

City of Buckhannon 2025 Comprehensive Plan

Final
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Introduction

In mid-2018, a Planning Commission was established by the City Council of Buckhannon to draft the 2025 Plan. By West Virginia law, planning documents are to be created every 10 years to provide direction to municipal leaders on the recommendations of stakeholders in the community. A decade ago, a vigorous process was executed to develop the 2015 Plan. That experience set in place a standard by which the current Planning Commission hoped to develop a working document with as much community input and wide variety of voices as its predecessor.

The Planning Commission established a chair and vice-chair for the organization and then developed an approximately one-year timeline to deliver a draft plan to the City Council of Buckhannon. The attached document is provided to the City Council of Buckhannon for its consideration as a reflection of vast amounts of work by the Commission's members, thousands of conversations, town-hall meetings, multiple stakeholder groups, surveys and studies of plans in similar-sized communities. Subcommittee Chairs were established to cover each category and lead the investigation, planning and narrative development of their respective topics.

Thousands of hours by both the Planning Commission and the community have gone into this plan. Both quarterly meetings and monthly work sessions were open to the public and advertised accordingly to garner both input and transparency to the process.

At the time of the development of the 2015 Plan, Buckhannon was a different place with different goals than it is today. Many of the short-range goals of the 2015 Plan were met while long-range goals may still be desirable, but not yet obtained. To that end, the Planning Commission took all of the stated goals of the 2015 Plan, and analyzed which goals had been met, which ones were still to be reached, and which ones were no longer relevant or pressing. That analysis is added within the addendum of this document for consideration of the City Council of Buckhannon and greatly influenced the narrative of various sections within this document.

Utilizing multiple samples of surveys from across the nation, and with the direction of professional researchers, the Planning Commission developed a survey and distributed it widely throughout the community in digital and hardcopy formats. A total of 729 individuals responded to the survey and provided a great deal of data. The data was entered by a West Virginia Wesleyan College student intern and the results of that survey are included within the addendum of this plan. That information was used by each subcommittee chair to provide insight into the various subjects addressed within.

In January 2019, a town-hall meeting was held to gather input from the Buckhannon Community. To advertise this event, news releases were distributed, stories were written, electronic billboards were used, social media was widely utilized, and stakeholder organizations were directedly invited. A packed room at the Buckhannon Safety Complex filled with people representing a wide-spectrum of the greater Buckhannon Community came together to constructively provide input through breakout groups led by the Subcommittee Chairs. That input made its way into every section of the plan's narrative.

Following up to the town-hall meeting, survey responses and 2015 plan analysis, Subcommittee Chairs individually met with subject-matter experts and specific stakeholders within the Buckhannon Community on their respective subcommittee section topics. Those individual meetings aided the development of each section with knowledgeable input on relevant topics.

Subcommittee chairs developed each section which were then reviewed by the committee's members and edited to the current narrative.

This document, while covering a great number of matters, is not complete. In keeping with Chapter 8A, Section 3 of West Virginia Code, efforts were made to ensure the requirements of the comprehensive plan as described, and to add to this plan additional sections that were felt to be very important to the greater Buckhannon Community. The 2025 Plan is an update of the original 2015 Plan found in the addendum of this document. Subjects that were not addressed directly in the narrative of the current update have been analyzed in the 2015 Plan to create recommendations to the City of Buckhannon addressing all sections as required by Code. That said, there will always be items, topics and issues that may be addressed, but that lacked consensus. This plan, as developed in the following narrative, reflects the best efforts of not only the Planning Commission, but also the extensive input of the community-at-large.

Noting that the Planning Commission is an appointed entity by an elected body, we also make the following recommendations concerning this plan at-large:

- The 2025 Plan is a ten-year plan, of which may be amended as the City Council of Buckhannon sees necessary.
- The 2025 Plan's recommendations, to be addressed within the 10-year span of this plan, are intentionally fluid so that City Council may determine priorities based on resources and other issues before the body.
- Noting that Buckhannon's economy and population have continued with stable growth, the topics within this plan reflect current realities, recent development and near-term expectations of those topics and therefore land use, as outlined in the 2015 Plan, should continue based upon that trend.
- Historic preservation of buildings and areas within the greater Buckhannon Community have been laid out in previous plans, and it is this entity's recommendation to continue the paths outlined in the 2015 Plan.

Two Hundred and Fifty Years ago, the first permanent settlers came to what is now Buckhannon in 1769, following the temporary refuge that Sam and John Pringle found in a hollow sycamore tree in the four years before. Since then, Buckhannon has built itself into a great community with a vibrant Main Street, a prestigious college, noted residents who have risen to the top of their fields, and devoted people who have worked diligently to make this town a great place to live, work or visit.

Both Buckhannon and the greater community treasure those things and wish to see them continue. And to that end, this plan attempts to provide recommendations to ensure that vision for the future – both near-term and for generations to come.

Community

Our intention is to be a safe, affordable, welcoming community where a point is made to include everyone who wants to participate. We encourage our citizens to collaborate and work together on finding solutions, understanding that we all must accept responsibility to engage the issues, both publicly and privately, if we are to find real answers. We promote strong engagement among citizens, community organizations, and government.

Specific goals to advance community include:

- Ensure a safe community where citizens work together with public safety officers in a collaborative manner, focusing on building trust and cohesion among the departments and the community at large.
- Support the efforts of the police department's CALEA accreditation and the fire department's CFAI accreditation programs.
- Continue to be an affordable community where people from all income brackets can live, work, and play.
- Maintain affordable and suitable housing that provides access to schools, jobs, and healthcare.
- The total costs associated with living in Buckhannon should be kept to a level that supports the expected public services at the lowest possible cost to residents and businesses.
- Continue to be a welcoming community by promoting employment opportunities, affordable housing, cultural diversity, educational opportunities, accessible healthcare, available public transit, and social opportunities.
- Enable citizens to easily participate in political activities, and ensure ongoing positive relationships with governmental personnel and positive relationships with police and the justice system.
- Continue to maintain public spaces and a non-punitive parking plan.
- Become more intentional about inclusion by making it a point to include everyone who wants to participate in city decision making and activities.
- City government personnel should approach issues with the insight that they do not have all the answers. They should ask questions and encourage citizens to collaborate and work together on finding solutions.
- Realign City policies and confront issues in a manner that makes the City more inclusive and inviting for all to better experience citizenship.
- Initiate collaboration between the retirement community and the college community.

The foundation of community development work is getting people to take small, brave steps toward collaborating with another individual or group of people. We need to focus on trust, not cynicism; hopefulness, not pessimism. The two biggest obstacles preventing communities from moving forward are personality conflicts and turf issues. We must step outside and around these issues and focus actions on what is in the best interests of the community. We must be willing to work with anyone towards a successful outcome for our community.

Economic Development

The future of economic development in the Buckhannon area should focus on innovation and partnerships. Currently in West Virginia, 87% of employers (in all industries) have fewer than 20 employees (WV Small Business Development Center <https://wvsbdc.com/>) and 89%, overall, in the United States. These trends are expected to accelerate and continue, particularly in the Appalachian Region. The big companies and major manufacturing firms are no longer the future, and not always best, for Appalachia. Partnering with the new IDEA Center downtown, building on our natural resources, and connecting to networks of developing entrepreneