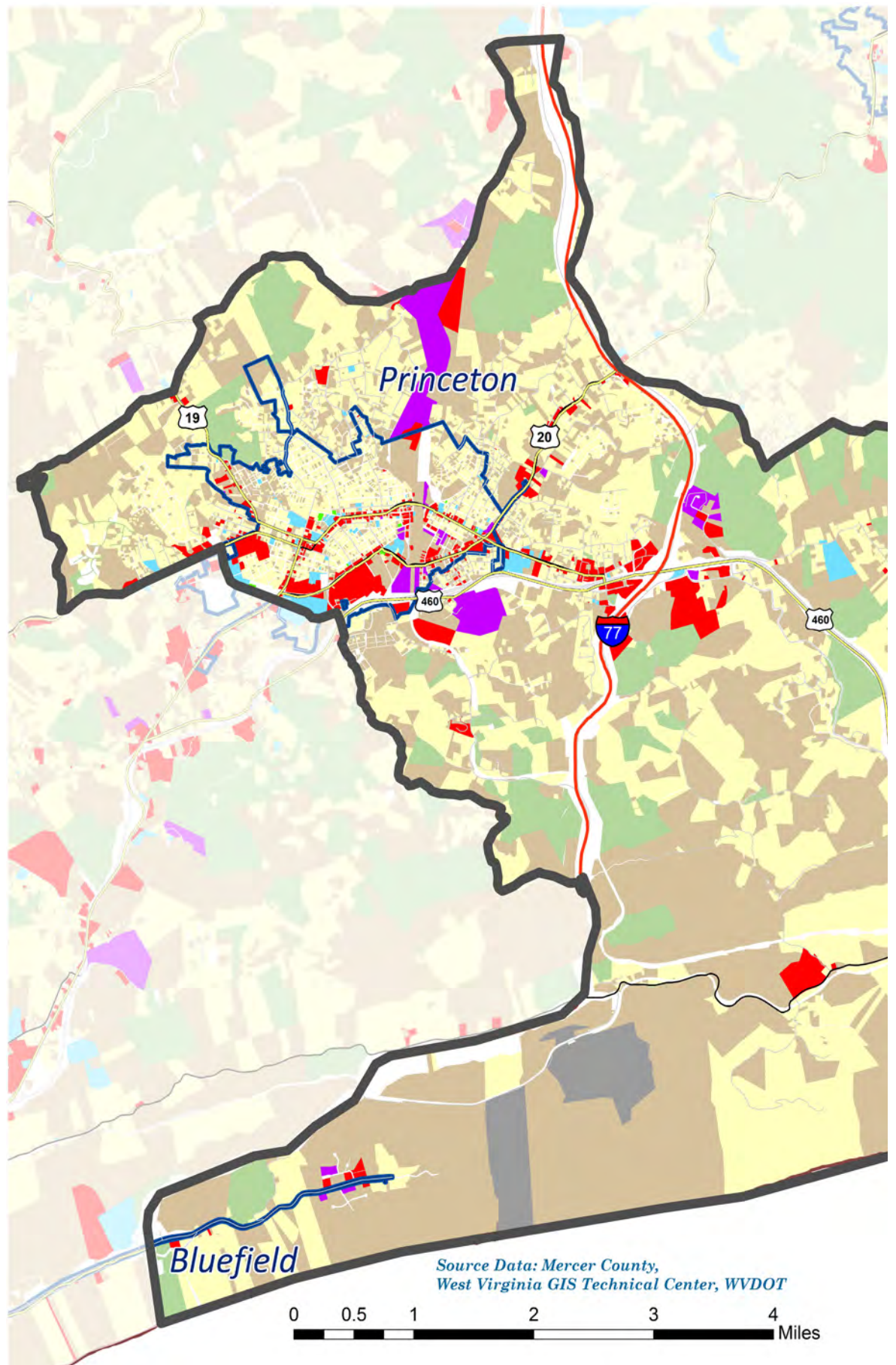
Mercer County Comprehensive Plan

Rock Planning Area



Source Data: Mercer County,
West Virginia GIS Technical Center, WVDOT





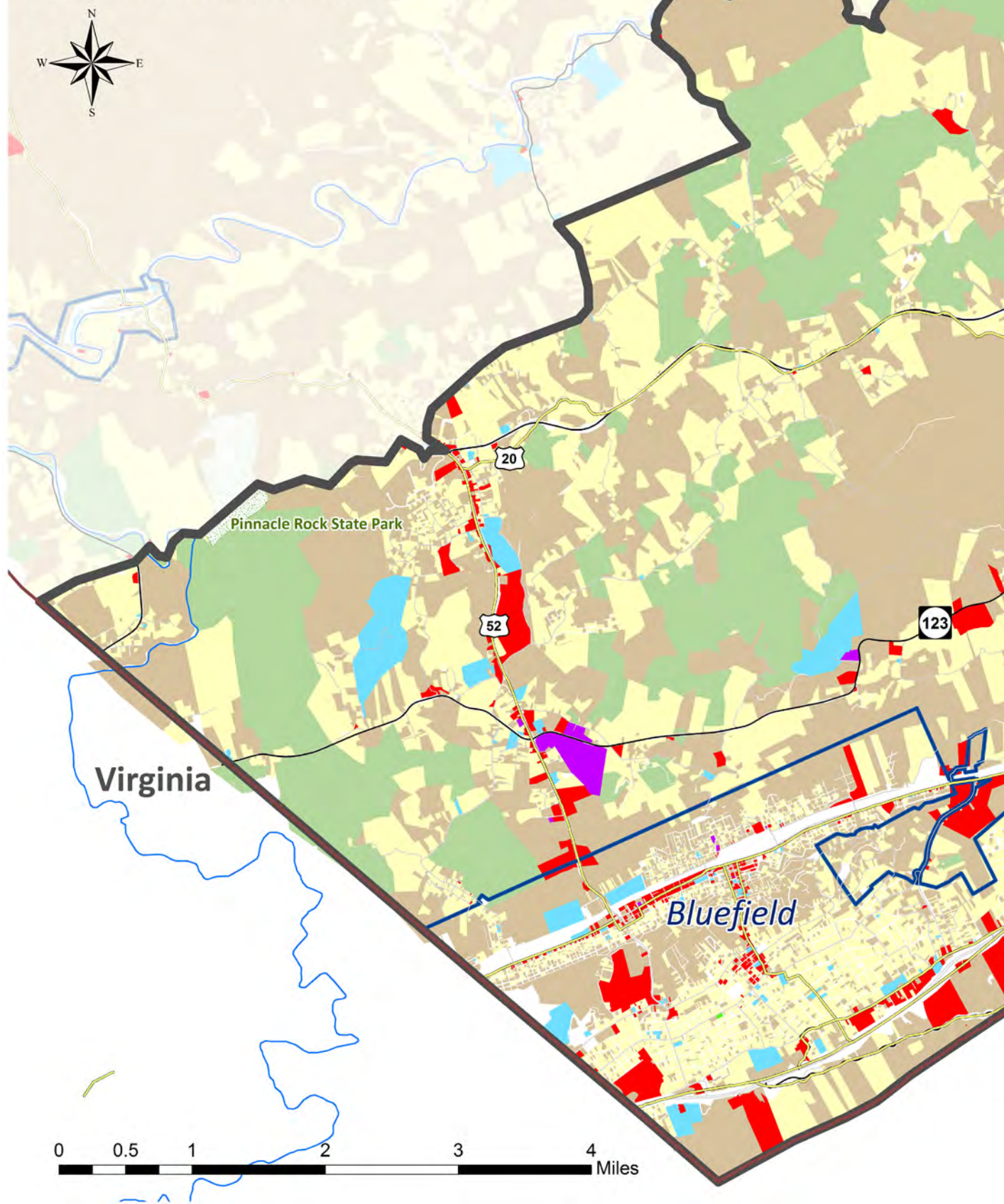
Mercer County Comprehensive Plan

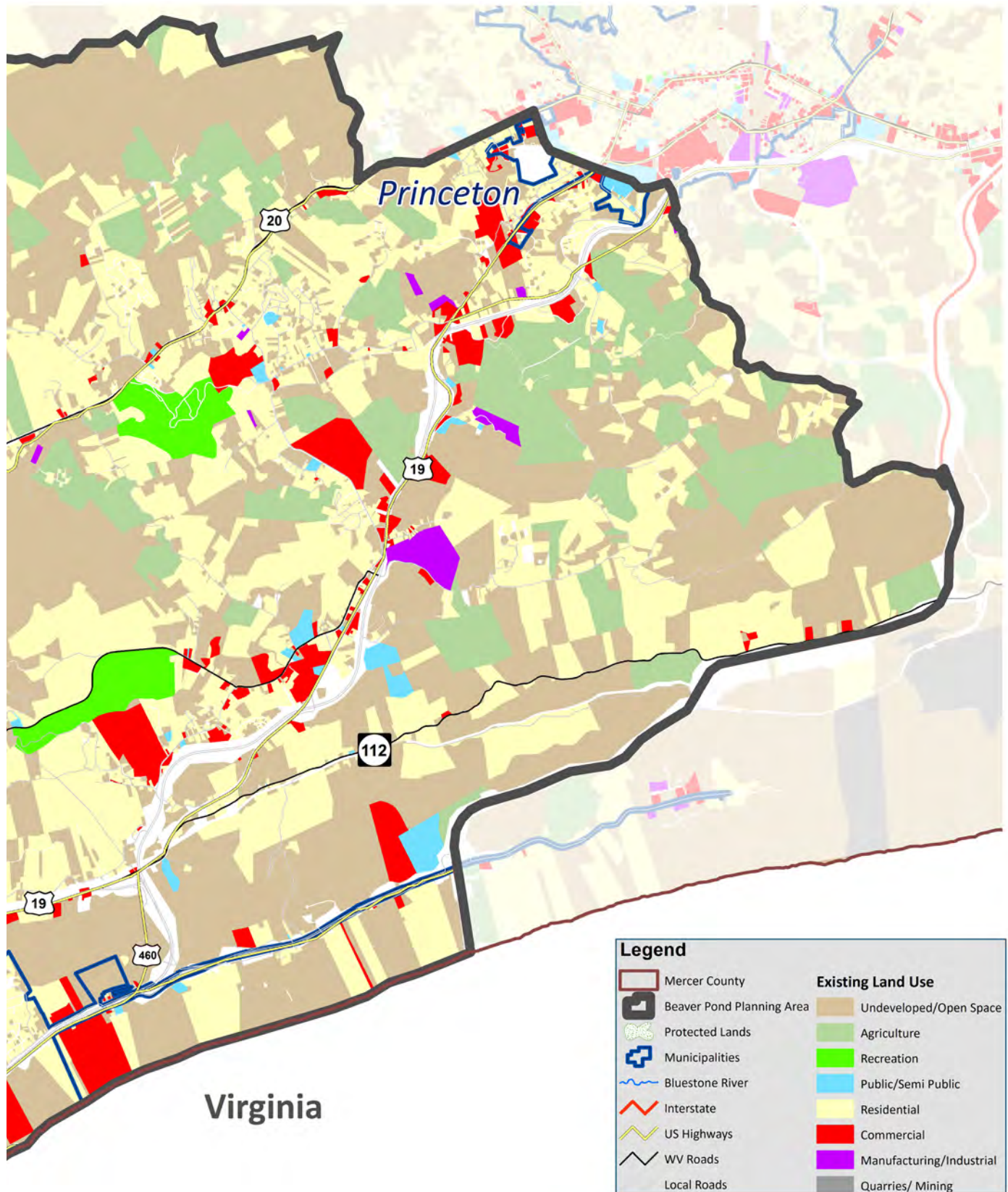
East River Planning Area



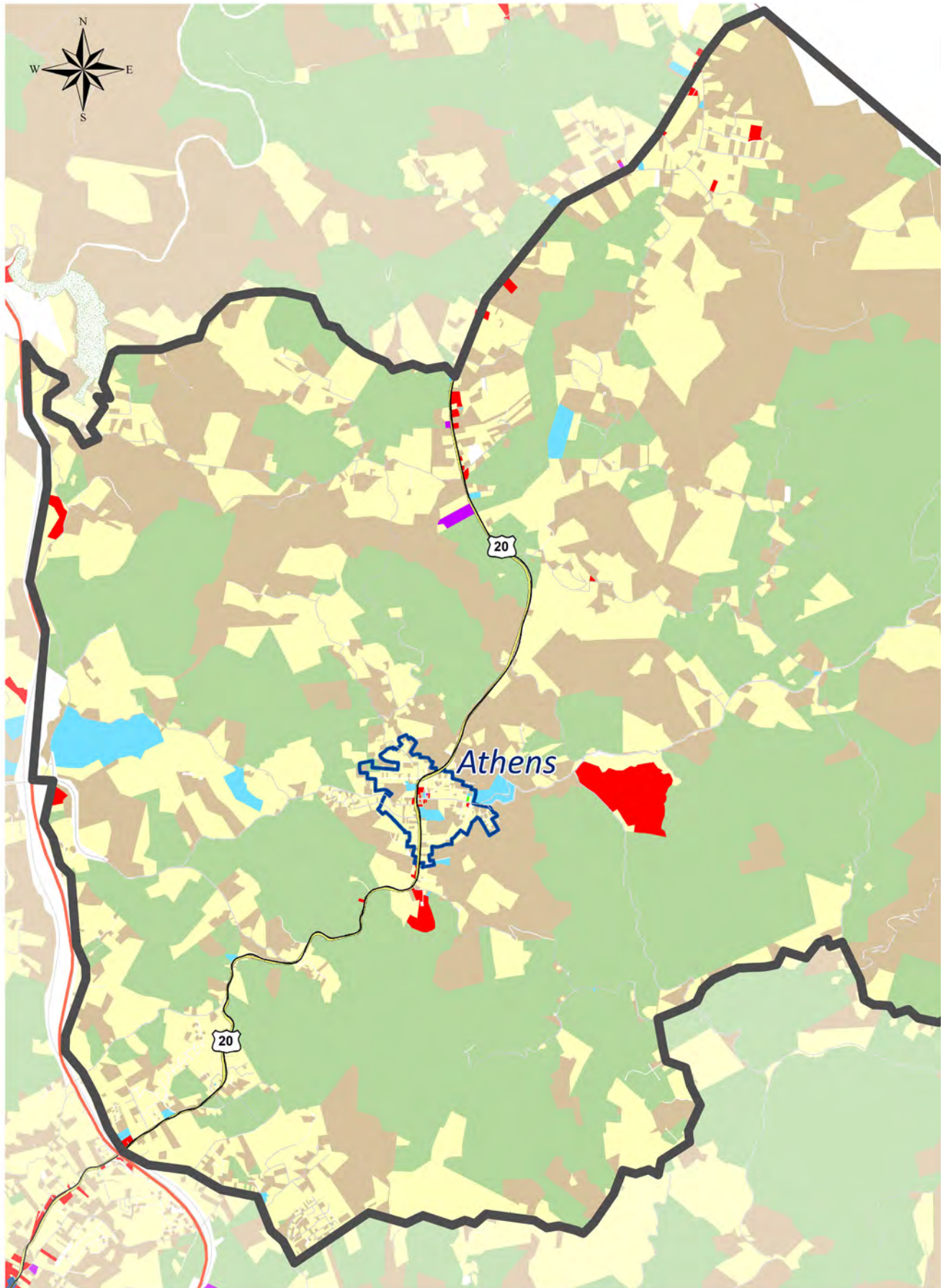
Mercer County Comprehensive Plan

Beaver Pond Planning Area



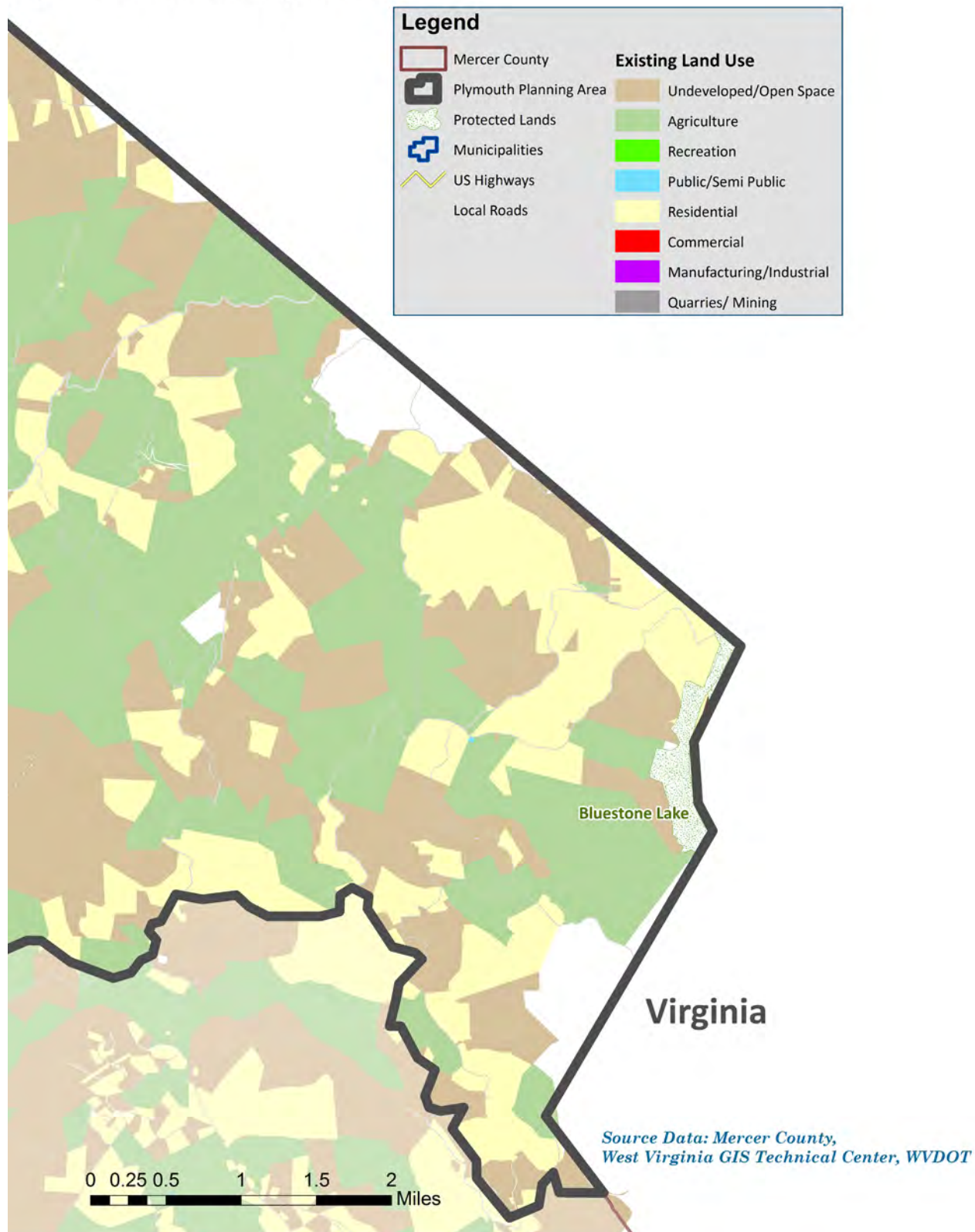


Source Data: Mercer County,
West Virginia GIS Technical Center, WVDOT



Mercer County Comprehensive Plan

Plymouth Planning Area



Organizing the Comprehensive Plan

The Mercer County Comprehensive Plan has been developed with readability and navigability in mind. Chapter 1, the introduction, outlines “The Comprehensive Plan Process,” including procedural and logistical requirements. “Chapter 2: Where Are We Now” highlights current conditions in Mercer County. “Chapter 3: Issues We Have Identified” is where the needs of the county, including those specific to certain planning areas, are described and analyzed. The last section, “Chapter 4: How Do We Achieve Our Vision,” provides a “plan of action” for the county to follow to achieve the identified goals and objectives.

The appendices provide supplemental information related to the comprehensive plan, including sample surveys, public input procedures, and open house results.

Tables (Compliance with Chapter 8A)

The following two tables indicate where certain requirements for the comprehensive plan have been satisfied. The first chart is the “required objectives” checklist, which outlines the seven objectives that every comprehensive plan in West Virginia must satisfy. The second chart outlines all of the “required components” that every comprehensive plan in West Virginia must include.

Required Objectives for a Comprehensive Plan	
W. VA. Code §8A-3-4(b)(1)-(7)	
Code Provision	Chapter
Statement of goals and objectives Maps, plats, and/or charts- that present basic information on the land, including present and future uses	All Chapters
Timeline on how to meet short and long-term goals and objectives	Implementation Matrix
Action plan with implementation strategies	Chapter 4, Implementation Matrix
Recommendations of a financial program for necessary public funding	Implementation Matrix
Statement of recommendations concerning future land use and development policies	3-1 to -8, -9 to -11, -15, -16 to -27
A program to encourage regional planning, coordination, and cooperation	All Chapters
Maps, plats, and/or charts- that present basic information on the land, including present and future uses	All Chapters

Required Components for a Comprehensive Plan

W. VA. Code §8A-3-4(c)(1)-(13)

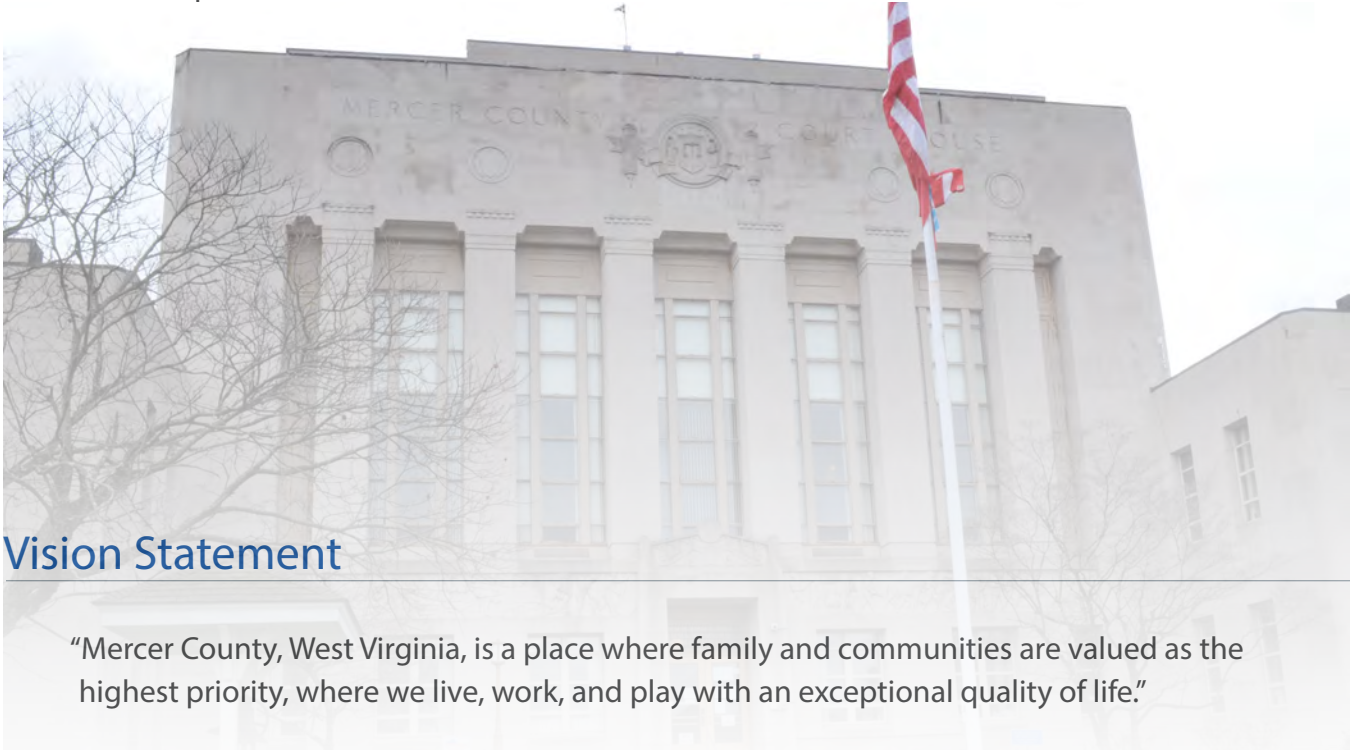
Code Provision	Page #
Land Use	
Different land uses (including, for example, residential, agricultural, historic, etc.)	1-5 to -15; 2-5 to -7, -21 to -25; 3-16 to -27
Population density and building intensity standards	2-2 to -8
Growth and/or decline management	2-2 to -8; 3-1 to -11; 3-16 to -29; 3-41 to -42, -44
Projected population growth or decline	2-2 to -5
Constraints on development (including identifying flood-prone and subsidence areas)	2-22 to -23
Housing	
Analyze projected housing needs and different types of housing needed (including affordable housing and accessible housing for persons with disabilities)	2-5 to -8
Identify the number of projected housing units and land needed	2-5 to -8; 3-31, -45
Address substandard housing	2-5 to -8; 3-30 to -33, -45
Rehabilitate and improve existing housing	3-30 to -33, -45
Adaptive reuse of buildings into housing	3-30 to -33, -45
Transportation	
Vehicular, transit, air, port, railroad, river, and any other mode	2-9 to -10; 3-44 to 45
Movement of traffic and parking	2-9 to -10, -13; 3-44 to -45

Required Components for a Comprehensive Plan	
W. VA. Code §8A-3-4(c)(1)-(13)	
Pedestrian and bicycle systems	3-37 to -38
Intermodal transportation	2-10
Economic development	
Analyze opportunities, strengths and weaknesses	2-10 to -13; 3-9 to -11
Identify and designate economic development sites and/or sectors	2-10 to -13; 3-9 to -11, -16, -27, -35, -43
Identify types of economic development sought	3-9 to -11, -35, -43
Miscellaneous Components	
Infrastructure	3-1 to -8
Public Services	2-14 to -20, 3-1 to -8, -12 to -16, -28 to -40, -43, -45
Rural	2-21, 3-5 to -8, -15, -17, -27, 29, -36, -45
Recreation	2-24 to -25; 3-35 to -43
Community Design	3-11, -29, -36 to -37, -41
Preferred development areas	3-16 to -27, -30 to -33
Renewal and/or redevelopment	2-5 to -8, 3-30 to -33
Financing	Implementation Matrix
Historic preservation	3-43

CHAPTER 2: “WHERE ARE WE NOW”

Chapter 2 of the Mercer County Comprehensive Plan provides a “snapshot” of where the county is now. This snapshot includes in-depth analysis of demographics and trends to provide a good foundation for identifying the needs of the community and developing prioritized recommendations for Mercer County to achieve its vision for the future.

A community’s vision statement is an overarching statement that anchors the comprehensive plan process and reflects where Mercer County would like to be in ten years. All of the goals, objectives, and action steps are consistent with the vision statement.



Vision Statement

“Mercer County, West Virginia, is a place where family and communities are valued as the highest priority, where we live, work, and play with an exceptional quality of life.”

History

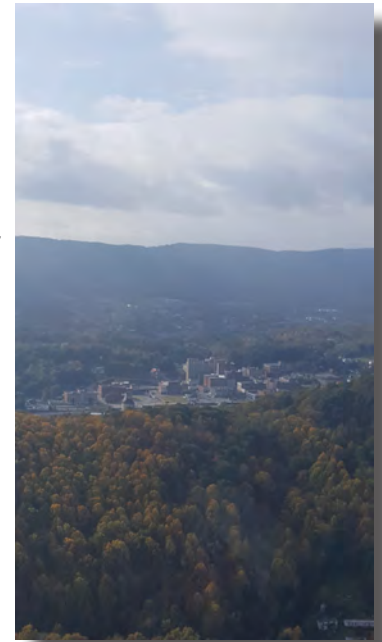
Each community within Mercer County has its own unique history full of significant people and events. Mercer County, West Virginia, was originally formed as a Virginia county in 1837 from portions of Giles and Tazewell Counties. The county was named in honor of General Hugh Mercer of Fredericksburg. General Mercer died at the Battle of Princeton, New Jersey, during the Revolutionary War. The most notable historic building in Mercer County is the McNutt House, the only surviving house in Princeton from the Civil War. The town was burned to the ground to keep the Union troops from taking the community.

The county seat of Mercer County is Princeton. Other incorporated municipalities in Mercer County include Athens, Bluefield, Bramwell, Oakvale, and Matoaka. However, Matoaka has recently taken steps to dissolve as a municipality.

Interesting Fact - During the Civil War, some of the buildings in Princeton were burned during key battles.

Mercer County was dominated by subsistence farming until the mid-1800s, when coal became a highly sought after commodity. While Mercer County has never been a significant coal-producing county, the county was a railroad hub for the Southern West Virginia Coalfields. The rail and timber industries became prominent in the region. In particular, Bluefield and Princeton saw a significant increase in population with the growth of industries that supported the rail, timber, and coal industries.

Mercer County has seen its share of large-scale employers in the past. In Princeton, North American Rockwell built electronic equipment used by Boeing. During the company's peak, North American Rockwell had 800 employees working in three shifts. The company was in business in Mercer County from the 1950s to late 1970s. Struthers Drug, another large company, was located near North American Rockwell. Other significant employers in Mercer County include the hospitals and the Board of Education. The Dean Company made veneer, operated from 1950 until 2000, and employed hundreds. During the mid-1900s, the shops in downtown Princeton collectively employed 800 people. Much of the business was due to the N & W Railroad Company. Recently, the service sector has become a larger part of the Mercer County economy.



City of Princeton

Interesting Fact - Over 600 cemeteries are located in Mercer County, many of which are family plots.

Population

Mercer County is part of the "Bluefield Micropolitan Statistical Area." This area includes Tazewell County, Virginia, and is anchored by the City of Bluefield, West Virginia. Micropolitan Statistical areas are identified as labor market areas centered on an urban area with between 10,000 and 50,000 people, such as Bluefield. The United States has 536 micropolitan areas: six micropolitan areas



City of Bluefield

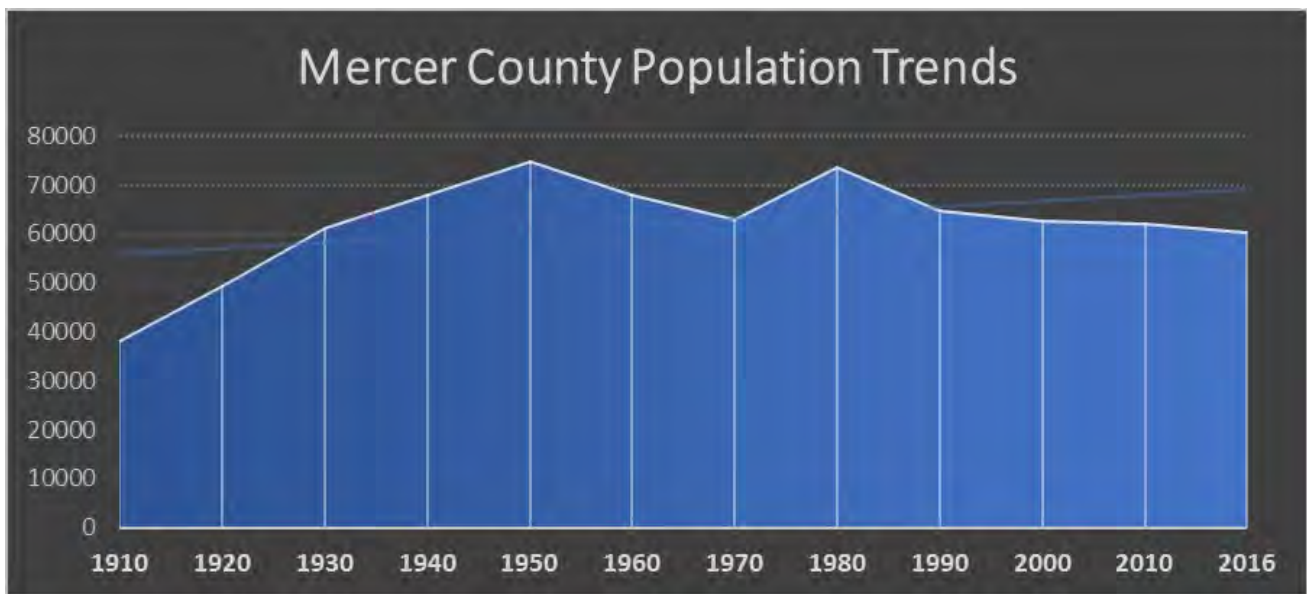
and 11 metropolitan statistical areas are located in West Virginia. In 2010, the Bluefield Micropolitan Statistical Area had a population of 107,342, making it the largest micropolitan statistical area in West Virginia.

As reported by the 2010 United States Census "West Virginia QuickFacts," Mercer County had the eighth highest population of any county in West Virginia with 62,264 people.

Top 10 Largest Counties in West Virginia, by Population:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Kanawha County 193,063 | 6. Raleigh County 78,859 |
| 2. Berkeley County 104,169 | 7. Harrison County 69,099 |
| 3. Cabell County 96,319 | 8. Mercer County 62,264 |
| 4. Monongalia County 96,189 | 9. Marion County 56,418 |
| 5. Wood County 86,956 | 10. Putnam County 55,486 |

Chart 2-1: Mercer County Population, by United States Census Bureau



Mercer County's population grew steadily through the early 1900s up through 1950, when the county hit an apex population of over 73,000 residents. While the population declined in the 1960s and 1970s, Mercer County saw a marked increase in 1980 to over 70,000 residents. Since 1980, Mercer County has experienced a gradual decline in population to just over 60,000 residents in 2016. The county's population has not been this low since 1930.

Mercer County has followed state trends in population—only a few counties in West Virginia have experienced population growth in the last four decades. The WVU Bureau of Business and Economic Research (BBER), through its "Population Trends in West Virginia through 2030," projected that Mercer County's population would continue to gradually decline from 62,264 in 2010 down to 59,454 by 2030, approximately a 5% drop in population over a 20-year period. Several counties, especially in the southern coalfields, are expected to lose more than 10% of their population during that time. Only 11 counties in West Virginia are expected to add residents between 2010 and 2030, with Monongalia, Jefferson, and Berkeley Counties forecasted to grow the most during that time. The continued loss in population affects many aspects of the community: tax revenue, new business development, grant funding, and the availability of various resources.

Age Cohorts

Analyzing age distribution by cohort can reveal valuable information on what types of services citizens will need in the next five to ten years. An older population might consider high priorities to be health services, senior and assisted living, and recreational opportunities. Meanwhile, a younger population may need more youth activities, education, and safety programs. The planning commission compiled Mercer County's age distribution by cohort from 2000 and 2015, and compared Mercer County's 2015 age cohorts to that of the State.

Age Cohorts

Young Child (under 5 years of age)

Primary School Age (5-9)

Middle School (10-14)

High School (15-19)

Post-Secondary (20-24)

Childbearing (25-35)

Childrearing (36-54)

Pre-retirement (55-64)

Retired (65-74)

Golden Years (75 and up)

(2015 American Community Survey Data)

Table 2-1 Age Distribution by Cohort, Mercer County 2000 and 2015

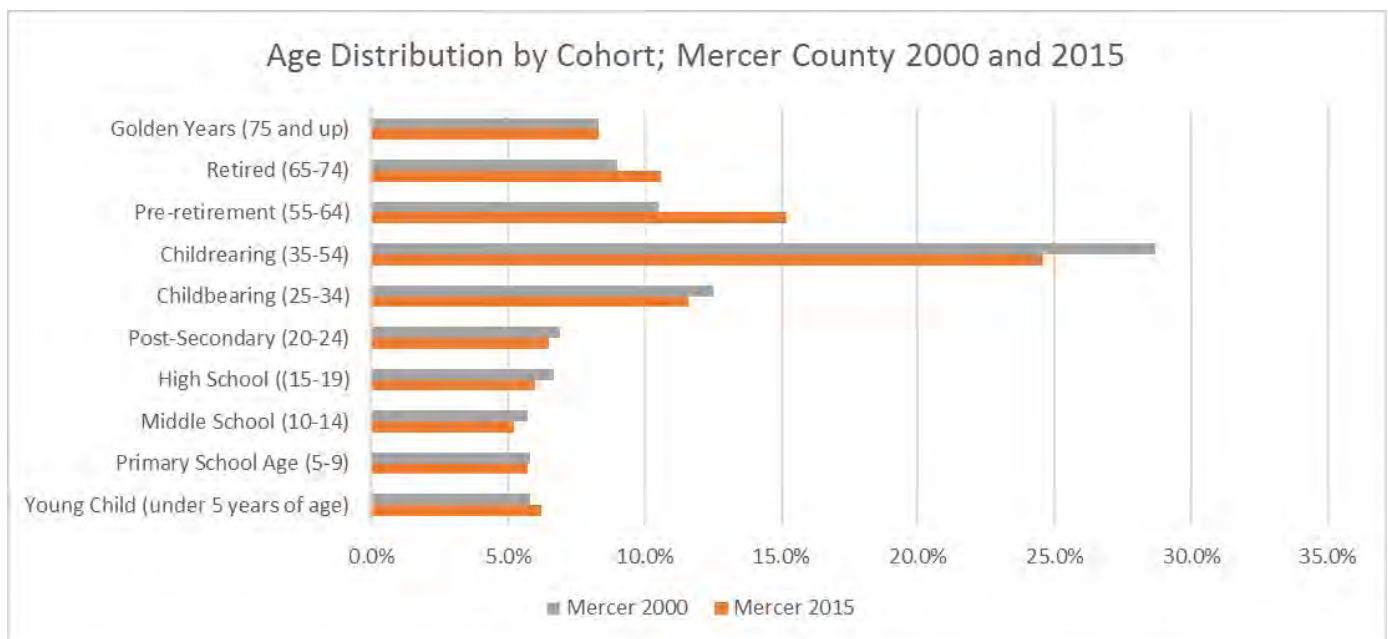


Table 2-1 highlights the age distribution difference in Mercer County between 2000 and 2015. The most noticeable change between Mercer County's age cohorts, during this time, is the significant decrease in Childrearing (35-54) persons, from 28.7% of the population in 2000, down to 24.6% in 2015. This decline is likely related to another significant change, the increase in Pre-retirement (55-64) persons from 10.5% in 2000 to 15.2% in 2015.



Town of Athens

Both changes, the decline in Childrearing persons and increase in Pre-retirement persons, are indicative of an aging population, following state trends. WVU's "Population Trends in West Virginia through 2030" forecasts that persons aged 65 and over (Retired and Golden Years cohorts) will increase from about 16% of the total population in 2010 to about 23% of the population in 2030. At present, Mercer County already has a slightly older population compared to the state.

Racial Diversity

Mercer County is more racially diverse than the state as a whole. According to the Census Bureau's "2015 Estimate," West Virginia was comprised of 93.6% Caucasian, 3.3% Black, 0.7% Asian, and 1.4% Hispanic persons. In Mercer County, 91.1% of the population was Caucasian, 5.9% Black, 0.7% Asian, and 0.9% Hispanic.

Housing

A community's housing stock is important to future growth and development potential. When the demand for housing is greater than the supply, housing becomes more expensive. Whereas, if the supply of housing is greater than demand, costs are typically lower. In the latter instance, vacancy and dilapidation become a concern. In order to be proactive, particularly with regard to blight, county officials should monitor the local housing stock: the number of units, the number of vacancies, the condition of the housing, and housing affordability. This ongoing assessment will allow local decision makers to determine policies that accurately address the needs of the community.

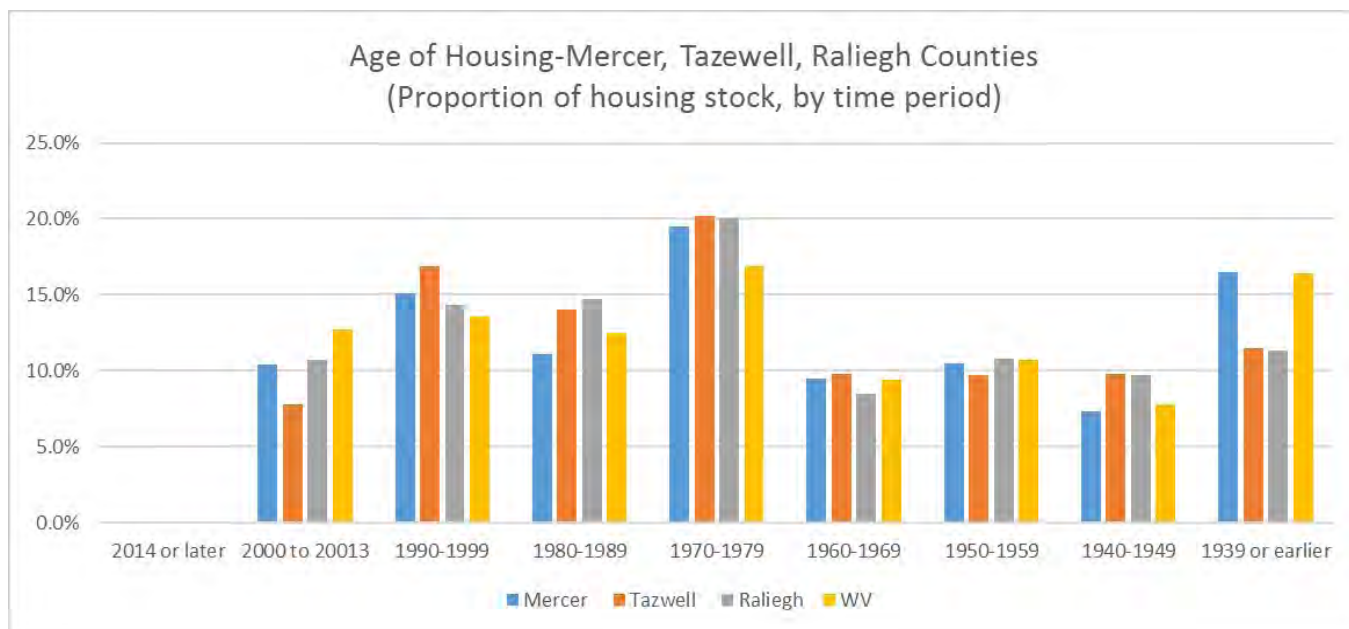
Housing Age

The age of a community's housing stock can be a good indicator of housing conditions and value. The older the housing structures, the greater the likelihood of deterioration and dilapidation. Higher than average vacancy rates likely exacerbate dilapidation when coupled with an older housing stock.

Table 2-2 compares the age of the housing stock in Mercer County to adjacent counties. This table shows what proportion of housing stock was built during a certain period in neighboring Tazewell County, Virginia, and Raleigh County, West Virginia—both have similar population sizes.

Very little new housing, built in the last 3 years, has been developed in any of the jurisdictions. All of the counties evaluated in Table 2-2 have few relatively new housing structures built between 2000 and 2013. Mercer and Raleigh Counties have higher proportions of relatively new housing than Tazewell County, but all three jurisdictions are below West Virginia’s statewide proportion. Instead, all three counties have more housing built between 1970 and 1979 than the statewide proportion. Mercer County’s proportion of the oldest housing, built in 1939 or earlier, approximates the state proportion, but is much higher than either Raleigh or Tazewell Counties.

Table 2-2: Age of Housing



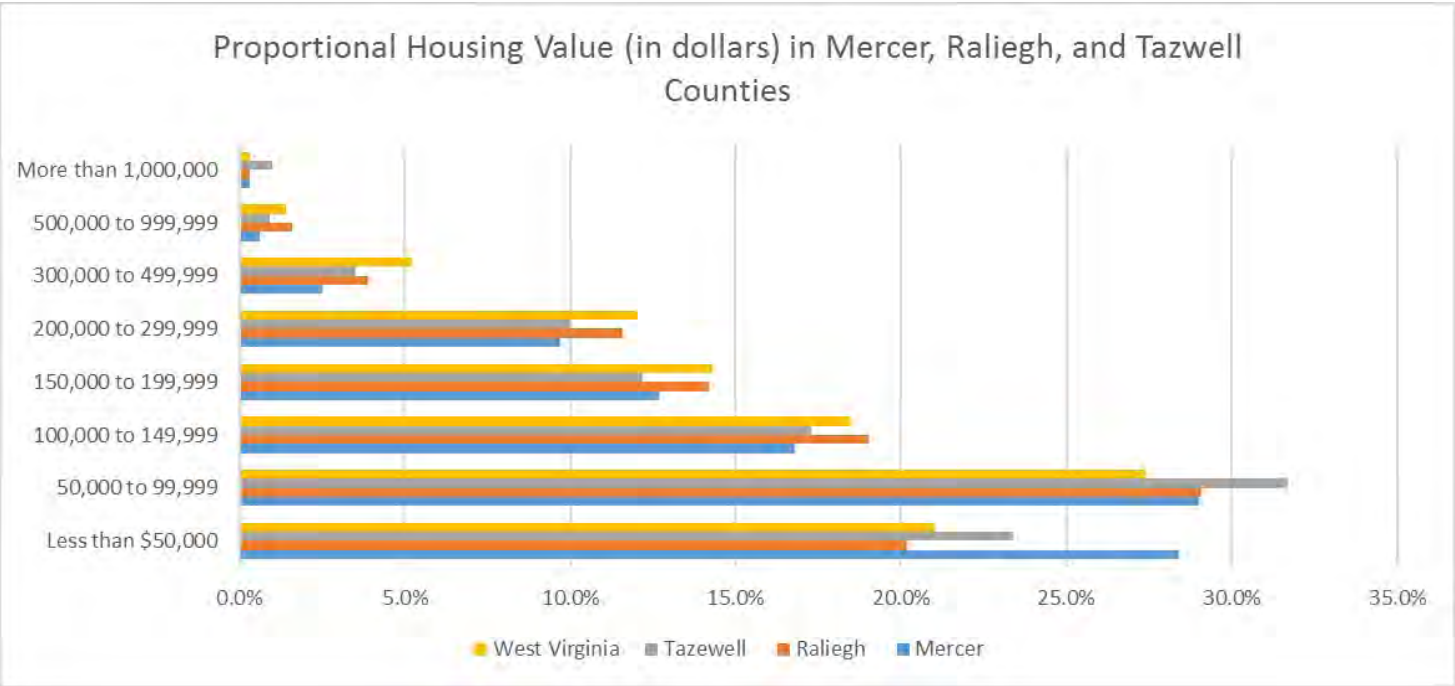
Housing Value

Local housing values can be a good indicator of affordability, demand, and the general condition of the housing stock. Table 2-3 identifies the values of owner-occupied housing in Mercer, Tazewell, and Raleigh counties, as well as West Virginia as a whole. The information was compiled from the 2015 American Community Survey.

In the lowest home value group (< \$50,000), Mercer County (28%) had a much higher proportion than Raleigh County (20%), Tazewell County (23%), or the state (21%). A significantly greater share of Mercer County’s owner-occupied housing stock has a low value compared to the other counties

analyzed and the state as a whole. One other significant difference is that Mercer County has a lower proportion of houses valued between \$100,000 and \$149,900 (16.8%), compared to Raleigh (19%), Tazewell (17.3%), and West Virginia (18.5%).

Table 2-3: Housing Value



Owner-Occupied and Housing Vacancy

In 2015, Mercer County had approximately 30,000 housing units, 15% of which were vacant. Of the occupied housing units, 72% were owner occupied and the remaining 28% were renter occupied. Mercer County’s owner occupancy and vacancy housing statistics closely parallel West Virginia’s, with statewide rates of 84% occupied and 16% vacant. Of the occupied housing units in West Virginia,



72.5% were owner occupied while 27.5% were renter occupied. Mercer County and West Virginia, as a whole, have higher vacancy rates and higher owner-occupancy rates than national statistics. During the same time in the United States, close to 88% of housing units were occupied (12% vacant), but only 64% of occupied housing units were owner occupied.

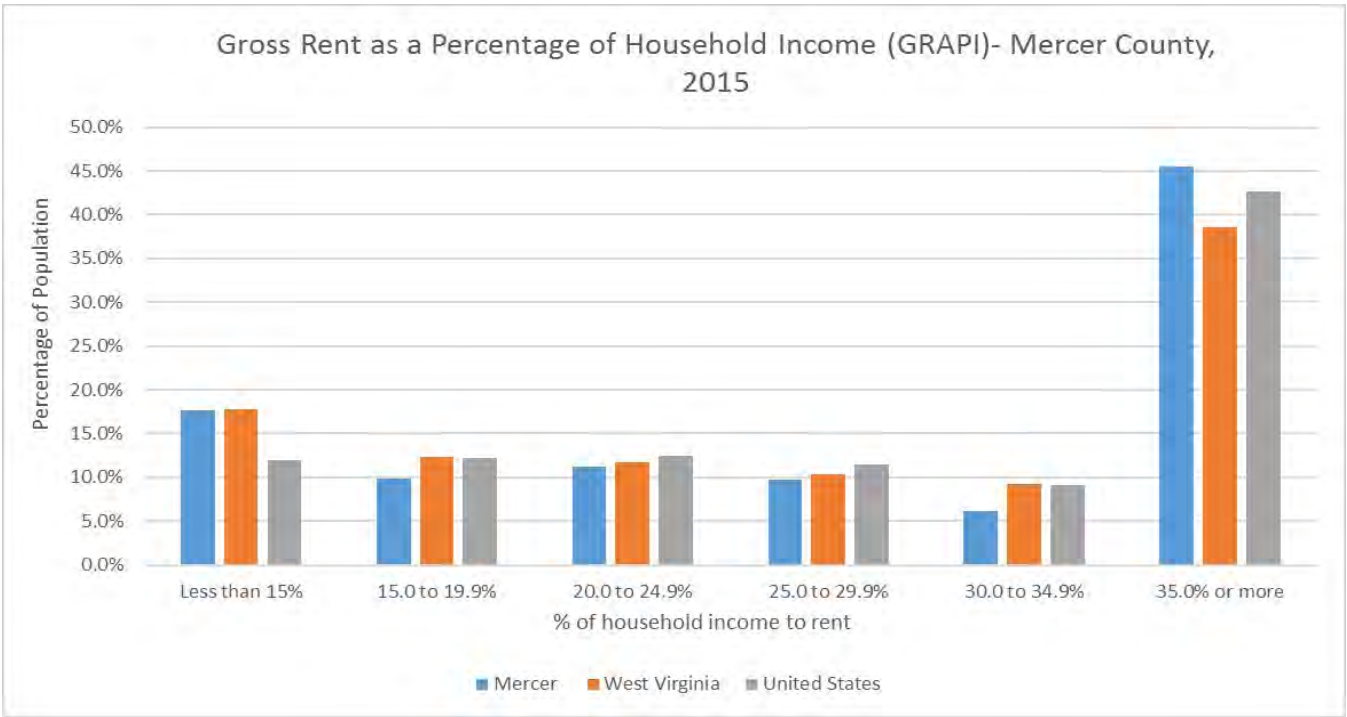
Over the last 15 years, the primary changes in Mercer County’s housing market with regard to the aspects discussed in this section are a decrease in housing units, an increase in owner-occupied housing units, and an increase in vacant housing. The county experienced a net loss of around 150 housing units. The owner-occupancy rate increased from 23% to 25%. The vacancy rate increased from 12% to 15%.

Gross Rent as a Percentage of Household Income (GRAPI)

Gross Rent as a Percentage of Household Income (GRAPI) is a ratio of monthly gross rent to monthly household income. GRAPI can be a good indication of housing affordability. Ideally, a majority of households are paying a lower percentage of income towards housing under GRAPI.

Table 2-4 indicates that Mercer County has a higher than average proportion of renters paying less than 15% of household income in rent. However, Mercer County also has a significantly higher proportion of renters paying greater than 35% of household income in rent. Nearly 46% of renters in Mercer County pay 35% or more of their household income in rent compared to 39% in West Virginia and 43% nationally.

Table 2-4: GRAPI, Mercer County



Transportation

Moving people and goods quickly and safely is an important goal for many localities. A good transportation network can increase the quality of life for all citizens.

Airports

Mercer County Airport has one asphalt runway that is 4,743 feet in length and 100 feet wide. The airport is publicly owned and operated by the Mercer County Airport Authority. The airport has 19 aircraft based on the field and averages 45 operations per day.

Charleston's Yeager Airport has air service to Chicago, Washington D.C., Atlanta, Myrtle Beach, and Houston, and is less than a two-hour drive for most Mercer County citizens. Roanoke Regional Airport is a little over an hour and half from Princeton and has nonstop service to Washington D.C., Charlotte, Atlanta, Orlando, New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. From Princeton, Piedmont Triad International Airport in North Carolina is about a 2.5-hour drive, and Charlotte Douglas Airport is a little less than a 3-hour drive; both of these airports provide transcontinental and international flights.

Vehicles

Mercer County is bisected by Interstate-77, which runs north-south from Cleveland, Ohio, to Columbia, South Carolina. US Route 460, another high traffic corridor, runs east-west and intersects I-77 in Princeton. Route 460 goes from Frankfort, Kentucky, to Norfolk, Virginia. Numerous other local and state roads provide Mercer County residents with access in and around the county.

The Mercer County Sheriff's Department provides information on vehicular crashes. Between January and October 2017, Mercer County reported 739 crashes. A high number of accidents occurred on Route 460, between Bluefield and Princeton, and on Route 20, between I-77 and the Town of Athens. Additionally, several accidents occurred around Princeton, particularly near the I-77 interchange.

Rail

Rail transportation has been a vital part of Mercer County's past. Several rail lines are still operational throughout Mercer County and the region.

Norfolk & Western (N & W) Railway was a large player in southern West Virginia beginning in the late 1800s. The City of Bluefield figured prominently as a terminal and as a major division point for the N & W Railway.

Another railway with history in Mercer County is the Virginian, nicknamed the "Richest Little Railroad in the World." The Virginian connected Hampton Roads, Virginia, with the southern coalfields of West Virginia, much like the N & W. The Virginian was later merged with the N & W and is now known

as the Norfolk and Southern. Princeton has a museum with several artifacts from the time that the Virginian was operational as a railroad in southern West Virginia.

River

Mercer County has no water bodies that provide economic transportation options via water, unlike portions of West Virginia with access to larger river systems like the Kanawha and Ohio Rivers, both of which are navigable with larger boats and barges. However, the Bluestone River, which bisects Mercer County, provides a beautiful backdrop to kayak or canoe when water levels are safe for transport. The Bluestone River is also a “National Scenic River,” one of only 150 nationwide, and is protected by the National Park Service.

Public Transit

Public transit in Mercer County is provided by the Bluefield Area Transit (BAT). BAT provides shuttle service in and around the Town of Athens for Concord University students on a regular, fixed schedule when school is in session. In 2013, administrative and maintenance facilities for BAT were constructed. The Bluefield facility is over 14,000 square feet and cost nearly \$3.9 million to construct, all funded by grants.

BAT also operates outside of Mercer County with several stops in McDowell County. BAT provides accessible transportation throughout the region on a fixed schedule. Monthly passes are available and most fares are between \$1.25 and \$2.25 for a one-way trip.

Intermodal

Although intermodal transportation is not currently utilized within Mercer County, the area may be conducive to future business development that utilizes intermodal transportation facilities. The City of Bluefield has plans for a Colonial Intermodal Center, but no developments are currently underway.

Economic Development

In the past, Mercer County had been economically tied to the coal industry. While not a large coal-producing county like some of its neighbors, Mercer County served as a transportation and manufacturing hub for the southern coalfields. Today, industry has shifted more to the healthcare, education, and service sectors. For example, as of 2015, the county has 16 hotels with over 1,000 beds. (Source: MCEDA) The number of beds has increased with recent hotel construction in Mercer County.

Princeton Community Hospital, employing approximately 1,200 people, is one of the larger employers in the county. The hospital provides a variety of medical and behavioral services, diagnostic imaging modalities, and other outpatient



Mercer Mall

ancillary procedures. Princeton Community Hospital continues to expand its office space and is developing medical offices in and around the hospital campus. The hospital is actively working with the County on opioid abuse, Hepatitis C prevention and treatment, and a dental care program for the underserved.

Some of the top employers in Mercer County: (Source: MCEDA)

- Princeton Community Hospital
- Bluefield Regional Medical Center
- EchoStar LLC
- Concord University
- Wal-Mart Associates, Inc.
- Mercer County Board of Education
- Bluefield State College
- Kroger
- Lusk Disposal/Empire Salvage
- Mercer County Courthouse
- Norfolk and Southern Company
- Res-care
- Southern Highlands

Mercer Mall, which opened in 1980, services the entire area. The Mall has approximately 70 stores and over 660,000 square feet of retail space. During recent years, and with changing shopping demographics, the Mercer Mall has experienced downward economic pressures.

The largest industries in Mercer County are healthcare, retail trade, education, accommodation and food services, manufacturing, and construction. Mercer County has a much higher proportion of its labor force in retail trade (15.6%) compared to West Virginia (12.6%) and the United States (11.3%).

Health care is the largest industry in Mercer County, making up 20% of the workforce. In other words, one out of every five people with jobs in Mercer County work in healthcare related positions. Mercer County's healthcare industry is proportionately higher than both state (17%) and national (12.7%) figures. The Professional and Technical Services industry is one with fewer jobs in Mercer County (3.8%), compared to both state (4.4%) and national (5.8%) figures.

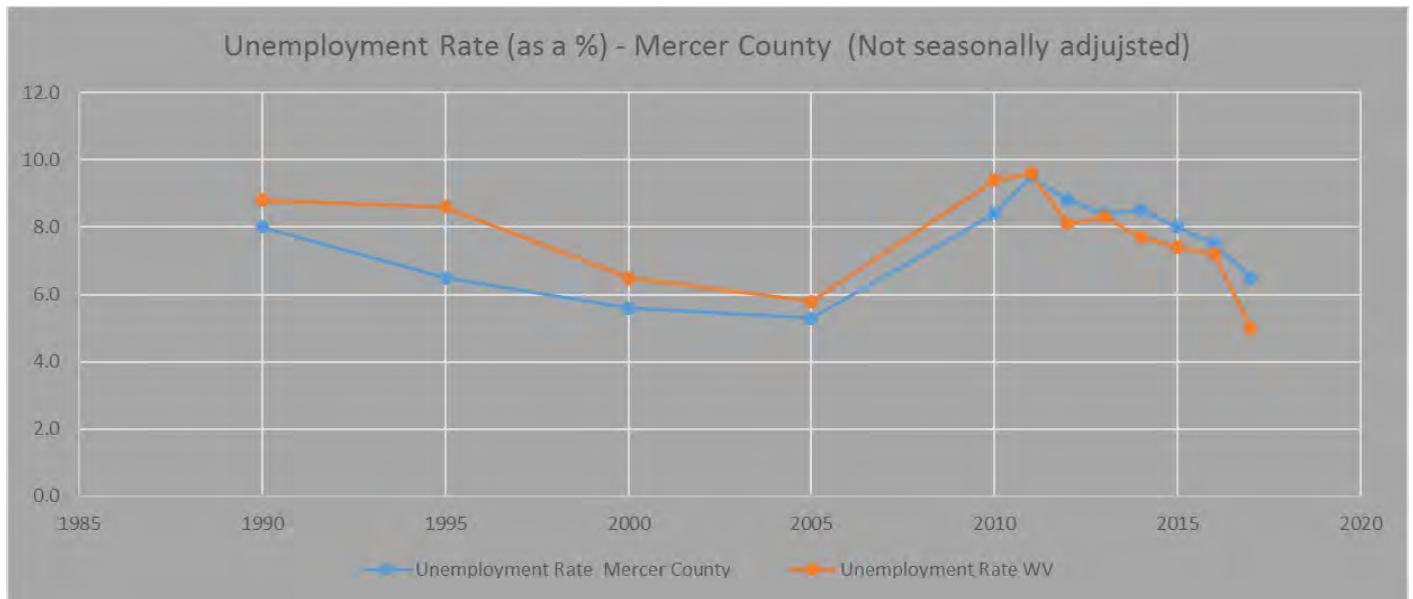
Tabel 2-5 shows the percent of employed workforce of Mercer County, West Virginia, and the United States, by industry.

Table 2-5: Paid Employment Share in 2015				
	Mercer County		West Virginia	United States
	Number	Percent	Percent	Percent
(Total)	23,443	-	-	-
Agriculture	66	0.03%	0.01%	0.9%
Mining	688	2.9%	4.3%	0.5%
Utilities	279	1.2%	1.5%	0.4%
Construction	1,236	5.3%	6.3%	4.3%
Manufacturing	1,674	7.1%	8.1%	9.0%
Wholesale Trade	414	1.8%	2.2%	4.3%
Retail Trade	3,661	15.6%	12.6%	11.3%
Transportation & Warehousing	864	3.7%	3.9%	3.1%
Information	482	2.1%	1.5%	2.1%
Finance	705	3.0%	3.0%	4.3%
Real Estate	115	0.5%	1.1%	1.5%
Professional & Tech. Services	894	3.8%	4.4%	5.8%
Management	21	~0.0%	0.001%	1.5%
Admin. & Waste Services	699	3.0%	3.4%	5.8%
Education	2,452	10.5%	9.7	1.9%
Health Care	4,678	20.0%	17.0%	12.7%
Arts & Recreation	378	1.6%	1.8%	1.5%
Accommodation/Food Services	1,818	7.8%	7.4%	8.7%
Other Services	1,130	4.8%	4.3%	3.4%
Public Administration	1,211	5.2%	6.7%	16.9%
* Source: United States Census Bureau. This table represents the most current statistics available.				

Unemployment Rate

Between 1990 and 2017, Mercer County's unemployment rate has fluctuated. In 1990, the county's unemployment rate was 8.0%. The unemployment rate gradually fell until around 2005, when the unemployment rate in Mercer County was slightly over 5.0%. After 2005, the unemployment rate increased quickly until it peaked at over 9.0% in 2011. Since 2011, unemployment has continued to decrease.

Chart 2-2: Unemployment Rate



From 1990 to 2011, Mercer County consistently had a lower unemployment rate than the state. After the Great Recession (2008-2010), some counties in West Virginia were able to rebound better than others. While Mercer County's unemployment rate has been falling since 2011, it has remained consistently higher than the state's unemployment rate.

As of 2015, the percent of Mercer County residents in the labor force is 49.1%. The same year, 53.9% of West Virginia's residents and 63.7% of people in the U.S. over 16 years old were in the labor force. Mercer County's "percentage in the labor force" figures are lower than the state and significantly lower than the national figures.

Travel time to work refers to the time it takes on average for people from a certain community to get from home to work each day, not counting people who work from home. The travel time includes time spent waiting for public transportation, picking up passengers in carpools, and in other activities related to getting to work. The average travel time to work is rounded to the nearest tenth of a minute.

In 2015, the average travel time to work in Mercer County was 21.6 minutes. Meanwhile, Tazewell County (23.4), Raleigh County (24.3), and West Virginia (25.6) all have higher average travel times to work. Less travel time, to and from work, allows citizens to enjoy activities other than commuting.

Governance

Law Enforcement

Mercer County Sheriff's Department has a staff of 51 people, with 28 sworn deputies. The Sheriff's Department services the entire county, covering 421 square miles. The department provides many community programs, such as patrol, K-9 demonstrations, K-9 school searches, and education on self-protection and safety.

Crimes in Mercer County 2016 (January through September)

- Homicide – 3 cases
- Robbery – 20 cases
- Assault – 234 cases
- Burglary – 225 cases
- Motor Vehicle Theft – 52 cases
- Drug Violations – 72 cases
- DUI – 150 cases

The Sheriff's Department identified several needs that would enhance the services already provided. These needs include hiring additional workers, putting together a special response team, community policing education, and tasers. The department is also looking for more space, particularly for the detective bureau, and to complete its range training building.

Emergency Services

Emergency services are crucial to the wellbeing of the community. The ability to provide fast, effective responses to emergencies is of paramount importance. Mercer County has an E-911 call center, ambulance and medical services, and an emergency and disaster planning program.

Mercer County operates an E-911 call center to provide quick deployment of emergency services throughout the community. The center's mission is "to serve as the communications contact point between the citizens and public safety agencies by accurately identifying the citizen's location, and public safety response needs. Provide fast and accurate activation of needed public safety services and provide communication support and coordination of all county public and support agencies."

Princeton Rescue Squad, with 70 employees, has provided ambulance services to Mercer County since 1961. The squad also serves as a specialized rescue agency. The Bluefield Rescue Squad is another ambulance service operating in Mercer County. The county also has two (2) hospitals, eight (8) health care related clinics, over 450 hospital beds, and 259 doctors. (Source: MCEDA)

Mercer County's Office of Emergency Management works with partners and volunteers to develop and implement disaster preparedness plans. The office is also focused on mitigating hazards and coordinating emergency planning and evacuation during flood events.

Fire Service

Mercer County has several fire departments, most of which are volunteer fire departments. Princeton and Bluefield are the only city fire departments. The Mercer County Firefighters Association has between 180 and 200 members. Since 1997, the Mercer County Firefighter's Association has allowed area fire departments to collaborate effectively on issues as a single unit, with issues like countywide policies and procedures, fire fees, and training.

Table 2-6: Number of Service Calls by Fire Department

Fire Department	Calls for Service 2014	Calls for Service 2015
Athens VFD	407	375
Bluestone Valley VFD	271	244
Bluewell VFD	280	283
Bramwell VFD	104	181
East River VFD	645	606
Green Valley VFD	391	405
Matoaka VFD	507	601
Montcalm VFD	130	N/A
Oakvale VFD	123	101
Princeton FD	1493	1486
Bluefield FD	955	880

Each fire department provides services such as emergency response to structural fires, motor vehicle crashes, forest fires, search and rescue needs, and natural disasters. The departments also provide non-emergency services such as traffic control, fire prevention education, water hauls for drinking and recreation, and assistance with controlled burns.

Many of the fire departments need facility improvement or expansion but have very limited financial resources. The Firefighters Association has noted concerns about areas of Mercer County not served by public water. These areas may have inadequate water supply for fire suppression: one example

is the Town of Matoaka. Mercer County could assist the Firefighters Association in addressing this critical issue by further developing public water infrastructure, installing dry hydrants at local water sources, and facilitating a partnership between the county, fire departments, and public water service providers.

Public Services and Facilities

In Mercer County, electrical service is provided by American Electric Power (Appalachian Power). The utility has approximately 35,000 customers in Mercer County. Appalachian Power has indicated a commitment to improving services, including the continuation of its utility pole replacement program to remove deteriorated poles and harden its local distribution system. Appalachian Power is also working on a project to improve transmission functionality. Part of the work will include upgrading an 88-kilovolt transmission line with a more modern 138-kilovolt line. The transmission line upgrade will enhance reliability, increase capacity for future load growth, and provide additional transmission options in the event of a major outage.

The Region I Planning and Development Council services Mercer, McDowell, Wyoming, Summers, and Monroe counties. Region I is committed to comprehensive regional development. Region I employs nine full time staff, produces the region's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), and administers the region's Hazard Mitigation Plan (HMP). Region I staff also work on water and sewer infrastructure projects, including the GIS mapping of water and wastewater facilities and distribution and collection lines in Mercer County.

There are three natural gas companies that provide service to Mercer County residents: the Bluefield Gas Company, the Allegheny Gas Company, and Mountaineer Gas. The gas companies provide the natural gas, maintain and service natural gas lines, read meters, and ensure the delivery of the product in an overall safe and efficient manner.

Water and Wastewater

Many Mercer County residents depend on private well water. However, twelve public service districts (PSDs) provide treated water to citizens of Mercer County. Some water providers have hundreds of customers, while others have thousands of customers. For instance, the Cool Ridge-Flat Top PSD provides water to a small group of customers in Mercer and Summers Counties, whereas West Virginia-American Water Company services several counties throughout West Virginia, including Mercer County.

The following municipalities have their own water treatment facilities: Athens, Bluefield, Bramwell, Matoaka, and Princeton. However, in January 2018, the Town of Matoaka began steps to dissolve. The town is working with county and state officials to ensure that basic utilities like water will continue uninterrupted during and after the dissolution process.

Table 2-7 lists the rates of all entities providing treated water in Mercer County. The county exhibits a wide range of costs for water service. One of the cheapest providers of treated water in the state, Hiawatha Water Association, has a rate of \$3.00 per 3,400 gallons. Meanwhile, the Town of Matoaka charged \$63.67 for the same amount of water and is one of the highest rates in West Virginia.

Table 2-7: Mercer County Water Utility Rates

Water Utility Rates in Mercer County (per/ 3,400 Gallons) as of June 2, 2017			
Utility	Type	Cost per 3,400 gallons	State Ranking (out of 367 total entities)
Hiawatha Water Association	Association	\$3.00	2
Cumberland Public Service District	PSD	\$16.92	19
Athens Municipal Water Works	Municipal	\$24.12	58
Windmill Gap Water Association	Association	\$25.00	64
Green Valley-Glenwood PSD	PSD	\$28.51	105
Cool Ridge-Flat Top PSD	PSD	\$34.81	191
Bluewell PSD	PSD	\$34.95	195
Town of Pocahontas	Municipal	\$39.50	251
Oakvale Road PSD	PSD	\$49.24	328
Lashmeet PSD	PSD	\$49.24	328
West Virginia- American Water Co.	Private	\$49.24	335
Town of Matoaka	Municipal	\$63.67	365

Wastewater Treatment

Nine entities collect wastewater (sewerage) in Mercer County. Like water utilities, a mixture of associations, public service districts, and municipalities provide wastewater treatment services. Only a few entities provide both water and wastewater service in Mercer County (Bluewell PSD, Town of Athens, Green Valley-Glenwood PSD, Town of Matoaka, and the Oakvale Road PSD).

Table 2-8 shows sewer utility rates as of June 2, 2017, for wastewater providers in Mercer County. Similar to water utilities, a significant cost disparity exists between different wastewater utilities in Mercer County. Green Acres Utilities charges \$10.00 per 3,400 gallons of sewage treated, less than half the cost of the Bluewell PSD, which is the next cheapest utility in Mercer County (\$22.20 per 3,400 gallons). All but two of the sewer utility rates are well below the state average of 321 providers.

Table 2-8: Mercer County Sewer Utility Rates Sewer

Utility Rates in Mercer County (3,400 Gallons) as of June 2, 2017			
Utility	Type	Cost per 3,400 gallons	State Ranking (out of 321 entities)
Green Acres Utilities	Private	\$10.00	2
Bluewell PSD	PSD	\$22.20	29
Oakvale Road PSD	PSD	\$23.11	39
Town of Matoaka Sanitary Board	Municipal	\$27.01	68
City of Princeton	Municipal	\$28.64	79
Bluefield Sanitary Board	Municipal	\$29.55	89
Green Valley-Glenwood PSD	PSD	\$30.32	99
Athens Sanitary Board	Municipal	\$41.39	223
Bramwell PSD	PSD	\$54.44	298

Education

Mercer County has 27 public schools, 2 private schools, and an enrollment of over 9,000 students. Recently, enrollment declined, even with an increase in enrollment during the 2012-2013 academic year. Mercer County also has five institutions of higher learning.

Mercer County Board of Education employs approximately 1,400 people, making it one of the top employers in the county. The Mercer County Board of Education has one large-scale project on the horizon, dependent upon grant funding—a new school in Green Valley. One of the county's greater resources is the existing school facilities, particularly those that could be opened to the public at certain times for recreational use. The Board of Education should consider working with County Officials to allow public use of school facilities, like the high school cross-country trails, when the facilities are not being used by students.

Understanding the levels of education attained in Mercer County is important for trying to attract certain industries to locate in Mercer County. Mercer County is similar to its neighbor, Raleigh County, and to the rest of the state. Compared to the state, Mercer County has a higher proportion of people with an educational attainment level between 9th and 12th grade and a lower proportion of people with a high school diploma or equivalent. Mercer County, Raleigh County, and West Virginia all have lower educational attainment proportions than the rest of the country, especially for bachelor and graduate or professional degrees.

Table 2-9: Educational Attainment

Educational Attainment (as %)	Mercer Co.	Raleigh Co.	West Virginia	United States
Less than 9th grade	6.1	6.1	5.2	5.7
9th to 12th grade	11.4	11.3	9.8	7.6
High School Graduate	37.9	39.5	40.7	27.8
Some college, no degree	19.7	18.5	18.5	21.1
Associate's degree	6.0	6.3	6.6	8.1
Bachelor's degree	12.5	12.0	11.7	18.5
Graduate or professional degree	6.3	6.3	7.4	11.2

Colleges and Universities

Mercer County is home to Bluefield State College, American National University, New River Community and Technical College, Valley College, and Concord University.

Bluefield State College was established as a black teachers college by the West Virginia Legislature in 1895. The college was later integrated in 1954. By the 1960s, the college had comprehensive four-year programs for teacher education, arts and sciences, and engineering technology. Later, a variety of two-year technical programs evolved in response to local needs. Bluefield State College is the only non-residential, four-year college in the state system. Although Bluefield State College currently retains its federal status as a historically black college, the student body is comprised of only 13% black students.

Originally stemming from Glenville State and Bluefield State's two-year programs, New River Community and Technical College was founded in 2003. The college was independently accredited in 2005. The college has locations in Beaver, Princeton, Lewisburg, and Summersville and provides

an assortment of programs and certificate programs. Valley College, located in Princeton, is another technical college located in Mercer County that offers a number of medical technical degrees.

American National University has a campus in Princeton, West Virginia. The college offers a range of diplomas and certificates, associate's degrees, bachelor's degrees, and graduate degrees mostly in the areas of medical, business, and cybersecurity.



Concord University

Concord University was long known as Concord College. The school's name was changed to Concord University in 2004. Located just outside of Athens, West Virginia, Concord University has an enrollment of 2,531 (2,236 undergraduate, 295 graduate students). Concord has been educating students for almost 150 years and prides itself on having a distinguished history and offering a high quality education. The University was ranked third nationally, in 4-year colleges, for veterans in 2014. Concord University was ranked the number one public West Virginia Institution by the US News and World Report, in 2015. The University provides several degree programs including English, Geography, Pre-law, History, Communication Arts, Music, Biology and Chemistry, Computer Science, Education, and many others.

Libraries

The two public libraries in Mercer County are Craft Memorial Library (in Bluefield) and Princeton Public Library. Both libraries provide numerous services to Mercer County citizens: computer and internet access, child and adult programming throughout the year, special interest clubs, and volumes of hard copy and electronic books. Craft Memorial even has a 3D Printer that can be used by the public. Additionally, Bluefield State College (Wendell G. Hardway Library) and Concord University (J. Frank Marsh Library) have libraries available to the public.

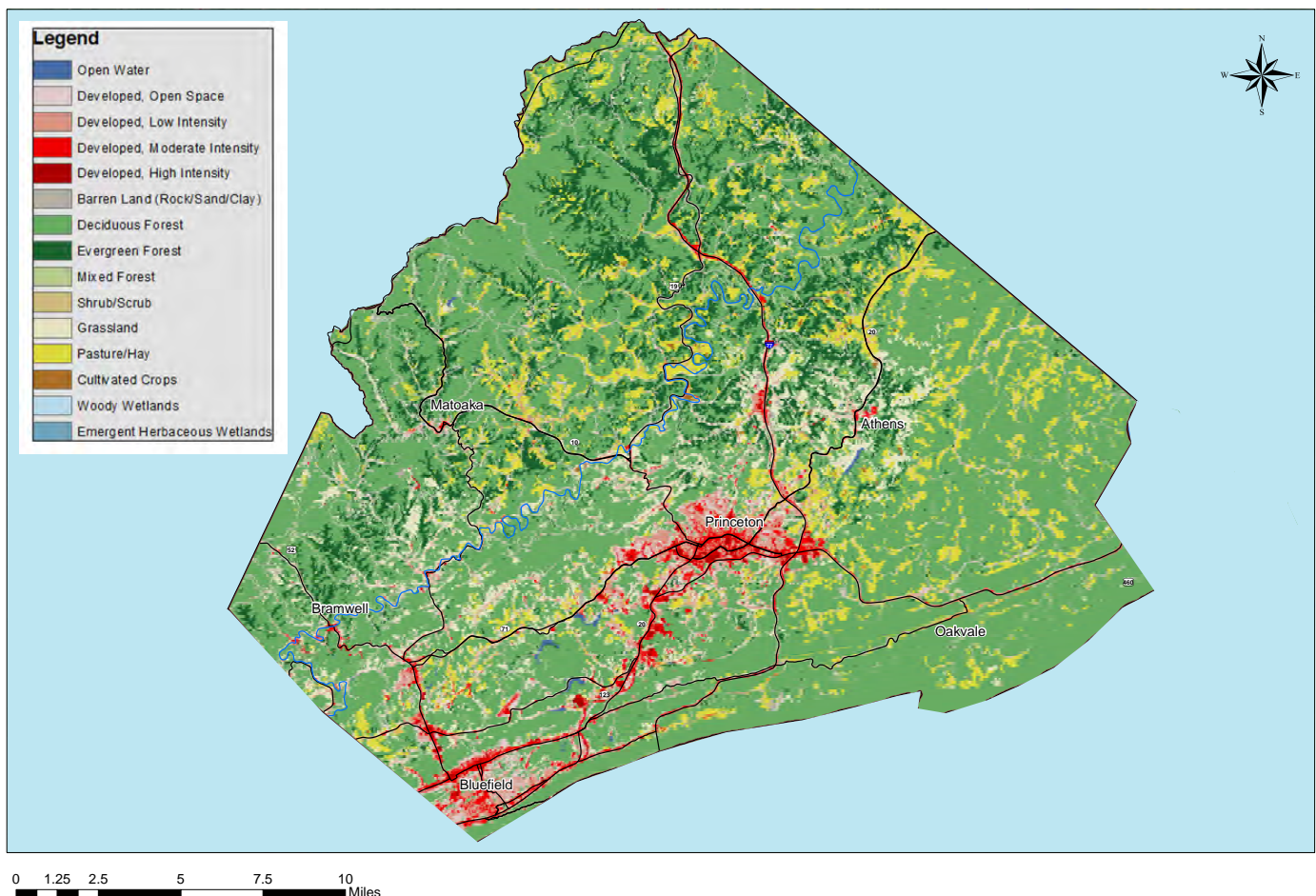
Existing Land Use

In 2012, Mercer County had 400 farms totaling well over 50,000 acres of land. The average size of a Mercer County farm was 129 acres. The market value of crops sold from Mercer County farms was approximately \$3.9 million, ranking 28th in the state out of 55 counties. In terms of state rankings, Mercer County ranked 5th in value of sales of nursery, greenhouse, floriculture, and sod. Mercer County ranked 7th in aquaculture value and 2nd in the number of acres of rye for grain. (Source: 2012 Census of Agriculture, USDA).

Map 2-1 shows the land use and land cover of Mercer County, in 2006. In the last 10 years, land use and land development have changed in Mercer County. Viewing land use land cover is a good way to look at the county, as a whole, to see where development has occurred and where it might be appropriate in the future. The majority of the land in Mercer County is forested, pastureland, or cultivated cropland. Map 2-1 also shows clusters of development, especially in and around Princeton and Bluefield and the Route 460 Corridor.

Viewing the Land Use Land Cover map, shades of red represent development, with darker shades indicating denser development. Yellow represents pastureland, while brown and gray indicate cultivated and barren land respectively. Light green indicates deciduous forest, and dark green indicates evergreen forest.

Map 2-1: Land Use Land Cover



Floodplains

Communities need to understand constraints on development, including flood prone and subsidence areas. Flooding is a common occurrence throughout West Virginia. However, the southern part of the state is particularly prone to flood damage. Some of the more densely populated areas of Mercer County are within the floodplain. Portions of Bramwell, Matoaka, Spanishburg, and Oakvale are within the Special Flood Hazard Area or “100-year floodplain.” The areas immediately adjacent to the Bluestone River are within the floodplain, but these areas are not heavily developed. Very little of the City of Bluefield is within the floodplain.

While property owners are free to develop in the floodplain, development is subject to certain restrictions. For instance, flood insurance is required by federally backed mortgages for homes located within the floodplain. In order to receive flood insurance, both the community and the individual property owner must meet the applicable minimum requirements of the National Flood Insurance Program.

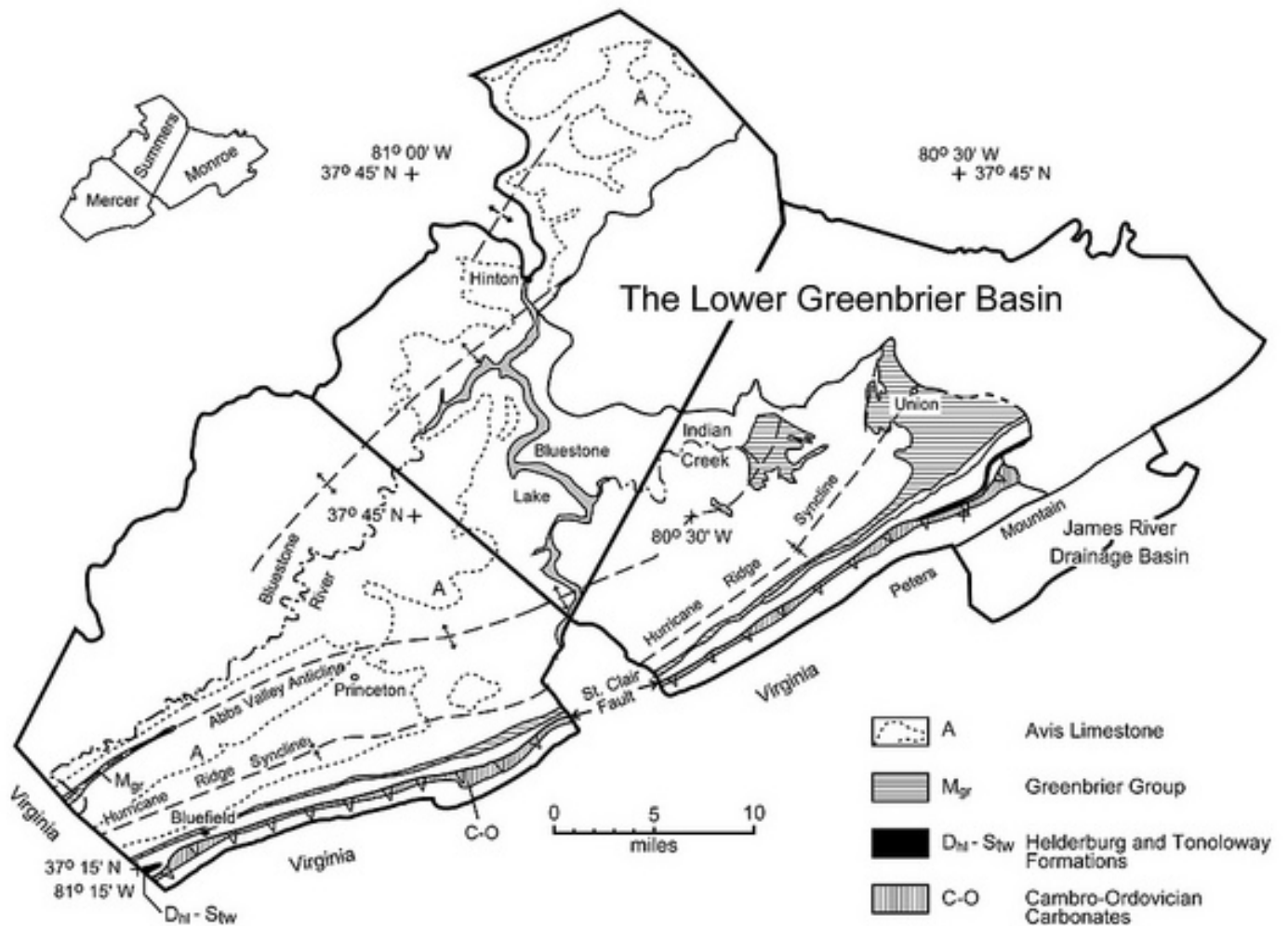


Subsidence

Several areas around the state exhibit karst topography. Areas with karst topography are typically characterized by formations such as fissures, sinkholes, caverns, or caves. Most of the areas exhibiting karst topography in West Virginia are situated along the eastern part of the state.

A few places in Mercer County (see Map 2-2) have karst features. The East River Mountain area, in particular, is home to several known caverns. Mercer County officials should understand the limitations to development that result from the presence of karst.

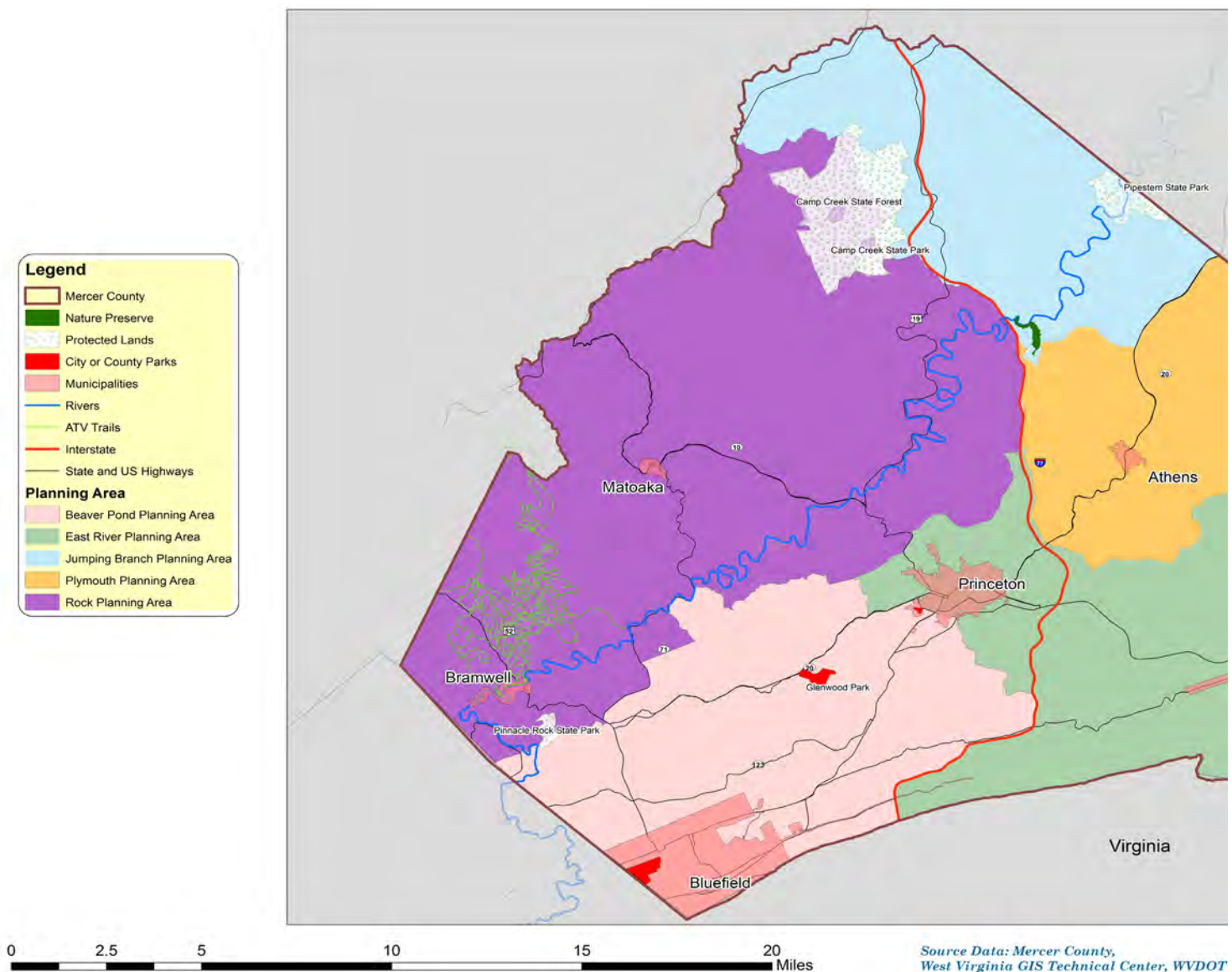
The New River Basin – Mercer, Monroe, and Summers Counties



Recreation

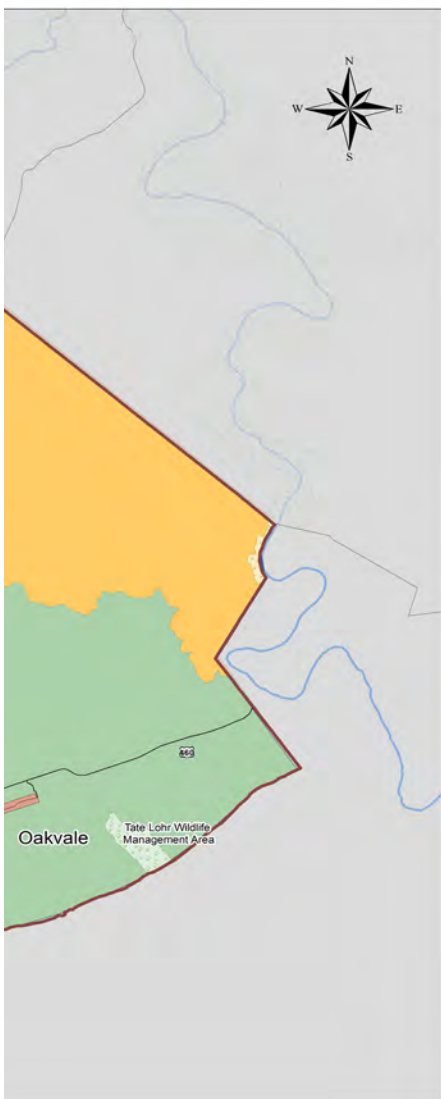
Mercer County is home to some of the most scenic areas in West Virginia. Camp Creek State Park and Forest encompasses over 5,000 acres. The park boasts picnicking facilities, horseback riding trails, playground equipment, famed waterfalls, and other features. Pinnacle Rock State Park is another Mercer County gem. The park sits at an elevation of 3,100 feet and includes Jimmy Lewis Lake, picnicking facilities, and a scenic overlook. Although located primarily in Summers County, Pipestem State Park is partially located in Mercer County. Pipestem State Park is considered one of the nicest parks in West Virginia, with several amenities: aerial tramway rides, horseback riding, golf, tennis, fishing, boating, swimming, and a large lodge for overnight accommodations and conferences.

Map 2-3: Recreation



Another recreational opportunity, Winterplace Ski Resort, is located near Mercer County. Winterplace Ski Resort has 27 slopes, 2 terrain parks, 10 lifts, and the largest snow-tubing park in West Virginia. The resort typically opens in December and runs through March.

Part of the famed Hatfield McCoy All Terrain Trails are located in Mercer County. The Pocahontas Trail System starts in historic Bramwell, the “Town of Millionaires.” Along with the Indian Ridge and Pinnacle Creek trails, the Pocahontas trail forms the largest portion of continuous trail in the entire Hatfield McCoy system. Visitors come from all over the eastern United States to adventure on the Hatfield McCoy trail system.



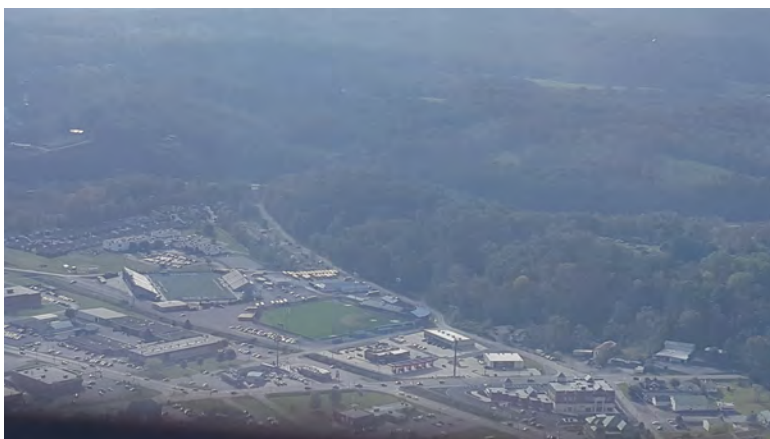
Glenwood Recreational Park and 4-H Camp is county owned and operated. The park is located near Princeton and has overnight accommodations at the 4-H camp, as well as a large lake for fishing, hiking trails, picnic areas, tennis courts, a mini-golf course, and playground equipment.

The Chuck Mathena Center (CMC) is a not-for-profit performing arts center located in Princeton. The CMC opened in 2008, and has become known as the “jewel of southern West Virginia.” CMC welcomes over 46,000 patrons each year. Schoolchildren, teens, parents, and older adults, including those residing in local assisted living facilities, all enjoy the offerings and opportunities provided by the CMC. The CMC strives to present a diverse selection of national touring shows each season, along with local theater and musical group performances, children’s theater workshops, fundraising events, art classes, and regional art exhibitions.



Photo Source: West Virginia Explorer

Mercer County boasts several other recreational opportunities: a paintball park, go-cart tracks, a zip line park, minor league baseball (Bluefield Blue Jays) in Bluefield, and several municipal parks around the county.



CHAPTER 3: NEEDS ASSESSMENT

A comprehensive plan is a community's vision for the future. By documenting and assessing the needs of the community, the comprehensive plan can address issues and recommend realistic strategies to fulfill the community's vision. During the comprehensive plan process, the Mercer County Planning Commission held public meetings, administered surveys, and engaged the community. Feedback from the community was integrated into the goals and objectives of the comprehensive plan.

A successful comprehensive plan is adopted and then continuously utilized for decision-making purposes, implemented, and periodically updated. Chapter 3 details the issues that Mercer County identified during the comprehensive plan process. Chapter 4 outlines a series of goals, objectives, and action steps to address these issues.

Issue 1: Infrastructure

Infrastructure typically includes water treatment, wastewater and sewer treatment, solid waste collection and disposal, and utility services. Broadband is also discussed.

Water and Wastewater Facilities

The completion of the Mercer/Summers County Regional Water Supply system gives the County great growth potential in the future. Several parts of the county, including Princeton, Lashmeet, Oakvale, Lerona, and Athens, benefit from the completion of the regional water supply system. In addition, the Green Valley PSD and Bluewell PSD both continue water line extension projects within their service areas.

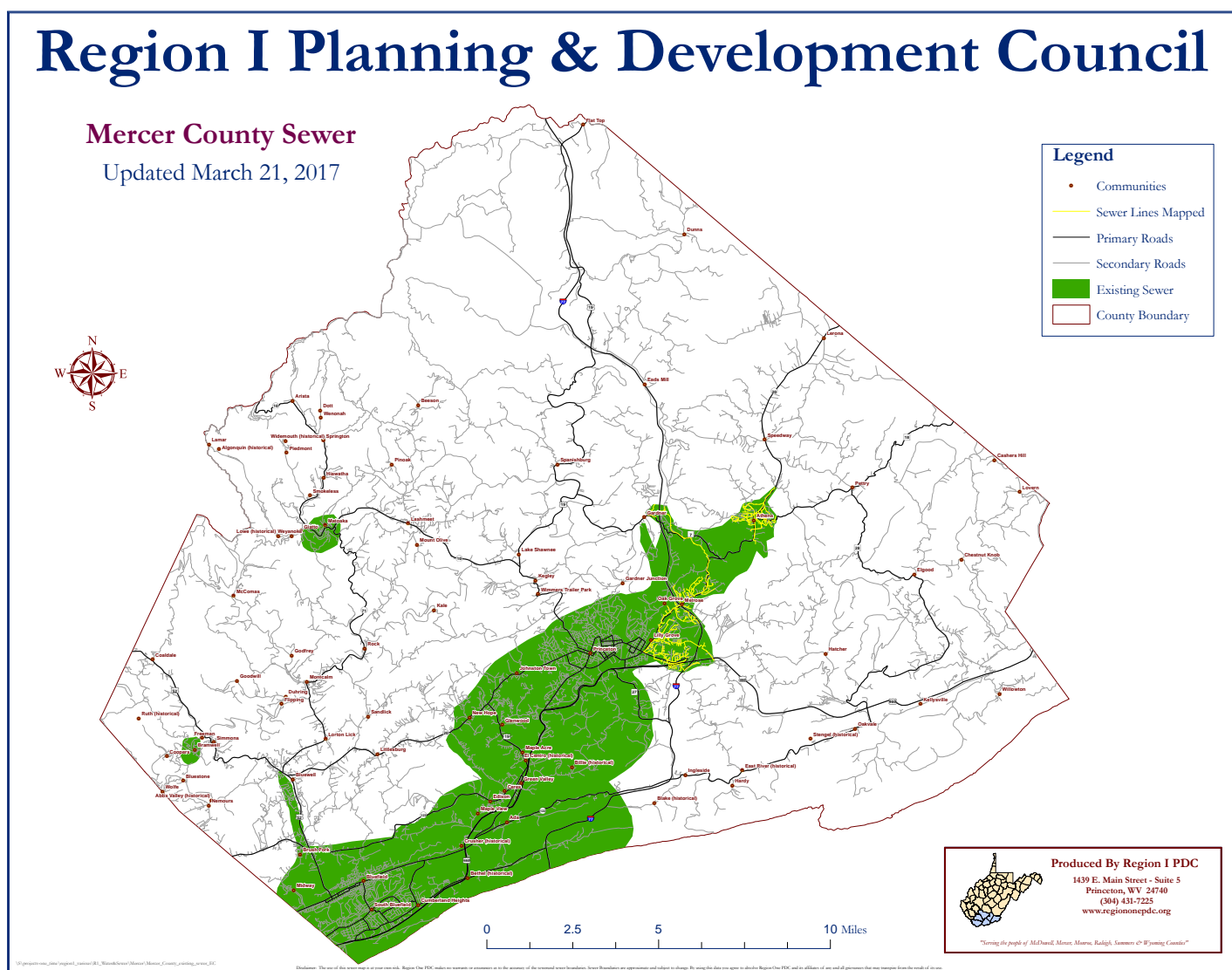
Mercer County recently completed a countywide wastewater plan. The next step is to obtain the funding necessary to implement the recommendations found in the plan. Wastewater treatment services are currently available in all municipalities, with the exception of the Town of Oakvale. However, wastewater treatment services are not available for many people living in unincorporated portions of Mercer County.

The Region I Planning and Development Council created Map 3-1 to show the location of wastewater treatment facilities in Mercer County. Wastewater infrastructure is found in and around Princeton, Bluefield, Matoaka, and Athens, and in other portions of the Beaver Pond and East River Planning Areas.

The 1999 Mercer County Comprehensive Plan identified several wastewater treatment needs that are still concerns today:

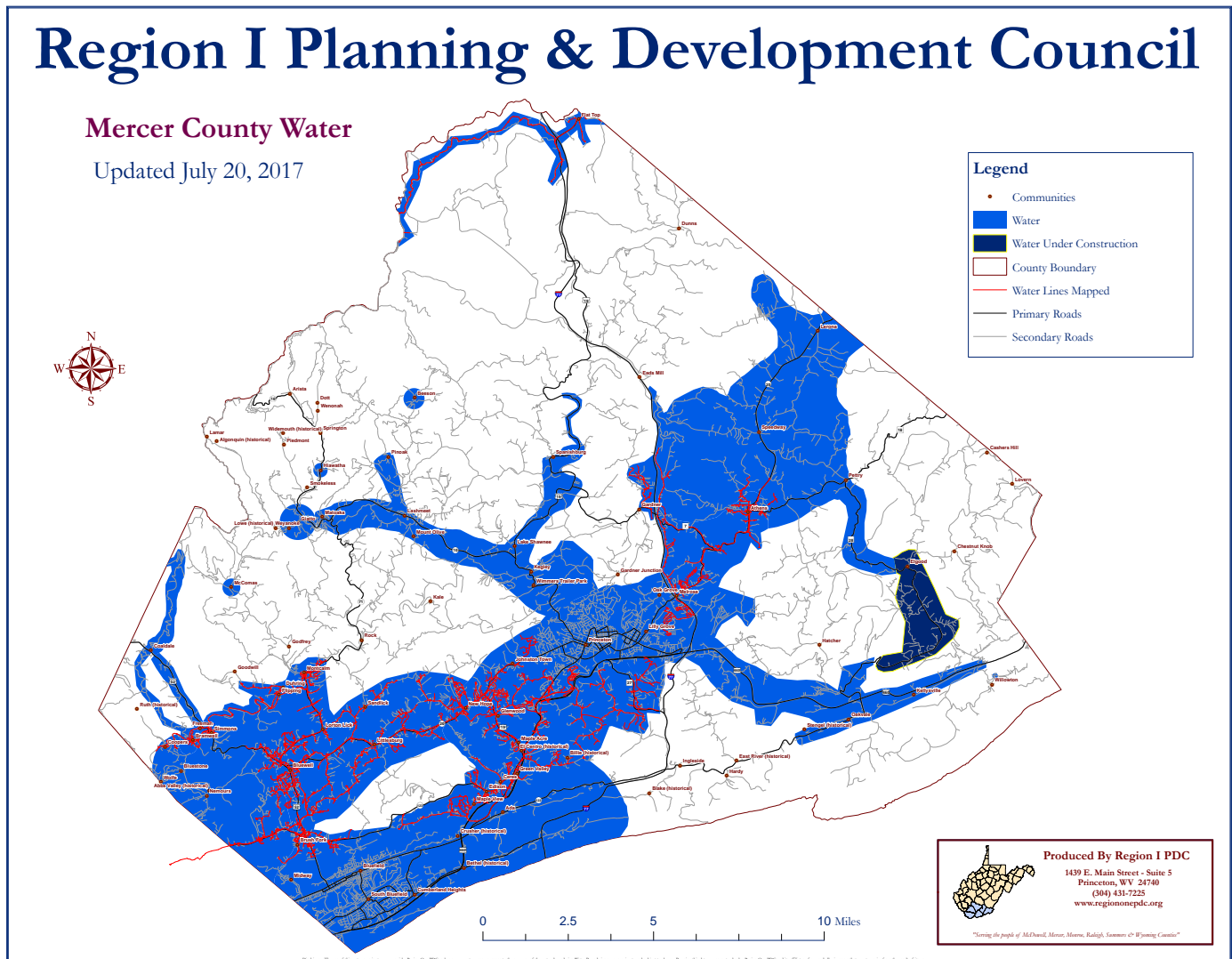
- Bluewell: No wastewater facilities at the airport.
- Matoaka: Wastewater treatment system releasing raw sewage into the river. Sewer costs are high and repairs are needed. In May 2018, citizens of Matoaka voted to dissolve the town. However, dissolution cannot happen until the town pays off all debt. The county anticipates that Lashmeet PSD will take over the town's water services and that West Virginia-American Water Company will take over the town's sewer services.
- Sun Valley-Lenora: Wastewater treatment system is needed for development. Potential to utilize the the Town of Athens' wastewater treatment facilities.
- Spanishburg: Wastewater treatment system needed in area.

Map 3-1: Mercer County Sewer¹



Map 3-2 shows where existing and planned water treatment facilities are located in Mercer County. More of the county is served with water than sewer. Several places, including most of the Jumping Branch Planning Area, a large portion of the Rock Planning Area, and a significant portion of the East River Planning Area, lack water treatment infrastructure.

Map 3-2: Mercer County Water²



The 1999 Mercer County Comprehensive Plan identified the Bluewell area, near the airport, and the Elgood area as needing water treatment facilities. During the 2017 open house in Spanishburg, several citizens recommended developing water and sewer infrastructure in Nubbins Ridge, Stovall Ridge, Gardner Area, Dunns, Cainbridge Ridge, and Camp Creek Park.

Citizens in areas of Mercer County without water treatment facilities rely on springs, wells, or hauling water. In unserved areas, water is also needed for hydrants and fire suppression.

The 1999 Mercer County Comprehensive Plan suggested,

The expansion of the availability of water and sewer is key to both current residents and businesses as well as future growth Efforts should be given to extending water and sewer service to targeted areas of the community currently experiencing growth or slated for future development. These projects should be done as part of a comprehensive development plan so that the county can be better positioned to market sites for industrial projects, housing, and other growth opportunities. . . . The time involved in securing funding and facility construction could hamper development options if not done proactively as part of a comprehensive development plan.

Mercer County should revisit the county wastewater plan and work with wastewater treatment utilities and Region I Planning & Development Council to prioritize future water and wastewater projects. Decision makers should focus on projects that are cost effective, serve a large number of people, and provide for sustainable growth and development consistent with the comprehensive plan.

The county should encourage the consolidation of water and wastewater service providers if consolidation is in the best interest of all parties involved and would make the operation and maintenance of water and wastewater facilities more cost effective.



Cell Towers

The Mercer County Planning Commission is working with Summers County representatives to draft a cell tower ordinance. Local governments can regulate in some respects the placement and design of cell towers in their jurisdictions and require co-location in most situations. The local government can also require that the cellular facilities are camouflaged, or “stealth” designed, to blend into the existing environment by, for example, being placed on a water tower or church steeple. However, local governments are preempted in some forms of regulation by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

The county needs to understand FCC regulations that limit local government control of cell towers. Mercer County should also work with other jurisdictions in the region, including Summers County, to gain a better understanding of best practices.



Broadband

One of the most commonly cited infrastructure needs is broadband. While Mercer County already has broadband in several places, improvements to speed and reliability are needed.

In 2014, the West Virginia Broadband Development Council and other partners commissioned the “Broadband Strategic Plan.” According to the Broadband Strategic Plan, the most common challenges for broadband in West Virginia include geography, population density, and willingness of providers to make initial capital expenditures. The Plan identifies strategies to address these challenges, namely promoting education and outreach to inform citizens of the benefits of broadband, alleviate the fear of broadband utilization, and encourage adoption.³

The Broadband Strategic Plan showed that many internet providers in the state failed to meet the 4 Mbps download threshold to be considered “broadband.” Some provided only the minimum threshold for download speeds in 12% of tests runs on infrastructure. Other providers performed much better, in the 80% to 90% range. In 2015, the FCC changed the minimum threshold of broadband download speeds to start at 25 Mbps.⁴

Nearly 75% of people surveyed as part of the State’s Strategic Plan said they are dissatisfied with the cost of internet services. Meanwhile, 60% were dissatisfied with reliability, and 58% were dissatisfied with internet speed.⁵

The West Virginia Broadband Mapping Program, as of June 2014, indicated that all areas of Mercer County have “broadband coverage,” although this status does not mean that everyone in Mercer County has broadband service. A majority of Mercer County has five or more broadband providers available. Areas in the western and northern part of the Mercer County have three or fewer broadband providers available.⁶

Several broadband funding sources might be available to fund broadband projects in Mercer County. The following is not an exhaustive list:

APPALACHIAN REGIONAL COMMISSION

- Regional economic development agency that represents a partnership between federal, state, and local government. State and local government can apply for grants to develop infrastructure like high-speed internet.

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION

- Deals with international and interstate communications. May have some initiatives catering to providers/companies, for example “Universal Service.”

USDA RURAL UTILITIES SERVICE

- Farm Bill Broadband Loans & Loan Guarantees – Provide funds for the construction, improvement, or acquisition of facilities and equipment needed to provide service at the broadband lending speed in eligible rural areas.
- Communities must be completely contained in rural area, or composed of multiple rural areas defined in 7 CFR 1738.
- At least 15% of the households in the proposed funded service area are unserved.
- No part of the proposed funded service area has three or more “incumbent service providers.”
- No part of the proposed funded service area overlaps with the service area of current RUS borrowers or the service areas of grantees that were funded by RUS.

USDA COMMUNITY CONNECT GRANTS

- Helps fund broadband deployment in rural communities where it is not yet economically viable for private sector providers to deliver service.
- Eligible area: rural areas that lack existing broadband speed of at least 4 Mbps downstream and 1 Mbps upstream.

USDA TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE LOAN PROGRAM

- Provides financing for the construction, maintenance, improvement, and expansion of telephone service and broadband in rural areas.
- Eligible areas: Rural areas and towns with a population of 5,000 or less. Areas without telecommunications facilities or areas where the applicant is the recognized telecommunications provider.

USDA DISTANCE LEARNING AND TELEMEDICINE GRANTS

- The Distance Learning and Telemedicine program helps rural communities use the unique capabilities of telecommunications to connect to each other and to the world, overcoming the effects of remoteness and low population density.

NATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND INFORMATION ADMINISTRATION

- West Virginia has been awarded \$126 million for a Broadband Infrastructure Project.
- Goal: Upgrade Internet access significantly at an estimated 471 schools, 176 public libraries, 53 Public Safety Answering Points, 184 telemedicine sites, 34 jails, 11 Planning and Development Councils, 55 county courthouses, and the Green Bank research observatory. Nearly 800 additional law enforcement offices and fire departments are expected to benefit from the enhanced broadband capabilities and services offered by last-mile providers.

Broadband fiber exists along I-77, at the industrial park, and at the Mercer County Courthouse. Empty conduit, for future fiber placement, was installed in downtown Bluefield while completing other infrastructure work.

Greater availability of broadband as well as higher upload and download speeds in Mercer County are important for quality of life, increased telecommuting opportunities, telemedicine, and job recruitment. Reliable broadband is essential for future growth and development at all Mercer County Schools and in the identified preferred development areas.

Recently, the West Virginia Legislature enacted Chapter 31G of the West Virginia Code to allow for Broadband “Cooperative Associations.” This 2017 legislation authorizes the creation of a pilot project to form non-profit cooperative associations for internet service. A Broadband Enhancement Council, established at the state level, sets guidelines and approves cooperative associations.

The expectation is that cooperative associations will pool resources and be utilized as a “mechanism for folks that are not being served to work together” to gain internet access.⁷ At least 20 users, either businesses or individuals, are needed to form a cooperative association. Cooperatives may be eligible for federal grants and may result in broadband access to areas that would not otherwise be served.

Emergency Response

One of the biggest concerns at the Jumping Branch Planning Area Open House was for improved emergency response.

Some of the public comments included:

- Long response time
- 911 calls bounce around based on time of day and day of week
- Emergency services needed for Flat Top Area
- Potential for a substation at the Old State Road Garage or Gardner Road
- Placement of ambulances in rural areas
- Put a satellite station in Ghent area



The county should work with local EMS, fire, law enforcement, and others to identify issues and determine how to address the issues with current personnel, equipment, and resources. If resources are lacking, the county, with assistance from the emergency providers, should identify what is needed and how to fund the additional equipment, personnel, or activities. Ensuring that response times are as short as practicable, personnel are adequately trained, and technology for dispatching responders is accurate are all high priorities for Mercer County, not only in the Jumping Branch Planning Area but throughout the county.

Issue 2: Jobs and Growth

Through the 20th Century, several Mercer County businesses provided coal-related services. In the last couple of decades, some of these companies have made a transition to other products and services. For example, one company is making the transition from coal-related products to building rescue equipment. Another Mercer County company made filter screens for coal, but now makes screens for aggregate.

Mercer County has seen a decline in the retail industry in the last couple of decades. Many Mercer County citizens are shopping in Blacksburg, Roanoke, Charlotte, and Winston-Salem. Online shopping is having an impact on local retail businesses across the country; however, the impact is magnified in small communities like Mercer County. The Mercer County Economic Development Authority (EDA) has been focused on strengthening and expanding the area's economy by encouraging strategic investment and facilitating the creation and retention of more skilled jobs.

These examples underscore the importance of diversifying the local economy. County officials and decision-makers can encourage new business development by ensuring that opening a new business or continuing an existing business is a straightforward process, with few regulatory obstacles.

The continued development and diversification of the retail industry will be important for Mercer County moving forward. The community should identify what types of retail should be encouraged and how decision-makers should encourage such development. For example, a large outdoor retail store like Cabela's or Bass Pro Shop would provide jobs, a one-stop shop for outdoor-related retail items, and a regional draw in Mercer County. The County needs to be proactive and reach out to desired companies and trade associations.

Another industry, besides retail, to promote in Mercer County is the hardwood and timber industry. According to the Land Use Master Plan of 2014, Mercer County is one of the most forested counties in West Virginia. Wood byproducts (biomass) are a potential energy source; however, as of 2014, there was no activity in the wood byproducts industry.

Expanded utilization of the "Business in the Hardwoods" facility to cultivate the timber industry should be explored. The Business in the Hardwoods facility has:

- Wood products lab
- 3 warehouses
- Wood education and training center
- Rough mill (not being used currently)

Other business opportunities related to the timber industry that should be explored for Mercer County include:

- Secondary wood manufacturing
- Sawmills
- Kilns
- Veneer
- Furniture and cabinets

The county should work with timber industry experts to identify how the community can foster sustainable and environmentally sensitive timbering industry growth in Mercer County.

Food/Fiber/Natural Products

Agriculture is still an important industry in Mercer County, although the industry may be in decline, as the relative age of the current farmers tends to be older. Local officials should work with groups such as WVU Extension and farm associations to ensure this vital part of Mercer County industry is maintained and encouraged.

One crop that may be able to increase the overall value of agriculture in Mercer County is ginseng. Ginseng is a cash crop that grows in the wild in West Virginia. State regulations limit when and the age at which ginseng can be harvested. The ginseng root is highly prized, especially in Asian countries where it is used as a dietary supplement and in traditional medicine. Because of its value, ginseng may be targeted for theft, so concerns about safety and loss of crops should be discussed if the County is going to work with state agencies to encourage more ginseng production.



Aquaculture is an industry that could be further developed in Mercer County. Aquaculture is the cultivation of animals, plants, or algae for a commercial purpose under controlled conditions. Examples include tilapia (fish) farming in large holding tanks for sale to local restaurants, or the cultivation of aquatic plants to sell to people with aquariums or outdoor ponds. Some of the highest rated salmon for human consumption were bred and raised in indoor warehouses in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.⁸ Depending on the size of the operation and the type of aquaculture, the costs of the business vary considerably. The county should work with Extension and the West Virginia Department of Agriculture to provide education to interested citizens and promote Mercer County as a place where aquaculture is encouraged.

Branding the County

The current Mercer County Seal should be reviewed by marketing and design experts to identify opportunity for improvement. The county does not have an official logo; however, the Mercer County CVB has both a brand and logo. If the county is going to update the seal and develop a new logo, the marketing and branding initiatives of the CVB, Chamber of Commerce, EDA, and other similar organizations in Mercer County should be consistent.

Developing a branding or marketing strategy takes time and great attention to detail by trained professionals to capture the essence of the community. The process includes focus groups, surveys, and public meetings to gather information to develop a brand with which citizens and business owners identify and tourists appreciate.

Mercer County residents also noted that the manufacturing industry is important for the future growth and development of the county. Some of the concerns included that the county needs to get water to the industrial park as an incentive to bring in additional manufacturing businesses. Some folks indicated that it is hard to compete with Virginia localities for new manufacturing development. Given the proximity to the Interstate and rail lines, manufacturing should be encouraged in Mercer County.

Issue 3: Drug/Substance Abuse

In 2018, the United States declared overdose deaths from opioids an epidemic. Across the United States, particularly in West Virginia, communities are devastated by the effects of opioid addiction. In some West Virginia counties, the overdose mortality rate is several times higher than the national average.⁹ Substance abuse is the one of the most pressing issues facing Mercer County.

Also rising from the opioid epidemic is a marked increase in the number of cases of Hepatitis B and C, most likely from sharing needles.¹⁰ Mercer County is one of few counties in the United States at risk for a Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, or HIV outbreak.¹¹ Additionally, Mercer County is experiencing an increase in Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C diagnoses. In July and August of 2017, the Mercer County Health Department reported 60 new cases of Hepatitis C. However, testing rates for Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C, and HIV remain too low to account for actual infection rates.

Mercer County officials want to promote the safety of its citizens and provide support to community members in need. The drug epidemic in West Virginia is exceptionally complex. There is no “silver bullet” solution. In order for a community to effectively address substance abuse, a multifaceted, cross-jurisdictional approach is needed.

In 2016, The National League of Cities and the National Association of Counties issued a report recommending four strategies for local governments responding to the opioid epidemic: (1) Leading in a Crisis, (2) Focusing on Prevention and Education, (3) Expanding Treatment, and (4) Reassessing Public Safety and Law Enforcement Approaches.

Mercer County should consider applying for funding opportunities from state and federal resources to fund these efforts. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has expanded grant options for state and local governments.¹² Additionally, the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (WV DHHR) has created a Strategic Action Plan that seeks to increase underutilized, existing addiction-related programs. WV DHHR is exploring alternative funding methods and partnerships to include voucher programs and community-based, non-treatment support programs. The state is also looking to expand Screening, Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) in primary health care and medical settings of high-risk communities. The President’s Commission on Opioids has recommended that SBIRT be introduced into schools. Cabin Creek, West Virginia, currently has an SBIRT school pilot project.

Leading in a Crisis

Mercer County officials should be leaders in the local conversation on opioids. Often times a stigma is attached to addiction. Overcoming the stigma will require community leaders, particularly those who are elected and hold positions of trust, to initiate candid, respectful, and compassionate discussions. Confronting the “elephant in the room” and recognizing that a problem exists is the first

step towards finding solutions. Efforts to increase recognition of the problem could include hosting town hall discussions and conducting public outreach through the Health Department and Sheriff's Department.

Mercer County officials can bring positivity to the conversation and motivate the public to reach out to friends and family to offer support. Guidance for initiating these discussions can be found in local associations such as the Prevention Coalition of Mercer County, which is dedicated to the prevention and treatment of alcohol, tobacco, and drug abuse. The Prevention Coalition of Mercer County provides programming for Mercer County youth and open houses to discuss substance abuse issues. Local resources, such as the Coalition, can be utilized to encourage a culture of recovery and prevention in Mercer County.

Mercer County officials should foster regional cooperation. As one of the more populous counties in the region, Mercer County can take the lead in gathering data, ideas, and resources. Regional coalitions should work with service organizations and churches, leading with evidence-based strategies to offer inclusive and diverse substance abuse reduction strategies.

Focusing on Prevention and Education

Increasing public awareness and reaching children at an early age are essential to curbing the proliferation of opioid addiction. Many individuals unknowingly develop addiction after being prescribed a pain-management opioid following an injury or surgery. Specifically, education should include information on the importance of managing opioid prescriptions related to school sports. Educating before individuals receive prescription medication or obtain illegal opioids is important in mitigating opioid addiction.

The community should provide increased education and recreation to school-aged children to curb addiction. The Sheriff's Department and health professionals can host programs during school hours to educate kids on the dangers of addiction. Programs like The Herren Project-Project Purple Initiative or Shatter Proof can provide great resources for after-school programs. The Mercer County Prevention Coalition currently operates the STAR (Students Teaching About Resistance) program, a youth-to-youth education program that provides educational opportunities and hosts retreats. Mercer County officials can supplement these efforts by advocating for further recreational opportunities at schools, parks, churches, community centers, fire halls, or anywhere that a child can be engaged in a productive and meaningful activity.

Substance abuse prevention education should not end with high school. Mercer County is also home to several institutes of high learning. Substance abuse prevention education should continue at these institutions. Students in health-related fields at Concord University and Bluefield State College could provide education to others in the community on the harms of addiction. Additionally, Mercer County can develop a program to train adult volunteers to identify at-risk youths and individuals before addiction occurs.

Addressing Youth Substance Abuse in Rural Communities

Programs are needed to address substance abuse by adolescents. Programs should use evidence-based strategies within schools and churches that involve parents. Programs might include discouraging alcohol use by younger adults.

Counselors, healthcare professionals, teachers, parents, and law enforcement can work together to identify problems and develop prevention strategies to control substance abuse in rural communities by:

- Holding community or town hall meetings to raise awareness of the issues
- Training law enforcement regarding liquor license compliance, underage drinking, and detection of impaired drivers
- Inviting speakers to talk to school-aged children to help them understand consequences
- Routine screening in primary care visits to identify at-risk children and adults
- Collaborating with churches and service clubs to provide a strong support system for individuals in recovery, possibly with support groups or tobacco quit lines
- Training adults as volunteers to identify and refer individuals at risk
- Developing a formal substance abuse prevention or treatment program for the community
- Providing care coordination and patient navigation services for people with substance abuse disorders
- Providing specialized programs and counseling to discourage substance abuse by pregnant women
- Collaborate with health service providers and local service organizations to ensure families affected by substance abuse have adequate food, housing, and mental health services

Expanding Treatment

Some resources for treatment are already available to Mercer County citizens. However, the availability of medication-assisted therapy options like methadone, suboxone, buprenorphine, and long-release Naltrexone programs could be improved.

Ensuring health care providers and substance abuse counselors are welcome in Mercer County is essential. Mercer County can encourage home-based businesses for counselors, outpatient centers, and inpatient centers. Addressing the crisis candidly and compassionately includes providing adequate access to needed resources and enabling qualified professionals to work throughout the county. Additionally, Mercer County can help facilitate treatment by opening county buildings to Narcotics Anonymous (NA) groups for use without charge. NA meetings are free, addict-led meetings that meet weekly or nightly to promote sobriety and a culture of sobriety through sponsorship programs.

Telemedicine or telehealth is aimed at improving health care, especially in rural areas, by enabling providers to consult and treat patients remotely. Telemedicine allows people living in rural areas to access health care services that might not otherwise be available. In regards to the opioid epidemic, “one study...demonstrated that the more sessions patients attended via telemedicine, the more likely they were to stay in an opioid treatment program.”¹³ Telemedicine has limitations. Effective telemedicine requires reliable high-speed broadband technology. Furthermore, the provider can only see or hear the patient, which may not be enough to conduct a full examination.

Reassessing Public Safety and Law Enforcement Approaches

Aside from reducing the illicit supply of opioids, which the county may not be able to influence much, Mercer County can support compassionate practices in the administration of public safety and law enforcement.

The road to addiction recovery often begins by acquiring livable conditions and meeting basic needs. Mercer County officials should collaborate with human services providers and local service organizations to ensure families affected by substance abuse have adequate food, housing, and mental health services

Deferring arrest is one strategy successfully employed by several local governments across the country.¹⁴ For example, the ANGEL program in Gloucester, Massachusetts, allows for street-level law enforcement officers to make decisions about drug-related arrests. Instead of sending a drug offender to jail, the offender may instead begin working with a case manager or social worker. After a little more than a year since the program’s inception, overdose rates in Gloucester have decreased and drug-related crimes have fallen by 27%.¹⁵

One tool to reduce opioid overdose deaths is Naloxone. “Naloxone is a medication that can reverse an opioid overdose and prevent a fatality. It is a highly efficacious, FDA-approved medication and it cannot be abused.”¹⁶ Naloxone is covered by Medicaid with a very low copay.

West Virginia recently completed a statewide Naloxone distribution program. The state purchased several thousand doses at a reduced cost of about \$30 per dose. Currently, “public interest” pricing exists for governments and nonprofit entities for Narcan Nasal Spray devices. The public interest rate is \$75 per two-dose carton (\$37.50 per dose), well below the market cost. Narcan is the preferred formulation for layperson programs, and the first intranasal device with FDA approval.

In 2016, the West Virginia legislature passed a bill (SB 335) that allows pharmacists to dispense Naloxone without a prescription. West Virginia University is working with police agencies around the state to distribute the nasal spray to first responders.¹⁷ If Mercer County first responders administer Naloxone, the first responders should have an adequate supply and be trained in the proper administration of the drug.

Additionally, Mercer County officials should collaborate with local businesses to participate in “drug take back days.” The National Prescription Drug Take Back Day aims to provide a safe, convenient, and responsible means of disposing of prescription drugs, while educating the public about the potential for abuse of medications.

Issue 4: Land Use and Litter Control

Land Use

The future growth and development of land is an essential aspect of the comprehensive plan. Regardless of how Mercer County determines is best to develop in the future, establishing ideal future land use patterns prior to development is important.

Zoning is one tool that can ensure the orderly growth and development of land. A “zoning ordinance may cover a county’s entire jurisdiction or parts of its jurisdiction.” W. Va. Code § 8A-7-1(b). Zoning provisions must be consistent with the jurisdiction’s comprehensive plan. There are no plans to pursue countywide zoning, however zoning has been discussed as an option near the interstate interchanges, which are areas that have also been designated as the preferred development areas of Mercer County. (See Maps 3-3 to 3-7 Preferred Development Areas).

Mercer County should consider the advantages and disadvantages of partial county zoning and, more specifically, what areas would be affected by and what provisions might be included in the ordinance. Zoning can be flexible and take different forms. Any zoning provisions for Mercer County should ensure that property rights and economic growth are important considerations.

The county should look into performance standards as an alternative to pure Euclidean zoning. Performance standards focus on limiting impacts of uses, rather than the use itself. For example, height, noise, and congestion might be more restricted in lower intensity areas than in higher intensity areas. Performance standards of a certain “district” apply whether the use is a single-family home or a small commercial site.

Mercer County might also want to consider enacting subdivision regulations for the orderly development of land within the county. Subdivision regulations ensure that adequate infrastructure, such as water and wastewater, are in place before development begins. Mercer County has, in the past, experienced strains on existing resources, such as schools and roads, because of development. Again, Mercer County should weigh the advantages and disadvantages of implementing tools such as subdivision regulations and adopt them only if the community as a whole benefits.

Land Use Master Plan

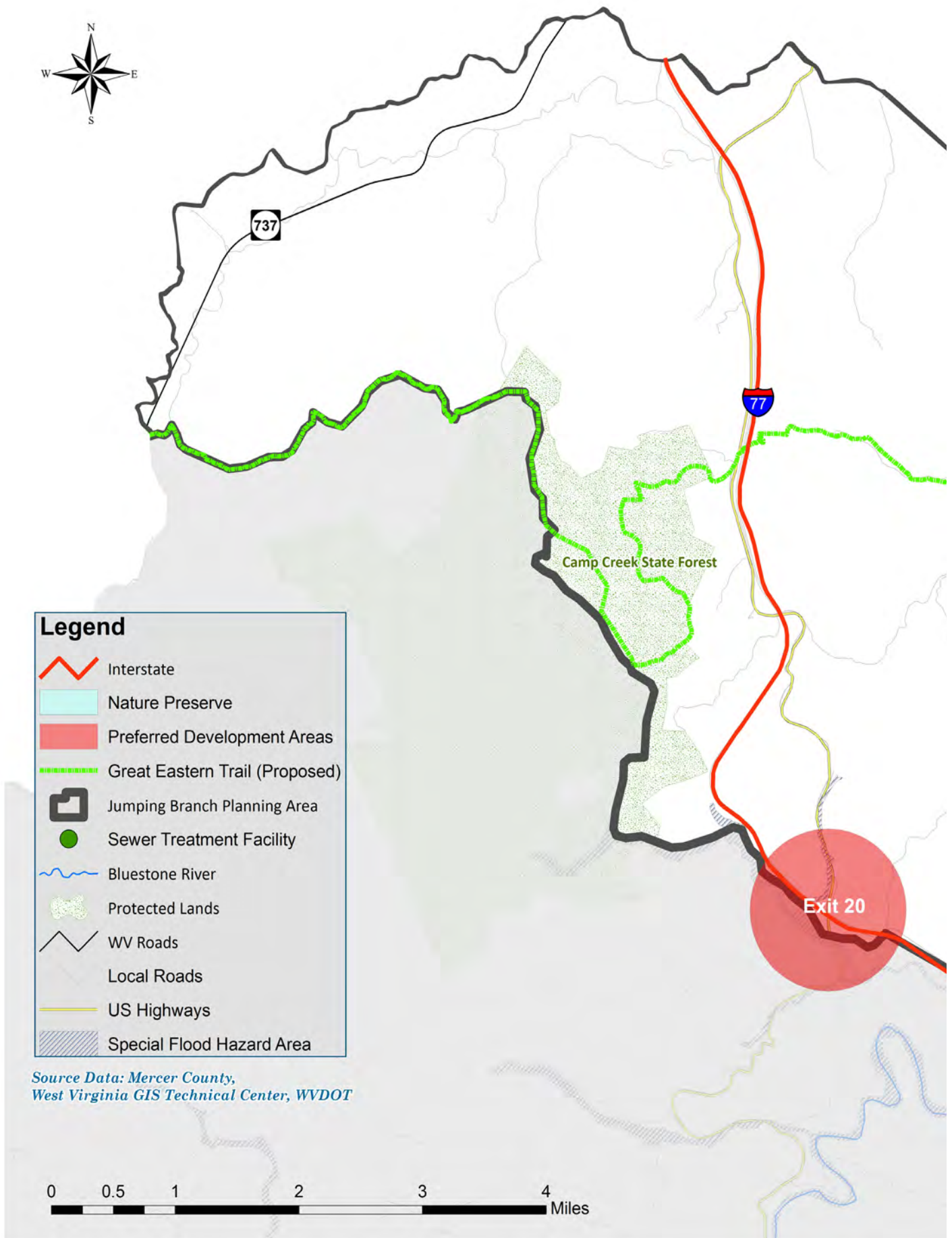
State law mandates the creation of a Land Use Master Plan (LUMP) by West Virginia counties with surface mine operations. A LUMP is concerned with the development of community assets, securing developable land, and ensuring that post-mine land use proposed in any reclamation plan complies with the specified land uses in the approved LUMP. Mercer County, with the assistance of the Office of Coalfield Community Development (WV Division of Energy), created a LUMP in 2014. No post-mine development has occurred in Mercer County, likely due to the small inventory of post-mine sites in the county.

The Mercer County LUMP identified and analyzed former mine sites in the county and ranked the sites based on several variables to prioritize sites for redevelopment. The LUMP focused on the top five sites, all of which were located in the western part of the county. Several of the proposed redevelopment sites would be located near the proposed King Coal Highway. Mercer County officials should periodically review the LUMP, as priorities for post-mine redevelopment within the county may change over time.

Preferred Development Areas

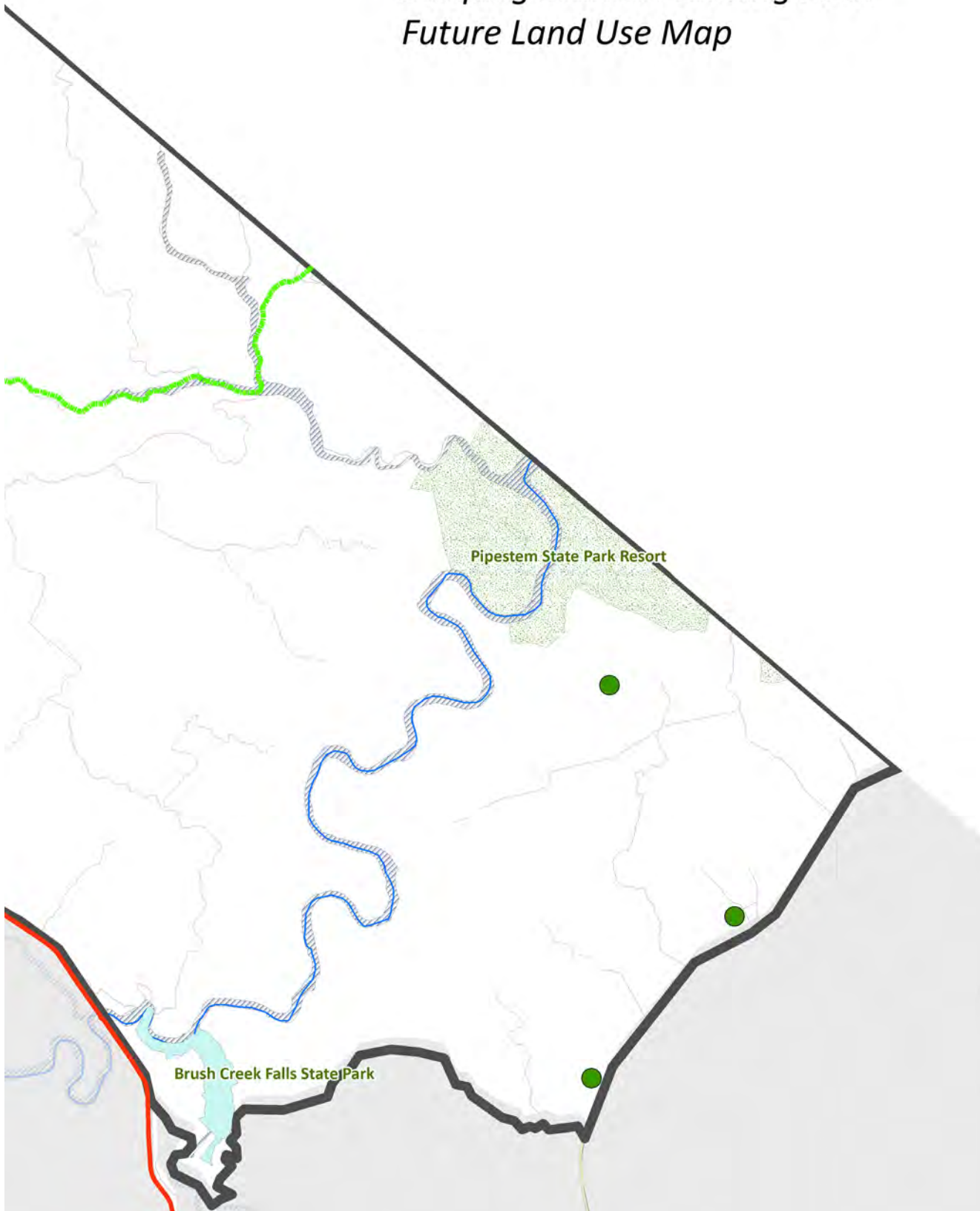
According to the West Virginia Code, a preferred development area is “a geographically defined area where incentives may be used to encourage development, infill development or redevelopment in order to promote well designed and coordinated communities.” W. Va Code § 8A-1-2. The Mercer County Planning Commission analyzed areas in the county and identified the preferred development areas shown on Maps 3-3 through 3-7. The main areas targeted for future development are located along Interstate 77. Exits 1, 9, 14, and 20 were identified as preferred development areas. The Route 52 Corridor, from Bluefield to the Mercer-McDowell county line and Route 123, near the airport, were also designated as preferred development areas.

Many of the preferred development areas identified in the county have been designated Opportunity Zones, which are an economic tool to increase development and spur job creation. These zones will be eligible for a new federal tax incentive to encourage private investment. The tax incentives are targeted at low-income communities and are structured so as to incentivize longterm investment.



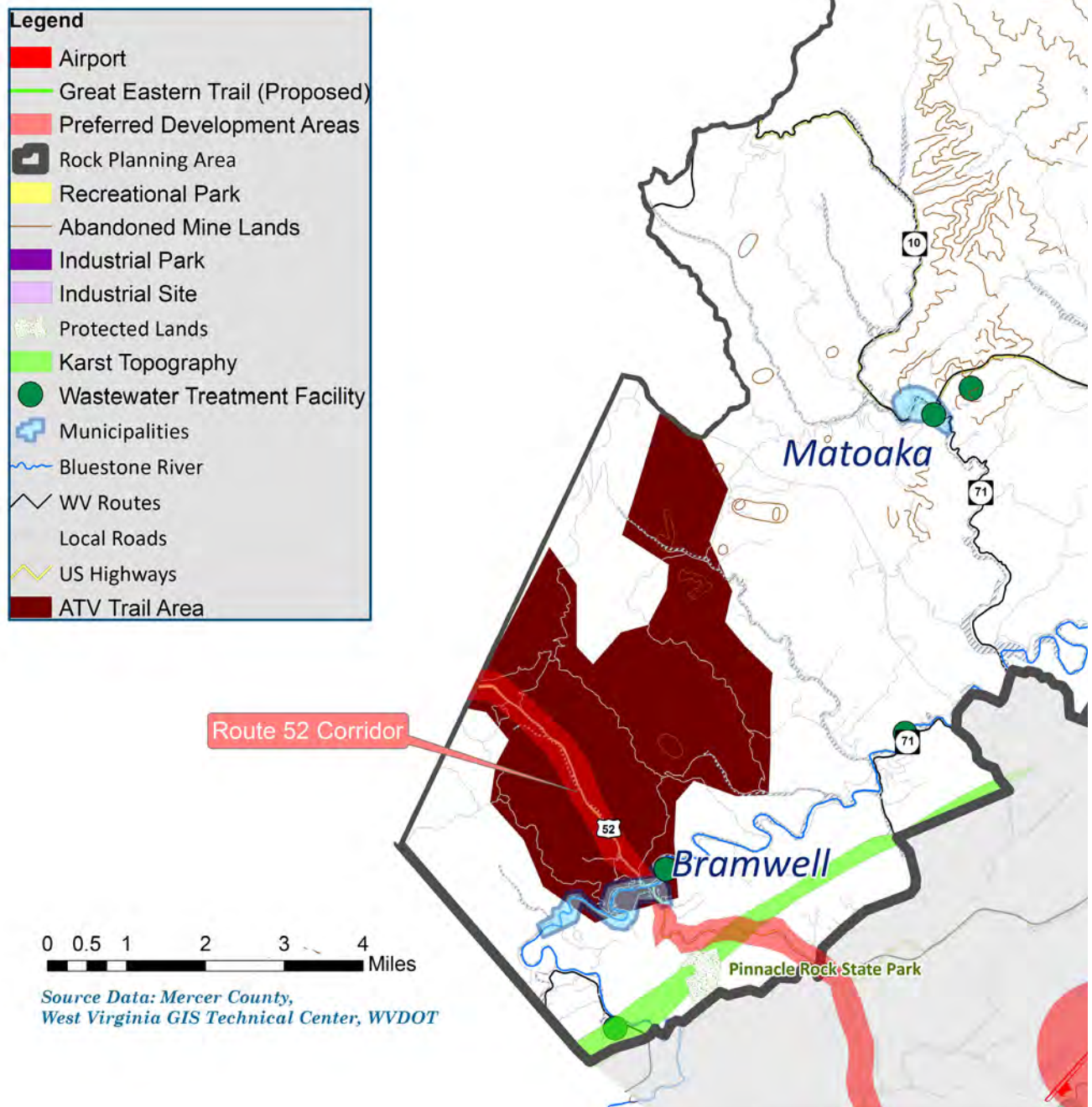
Mercer County Comprehensive Plan

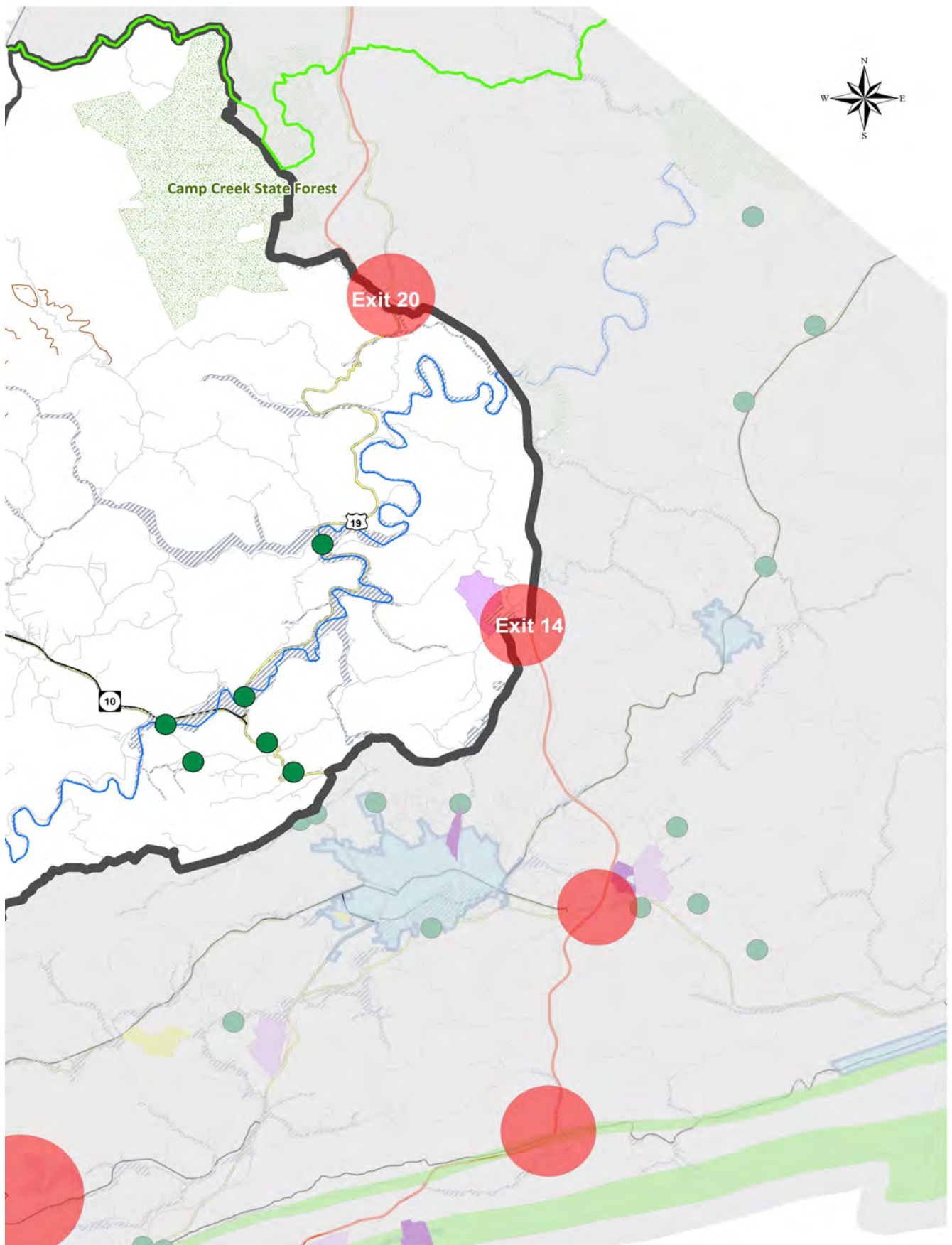
Map 3-3: *Jumping Branch Planning Area
Future Land Use Map*



Mercer County Comprehensive Plan

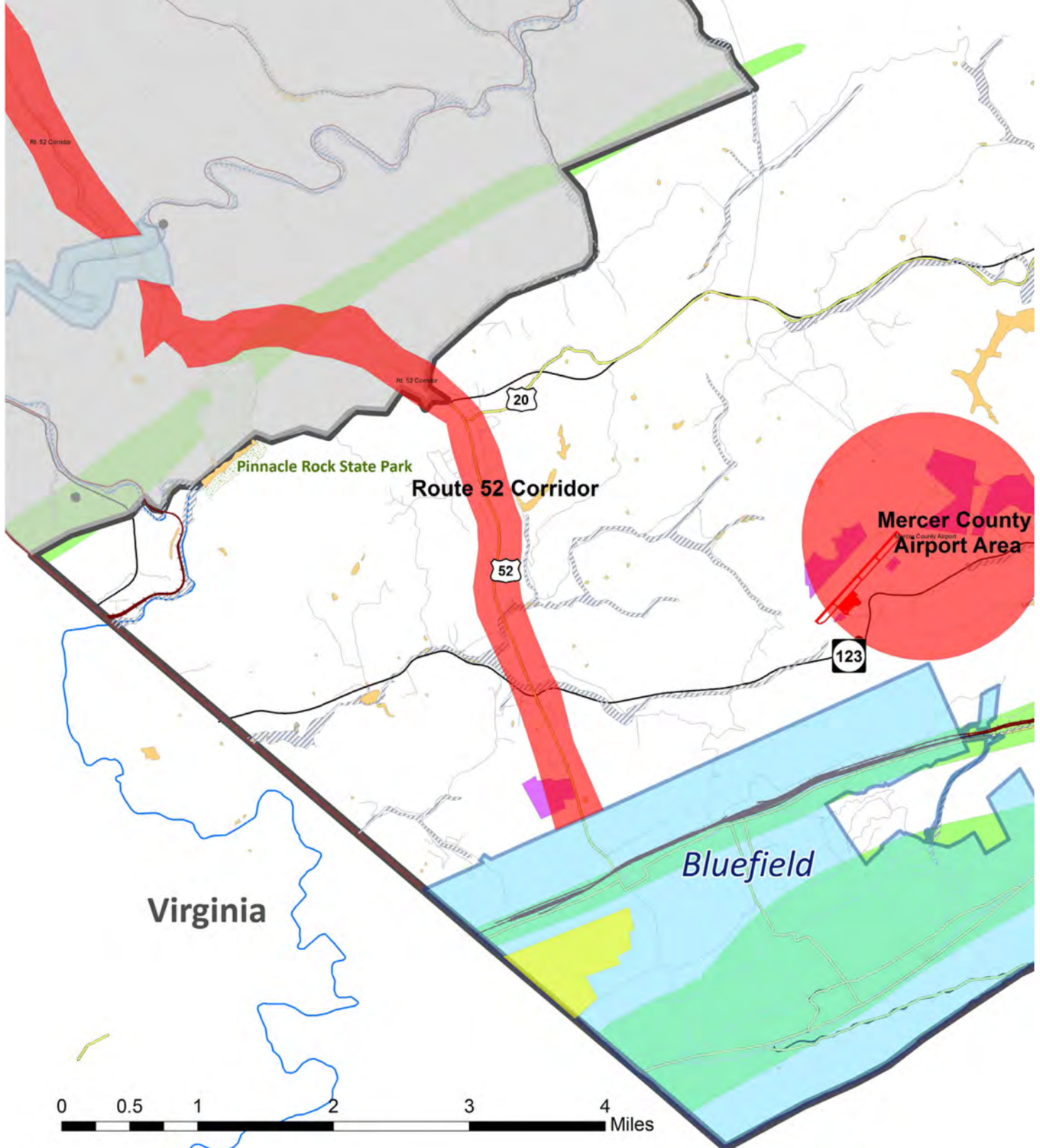
Map 3-4: *Rock Planning Area*
Future Land Use Map

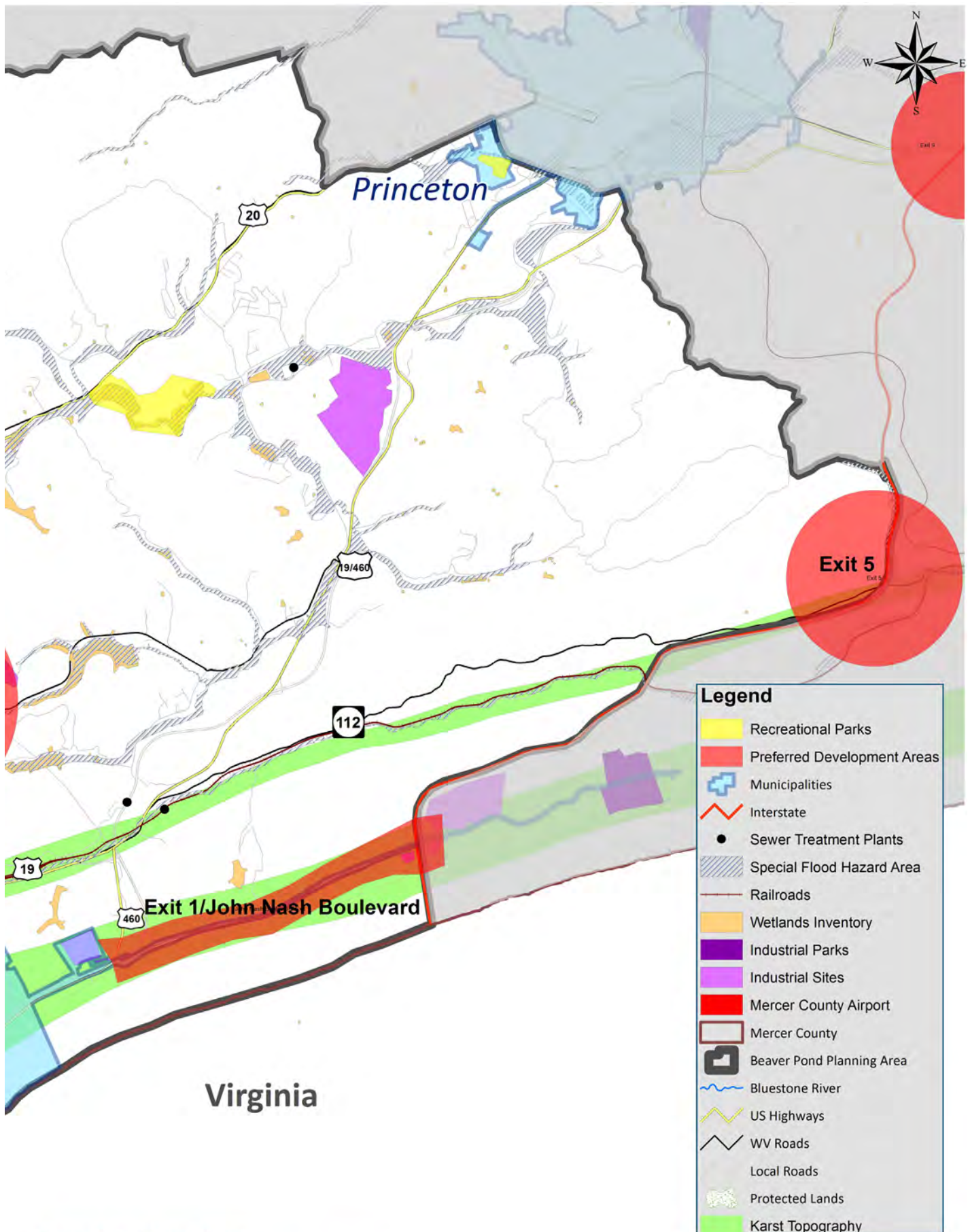




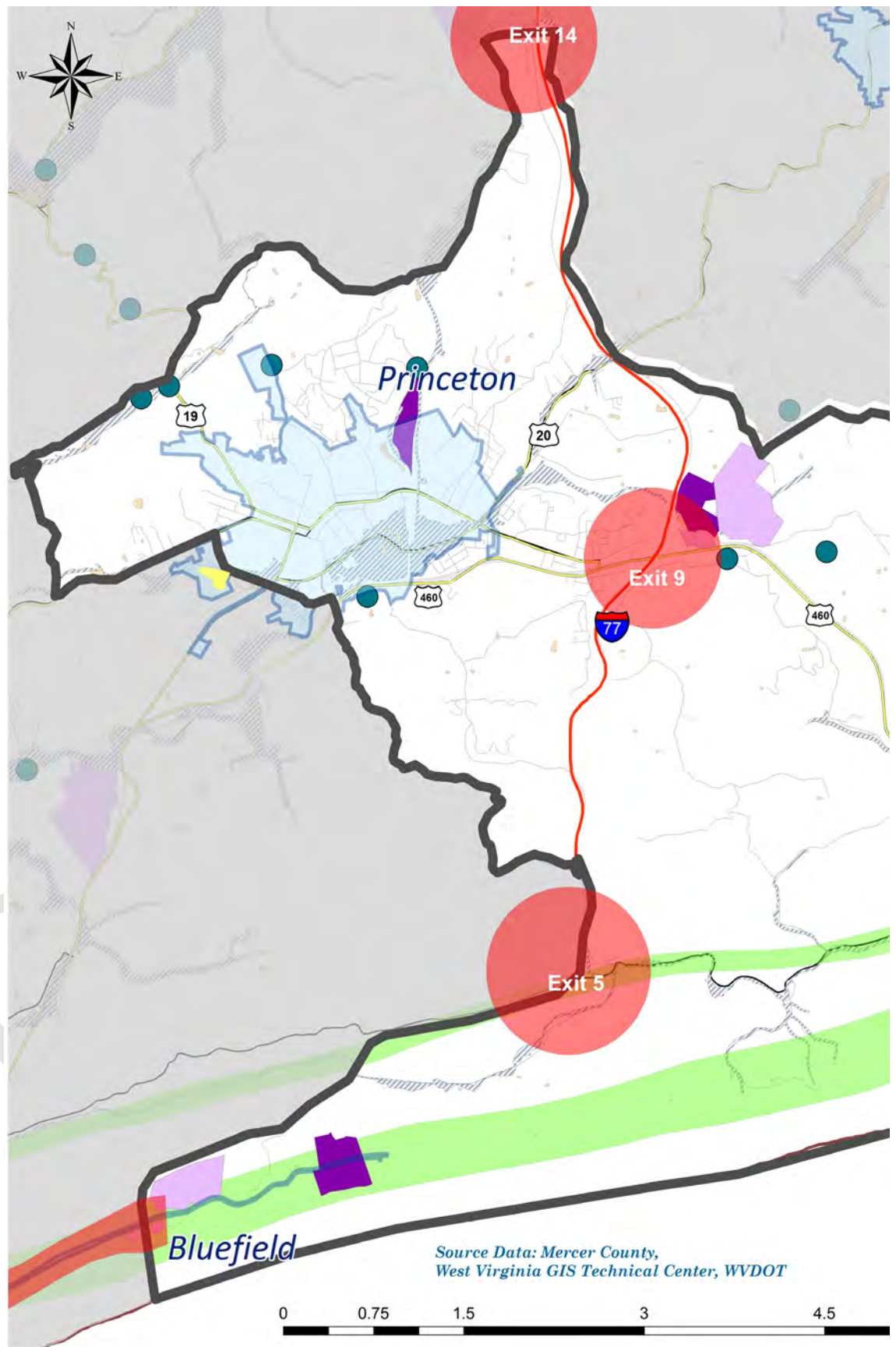
Mercer County Comprehensive Plan

Map 3-5: Beaver Pond Planning Area
Future Land Use Map





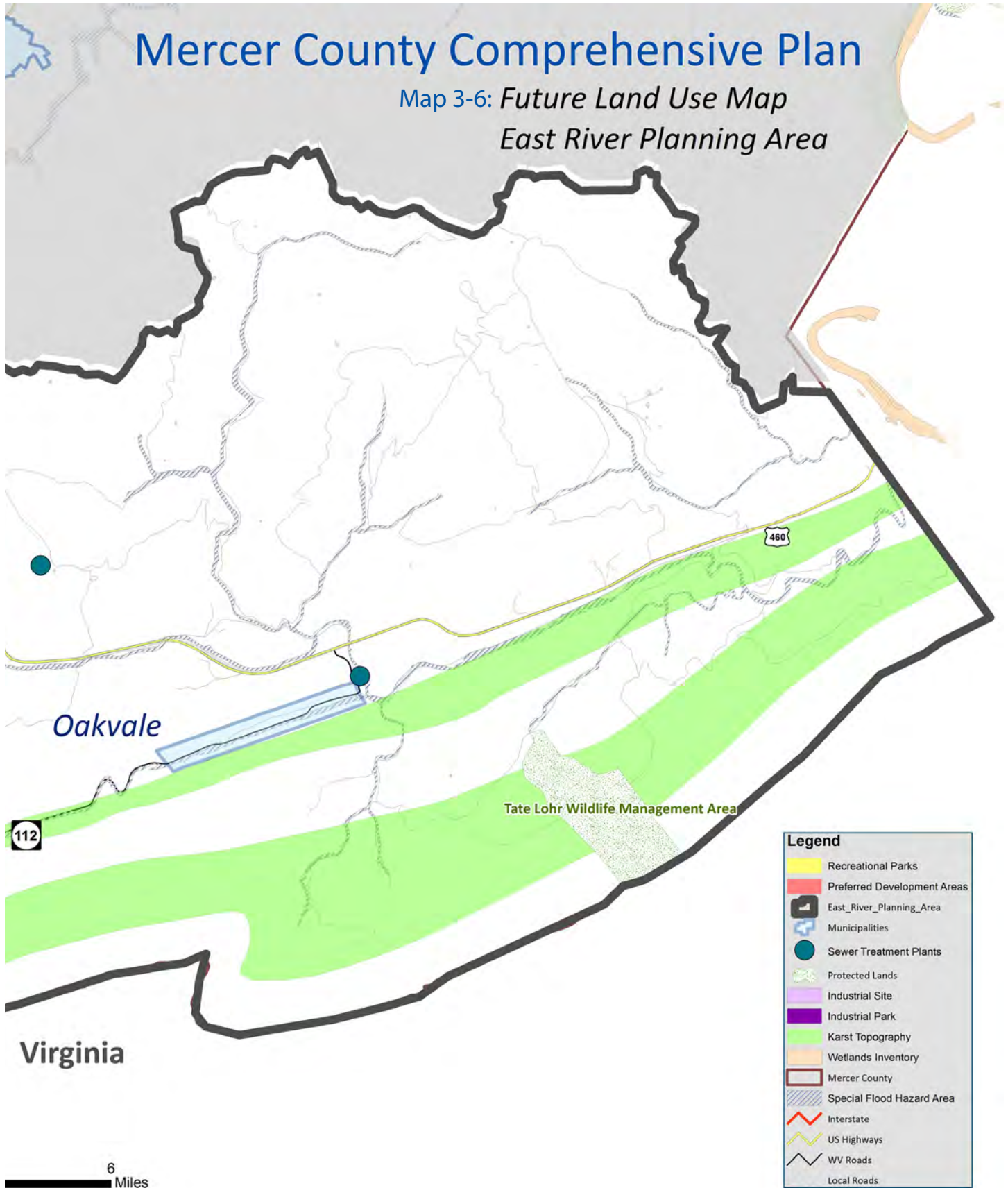
Source Data: Mercer County,
West Virginia GIS Technical Center, WVDOT

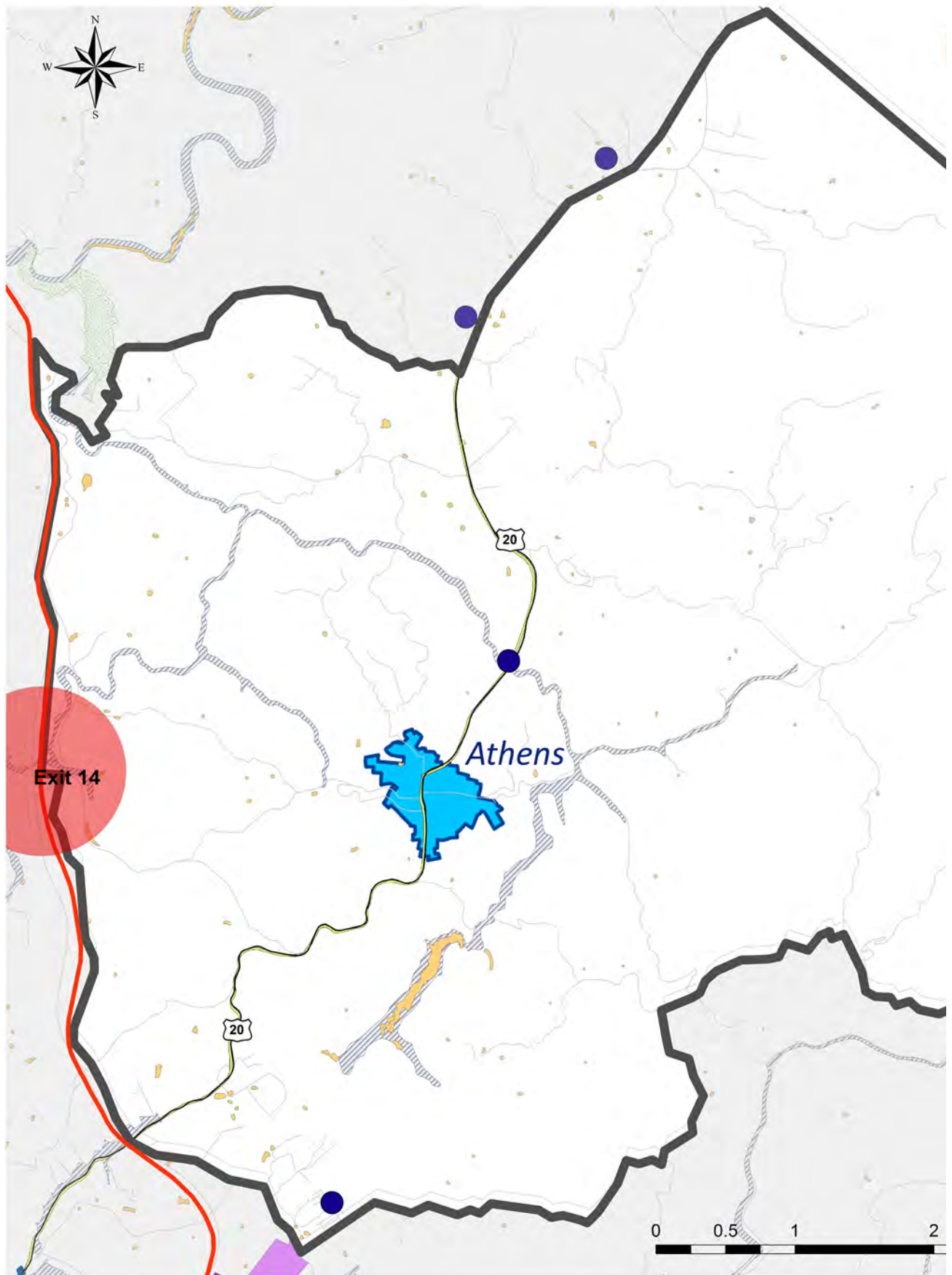


Mercer County Comprehensive Plan

Map 3-6: Future Land Use Map

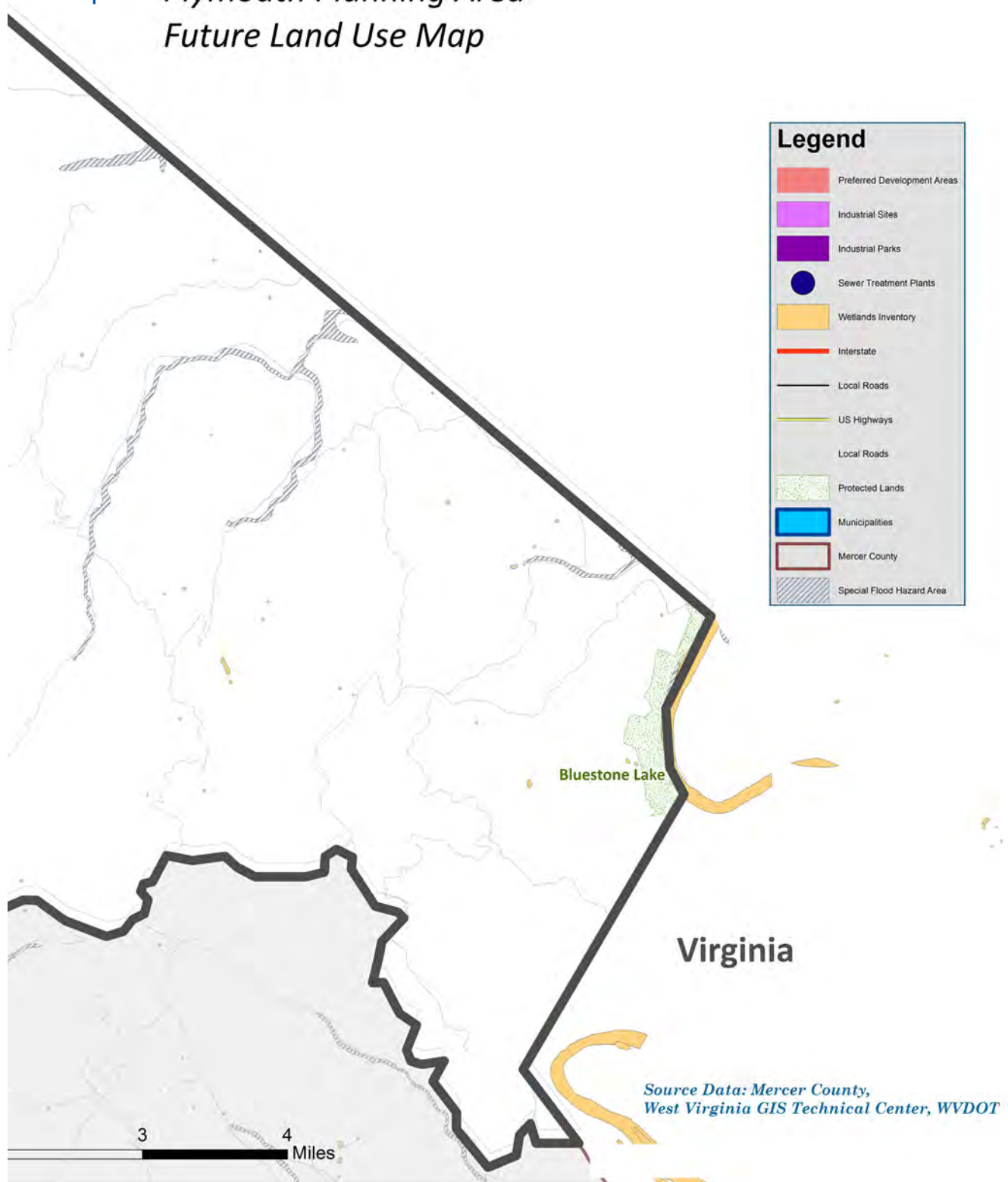
East River Planning Area





Mercer County Comprehensive Plan

Map 3-7: Plymouth Planning Area
Future Land Use Map



Litter

Recycling and litter control are important issues that need addressed in Mercer County. The Mercer County Solid Waste Authority operates a landfill located between Bluefield and Princeton, near the US 460 Corridor. Waste in the county is collected from both private handlers and municipalities.

In 2010, the Mercer County EDA conducted a Needs Assessment. Litter control was seen as a “severe” problem by 57% of the respondents. Junk cars were seen as a “severe” problem by 60% of the respondents. The Needs Assessment indicated “a definite sentiment for better enforcement of litter laws and to have more community involvement of local governments in community clean-up activities.” In the time since the Needs Assessment was conducted, Mercer County's “Love Where you Live, Keep Mercer Clean” Campaign was recognized as an innovative and effective program to address litter by the National Association of Counties with the 2018 Achievement Award.

While litter control is an important issue to address, recycling has also been discussed by many citizens in Mercer County. The Town of Athens and the City of Bluefield are currently the only communities in the county with curbside recycling. West Virginia Code Section 22-15A-18 enables county recycling programs for solid waste. Programs can be established by ordinance or approved by referendum during any primary or general election. To the extent possible, new recycling programs should be coordinated with existing nearby recycling programs.

In the summer of 2017, Mercer County launched a recycling program. The county received approximately \$100,000 in grant funds from the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), the Dr. Pepper Snapple Group, and the Keep America Beautiful Park Recycling Bin Grant Program. The grant will provide for a recycling coordinator, a recycling truck, two recycling trailers, and marketing materials. Twenty recycle bins will be placed at the Glenwood Recreation Park.¹⁸



In 2017, West Virginia Code Section 22-15A-4 was amended to increase criminal penalties for littering. The statute increased the maximum penalty for littering refuse of up to 100 pounds or 27 cubic feet to \$2,500 or 100 hours community service. For litter over 100 pounds or greater than 27 cubic feet, the maximum penalties were increased to \$5,000. The increased fines could reduce littering and be used to remediate dumpsites.

A commonly cited source of litter in Mercer County is debris falling out of trucks, which has prompted the discussion of an open face trash-tarp ordinance. However, local governments do not presently have the enabling authority to require a tarp or any other form of covering for vehicular transport. Mercer County should identify other ways to reduce the amount of debris falling out of trucks and work with state officials on how to address this issue.

Mercer County officials have also discussed a program that incentivizes the collection of used tires. One idea is for the county to pay \$2 for each used tire brought to a designated location for proper disposal. However, such a program needs external funding, such as private donations or non-match grant funding. A tire reclamation program of this sort would likely need to be limited to Mercer County residents only.

Flooding

A real concern throughout the state is damage from flood events. In 2016, floodwaters caused significant damage to several West Virginia communities, destroying homes and businesses, closing schools, and causing the loss of life. Mercer County officials are aware of the dangers flood waters can pose and want to take steps to mitigate future damage. One area frequently mentioned by stakeholders as being flood prone is along the East River. The area of the East River, near Oakvale, has a history of flooding. The causes for flooding in this area include surface runoff from the Mercer Mall area and other paved locations upstream and various restrictions to the flow of water throughout the East River Basin.

As a result of the high frequency of flooding, FEMA purchased several mitigation lots in the Oakvale area. The lots were given to the local government with significant limitations on future development. In order to lessen the intensity of flood events, the county should work with the Army Corps of Engineers to remove stream restrictions and improve the flow of water. The county should also continue to participate in the National Flood Insurance Program.

Beautify our Gateways

Gateways often provide an important first impression of a community. An attractive, well-maintained gateway can be an important asset for growth and development. The entrances into Mercer County have potential to give a positive impression to travelers, especially along Interstate 77.

At both the northern and southern terminus of Interstate 77 in Mercer County, aesthetically appropriate landscaping and signage to welcome people to the community could be added. Ensuring both Exit 1, near Bluefield, and the Flat Top Area, in the northern part of the county, are well maintained should be a priority.

Route 460 and Route 52 are other high-traffic corridors that provide gateways into the county. Keeping these entrances clear, free from rubbish, and aesthetically pleasing will benefit the county's tourism industry and overall economic development.

Issue 5: Abandoned and Dilapidated Structures

During the open house meetings, one issue was consistently identified: the number of dilapidated structures found throughout the county. Dilapidated structures reduce the value of nearby properties and present health and safety concerns.

Mercer County can utilize several tools to address abandoned and dilapidated properties. In order to decide what tools are most appropriate, the county should understand the breadth and types of structures that are abandoned and dilapidated.

While completing a comprehensive countywide survey of all abandoned and dilapidated structures may not be feasible, some type of inventory is needed to understand approximately how many structures might be abandoned or dilapidated. An inventory helps identify clusters of abandoned or dilapidated structures, giving county officials a better sense of how to address these structures. Lorton Lick Road is one example of an area mentioned several times during open houses as having a cluster of dilapidated structures.



Another tool to address dilapidated structures is to create an unsafe structures ordinance under West Virginia Code Section 7-1-3ff. This statute gives Mercer County the enabling authority to regulate unsafe and unsanitary structures. An unsafe structures ordinance enables the county commission to address unsafe structures as well as the accumulation of refuse, or debris;

and toxic seepage that has been determined by the County Enforcement Agency to be detrimental to the public safety or welfare. In order for Mercer County to enforce an unsafe structures ordinance under Chapter 7, the county must designate an “enforcement agency,” which consists of the county engineer, county health officer, and two at large members. The county sheriff is required to serve as an ex officio member of the enforcement agency. The sheriff would be charged with the enforcement of the unsafe structures ordinance.

An advantage of adopting an unsafe structures ordinance is that the ordinance does not require the county to hire additional personnel. The ordinance also provides some latitude to adopt unique standards for regulating unsafe and unsanitary structures.

One disadvantage of the unsafe structure ordinance is that it does not require certification or training to enforce its provisions. Unlike the WVSBC, the unsafe structure statute lacks clear standards. A lack of clear standards may increase the likelihood of litigation based on arbitrary standards. Another weakness is that the enforcement agency may not have the technical expertise to determine whether a particular building is structurally sound or fit for human habitation.¹⁹

The West Virginia Weatherization Assistance Program is run through the West Virginia Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). The mission of the weatherization program is to reduce the energy costs for low-income families and people with disabilities by improving the energy efficiency of homes while also improving safety.²⁰ While the mission of the weatherization program is not directly tied to abandoned and dilapidated structures, improved weatherization of homes can reduce the likelihood of future dilapidation.

The OEO contracts statewide with 12 local community action agencies. The community action agencies employ trained weatherization crews to install energy efficiency and conservation measures in low-income housing units. Weatherization examples include, but are not limited to, “installing insulation, reducing air-infiltration, performing heating and cooling tune-ups and modifications, and when appropriate, replacing heating units for energy efficiency and safety.” Community Action of South Eastern West Virginia (CASE WV) in Princeton is a West Virginia Weatherization Provider.

The West Virginia Property Rescue Initiative (PRI) is allocating \$1 million over a five-year period for a revolving loan program. The revolving loan program is available to counties, such as Mercer, that want to rid their communities of blighted and other unsafe properties. To be eligible, the county must have the authority to acquire or demolish properties. The structure to be razed must also constitute a health and safety hazard. The PRI loans may not exceed \$250,000 per year. PRI loans do not accrue interest if paid off during the first two years.²¹

Projects for which PRI loans can be used include:

- The acquisition of property or the demolition or deconstruction of residential structures.
- The removal and proper disposal of all debris, including hazardous materials.
- Pre-demolition costs such as surveys and title searches and supplemental work associated with demolition.²²

Partnerships with Financial Institutions

One informal strategy to address dilapidated structures in Mercer County is for county officials to work with financial institutions such as local banks. Collaborating banks can provide forgivable or low-interest loans to qualified individuals or developers to redevelop a dilapidated property. County officials should work with banks to provide an agreement that transfers neglected properties to new owners at low or no cost. A common requirement of such transfer is that the new owners must rehabilitate the neglected property within a given time period.

For a partnership to work, local officials need to work with the banks in a collaborative environment. The benefits to participating banks should be clearly articulated—a bank’s goals can be consistent with the county’s goals. In addition, a bank can receive positive publicity by working with the community.

CASE WV

Community Action of South Eastern West Virginia (CASE WV) started servicing the area in 1964. CASE WV is “governed by a volunteer Board of Directors that represents three different segments of the population: elected officials, private sector, and low income. CASE covers all of Mercer and surrounding counties.”²⁴

CASE WV provides low interest housing loans, onsite septic loans, and rental housing. One of CASE WV’s projects is the Kennedy Center, a 28-unit affordable housing facility in Bluefield. The county should continue to support CASE WV initiatives that benefit Mercer County citizens.

Housing Authority

Housing authorities in West Virginia are created to protect the health, safety, morals, and welfare of the public. Housing authorities engage in low- and moderate-cost housing development and slum clearance projects. Additionally, housing authorities can provide youth and senior programming and education and social services associated with public housing or rental assistance. Only a few housing authorities currently exist in West Virginia.

Housing authorities typically offer two types of housing assistance: 1) public housing and 2) rental assistance, which includes the Section 8 voucher program. Each city or county in West Virginia is enabled to create a housing authority; however, the need to establish a housing authority must be exhibited by a jurisdiction.

Public housing programs offer housing to qualified tenants in communities managed by the housing authority. The rent participants pay is based on 30% of a tenant's monthly-adjusted income. All basic utilities are paid by the housing authority. Section 8 programs include the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, which is tenant-based assistance (assistance travels with a family), and the Moderate Rehabilitation Program, which is unit-based assistance (a family has assistance as long as they reside in a designated unit).²³

The Bluefield Housing Authority (BHA) is a Section 8 and Public Housing Agency in Mercer County. The BHA operates two public housing developments, Tiffany Manor and King Bridge Apartments, both of which are located in Bluefield. The Authority also provides Section 8 housing assistance throughout Mercer County.

In the future, a multi-county, multi-municipal regional housing authority should be considered. BHA may be the appropriate agency for a larger regional authority.

Issue 6: Youth and Education

One of the most important age cohorts to engage during the comprehensive plan process is the community's youth. Teenagers at the time the comprehensive plan is adopted will be in their 20s and 30s when implementation of the plan is near completion. Understanding how youth view the community is important. Today's youth in Mercer County will eventually have to answer questions such as "Do I want to live here?"; "Would I want to raise my family here?"; and "Is there any chance of finding work here?"

Members of the Mercer County Planning Commission and the WVU Land Use and Sustainable Development Law Clinic visited PikeView High School in the fall of 2016 to solicit input from the students. The visit also allowed Mercer County officials to explain the importance of the comprehensive plan process.

The students completed a Strengths, Weaknesses, and Opportunities exercise. The most identified weaknesses by the students were: 1) drug abuse; 2) road conditions; 3) limited youth and community activities, or nothing to do; 4) lack of diversity; and 5) lack of shopping. Full results of the Pikeview High School visit can be found in Appendix B.

In 2010, a Needs Assessment Survey was completed by the Mercer County EDA. Under the category of "education and work preparation," 33% of survey respondents indicated that it was a "moderate" problem, and another 44% said it was a "severe" problem in Mercer County. Participants were also asked to "assess the quality of the education" in Mercer County: 28% of respondents indicated that quality of education was "not a problem," 42% said quality of education was a "moderate problem," and 30% said quality of education was a "severe problem."

Another "severe problem" identified by 49% of the survey participants was the lack of existing programs for youth. When asked about non-school activities for young people, a majority of respondents indicated that a lack of activities was a "severe" problem for 1) high school students and 2) youth with disabilities. Providing more nonathletic type activities—such as drama groups, art and science clubs, nature hikes, and community service activities—was considered a priority in 2010.



Youth Education

The Mercer County Planning Commission indicated a need for the local youth to have a better understanding and appreciation for the county's robust history and importance to the region.

While attendance to institutions of higher education, including community colleges, should be encouraged, a stronger emphasis on vocational and technical training is needed. Several students interviewed at PikeView had no intention of going to college. Mercer County officials should continue emphasizing to youth the importance of a quality education in the vocational trades.

The 1999 Mercer County Comprehensive Plan called for the development of pre-vocational and technical classes to be taught after school. Well-trained volunteers would serve as instructors. Funding for these classes would come from grants and from small participation fees. This program could include entry level training for the tourism, hospitality, construction, and technical industries. Graduates of the pre-vocational and technical program could receive preferential consideration during hiring by area businesses.

Mercer County officials should collaborate with Mercer County Public Schools to:

- 1) Expand service learning.
- 2) Provide earlier exposure to vocational trades.
- 3) Teach entrepreneurial and management skills to all students.

The County Commission and the County School Board should consider creating an agreement that would permit the public to utilize school facilities when not being used for school activities. Examples include the use of the cross-country trails as nature trails, the use of school playgrounds during the summer months, and the use of school gymnasiums for adult basketball leagues or other indoor activities. The utilization of school facilities by the public would come secondary to the use of the facilities during school hours or during school events.

Youth Activities

During the Mercer County Comprehensive Plan process, several participants indicated a need for more youth activities. Providing youth activities throughout the county, beyond Bluefield or Princeton, was viewed as a priority.

One suggestion was to create a science and education museum in Mercer County. A science and education museum would need to be funded by private donations and staffed by volunteers. Currently, the closest science museum is in Roanoke, Virginia, approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes from Princeton. The Youth Museum of Southern West Virginia is located in Beckley, less than one hour from Princeton. Mercer County is also home to a train museum in Princeton.

Establishing a children's museum in Mercer County was also discussed during the comprehensive plan process. A children's museum could utilize students from the county's colleges and universities to develop programs and to volunteer as docents.

The Bluefield WV-VA Micropolitan Statistical Area has a population of over 105,000 people, which may be a large enough population to sustain a small local museum.²⁵ However, creating a museum is time consuming, takes careful planning, and requires a great deal of capital. A new museum's purpose and mission must be clear, and a dedicated group of people must champion its development.



An amenity suggested by the youth was a trampoline center. A trampoline center is a facility that has multiple trampolines. Patrons can jump, exercise, and otherwise recreate. Currently, only a handful of trampoline centers are located in West Virginia. Many existing trampoline centers in West Virginia have open jump times, can be rented out for birthdays and special occasions, and offer exercise programs. The county should actively solicit investors that can analyze the feasibility of establishing a trampoline center. County officials along with the Mercer County EDA should identify sites for a trampoline center within the county.

Additional Concerns

Recreation

Providing recreational opportunities is essential for the physical and mental well-being of the community. Recreational activities can be as simple as taking a walk, or as involved as participating in a triathlon. Regardless of age or physical condition, recreational activities should be available for all Mercer County citizens.

Expanding and enhancing recreational opportunities in Mercer County was cited throughout the comprehensive plan process. During this process, the planning commission completed an inventory of existing recreational facilities and events. The inventory provided the planning commission with a starting point to develop the goals and objectives found in the comprehensive plan. Joint projects with municipalities should be sought after where practicable.

Mercer County is home to two state parks, Pinnacle Rock and Camp Creek, with another state park, Pipestem, located just across the county line, in Summers County. Mercer County is also home to Glenwood Park and several municipal parks. Activities at the local parks include hiking, camping, golfing, swimming, and horseback riding. Even with several recreational amenities in

Mercer County, continued enhancement or expansion of recreational amenities will benefit the community. Municipalities in Mercer County should be involved in any planning and development of recreational activities because collaboration between the County and the municipalities helps to avoid duplication of services.

Many local resources are available to improve recreational amenities. The County should collaborate with Mercer County schools. The school system could assist with constructing picnic tables and shelters at the parks and could work with the Mercer County CVB to provide marketing tools for recreational amenities. Area colleges and universities could be a valuable resource for technical assistance and developing programs and activities. Local businesses can provide sponsorships, labor, or equipment for recreational activities. Foundations and non-profit organizations offer grants and other recreation-related services. Citizens are a great resource and can offer everything from labor to private donations. State and federal government and agencies can provide technical services and grant money.

During the comprehensive plan process, the citizens of Mercer County developed a “recreation plan.” The recreation plan is attached as an appendix to the comprehensive plan, and recommendations from the recreation plan have been integrated into the comprehensive plan.

The Bluestone River is a tributary of the New River. The River flows through Mercer County in a northeast direction from Pinnacle Rock State Park, past Lerona, and into Summers County. A portion of the Bluestone River, between Hinton and Athens, has been designated a National Scenic River by the National Park Service.

Access to the Bluestone River has historically been very limited. Pipestem State Park in Summers County provides some of the best access to the river. Few public access points exist along the Bluestone River in Mercer County. Mercer County officials would like to provide better access and increase utilization of the Bluestone River.

Mercer County officials are considering the creation of the Bluestone River Water Trail. The trail would extend the entire length of the Bluestone River in Mercer County, from the Summers County line to the Virginia border.

During certain times of the year, the Bluestone River is ideal for kayaks and flat-bottomed boats. The county has applied for grant funding to help offset construction costs of access points to the river. County officials need to understand, and try to mitigate, any adverse effects of opening up the river to more recreational boaters. The Bluestone River is already being used by kayakers; additional access points are intended to make the river more easily accessible for recreation throughout the county.

Recreational walking and biking trails are being considered in Mercer County. The county owns an old railroad right-of-way (32 feet in width) that extends from the old Bluestone Lumber Company property near Exit 14 all the way to Flat Top. The right-of-way also extends to Camp Creek State Park. County Officials are working with state park officials and Summers County Officials to create a larger network of walking and biking trails in the region.

County officials should also ensure that Glenwood Park has biking and walking facilities that are connected to the surrounding neighborhoods and businesses. County officials should work with municipalities to create or extend existing municipal pedestrian or bicycle systems into the unincorporated areas, adjacent to the municipalities. If the county decides to create a Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance, the county can require all major developments to have sidewalks constructed on at least one side of a road that serves a certain number of residences or businesses.



During the 2017 legislative session, West Virginia House Bill 2953 was introduced. The purpose of the bill was to establish the “Southern West Virginia Lake Development Study Commission.” While Bill 2953 was not signed into law, several discussions occurred during the legislative session regarding the creation of a large recreational lake in southern West Virginia.

The findings of the bill indicated that the legislature was trying to identify innovative approaches to revitalize the southern coalfields. The legislature was looking at new industries and businesses to provide “sustainable long-term development for southern West Virginia.” Bill 2953 states that the southern coalfields area would be ideal for a large recreational lake “with hundreds of miles of lake front property and tens of thousands of acres of lake surface.” The bill would have created a Lake Development Study Commission within the West Virginia Development Office, with representatives from Mingo, McDowell, Mercer, and Wyoming counties.

Equine Trails/Horseback Riding

Horseback riding is an important recreational activity in Mercer County. During the 2017 open house meetings, several citizens indicated that further development of equine trails and facilities should be prioritized in Mercer County. The planning commission also has indicated a desire to improve and expand the horseback riding opportunities in Mercer County.

Camp Creek and Pipestem State Parks currently maintain horseback riding trails. Pipestem State Park has privately held stables that are open in the summer. The Pocahontas Trail system, part of the Hatfield McCoy trail system, has a trailhead in historic Bramwell and allows horseback riding. Additionally, Kairos Wilderness Resort, which is partially in Mercer County, maintains horseback riding trails.

Mercer County does not appear to have a shortage of recreational horseback riding trails, but people in the county may not be fully aware of the current horseback riding options. The county, in conjunction with the CVB and the Chamber of Commerce, should inventory all existing horseback riding trails available for public use in Mercer County and convey the information to the public through websites, social media, and press releases. If the current inventory of horseback riding trails is insufficient, then locations for additional horseback riding trails should be identified.



Existing Recreational/Tourists Facilities

Mercer County should focus on enhancing existing recreational facilities as opposed to creating new ones, particularly through coordinated river clean up activities. For example, Camp Creek was consistently referred to as a “hidden gem,” but it needs public water facilities. Camp Creek is widely considered an underutilized resource for both Mercer County residents and non-residents. The Mercer County CVB has already begun promoting Camp Creek State Park and its recreational opportunities.

Brush Creek Falls Wildlife Management Area would benefit from additional signage and better access to water falls. With the assistance of the West Virginia Department of Highways, the county should improve signage to and from the falls. The county should also work with park staff and the park foundation to increase visitation and to improve trail access. Pinnacle Rock State Park is another underutilized amenity in Mercer County. The park is home to beautiful vistas, Jimmy Lewis Lake, and 14 miles of hiking trails. Plans are in place to build cabins and to repair the earthen dam for better stability.

Renovations to Glenwood Park should continue to be a priority. The 1999 Comprehensive Plan suggested a swimming beach, additional walking trails, development of mountain biking trails, and modernization of the Glenwood Park facilities. Another suggestion was to create a light show on Glenwood Lake to attract residents and visitors. However, some of these suggestions are almost 20 years old and should be re-evaluated.

Senior Activities

Mercer County is home to many senior citizens. The proportion of senior citizens in the county is likely to increase in the next couple of decades. County officials should understand the needs of senior citizens with regard to transportation, housing, shopping, and recreation.

Expanding and enhancing recreational activities for seniors in Mercer County was mentioned during the comprehensive plan process. Mercer County is fortunate to have the Commission on Aging with Community Action South Eastern West Virginia (CASE WV). The Commission on Aging provides transportation, personal care, mobility, nutrition, and housekeeping and laundry services.

CASE WV provides several community programs for Mercer County residents, including weekday lunches, exercise opportunities, line dancing, crafts, bingo, in-home care services, transportation, health programs, and home-delivered meals. The county should work with organizations and agencies, such as CASE WV, to expand and enhance the activities and programs offered for senior citizens in Mercer County.

Tourism

Mercer County is located within 500 miles of several major cities, including Atlanta, Baltimore, Charlotte, Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Virginia Beach, and Washington, D.C.

The Route 460/I-77 interchange, near Princeton, is one of the busiest intersections in the state. Mercer County, compared to many other places in West Virginia, is highly visible. The county has also become an overnight stopping point for people traveling through the region. County officials should work with business owners and the Mercer County CVB to encourage travelers to spend more time experiencing all that Mercer County has to offer.

Mercer County is home to several tourism-related events and activities. Tourists visit the county to learn about coal history, ride on ATV trails, visit beautiful state parks, and watch professional sports teams. County officials should continue working with trade organizations, including the CVB and Chamber of Commerce, to promote Mercer County as a recreational hub. Mercer County offers several options for overnight accommodations, from hotels directly off the interstate to bed and breakfasts, ATV-friendly lodges, and RV campgrounds. A variety of overnight accommodations will enhance the tourism industry in Mercer County.

Mercer County currently has more than 15 motels, two campgrounds, four bed and breakfasts, and approximately ten ATV-related cabins. A hotel close to the hospital in Princeton would allow family and friends of patients to remain close to loved ones. More “ATV friendly” lodging, especially near the trailhead in Bramwell, is needed as well. An Abandoned Mine Land grant of \$1.8 million was recently awarded to develop a new ATV trail, with lodging and other accommodations, in the Coaldale community.



Photo Source: CVB

In the last five to ten years, the arts community in Mercer County has grown significantly. The visual and performing arts are an important means of self-expression for people of all ages. Local culture and traditions are often perpetuated through song, dance, painting, and sculpture. The arts community in Mercer County should be embraced and encouraged. Mercer County should continue to grow as a regional hub for artists to display talents.

Annual Events and Festivals in Mercer County

- All Together Art Week
- Bramwell Tour of Homes
- Celebrate Princeton
- Cole Chevy Mountain Festival
- The Bluefield Shrine Horse Show
- Mercer County Fair
- Athens-Concord Town Social
- Lemonade Festival
- Mercer County Heritage Festival
- Camp Creek Fall Festival
- Princeton Autumnfest
- Lake Shawnee Abandoned Amusement Park Dark Carnival and Tours
- Bramwell Ghost Tours
- Ramp Feast and Lumberjack Competition
- Pocahontas Chapter NRHS Train Show
- Holiday of Lights Festival
- Bluefield-Graham Football Game
- Bramwell Christmas Tour of Homes
- Bluefield Lemon Drop
- Downtown Countdown- Princeton
- Winter Warmer
- Octoberfest- Beautification Committee

Mercer County should also encourage ancillary businesses that support the tourism industry. Ancillary businesses include hotels, restaurants, convenience stores, and recreational activities like miniature golf or go-carts. Ancillary businesses are not the primary reason tourists visit a certain area but are still very important to ensuring that the tourists have a good experience and come back.

Greater emphasis should be placed on ensuring that current Mercer County events and festivals are “bigger and better.” Promoting and advertising existing festivals and events can be tedious and time consuming. However, promoting the county’s ability to accommodate overnight guests and encouraging visitors to patronize local businesses will improve tourism.

In order to come up with more specific and concrete tourism-based initiatives, Mercer County and its partners should continue to collect tourism-based data. Collecting tourism data that highlights where Mercer County should focus its attention should be a high priority. However, data collection can be costly and time-consuming.

ATV-based tourism should be a high priority in Mercer County. The Hatfield McCoy Trail system is found in Logan, Mingo, Boone, McDowell, Wyoming, Lincoln, and Mercer Counties. The Pocahontas Trail, which has a trailhead in Bramwell, links up with the Indian Ridge and Pinnacle Creek Trails, creating the most extensive continuous trail system east of the Mississippi. According to the Hatfield-McCoy trails website, Mercer County currently has two businesses located along the Pocahontas Trail.

Mercer County officials should encourage additional ATV-related businesses, either along the trails or in close proximity to the trailheads. For example, in 2017, a business providing ATV riding accessories, lodging, and tours on the Hatfield-McCoy trails opened in a vacant storefront in Bluewell.



When trail riders park, often they want amenities readily available. Mercer County should work with property owners and prospective business owners to locate ancillary services close to the trailheads or along the trail.

A few comprehensive plan process participants mentioned that ATV riders do not feel welcome in Mercer County. Hospitality and friendliness are important to the growth of the ATV industry. Every effort should be made to be hospitable to ATV riders when they come and recreate in the county.

Multi-use Facility

A Market and Financial Analysis Study, for a multi-use event center, was presented to the Mercer County EDA by Crossroads Consulting Services in April 2014. Additionally, studies completed in 2007 and 2011 suggested that Mercer County could support a multi-use facility.²⁶ The 2011 study proposed the development of a 3,500-fixed seat indoor multi-use event center, with a maximum capacity of 5,500 people, and supporting infrastructure, including horse stalls, RV hookups, and on-site parking. Equine events, live entertainment, and sporting events would be the focus of the multi-use center. The studies also discussed the possibility of establishing a casino near the multi-use events center.

A multi-use facility would generate hundreds of new jobs and provide millions of dollars in additional tax revenue to the local jurisdictions, including Mercer County. As stated in the market study, benefits of the proposed multi-use facility include,

...enhancing the region's image as a destination by increasing its visitor amenities, broadening market reach to new visitors, extending the length of stay for existing tourists, increasing economic and fiscal impacts for local and state governments by generating more tourism, capitalizing on existing tourism efforts (e.g. trail system, statewide gaming), receiving increased state, regional, and national exposure through hosting larger, national and regional event activity, and promoting agriculture and equine related businesses.

The multi-use facility has not yet been constructed, primarily due to a lack of funding. When the multi-use facility is considered a priority for Mercer County, a committee should be formed with the primary function to secure the necessary funds to complete the design and construction of the facility.

Historic Preservation

Princeton, Bramwell, and Bluefield have federally designated historic districts. However, Mercer County has no state or federally designated historic districts in the unincorporated portions of Mercer County. County officials should work with local historical groups to identify historic structures and districts in Mercer County. The community should weigh the advantages and disadvantages of designating historical areas or structures. The county can continue to promote local historic attractions and tourism-related businesses such as Lake Shawnee Amusement Park.

Transportation

Transportation impacts are often the result of dozens of variables. Infrastructure, demographic trends, the economy, and technology are just a few components that influence travel.²⁷ In 2000, roughly 400,000 daily auto trips occurred in Mercer County. Of those trips, roughly 30% involved at least one trip end outside of the county. Trips with one end outside of the county are estimated to grow by 28% between 2000 and 2025. By 2025, roughly 6 out of 10 trips will either begin or end outside of Mercer County. Ideally, people will drive from outside areas into Mercer County to shop, work, and recreate.

One of the most important transportation projects for Mercer County is the completion of the King Coal Highway. The King Coal Highway was originally an ARC (Appalachian Regional Commission) project. The King Coal Highway was designated as “a high priority segment of a high priority corridor in the National Highway System.”²⁸ The highway will be approximately 90 miles long and located completely within southern West Virginia. The completed bridge near Bluefield, which is part of the King Coal Highway, was finished over 10 years ago, but currently terminates at the side of a mountain. The estimated \$50 million project to take the highway from the bridge to intersect with Airport Road is scheduled to start in 2019.”²⁹

Transportation funding may be available through the FAST Act, which is a “5 year highway bill that will reinvest in West Virginia’s Infrastructure.”³⁰ State officials will determine how to prioritize federal monies appropriated for roads. Another funding source is a \$1.6 billion dollar bond referendum, which was approved by West Virginia citizens in fall 2017. Prior to the referendum, Governor Jim Justice indicated if the bond passed, both the King Coal Highway and the Coalfields Expressway would be built.



The Coalfields Expressway is an important transportation project. Although not designed to be built in Mercer County, the Coalfields Expressway would provide another north-south transportation corridor through the region. The Coalfields Expressway Authority is a “public corporation created by an act of the West Virginia Legislature, in 1996, whose purpose is to advance the construction of a modern highway through McDowell, Raleigh, and Wyoming Counties.”³¹

The Shawnee Highway is a partially completed highway that runs along the northwestern Mercer County border with Raleigh and Wyoming counties. A segment between Ashton and Ghent has already been constructed. With any highways potentially receiving a “scenic highway” designation, the county should understand the implications of such designation.

The Shawnee Highway is an important transportation project that should be completed to improve transportation options for Mercer County residents.

As to traffic congestion, certain intersections have been identified as problematic. The I-77/Route 460 interchange is congested at times. Route 20, between Princeton and Athens, and Princeton and Bluefield can become congested. Traffic flow could be improved by the integration of smart (adaptive) traffic signals that adjust to real time traffic conditions. County officials should also encourage a commercial airline carrier with scheduled flights.

Housing

Housing is often one of the most important aspects of community living. People need adequate shelter to live comfortably. Several issues related to housing in Mercer County were identified during the comprehensive planning process.

The 2010 Needs Assessment, completed by the Mercer County EDA, indicated that affordable housing was needed for young couples with children (45% considered this the most serious housing issue). Other primary concerns included the lack of affordable housing or rental property and the potential to rehabilitate substandard housing for rental purposes.

Mercer County officials should encourage a diversity of housing options, including more green space, tiny homes, and community-based villages. While nontraditional housing options are ideal for younger folks, some options can also be appealing for retirees and senior citizens. The community should focus on smaller-scale housing; natural amenities; and proximity to hospitals, restaurants, and entertainment.

Mercer County's population is aging. Working with developers to create housing options that allow citizens to age-in-place is important. The county should also continue to support assisted living facilities with varying degrees of independent living, and otherwise support affordable CASE WV initiatives.

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CHAPTER 4: ACTION PLAN

Chapter 4: Action Plan establishes a set of goals, objectives, and action steps that will allow Mercer County to realize its overall vision for the future. The goals, objectives, and action steps in Chapter 4 are based on issues identified in Chapter 3: Needs Assessment. Chapter 4 also includes an implementation matrix that identifies potential partners, estimates costs of completion, prioritizes action steps, and lists funding sources. The implementation matrix can be used as a standalone document to implement the comprehensive plan.

The list of issues, as prioritized, are as follows:

- 1) Infrastructure and Public Safety
- 2) Jobs and Growth
- 3) Drugs/Substance Abuse
- 4) Land Use and Litter Control
- 5) Abandoned and Dilapidated Structures
- 6) Youth and Education

These issues directly correspond to the goals that are outlined in Chapter 3.

Goal 1: Improve existing infrastructure and encourage the development of new infrastructure, where needed.

Objective 1: Address water and wastewater issues.

Action Step 1: Work with water and wastewater providers to continue to identify where services are needed.

Action Step 2: Review the Mercer County Wastewater Plan. Prioritize future wastewater projects. Create a ranking system that will allow decision-makers to choose cost-effective projects.

Action Step 3: If in the best interest of all parties involved, encourage consolidation of Public Service Districts (PSDs). Consolidation efforts should improve efficiency and cost of water and wastewater utilities.

Objective 2: Create a cell tower ordinance that reflects the community's interests.

Action Step 1: Understand and apply FCC regulations that limit local government control of cell towers.

Action Step 2: Work with Summers County, and other local officials, to develop a cell tower ordinance that reflects the desires of the county. Include stealth design and colocation requirements, when practicable.

Objective 3: Pursue reliable, affordable, high-speed broadband available throughout the county.

Action Step 1: Encourage greater bandwidth and higher upload and download speeds in Mercer County.

Action Step 2: Understand the rules and regulations governing Broadband Associations.

Action Step 3: Work with Mercer County schools to promote broadband at local schools.

Action Step 4: Identify grant funding opportunities for broadband expansion and development.

Objective 4: Provide efficient and reliable “first responder” services to all parts of Mercer County.

Action Step 1: Work with local first responders to address any issues with lack of personnel, equipment, or resources. Identify how county officials can help local first responders.

Action Step 2: Ensure response times are as short as practicable, personnel are adequately trained, and dispatching technology is accurate and reliable.

Goal 2: Cultivate an environment that promotes long-term job creation and retention as well as responsible economic growth in Mercer County.

Objective 1: Encourage diversification of Mercer County's economy.

Action Step 1: Encourage growth and development by ensuring that opening a new business or continuing to operate a business is an easy and straightforward process, with few local regulatory obstacles.

Action Step 2: Collaborate with the Mercer County CVB, Chamber of Commerce, and EDA to identify what types of retail business and manufacturing should be encouraged. Actively recruit identified types of businesses.

Action Step 3: The hardwoods and timber industry should be encouraged in Mercer County. Highlight the Business in the Hardwoods facility and other responsible timber industry enterprises.

Objective 2: Promote the development of foods, fibers, and other natural products cultivated and grown in Mercer County.

Action Step 1: Understand the rules and regulations that govern alternative crops, such as ginseng, and promote sustainable cultivation.

Action Step 2: Promote the aquaculture industry in Mercer County. Invite industry leaders in aquaculture to Mercer County. Encourage industry leaders to talk about the advantages and disadvantages of various aquaculture practices to Mercer County citizens, officials, and property owners.

Action Step 3: Continue to support agricultural practices, including the raising of livestock and crops that have traditionally been grown in Mercer County.

Objective 3: Branding the county.

Action Step 1: Update the Mercer County seal and create a county logo. Ensure consistency with existing marketing and branding of local organizations.

Action Step 2: Work with partner organizations to revamp marketing and branding strategies for the Mercer County government.

Goal 3: Coordinate efforts to address the substance abuse crisis in Mercer County.

Objective 1: Address substance abuse in a multifaceted, cross-jurisdictional approach.

Action Step 1: Mercer County and neighboring jurisdictions should focus their efforts on (1) leading in a crisis, (2) prevention and education, (3) expanding treatment, and (4) reassessing public safety and law enforcement approaches.

Action Step 2: First responders should receive proper training for administering Naloxone in overdose situations.

Action Step 3: Become a regional leader and foster cooperation in addressing substance abuse in southern and southwest West Virginia.

Action Step 4: Increase the availability of substance abuse treatment options.

Objective 2: Increase awareness about substance abuse.

Action Step 1: Ensure properly trained health care providers and substance abuse counselors are welcome in Mercer County.

Action Step 2: Lead discussions on how to address the substance abuse issues by facilitating dialogue and bringing in experts that can help frame the issues.

Objective 3: Focus on prevention and education.

Action Step 1: Encourage integration of opioid abuse prevention into school curriculum. Teachers can utilize opioid statistics in math exercises. Students can write about the effects of substance abuse on the community as a writing exercise.

Action Step 2: Advocate for the expansion of after school programs and recreational opportunities in places where children can be engaged in productive and meaningful activities.

Action Step 3: Collaborate with local businesses to participate in “drug take back days.”

Action Step 4: Hold town hall meetings to raise awareness of issues. Invite speakers to schools and other youth activities to help students understand the consequences of substance abuse.

Objective 4: Expand treatment options and law enforcement alternatives.

Action Step 1: Identify where treatment centers are needed. Encourage the placement of centers in those areas.

Action Step 2: Support alternatives to arrest, when in the best interest of the community.

Action Step 3: Collaborate with health and human services and local service organizations to ensure families affected by substance abuse have adequate food, housing, and mental health services.

Goal 4: Encourage appropriate land use development and litter control.

Objective 1: Analyze the appropriateness of zoning in Mercer County.

Action Step 1: Understand the enabling authority for zoning in West Virginia.

Action Step 2: Weigh the advantages and disadvantages of zoning.

Action Step 3: Speak with property owners, business owners, and citizens about zoning and address any concerns.

Objective 2: Analyze the appropriateness of a subdivision ordinance in Mercer County.

Action Step 1: Identify costs and benefits of creating and enforcing subdivision regulations in Mercer County.

Action Step 2: Understand the state enabling authority for subdivision and land development ordinances.

Objective 3: Encourage development in the “preferred development areas.”

Action Step 1: In the preferred development areas, actively recruit businesses and developers with the assistance of local partners, including the local Chamber of Commerce, EDA, and CVB.

Action Step 2: Identify what, if any, incentives county officials can provide to stimulate new growth or to expand existing businesses in the preferred development areas.

Objective 4: Encourage countywide recycling.

Action Step 1: Ensure that the county recycling program is coordinated with local municipal recycling programs.

Action Step 2: Work with state officials to create enabling authority that allows the county to address debris falling out of trucks. Once enabled, enact an ordinance to require all commercial trucks to secure debris from falling out of vehicles while in transport.

Action Step 3: Develop a tightly regulated tire reclamation program funded by grants or private donations.

Objective 5: Encourage programs and activities that mitigate damage due to flooding events.

Action Step 1: Continue to participate in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). Ensure property owners that are required to carry flood insurance can receive flood insurance.

Action Step 2: Focus on areas subject to periodic flooding, especially near Oakvale and Spanishburg. Look at improving impediments to normal stream flow.

Objective 6: Beautify Mercer County's gateways.

Action Step 1: Ensure that the gateways into the county have proper signage and have an aesthetically pleasing visual appearance.

Action Step 2: Keep the gateways clean and free from rubbish.

Goal 5: Address abandoned and dilapidated structures.

Objective 1: Analyze tools to address abandoned and dilapidated structures.

Action Step 2: Understand the advantages and disadvantages of enacting an unsafe and unsanitary structures ordinance under West Virginia Code Section 7-1-3ff.

Action Step 3: Promote the West Virginia Weatherization Assistance Program. The weatherization program may assist low-income persons with energy efficiency home renovations.

Action Step 4: Review the State's Property Rescue Initiative Revolving Loan Fund requirements. Funds may be available to remediate abandoned or dilapidated residential structures.

Objective 2: Collaborate with financial institutions to address abandoned and dilapidated properties.

Action Step 1: Collaborate with local banks to address neglected properties in Mercer County.

Action Step 2: Develop action steps with financial institutions to address neglected properties. Action steps might include banks providing forgivable or low-interest loans for the purchase of neglected properties or banks requiring new owners of properties to rehabilitate neglected properties.

Objective 3: Understand how a Regional Housing Authority could benefit Mercer County.

Action Step 1: Work with the Bluefield Housing Authority to ensure that the entire county is being adequately served.

Action Step 2: Consider the creation of a regional housing authority that would complement existing housing authority initiatives.

Goal 6: Support youth education, programs, and activities.

Objective 1: Encourage continual improvement in educational experiences and post-graduation preparedness.

Action Step 1: Encourage vocational education and the technical trades.

Action Step 2: Work with Mercer County schools to ensure students receive the highest quality education and training. County officials should partner with school officials, when appropriate, to enhance learning experiences.

Objective 2: Encourage public utilization of school facilities.

Action Step 1: Establish an agreement with Mercer County schools to have certain facilities open to the public when not being utilized for official school activities. Activities could include the use of cross-country courses for walking/hiking; use of school playgrounds during evenings, weekends, and the summer; and use of gymnasiums for youth recreation and adult basketball or indoor soccer games, when supervised.

Objective 3: Promote existing youth activities and encourage new youth-focused activities.

Action Step 1: Continue and support learning and educational opportunities for children in Mercer County, including local museums.

Action Step 2: Work with potential investors to identify places to create a trampoline center or similar recreational facility in Mercer County.

Additional Goals, Non-prioritized

Goal: Enhance and expand recreational opportunities.

Objective 1: Collaborate with groups in the community that support local recreation.

Action Step 1: Work with local schools and colleges to provide technical assistance, programming for youth activities, and assistance in the construction of recreational facilities such as picnic tables and shelters.

Action Step 2: Coordinate with the CVB, Chamber of Commerce, and the EDA to identify recreational amenities that might have a positive impact on tourism and economic development.

Action Step 3: Work with municipalities in Mercer County to develop joint recreation projects.

Objective 2: Utilize the “recreation plan” developed by Mercer County citizens.

Action Step 1: Periodically review the recreation plan, which is included in the appendix of the comprehensive plan.

Action Step 2: Create a standing committee on recreation to report to the County Commission no less than quarterly.

Objective 3: Ensure state and federal recreational amenities in Mercer County are being well utilized.

Action Step 1: Continue to work with the WV DOH to improve signage to and from Pinnacle State Park and other recreational attractions.

Action Step 2: At Camp Creek State Park, increase visitation and recreational activities and provide public water.

Action Step 3: Renovate Glenwood Park, and utilize the “recreation plan” as a guide.

Objective 4: Enhance recreational opportunities on the Bluestone River.

Action Step 1: Support the Bluestone River Water Trail.

Action Step 2: Work with the Mercer County Solid Waste Authority to continue river “clean ups.”

Action Step 3: Work with state officials and local landowners to locate, secure, and designate access along the river.

Objective 5: Participate in discussions regarding a southern West Virginia recreational lake.

Action Step 1: Assert Mercer County's interests in discussions regarding the development of a large recreational lake in southern West Virginia.

Objective 6: Promote horseback riding in Mercer County.

Action Step 1: Inventory all existing horseback riding trails in Mercer County.

Action Step 2: Continue to advertise and promote Mercer County as a "horse-friendly" community.

Objective 7: Ensure Mercer County senior citizens have adequate recreational opportunities.

Action Step 1: Create an ad hoc or standing committee on senior citizen issues and concerns to report quarterly to the Mercer County Commission.

Action Step 2: Involve senior citizens in the local art and music scene. Establish an art show for senior citizens at one of the parks. Recruit senior citizens to be volunteers at concerts and shows in the community.

Action Step 3: Involve senior citizens in the Mercer County recycling program in disseminating literature and speaking to school-aged children about the benefits of recycling.

Action Step 4: Work with CASE WV to expand and enhance activities offered to senior citizens.

Goal: Work with the local trade organizations, including the CVB, Chamber of Commerce, and EDA, to promote Mercer County as an accessible and enjoyable destination.

Objective 1: Encourage a diversity of activities that will enhance the tourism industry in Mercer County.

Action Step 1: Encourage options for overnight accommodations, including ATV-friendly lodging near trailheads. Encourage business owners to provide unique lodging options such as tree houses and themed lodging to enhance the experience.

Action Step 2: Collect tourism-related data to determine where best to focus attention in the next 10 to 15 years.

Objective 2: Support the local arts and entertainment community.

Action Step 1: Continue to embrace local visual and performing arts. Encourage concerts in the park, art strolls, and occasional street performances.

Action Step 2: Work with partners to ensure current Mercer County events and festivals continue to grow.

Objective 3: Continue to promote ATV-based tourism.

Action Step 1: Encourage business development near ATV trailheads and along the trail system.

Action Step 2: Work with local business owners and citizens to promote a welcoming attitude towards trail riders and tourists.

Action Step 3: Periodically track usage of Hatfield McCoy Trail System to utilize data to develop future policy initiatives.

Objective 4: Support the development of a multi-use events center in Mercer County.

Action Step 1: A committee should be formed with the primary function to find the capital necessary to complete the project.

Goal: Improve infrastructure and transportation networks.

Objective 1: Promote the completion of large highway projects in the region.

Action Step 1: Support the completion of the King Coal Highway.

Action Step 2: Support the completion of the Coalfields Expressway.

Action Step 3: Support the completion of the Shawnee Highway.

Objective 2: Enhance existing transportation networks in Mercer County.

Action Step 1: Work with the Mercer County Airport Authority to encourage a commercial airline carrier, with scheduled flights, to locate at the airport.

Action Step 2: Understand the implications of a “scenic highway” designation on certain byways in Mercer County.

Goal: Ensure an adequate supply of habitable residential structures in Mercer County.

Objective 1: Identify housing needs in Mercer County.

Action Step 1: Review the 2010 Needs Assessment completed by the Mercer County EDA to understand better the housing needs in the county.

Action Step 2: Work with housing providers and agencies in a collaborative environment to address housing issues.

Objective 2: Encourage a diversity of housing options in Mercer County.

Action Step 1: Work with developers and industry leaders to identify the types of housing sought.

Action Step 2: Support CASE WV initiatives, particularly those related to affordable housing.

Mercer County Comprehensive Plan- Implementation Matrix

Recommendation	Timeline	Priority	Reference page #	Potential Partners	Financing & Costs	Funding Sources
Goal 1: Improve existing infrastructure and encourage the development of new infrastructure, where needed.						
Work with water and wastewater providers to continue to identify where services are needed.	Long Term	High	3-1 to 3-4; 4-1	Local water and wastewater providers	Staff and officials time and effort	Infrastructure and Jobs Development Council (IJC) loans, grants; WV DEP Funds
Review the Mercer County Wastewater Plan.	Long Term	Moderate	3-1; 4-1	Local wastewater utilities, WV DEP	Staff and officials time and effort	General Fund
If in the best interest of all parties involved, encourage consolidation of Public Service Districts (PSDs) and other utilities providers.	Long Term	Low	3-1 to 3-4; 4-1	Local Governments, water and wastewater utility customers	Staff and officials time and effort; hold meetings, prepare documents	General Fund
Understand FCC regulations that limit local government control of cell towers.	Short Term	Low	3-4; 4-2	N/A	Staff and officials time and effort; minimal costs	General Fund
Work with Summers County and other local officials to develop a cell tower ordinance that reflects the desires of the county.	Mid Term	Low	3-4; 4-2	Summers County Officials and other local governments	Staff and officials time	General Fund
Encourage greater bandwidth and higher upload and download speeds in Mercer County.	Short Term	High	3-5 to 3-7; 4-2	Internet Service Providers, WV Broadband Enhancement Council	Cost dependent on project. Installing fiber optics can cost between \$2.50 to \$4.00 per linear foot, or more.	State and Federal Grant Funding
Understand the rules and regulations governing Broadband Associations.	Short Term	High	3-5 to 3-7; 4-2	WV Broadband Enhancement Council	Staff time, legal counsel	General Fund
Work with Mercer County schools to promote broadband at local schools.	Short Term	High	3-5 to 3-7; 4-2	Mercer County Public Schools	Staff time, legal counsel	N/A
Identify grant funding opportunities for broadband expansion and development.	Short Term	High	3-5 to 3-7; 4-2	Mercer County EDA	Staff time	General Fund
Work with first responders to address any issues with lack of personnel, equipment, or resources. Identify how county officials can help first responders.	Long Term	High	3-8; 4-2	County First Responder Personnel, Mercer County E-911 Center, Mercer County Department of Public Safety	Cost dependent on personnel, equipment, and other resources needed	US Fire Administration Grants, Homeland Security Grants, and other grant funding options; Fire Service Fee
Ensure response times are as short as practicable, personnel is adequately trained, and dispatching technology is accurate and reliable.	Long Term	High	3-8; 4-2	Mercer County E-911 Center	Cost dependent on personnel, equipment, and other resources needed	Federal grant funding for emergency response

Recommendation	Timeline	Priority	Reference page #	Potential Partners	Financing & Costs	Funding Sources
Goal 2: Cultivate an environment that promotes long-term job creation and retention as well as responsible economic growth in Mercer County.						
Ensure that opening a new business or continuing to operate a business is an easy and straightforward process, with few local regulatory obstacles.	Long Term	High	3-9; 4-2	Mercer County Economic Development Authority (EDA), Chamber of Commerce	N/A	N/A
Collaborate with the Mercer County CVB, Chamber of Commerce, and Mercer County EDA to identify what types of retail business and manufacturing should be encouraged.	Long Term	High	3-0; 4-2	Mercer County EDA, Mercer County CVB, Chambers of Commerce	Staff time	General Fund
The hardwoods and timber industry should be encouraged in Mercer County.	Long Term	Moderate	3-9; 4-3	Wood Education and Resource Center, local industry experts	Educational materials, website development, training sessions, promotional materials	Trade industry grants
Understand the rules and regulations that govern sustainable cultivation of alternative crops, such as ginseng, and promote sustainable cultivation.	Long Term	Low	3-10 to 3-11; 4-3	WVU Extension Office, WV Dept. of Ag., current practitioners	Staff time; educational materials, presentations; costs should be minimal for informational materials	General Fund, USDA, WV Department of Agriculture (Specialty Crop Block Grant Program)
Promote aquaculture in Mercer County. Invite industry leaders to discuss advantages and disadvantages.	Long Term	Low	3-10 to 3-11; 4-3	WVU Extension Office, Mercer County EDA, WV Dept. of Agriculture	Educational materials, presentations; costs should be minimal for informational materials.	USDA grants
Continue to support agricultural practices, including the raising of livestock and crops that have traditionally been grown in Mercer County.	Long Term	Moderate	3-10 to 3-11; 4-3	local farmers, WVU Extension	N/A	N/A
Update the Mercer County seal and create a county logo. Ensure consistency with existing marketing and branding of local partners.	Short Term	High	3-11; 4-3	3rd Party Design Consultant, CVB, EDA, Chamber of Commerce	Updating seal, creating a county logo would cost hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars, to have done professionally.	General Fund, Partner funds
Work with partner organizations to revamp marketing and branding strategies for the Mercer County government.	Short Term	High	3-11; 4-3	3rd Party Design Consultant, CVB, EDA, Chamber of Commerce	Revamping marketing and branding will cost several thousand dollars	General Fund, Partner funds

Recommendation		Timeline	Priority	Reference page #	Potential Partners	Financing & Costs		Funding Sources
Goal 3: Coordinate efforts to address the substance abuse crisis in Mercer County.								
Mercer County and neighboring jurisdictions should focus their efforts on 1) leading in a crisis, 2) prevention and education, 3) expanding treatment, and 4) reassessing public safety and law enforcement approaches.	Long Term	High	3-12 to 3-16; 4-3	Other local governments, health care organizations and advocates, law enforcement	Staff time to meet and pull resources together	General Fund, Federal Grant Funding		
First responders should receive proper training for administering Naloxone in overdose situations.	Short Term	Moderate	3-15 to 3-16; 4-3	Local fire, EMS, law enforcement personnel. Agencies responsible for training	Host several training sessions throughout Mercer County; obtaining Naloxone is separate cost	General Fund		
Become a regional leader and foster cooperation in addressing substance abuse in southern West Virginia.	Mid Term	High	3-13; 4-3	Other local governments	Staff time	N/A		
Increase the availability of substance abuse treatment options.	Long Term	High	3-12 to 3-16; 4-3	Health Care Providers, Substance Abuse Counselors	Staff time, minimal costs	N/A		
Ensure properly trained health care providers and substance abuse counselors are welcome in Mercer County.	Long Term	High	3-15; 4-4	Chamber of Commerce, Mercer County EDA, existing local healthcare community	N/A	N/A		
Encourage integration of opioid abuse prevention into school curriculum.	Short Term	High	3-12 to 3-14; 4-4	Mercer County Public Schools	Staff time in working with school officials	General Fund, Grant funding (ex. The Herren Project)		
Advocate for the expansion of after school programs and recreational opportunities in places where children can be engaged in productive and meaningful activities.	Long Term	Moderate	3-13; 4-4	Mercer County Public Schools, local faith based community	Staff and officials time in meeting with people who work in places that could provide afterschool activities	General fund		
Collaborate with local businesses to participate in "drug take back days."	Mid Term	Moderate	3-16; 4-4	Chamber of Commerce, local business owners	Costs of coordination and collection of drugs	Volunteer time, General Fund		
Hold town hall meeting to raise awareness of issues. Invite speakers to schools and other youth activities to help students understand the consequences of substance abuse.	Long Term	High	3-13; 4-4	Substance Abuse Experts, Health Care Providers, Mercer County Public Schools	Costs for light refreshments, replication of education materials; minimal overall costs	General Fund		
Identify where treatment centers are needed. Encourage the placement of centers in those areas.	Long Term	High	3-13 to 3-15; 4-4	Substance Abuse Experts, Health Care Providers	Staff and officials time and effort	N/A		
Support alternatives to arrest, when in the best interest of the community.	Long Term	Moderate	3-15 to 3-16; 4-4	Local Courts, law enforcement agencies	Primary costs will be with courts and law enforcement; costs to county if Sheriff's Department involved	General Fund, law enforcement grants		
Collaborate with health and human services and local service organizations to ensure families affected by substance abuse have adequate food, housing, and mental health services.	Long Term	Moderate	3-14 to 3-15; 4-4	non-profit organizations, faith based community, WV Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR)	N/A	N/A		

Recommendation		Timeline	Priority	Reference page #	Potential Partners	Financing & Costs	Funding Sources
Goal 4: Encourage appropriate land use development and litter control.							
Understand the enabling authority for zoning in West Virginia.		Short Term	Moderate	3-16 to 3-17; 4-5	3rd Party Consultant	A thorough understanding could take multiple meetings; staff time, may need a third party consultant	General Fund
Weigh the advantages and disadvantages of zoning.		Long Term	Moderate	3-16; 4-5	3rd Party Consultant	See previous recommendation	General Fund
Speak with and educate property owners, business owners, and citizens about zoning and address any concerns.		Long Term	Moderate	3-16; 4-5	Local property owners, business owners, and citizens	Staff time and effort; minimal costs with education materials	General Fund
Identify costs and benefits of creating and enforcing subdivision regulations in Mercer County.		Short Term	High	3-17; 4-5	3rd Party Consultant	A thorough understanding could take multiple meetings	General Fund
Understand the state enabling authority for subdivision and land development ordinances.		Short Term	High	3-17; 4-5	3rd Party Consultant	Staff time and effort	General Fund
Encourage growth in the preferred development areas. Actively recruit businesses and developers with the assistance of local partners.		Long Term	High	3-17 to 3-27; 4-5	Mercer County EDA, Chamber of Commerce	County costs are limited to time and effort; partners costs to develop marketing and recruitment initiatives	General Fund
Identify what, if any, incentives county officials can provide to stimulate new growth or to expand existing businesses in the preferred development areas.		Long Term	Low	3-16 to 3-17; 4-5	Mercer County EDA, Chamber of Commerce	Staff time and effort	General Fund
Ensure that the county recycling program is coordinated with local municipal recycling programs.		Short Term	High	3-28; 4-5	Mercer County Solid Waste Authority	Staff time and effort	Previously awarded grant funds
Work with state officials to create enabling authority that allows the county to address debris falling out of trucks.		Long Term	Moderate	3-29; 4-5	WV DOH, West Virginia Legislators	Crafting language, legal counsel may be required; meetings with legislators, travel and time costs	General Fund
Develop a tire reclamation program funded by grants or private donations.		Long Term	Low	3-29; 4-5	Mercer County Solid Waste Authority	Costs to collect and properly dispose of scrap tires; monetary payment for collection of scrap tires; program could cost thousands to administer	State and Federal Grant Funding
Continue to participate in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP). Property owners that are required to carry flood insurance can receive flood insurance.		Long Term	Low	3-29; 4-6	West Virginia Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management; Mercer County Department of Public Safety	Staff time and effort, coordination with state and federal officials	General Fund; fees for development permits
Focus on areas subject to periodic flooding, especially near Oakvale and Spanishburg. Look at improving impediments to normal stream flow.		Long Term	Low	3-29; 4-6	West Virginia Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management; Mercer County Department of Public Safety, US Army Corps of Engineers.	Dependent on specific project; river dredging, can often cost several hundred thousand dollars	Grant funding, work with WV DHSEM
Ensure that the gateways into the county have proper signage and have an aesthetically pleasing visual appearance.		Long Term	Low	3-29; 4-6	CVB, Chamber of Commerce, WV DOH	Sign costs highly dependent on size, materials used, base/anchoring system used; landscaping costs	General Fund, partner funds, grant funding
Keep the County's gateways clean and free from rubbish.		Long Term	High	3-29; 4-6	Keep Mercer Clean. Volunteers, work with local correctional institutions to provide labor.	Costs of garbage bags, vests, gloves; periodic mowing; less than \$1,000 each year for supplies	General Fund, grant funding

Recommendation	Timeline	Priority	Reference page #	Potential Partners	Financing & Costs	Funding Sources
Goal 5: Address abandoned and dilapidated structures						
Understand the advantages and disadvantages of enacting an unsafe and unsanitary structures ordinance under West Virginia Code Section 7-1-3ff.	Short Term	High	3-30 to 3-32; 4-6	WVU Land Use and Sustainable Development Law Clinic	Staff and officials time and effort	PRI Technical Assistance
Promote the West Virginia Weatherization Assistance Program.	Long Term	Low	3-30 to 3-32; 4-6	CASE WV, WV Office of Economic Opportunity	Promotion of the program will required, staff time and effort	Community Services Block Grant (through Community Action Agencies, CASE WV)
Review the State's Property Rescue Initiative Revolving Loan Fund requirements.	Short Term	Low	3-30 to 3-32; 4-6	WVU Land Use and Sustainable Development Law Clinic, WV BAD Buildings	Minimal costs to review	PRI Technical Assistance
Collaborate with local banks to address neglected properties in Mercer County.	Short Term	Low	3-32; 4-6	Local financial institutions	Staff and officials time and effort	N/A
Develop action steps with financial institutions to address neglected properties. Action steps might include banks providing forgivable or low-interest loans for the purchase of neglected properties or banks requiring new owners of properties to rehabilitate neglected properties.	Short Term	Low	3-32; 4-6	Local financial institutions	Staff and officials time and effort	N/A
Work with the Bluefield Housing Authority to ensure that the entire county is being adequately served.	Long Term	Moderate	3-33; 4-7	Bluefield Housing Authority	Staff and officials time and effort	General Fund
Consider the creation of a regional housing authority that complements existing housing authority initiatives.	Long Term	Low	3-33; 4-7	Bluefield Housing Authority	Staff and officials time and effort	General Fund

Recommendation	Timeline	Priority	Reference page #	Potential Partners	Financing & Costs	Funding Sources
Goal 6: Support youth education, programs, and activities.						
Encourage vocational education and the technical trades.	Long Term	High	3-35; 4-7	Mercer County Public Schools	N/A	N/A
Work with Mercer County Public Schools to ensure students receive the highest quality education and training.	Long Term	High	3-34 to 3-35; 4-7	Mercer County Public Schools	N/A	N/A
Establish an agreement with Mercer County Public Schools to have certain facilities open to the public when not being utilized for official school activities.	Long Term	Low	3-35; 4-7	Mercer County Public Schools	May need to purchase public liability insurance, or contribute to schools liability insurance; county should support maintenance of facilities	General Fund
Continue and support learning and educational opportunities for children in Mercer County, including local museums.	Long Term	Low	3-35 to 3-36; 4-7	Non-profits, investors, volunteers	Considerable costs in capital: land acquisition, site development, construction, staffing, programming; costs could be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars	Private Investment
Work with potential investors to identify places to create a trampoline center or similar recreational facility in Mercer County.	Short Term	High	3-36; 4-7	Private Investors, Mercer County EDA	Staff and officials time and effort	General Fund

Recommendation	Timeline	Priority	Reference page #	Potential Partners	Financing & Costs	Funding Sources
Additional Goals, Objections, and Action Steps (Non-Prioritized)						
Work with local schools and colleges to provide technical assistance, programming for youth activities, and assistance in the construction of recreational facilities such as picnic tables and shelters.	Long Term	Moderate	3-37; 4-8	Mercer County Public Schools, Local Colleges and Universities	Costs dependent on scope of project; materials for picnic tables- approximately \$100 per table; might be cheaper to buy prefabricated, in bulk	Donated time and materials; General Fund to supplement
Continue to coordinate with the CVB, Chamber of Commerce, and the EDA to identify recreational amenities that might have a positive impact on tourism and economic development.	Long Term	High	3-37; 4-8	Mercer County CVB, Chamber of Commerce, Mercer County EDA	Staff and officials time and effort	N/A
Work with municipalities in Mercer County to develop joint recreation projects.	Short Term	High	3-36; 4-8	Municipalities in Mercer County	Staff and officials time and effort	General Fund
Periodically review the recreation plan, which is included in the appendices of the comprehensive plan.	Long Term	Moderate	3-37; 4-8	Interested citizens	Staff and officials time and effort	General Fund
Create a standing committee on recreation to report to the County Commission no less than quarterly.	Short Term	High	3-36 to 3-38; 4-8	Interested citizens	N/A	N/A
Continue to work with the WV DOH to improve signage to and from Pinnacle State Park and other recreational attractions.	Short Term	High	3-39; 4-8	Mercer county CVB, WV DOH, WV state parks	Costs for road signage can cost between \$15 to \$25 per square foot, unless the sign is electronic	Signage Grants, State Funding
At Camp Creek State Park, increase visitation and recreational activities and provide public water.	Short Term	High	3-39; 4-8	West Virginia State Parks, Staff Camp Creek SP, local water utility provider	Minimal cost to county in coordinating efforts	General Fund
Renovate Glenwood Park, and utilize the "recreation plan" as a guide.	Short Term	High	3-39; 4-8	Citizens interested in Mercer County recreation	Staff and officials time and effort; minimal costs of plan replication; renovation costs dependent on scope of projects	General Fund
Support the Bluestone River Water Trail.	Short Term	High	3-37; 4-8	Bluestone Water Trail Committee	Costs for parking, landings, other amenities; could cost several thousands dollars over the course of several years	Grant funding; National Trails Training Partnership has list of funding sources
Work with the Mercer County Solid Waste Authority to continue river "clean ups."	Long Term	High	3-39; 4-8	Mercer County Solid Waste Authority, interested citizens	Costs for collecting and disposing of debris; costs can be minimized by recruiting volunteer labor	Federal and State Grants, WV DEP funds
Work with state officials and local landowners to locate, secure, and designate access along the Bluestone River.	Short Term	High	3-36 to 3-38; 4-8	Bluestone Water Trail Committee, WV DNR, FEMA	Land acquisition can cost thousands; staff and officials time and effort	General Fund for staff time; possible grant funding for land acquisition; work with FEMA for Hazard Mitigation Grant Funding
Assert Mercer County's interests in discussions regarding the development of a large recreational lake in southern West Virginia.	Long Term	Low	3-38; 4-9	West Virginia State Legislators	Staff and officials time and effort	General Fund
Inventory all existing horseback riding trails in Mercer County.	Short Term	Moderate	3-38 to 3-39; 4-9	local horseback riding enthusiasts	Minimal costs to county	N/A
Continue to advertise and promote Mercer County as a "horse-friendly" community.	Long Term	Low	3-38 to 3-39; 4-9	Mercer County CVB	costs dependent on activity. Adding language to existing website, promoting on existing mediums could have minimal costs.	Largely partner funding; county can contribute through General Fund
Create an ad hoc or standing committee on senior citizen issues and concerns to report quarterly to the Mercer County Commission.	Long Term	Low	3-39 to 3-40; 4-9	interested citizens	Staff and officials time and effort	General Fund
Involve senior citizens in the local art and music scene. Establish an art show for senior citizens at one of the parks. Recruit senior citizens to be volunteers at concerts and shows in the community.	Long Term	Low	3-39 to 3-40; 4-9	Riff Raff Arts Collaborative, local art's community, CASE WV	Minimal costs to the County	N/A

Recommendation	Timeline	Priority	Reference page #	Potential Partners	Financing & Costs	Funding Sources
Involve senior citizens in the Mercer County recycling program. Disseminate literature and speak to school-aged children about the benefits of recycling.	Long Term	Low	3-39 to 3-40; 4-9	Mercer County Schools, Mercer County Solid Waste Authority, CASE WV	Minimal costs for educational materials	Recycling grant funds
Work with CASE WV to expand and enhance activities offered to senior citizens.	Long Term	Low	3-39 to 3-40; 4-9	CASE WV	Staff and officials time and effort	General Fund
Encourage options for overnight accommodations, including ATV-friendly lodging near trailheads.	Long Term	High	3-40; 4-9	Chamber of Commerce, Hatfield-McCoy Trail Authority, CVB	Staff and officials time and effort; private capital to operate businesses.	Private Investment, General Fund
Collect tourism-related data to determine where best to focus attention in the next 10 to 15 years.	Long Term	Moderate	3-42; 4-9	Mercer County CVB, 3rd Party Consultant, Bluefield College	Data collection can cost thousands of dollars to collect, depending on scope and analysis of data	Partner funding: Hotel and Occupancy Tax; County can contribute some funding
Continue to embrace local visual and performing arts. Encourage concerts in the park, art strolls, and occasional street performances.	Long Term	High	3-41; 4-10	Local Arts Community	Costs to plan and run the events	Performing Arts grants, private donations
Work with partners to ensure current Mercer County events and festivals continue to grow.	Long Term	High	3-41 to 3-42; 4-10	Chamber of Commerce, Mercer County CVB	Staff and officials time and effort	Partner funding: Hotel and Occupancy Tax; county can contribute some funding
Encourage business development near ATV trailheads and along the trail system.	Long Term	High	3-40 to 3-42; 4-10	EDA, CVB, Hatfield-McCoy Trail Authority	Staff and officials time and effort	Partner funding: Hotel and Occupancy Tax, private investment
Work with local business owners and citizens to promote a welcoming attitude towards trail riders/tourists.	Mid Term	High	3-40 to 3-42; 4-10	Hatfield-McCoy Trail Authority, Mercer County CVB, Mercer County EDA, interested citizens	Minimal costs	General Fund
Periodically track usage of Hatfield McCoy Trail System to utilize data to develop future policy initiatives.	Long Term	Moderate	3-40 to 3-42; 4-10	Hatfield-McCoy Trail Authority, 3rd Park Consultant	Costs highly dependent on scope of work	Partner Funds
A committee should be formed with the primary function to find the capital necessary to complete the multi-use facility.	Long Term	Low	3-43; 4-10	Other local governments standing to benefit from multi use facility, EDA, CVB	Staff and officials time and effort	General Fund
Support the completion of the King Coal Highway.	Long Term	High	3-44; 4-10	WV DOH	\$1.6 Billion to complete 95 mile highway (2004 estimate)	Federal and State Funding
Support the completion of the Coalfields Expressway.	Long Term	High	3-44; 4-10	WV DOH	The West Virginia portion of the Expressway is estimated to cost \$1.0 Billion to complete	Federal and State Funding
Support the completion of the Shawnee Highway.	Long Term	High	3-44 to 3-45; 4-10	WV DOH	Considerable costs	Federal and State Funding
Work with the Mercer County Airport Authority to encourage a commercial airline carrier, with scheduled flights, to locate at the airport.	Long Term	Moderate	3-45; 4-10	Mercer County Airport Authority, EDA	Staff time and effort; costs may include facility upgrades, which would be the responsibility of the Airport Authority	Partner Funds
Understand the implications of a "scenic highway" designation on certain byways in Mercer County.	Short Term	Low	3-44; 4-10	WV DOH	Minimal costs	N/A
Review the 2010 Needs Assessment, completed by the Mercer County EDA to understand better the housing needs in the county.	Short Term	High	3-45; 4-11	Mercer County EDA	Staff and officials time and effort	General Fund
Work with housing providers and agencies in a collaborative environment to address housing issues.	Long Term	Low	3-45; 4-11	Bluefield Housing Authority, CASE WV, local developers	Staff and officials time and effort	General Fund
Work with developers and industry leaders to identify the types of housing sought.	Long Term	Low	3-45; 4-11	Mercer County EDA, and Chamber of Commerce, Bluefield Housing Authority	Minimal costs	N/A
Support CASE WV initiatives, particularly those related to affordable housing.	Long Term	Low	3-45; 4-11	CASE WV	Staff and officials time and effort	General Fund

Appendix A: Public Input Documents

Mercer County, West Virginia
Planning Commission
The Comprehensive Plan Procedures for Public Input

Pursuant to the requirements of W. Va. Code § 8A-3-6(c), the Planning Commission of Mercer County, West Virginia (hereinafter "County") hereby adopts the following procedures to encourage and promote public participation in the drafting of the County's comprehensive plan. The comprehensive plan is being drafted pursuant to W. Va. Code § 8A-1-1.

- (1) Prior to recommending a new or amended comprehensive plan, the Planning Commission will hold a public meeting on the new comprehensive plan. The purpose of a public meeting is to gather input from the general public as to the County's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats as they pertain to matters in the comprehensive plan.
- (2) The Planning Commission will request input from other affected governing bodies and units of governments that may be affected by the adoption of the comprehensive plan.
- (3) Under W. Va. Code § 8A-3-6(b), once the Planning Commission has completed a draft of the comprehensive plan, and before submitting a plan to the County Commission for adoption, it must publicize and hold a public hearing on the draft of its plan.
 - a. More particularly, under W. Va. Code § 8A-3-6(b), at least thirty(30) days prior to the date set for the public hearing, the Planning Commission will publish a notice of the date, time, and place of the public hearing as a Class I legal advertisement in compliance with the provisions of article three, chapter fifty-nine of the West Virginia Code. The notice shall run in a general circulating publication, the publication area will be the area that will be covered by the comprehensive plan.
 - b. In addition to the requirements at W. Va. Code § 8A-3-6(b), above, the Planning Commission will publish its draft of the comprehensive plan at least thirty (30) days prior to the public hearing. Specifically, the Planning Commission will post a draft of the plan on the City's website, and will post hardcopies for public review at the Mercer County Courthouse.
- (4) For purposes of this comprehensive planning process, the Planning Commission considers the "community" of Mercer County to be broader than just full-time residents within the county boundary. For input into the comprehensive planning process, the Planning Commission will look to business owners who live outside the county, part-time residents, university/college students and employees, visitors, and others.
- (5) Public notice of Planning Commission meetings will be given pursuant to the West Virginia Open Governmental Proceedings Act, where applicable.
- (6) No provision herein shall be construed as limiting the Planning Commission's ability to engage in additional public participation efforts as the Commission deems appropriate. No provision herein shall prohibit the Planning Commission from amending these procedures.

Adopted this 24TH day of FEBRUARY, 2016.

Colinda King
President

John Smith
Vice-President

Vicky Reed
Secretary

[Signature]
Member

M. Clyf
Member

Janet Bailey
Member

McLane, Jr.
Member

Dkt Ball
Member

Member

Member


Member

Mercer County Open House Results

The Mercer County Planning Commission hosted five open houses during the week of 1/16/17. The open houses were held throughout the county, in **Oakvale, Spanishburg, Bluewell, Glenwood Park, and Athens**. The goal of the open houses was to receive public input on a variety of topics, such as infrastructure, land use, and economic development. The information received will help inform the Mercer County Planning Commission in preparing a comprehensive plan draft. The feedback received during the open houses is as follows:

Oakvale Open House

Exercise 1: What comes to mind when you hear Mercer County and...

What first comes to mind when you hear Mercer County and...				
Housing	Land Use and Development	Education and Youth Activities	Job Creation and Retention	Infrastructure

Housing

- Water and sewer (lack of)
- Housing is plentiful

Land Use and Development

- Develop equine trails/facilities
- Trash in rural areas

Education and Youth Activities

Job Creation and Retention

- More skilled labor education
- Industrial development—need someone out there talking to manufacturing companies and the Vo-tech Center

Infrastructure

- Open up King Coal Highway
 - Expand the airport
- Businesses need high speed internet
- Rural roads
 - Roads where two cars can't pass

Exercise 2: Looking to the future!



What is your favorite thing about Mercer County?

- Flood Control
- MCTEC Education Center—favorite
- Scenery
- Rural
- Potential (location/roads, railroads/work force)

What is something that needs to be improved, regarding Mercer County, in the next few years?

- Better police control
- Cut brush on county roads
- Better maintenance of paved rural roads
- Equine trails/ATV
- High speed internet
- Animal shelter—too much cost
- Community trash receptacles like Virginia

Exercise 3: “Spend my tax dollars on...to help improve the quality of life in Mercer County.”



- Roads
- Education
- Police protection
- Bring in more industry jobs

Exercise 4: SWOT: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

*Instructions: 1) Place a **red dot** next to the greatest strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat.
2) Place a **blue dot** next to the second greatest strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat.*

Strengths

- Hatfield McCoy Trail ●●
- Low Crime Rate ●
- Plenty of Real Estate ●
- Climate ●
- Good transportation (Interstate/RR) ●
- Geographic location ●

Weaknesses

- Drug problem ●●●●●
- High speed internet ●●●
- No manufacturing jobs...all retail ●●
- More skilled workforce ●●
- Water/sewer infrastructure ●
- Our biggest export is our kids ●
- No funding for highway projects ●
- No life south of Beckley ●

- More equine opportunities ●
- Two Chambers of Commerce ●

Opportunities

- Transportation—Highways ●●
- Can reconnect with Charleston ●
- Mercer County Airport ●
- Partner with Law Enforcement to fight drugs ●
- Tourism ●
- Entrepreneurship ●
- Developable land ●
- Involve our young adults ●

Threats

- Drug problems ●●●
- Lack of water sewer ●●
- Trash on highways ●●
- Rising cost of healthcare ●
- Not seeking industry/manufacturing ●
- Lack of county “home rule” ●
- Over regulation ●

Spanishburg Open House

Discussion Notes

- Recycling Program
- GPS Routes off Route 19 guide trucks off at Camp Creek
- Houses
- Improved Water and Sewer
 - Water in Nubbins Ridge
 - Water on Stovall Ridge
 - Water in Gardner Area
 - Water in Dunns
 - Water on Cainbridge Ridge
 - Water in Camp Creek Park
- Jobs
 - Secondary wood manufacturing
 - Forestry
 - Sawmills
 - Hardwoods

- Kilns
 - Veneer
 - Furniture & cabinets
- Coal miners get black lung easier—issue that deserves attention
- More fire hydrants
- Dry hydrants on farms (pond)—Camp Creek
- Emergency and Ambulance Services
 - Long response time
 - People want basic safety services
 - 911 calls bounce around, depends on time of day/day of week
 - Emergency services needed for Flat Top Area
 - Potential for a substation & Sheriff Dept.—Old State Road Garage or Gardner Road—places with access to interstate
 - 911—Addresses of Beckley Road (Mercer) and Flat Top Road (Beckley)
 - All on Route 19
 - Emergency services have trouble navigating
- No zoning!
- Police patrolling in this entire area
- Internet—some dead zones in this area
- Need for high-speed internet
 - Development of housing/attractiveness of area is deterred by the lack of high speed internet
- Road signs (Beckley)
- Issue of trash & open dumps
 - Idea for a “bottle bill”
 - Consumers receive money for returning cans, bottles, etc.
 - Idea of lowering littering fine to a more realistic and enforceable amount—it is currently over \$2,000 and some believe it should be \$150
 - If individual cannot pay the littering fine, they could spend a day picking up litter around the county
- Smaller government—less regulations
- No Building Code
- Exemptions for Agriculture
- Drug problem in county!!!! Law enforcement needed
- Ginseng is the crop for WV agricultural development

Exercise 1: What comes to mind when you hear Mercer County and...

Housing

- Low income senior housing
- Provide basic services (water, fire, ambulance) to outlying areas to service all citizens of the county
 - Lack of these essential services will hamper/bleed over development into Mercer County from Ghent area, which is currently experiencing development now. Developable land in Jumping Branch is limited due to lack of basic services.

Land Use and Development

- Gardner Rd., more development

Education and Youth Activities

- Provide anything for anyone outside of city limits of Bluefield and Princeton.

Job Creation and Retention

- Stop regulating jobs out of business
- Potential for development in Jumping Branch District could be enhanced to expand tax base by providing basic public services.

Infrastructure

- No zoning!
- No zoning!
- No zoning!
- No permits!
- No zoning
- No permits
- High speed internet would be great, if I only had adequate water to bathe, wash, etc.
- [In response to previous comment] He is right! The issues boil down to emergency response and lack of updated infrastructure for utilities (water, telephone, cable, internet.) I am between Ghent and Camp Creek, above Dunn's. We are required to use satellite and our own water/sewer systems.

Exercise 3: Spend my tax dollars on...to help improve the quality of life in Mercer County.

- Essential basic services for citizens outside the city limits of Princeton and Bluefield (water, fire, police, ambulance)
- Improve police and 911 response
- Public safety for all of Mercer County with fire, EMS, and police. Please
- No zoning

- Water & sewer on Nubbins Ridge
- No zoning period!
- No zoning or permits
- Quit raising tax—two times last year
- Improve utility infrastructure
- No raises for County Commission. They only work part time.

Exercise 4: SWOT: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

*Instructions: 1) Place a **red dot** next to the greatest strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat.
2) Place a **blue dot** next to the second greatest strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat.*

Strengths

- Good transportation (Interstate/RR) ●●
- Skilled workforce ●
- Geographic location ●
- Infrastructure ●
- Low cost of living ●
- Low cost utilities ●
- Two Chambers of Commerce ●
- Three industrial parks ●
- Education ●
- Plenty of Real Estate ●
- Hatfield McCoy Trail ●

Weaknesses

- Water/sewer infrastructure ●●●●●●●●
- Drug Problem ●●●●●●●●
- Lack of community involvement ●●
- No manufacturing jobs...all retail ●●
- Workforce/motivation ●
- Virginia vs. West Virginia ●
- Aging Population ●
- Poor 911 response to Northern County border areas ●
- Weak County government ●
- Regional economy ●
- No funding for highway projects ●
- Poor utility infrastructure (i.e. internet) ●

Opportunities

- Jobs ●●●●
- Partner with Law Enforcement to Fight Drugs ●●●●
- Caring Community ●●●
- Developable Land ●● [note: "If it only had basic services."]
- Community College ●
- New look with changes in politics ●
- Involve our young adults ●
- Bulk transfer facility [note that this should be at Exit 14] ●
- Tourism ●

Threats

- Drug Problem ●●●●●●●
- "Sitting on our hands"/"Heads in the sand" [Note: "Indifference of millennials/young-uns to issues other than themselves"] ●●●
- Lack of forward thinking expansion of basic services to expand tax base and development ●
- Trash on highways ●
- Waste of money on Mercer Street ●
- Rising Cost of Healthcare ●
- Demise of coal as we know it ●
- Local Government (local, state, federal) ●

Bluewell Open House

Exercise 1: What comes to mind when you hear Mercer County and...

Housing

- Great job
- Stop losing our young people
- ATV housing
- Demolish old, unused houses
- Clean up HUD Housing
- Clean up mobile home parks, Airport Rd, and Rt. 52
- Reminisce of former nice communities
- Need more pride in their homes
- Lorton Lick needs cleaned up
- Upkeep homes
- Trash piled in yards
- Enforce cleanup of very littered property

- Few housing options for young people
- Lorton Lick Rd looks like land fill [someone else wrote “some of it” beside this comment]
- Lorton Lick Rd has a house that the trash and junk spills out everywhere! The house next to it is condemned from drugs
- Dilapidated homes beside nice home lowers value of all properties
- Housing only in developments

Land Use and Development

- More businesses
- Develop country property
- Clean up property
- Protect natural resources
- Provide natural gas to all areas.
- Jobs!!
- Need for more economic diversification and industrial development
- Need businesses
- Develop state park
- Tear down dilapidated buildings
- Building tear down
 - There are two currently on Rt 52 in Bluewell that were abandoned businesses
- Stream/creek and drains in front of coke plant need cleaned and dredged “desperately”
- Ditches on Lorton Lick cleaned up and drains put in
- Reuse vacant buildings

Education and Youth Activities

- More youth activities in local places
- Christmas Acres is a great place for kids and adults too!
- Youth activities in smaller towns
- Churches are empty
- Educational opportunities for seniors
- Life skills for kids not going to college [someone drew a star and wrote “second this”]
- Education → respect of our community and land
- Need more programs to keep youth busy
- Pay teachers more ☺
- Pay raise teachers
- Bring back the after school program and keep Bible in schools
- Some children are from broken, dysfunctional homes. Parents may be on drugs, or one from generation of welfare, parents may not value education. The cycle needs to be broken. Need public assistance. More DHR workers. Social programs.

Job Creation and Retention

- Need
- Need lot more
- More jobs
- More
- Expand tourism
- Economic diversification—it can't be done with “just” tourism
- Need jobs and good ones
- Lower businesses taxes
- Lack of jobs for young people
- Make it easier for jobs to come back to our area!
- More jobs
- Boot people off welfare! Lol but seriously it's too easy for individuals to collect a check. The others can't pass drug testing.

Infrastructure

- Complete King Coal Highway, at least through Mercer County
- Cleaner places to live
- Roads, of course, need work
- Revitalize – rebuild
 - Use resources to rehabilitation
- Roads
- Keep property clean
- High speed internet [someone else commented “yes!”]
- Interstate 73/74
- Roads
- Clean up our town and take pride.
- Access to high-speed internet +100

Exercise 2: Looking to the future!

What is your favorite thing about Mercer County?

- | | |
|---|----------------------|
| • The beauty of the country—need to improve tourism | • Families |
| • Bramwell!!! | • Hiking |
| • The wonderful people | • Biking |
| • Most scenery | • Beauty |
| • Very friendly and scenic | • Mountains |
| • Good area to raise a family | • Streams |
| • Good people! | • River |
| | • Beauty of the area |

- Beauty of the mountains and streams
- Scenic beauty (potential)
- Established community (neighborhoods)
- Sports
- Schools
- Bluewell School
- Bluewell
- Pinnacle River
- Friends
- Family
- People
- People

- Buffalo Trail Restaurant ☺
- People
- Community feeling
- Everyone is always willing to help out
- King people and friendly faces
- Hatfield McCoy Trails
- Knowing most of the people in our town
- Mountains
- Church
- Scenery; small town feel

What is something that needs to be improved, regarding Mercer County, in the next few years?

- Roads—Coal Field Highway
- Litter cleanup
- Drug control
- Airport
- Drug control
- Enforcement of speed limit in Bluewell
- More recycling plans
- Speeding on Lorton Lick = coal trucks
- Airport service
- Jobs & high schools training kids that are not going to college to do basic skills. Cooking, cleaning, counting change, budgeting, life skills.
- Airport services
- Abandoned buildings—ditto
- Litter! –ditto
- Lorton Lick Rd
- New schools this end of county
- People need to take care of their homes and property and clean up trash and broken down furniture in their yards

- Bring natural gas to all areas—it would benefit business
- Restaurants
- Drugs
- Trash—no regulation or zoning in county
- Falling down houses
- Trash
- Improve or take out abandoned homes—too many abandoned on disregarded residences
- Courts need to be tougher
- Drugs
- Clean up abandoned houses, yards, and rental properties
- Roads
- Industry
- Building upkeep in Bluewell—especially closed ones
- The attitudes of people who feel it perfectly acceptable to “only get by with a check” who have no desire to improve where we live. Who do not encourage children to go to school. They bring us all down. How Court

- House committees fix the mindset of a generation?
- Clean up ditches and houses on the road
- Trash picked up/houses/yards cleaned up
- More restaurants
- Trash clean-up
- More activities/businesses that cater to all ages, especially 20-29 y.o.
- Lorton Lick Rd. ditch drainage
- Pinnacle View Rd. ditches/stream need cleaned-dredged
- Lorton Lick Road MUST be cleaned up
- Need to require clean & well-maintained homes
- Pride in need of town
- Encourage participation; encourage sense of town pride
- More community activities like runs, festivals, etc.
- Trash and pride of our living area
- More of us need to get involved in the community
- Free to run your property as you see fit, until it directly affects other properties.
- All of the above

Exercise 3: Spend my tax dollars on...to help improve the quality of life in Mercer County.

- Better internet/cell phone access
- Litter control—ditto
- Youth activities
- Drug control
- Animal control
- Drug control
- Litter control
- Police—more county police enforcement
- Drugs
- Roads and schools
- Drug control
- Drugs and litter
- Roads and safe neighborhoods
- Police, youth activities
- Roads and drug control
- Get rid of drug drop off in Bramwell
- Litter
- Improve roads
- Care for poor
- Elder assistance
- Schools
- Schools (buildings)
- Education (teachers not admins)
- Roads/litter control
- Building code & enforcement
- Promote tourism
- Encourage property owners and renters to keep their property up!
- Animal control
- Drug control
- Animal control—no kill shelter
- Drug enforcement
- Police available in Bluewell
- No kill animal shelter—yes!
- No kill shelter
- Education/ PR for litter campaign
- Litter/ trash enforcement
- Police—drug elimination
- More drug enforcement
- Removing trashy houses
- Drugs and programs to help
- Drugs/litter
- Bottle bill/litter
- Drugs/litter
















- Fine property owners for not keeping land/business neat, or make them tear down if need be
- Roads, trash picked up
- More police enforcement
- Drug control **
- Take pride in our town
- Billboard/commercial
- Housing options for young professionals
- Cleaning up Lorton Lick Road

Exercise 4: SWOT: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats











Instructions: 1) Place a red dot next to the greatest strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat.

2) Place a blue dot next to the second greatest strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat.

Strengths

- Hatfield McCoy Trail 
- Good quality of life 
- Low cost of living 
- Volunteerism 
- Geographic location 
- Three industrial parks 
- Infrastructure 
- Climate 
- Low crime rate 
- Mercer County Airport 
- Low cost utilities 
- Good transportation (Interstate/ RR) 
- Skilled workforce 
- Medical facilities 
- Education 

Weaknesses

- Drug problem 
- No manufacturing jobs...all retail 
- Workforce/motivation 
- No life south of Beckley 
- Water/sewer infrastructure 
- No funding for highway projects 
- Growing lack of concern for education 
- Our biggest export is our kids 
- Turnpike tolls 
- No commercial airline service 

- Local government (local, state, federal) ●
- Most regulated education in the US ●
- Funding cuts for higher education ●

Glenwood Park Open House

Exercise 1: What comes to mind when you hear Mercer County and...

Housing

- A variety

Land Use and Development

- Needed
- Route 19 Potholes

Education and Youth Activities

- More youth activities
- New movie theater
- Quality but youth need ability to access

Job Creation and Retention

- New jobs brought to area
- Shopping opportunities—people go out of town to do this
- Jobs needed
- More shopping opportunities—have to travel to Roanoke for shopping opportunities

Infrastructure

- Improve road conditions
- No zoning is a plus
- No zoning...
- Need build coalfields (King Coal Highway)
- Good
- Litter: if highways received scenic highway designation, maybe less litter

Exercise 2: Looking to the future!

What is your favorite thing about Mercer County?

- No zoning where I live
- Climate

- Roads 460-77
- No zoning
- Sense of community

What is something that needs to be improved, regarding Mercer County, in the next few years?

- Roads
- Trash
- Moral law enforcement
- Trash
- Old buildings and homes
- Roads
- Trash
- Addressing drug issue by all

Exercise 3: Spend my tax dollars on...to help improve the quality of life in Mercer County.








- Improved roads
- Law enforcement
- Road improvement
- Education—formal and informal

Exercise 4: SWOT: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats













Instructions: 1) Place a red dot next to the greatest strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat.

2) Place a blue dot next to the second greatest strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat.

Strengths

- Geographic location  
- Good quality of life 
- Good transportation (Interstate/RR) 
- Education 
- Plenty of Real Estate 
- Low cost utilities 
- [4-H was written as a strength]

Weaknesses

- Drug problem    
- No manufacturing jobs...all retail   
- Turnpike tolls   
- Regional economy 
- Our biggest export is our kids 

- Aging population ●
- No funding for highway projects ●

Opportunities

- Rail transportation ●●
- Involve our young adults ●●
- Developable land ●●
- Tourism ●
- Can reconnect with Charleston ●
- New look with changes in politics ●

Threats

- Drug problems ●●●●●
- Trash on highways ●●●
- Demise of coal as we know it ●
- Rising cost of healthcare ●●

Athens Area Open House

Exercise 1: What comes to mind when you hear Mercer County and...

Housing

- No codes/zones
- Good place to live

Land Use and Development

- None

Education and Youth Activities

- Limited youth activities

Job Creation and Retention

- See Pat Keaton's list
- More manufacturing jobs

Infrastructure

- Sewer/water county wide
- Litter control
- Recycling services
- More water and sewer

Exercise 2: Looking to the future!

What is your favorite thing about Mercer County?

- Small, laid back
- Small, caring communities and community schools
- The people
- Small town feel

What is something that needs to be improved, regarding Mercer County, in the next few years?

- Drugs stopped
- Reliable internet service
- Making better shared use of already existing facilities (e.g. university athletic and fine arts facilities, public school buildings, and athletic facilities, etc.
 - See “Unlock the Gates” sponsored by the American Heart Association—expand to higher education
 - Work with Summers County to support Pipestem [State Park]
- There needs to be more attractions for young adults, such as places to hang out, enjoy the arts, etc.
- Health of general population—Concord should be tobacco free (WVU and Marshall became tobacco free in 2013)
- No more school consolidation
- Internet

Exercise 3: Spend my tax dollars on...to help improve the quality of life in Mercer County.





- Sewers/water/roads
- Schools
- Stopping drugs
- EDA to find new businesses

Exercise 4: SWOT: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats

Instructions: 1) Place a red dot next to the greatest strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat.

2) Place a blue dot next to the second greatest strength, weakness, opportunity, and threat.

Strengths

- Geographic location 
- Good quality of life 
- Low cost of living 
- Education 

- Infrastructure ●
- Climate ●
- Medical facilities ●
- Low cost utilities ●
- Hatfield McCoy Trail ●
- [Pipestem Park was written as a strength]

Weaknesses

- Drug problem ●●●●●●●
- No manufacturing jobs...all retail ●●●●●
- Water/sewer infrastructure ●●
- Virginia vs West Virginia ●●
- Growing lack of concern for education ●
- Lack of community involvement ●
- Our biggest export is our kids ●
- Lack of zoning off interstate exits ●
- No commercial airline service ●
- Limited things to do for young adults ●
- No funding for highway projects ●

Opportunities

- Developable land ●●●●
- Involve our young adults ●●●
- Hatfield McCoy Trail ●●●
- Two higher education institutions ●●
- Transportation—highways ●●
- Partner with Law Enforcement to fight drugs ●●
- Tourism ●
- Community college ●
- Rail transportation ●
- Entrepreneurship ●

Threats

- Drug problems ●●●●●●●
- “Sitting on our hands” / “Heads in the sand” ●●●●
- Rising cost of healthcare ●●●●
- Demise of coal as we know it ●●●
- Most regulated education in the US ●●
- Funding cuts for higher education ●

MERCER COUNTY RECREATION DRAFT PLAN

AUGUST 17, 2017

[This draft plan was created by interested citizens as a starting point for discussions about future plans for recreation in Mercer County.]

INTRODUCTION:

Recreation is a vital component of any community, town/city, county, state, and nation. It is essential for the physical and mental health of every person.

Recreation activities take many forms. It can be as simple as taking a stroll, or as involved as running a marathon. No matter age or physical condition, there exists a recreational activity for everyone.

This plan is meant to address some of the activities that are available in Mercer County. It also looks at the development of activities currently not available in Mercer County.

The planning period covers from July 1st, 2018 – June 30th, 2023. This plan is to be reviewed yearly and revised as needed.

The goal is to enhance the recreational opportunities of the citizens and visitors of Mercer County.

To meet this goal, partnerships will need to be developed. Funding sources will need to be identified and secured.

PARTNERSHIP & FUNDING SOURCES:

At the local level, the cities of Bluefield and Princeton need to be involved in any planning and developing recreational activities. This helps in avoiding costly duplications.

The Mercer County school system could be an untapped resource. It could be a source of things from plants, used for landscaping, to aid in construction of picnic tables and shelters.

Area colleges and universities are valuable resources for technical assistance.

Businesses make good partners in many recreational activities. They can offer everything from sponsorships, labor, and equipment.

Foundations offer numerous grants and other services.

Citizens are a great resource. They can offer everything from time to money.

Fraternal groups offer many unique resources.

State government/agencies can provide everything from technical services to grant monies.

The same can be said for the federal government/agencies.

GLENWOOD PARK:

In the next 18 months, the lake will be drained to allow for work on the dam. During this time, the lake will be dredged.

After this has been done and before the water is started to be impounded, work with the DNR to construct fish habitats structures.

Once the lake fills, work with the DNR to restock the lake with suitable fish species for the lake.

While the lake is drained, now would be a good time to close the park allowing for a major makeover. Once the lake is filled, hold a “Grand Reopening”.

Lakeside Area;

***Replace all docks**

***Repair paddle boats, if needed**

***Add to boat inventory with the addition of Kayaks and other boats of this type**

***Check all floatation devices and replace if needed**

***Repair and refurbish the rental/office building**

***Remove and replace miniature golf course with a modern course**

***Replace putters and golf balls**

***Remove playground equipment from this area and replace with a “Beach Volleyball” court**

***Repair and refurbish restroom facility**

- *Convert Shelter#1 to a multi-use pavilion**
- *Around this area, place a mixture of benches and picnic tables**
- *Repair any damage done to road and parking area**

Shelter#2 Area;

- *Repair and refurbish shelter, to make it “handicapped friendly”**
- *Establish paved parking area, near shelter, with a paved path to shelter**
- *Build a “handicapped friendly” restroom, with paved path from shelter**
- *Relocate “handicapped friendly” playground equipment to this area**
- *Once completed, advertise and rent accordingly**

Gazebo Area;

- *Build a multi-use pavilion, for receptions etc.**
- *Build a restroom facility for the area**
- *Construct paved parking area, with paved path to pavilion and gazebo**
- *Landscape area with plantings of flowers, shrubs, and trees**
- *Once completed, advertise and rent accordingly**

Tennis Court Area;

- *This area shows signs of little or no use**
- *Convert the courts into a skate park**
- *Repair and expand parking area, to handle expected increase use**
- *Place several benches around area**

Main Playground Area, near Shelters#7,8,9;

- *Place all remaining equipment in this area**

- *Divide equipment and area into 2 separate areas, 1 for younger and 1 for older children**
- *Use a combination of benches and picnic tables to create the separation**
- *All equipment should be in good repair, if not replace it**
- *Build a “Splash Pad” area, near the restroom facility**
- *Locate a graveled parking, on the same side of road for this area**

**This concludes the makeover work, to be performed during the 18 month shutdown period.
The following work is to be completed during the remaining 5 year period.**

Shelters;

- *Repair and refurbish remaining shelters**
- *If beyond repair, replace if funding allows**
- *If replacement not possible, close and remove until possible**

Restrooms;

- *Repair and refurbish remaining restroom facilities**
- *If beyond repair, replace if funding allows**
- *If replacement not possible, close and remove until possible**

Picnic Tables;

- *Repair or replace any in need**

Hiking/Walking Trails;

- *Upgrade existing trails to meet current accepted standards**
- *Locate and build additional trails, in suitable areas, around lake**
- *All new trails should meet current accepted standards**
- *Post all trails with name and length**

- *Place benches along every trail**

Historic Area;

- *Another under used/visited area**

- *Build parking area and path to site**

- *Place better signage to narrate importance of building and site**

- *Landscape area with plantings of flowers, shrubs, and trees**

General Improvements;

- *All remaining parking areas, for shelters and picnic tables, need upgrading and graveling**

- *All park signage needs replaced with modern signage**

- *Reduce mowing use landscaping with plantings and mulching**

- *Consider wildflower and wildlife plantings**

- *Post these areas as such**

- *Work with DNR to manage and limit number of waterfowl on area**

- *Locate and designate areas suitable for “RC” device use**

- *Post signage where their use is prohibited**

GLENWOOD 4-H CAMP:

- *Working with WVU Extension, determine what is needed to meet the needs of 4-H campers**

- * These needs should be for now and the foreseeable future**

- *Consider what would be needed to make facility a more desirable for “Fairs & Festivals”**

- *Consider what the needs are to market this facility as a “Retreat” destination**

- *Identify other uses and activities suitable for this area**

BLUESTONE RIVER:

- *Establish a “Bluestone River Trail Association”, to maintain integrity of the river**
- *Work with the county solid waste authority to continue river clean ups**
- *Work with DNR and local landowners to locate, secure, and designate river access takeouts**
- *Work to obtain a river trail designation for the Bluestone River**
- *After obtaining trail designation, work on establishing multi-use trails along river**

EXIT 14 (ATHENS RD.):

- *Establish Mercer County Visitor Center/Museum**
- *Commission study to determine best use of county property**
- *Consider this location for an “Expo Center” or a “Sports Complex”.**

ATVs:

- *Continue support of the “Hatfield/McCoy Trail system**
- *Work on expanding existing trail and opportunities along trail**
- *Explore new trail system in the Camp Creek State Park/Forest area**

BRUSH CREEK FALLS STATE PARK:

- *Work with DOH to improve signage to and from falls.**
- *Work with staff and park foundation to increase visitation**
- *Work with staff and park foundation to improve trail access**

PINNACLE ROCK STATE PARK:

- *Work with staff and foundation to increase visitation**
- *Work with staff and foundation to increase recreation activities on area**
- *Work with DOH to improve signage to and from park**

CAMP CREEK STATE PARK/FOREST:

- *Work with staff and foundation to increase visitation**
- *Work with staff, foundation, and county commission to get public water to facility**
- *Work with staff and foundation to increase recreational activities**

OTHER:

- *In the more remote areas, work with BOE to make school gyms available for recreation**
- *Work with the cities of Bluefield and Princeton developing joint recreation projects**
- *It is recommended the Mercer County Commission create a "Recreation Board/Authority**

CONCLUSION:

Plans have two important elements. These elements are clear, obtainable goals and ways to meet those goals. Plans are living documents, made to be read and implemented. They are also made to be changed or modified, depending on changing circumstances.

This plan does not place costs or address details of each recommendation. By not doing these things, it hopes to give this plan as much flexibility as possible.

As with all plans, the success or failure depends on funding streams. As these streams increase and decrease, this plan should be altered to reflect this.

Mercer County has a great recreational potential. It already has numerous opportunities and the potential for so much more. Mercer County can become a great recreational place to reside and a destination for those seeking numerous and various recreational activities.

Appendix B: Planning Commission Documents

Mercer County Planning Commission – SWOT October 2015

STRENGTHS

- Skilled Workforce
- Good Transportation (Interstate/RR)
- Good Quality of Life
- Education
- Medical Facilities
- Geographic Location
- Infrastructure
- Climate
- Low Cost of Living
- Plenty of Real Estate
- TV-Radio-Newspaper
- Low Crime Rate
- Low Wages
- Access to capital
- Low Cost Utilities
- Volunteerism
- Foundation Support
- Things to do (in each community)
- Hatfield McCoy Trail
- Two Chambers of Commerce
- Affordable Housing
- Three Industrial Parks
- Boy Scouts
- Mercer County Airport

WEAKNESSES

- Drug Problem
- Workforce
- Weak County Government
- Water/Sewer Infrastructure
- Zoning or Lack Thereof
- Funding/EDA
- Lack of Shovel Ready Sites
- No Commercial Airline Service
- No Convention Center
- Regional Economy
- Corporate Income taxes
- Lack of Tort Reforms
- No Funding for Highway Projects
- Virginia vs West Virginia
- Lack of Regional Focus
- Perceived Quality of Secondary Education
- Growing Lack of Concern for Education
- Lack of Community Involvement
- Our Biggest Export is Our Kids
- No Manufacturing Jobs...All Retail
- Moving Away From the Typical “Family” Unit
- Prevailing Wage
- No Life South of Beckley
- Motivation
- No Right to Work
- Aging Population
- Turnpike Tolls

OPPORTUNITIES

- Tourism
- Entrepreneurship
- Two Higher Education Institutions
- Community College
- Can Reconnect with Charleston
- New Look with Changes in Politics
- Rail Transportation
- Community Engagement
- Opportunity for Partnerships
- Developable Land
- Transportation–Highways
- Involve Our Young Adults
- Boy Scouts/Bechtel Summit
- Caring Community
- Mass Media Presence (TV, Radio, Newspaper)
- Hatfield McCoy Trail
- Mercer County Airport
- The Arts
- Partnership with Law Enforcement to Fight Drugs
- Bulk Transfer Facility

THREATS

- Drug Problems
- Local Government (Local, State, Federal)
- Demise of Coal as We Know It
- Lack of “County” Home Rule
- Most Regulated Education in the United States
- Funding Cuts for Higher Education
- Rising cost of Healthcare
- Trash on Highways
- “Sitting on Our Hands”
- “Heads in the Sand”
- Two Higher Education Institutions

Appendix C: Adoption Documents

BLUEFIELD DAILY TELEGRAPH

928 Bluefield Avenue,
Bluefield, WV 24701
Phone: 304-327-2801 • Toll Free: 800-763-2459
Fax: 304-327-0433 www.bdtonline.com

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DATE 10/15/18

Client:
MERCER COUNTY COMMISSION
1501 MAIN ST
STE 210
PRINCETON, WV 24740-0000
(304) 487-8306
ACCOUNT NUMBER: 107120

PUBLIC NOTICE

The Mercer County Commission will hold a public hearing and meeting on Tuesday, November 13, 2018 at 5:30 PM at the Mercer County Courthouse, 1501 West Main Street, Princeton WV 24740. The public is invited to attend and submit comments on the recently drafted Mercer County Comprehensive Plan. Beginning on October 18, 2018, a copy of the draft comprehensive plan can be reviewed at the Mercer County Courthouse, 1501 West Main Street, Princeton WV 24740, the Princeton Public Library, 920 Mercer Street, Princeton, WV 24740, the Craft Memorial Library, 600 Commerce Street, Bluefield, WV 24701 during normal business hours, or online at <http://www.mercercountywv.org/>. Members of the public can call Vicky Reed, at 304- 487-8306 (Monday through Friday 8:30 AM to 4:30 PM) if they are unable to review the plan at the courthouse, the libraries, or online. Written comments can be submitted prior to the scheduled hearing at the Mercer County Courthouse, 1501 West Main Street, Princeton WV 24740, or may be emailed to the County Administrator at mercercorcommission@frontiernet.net.

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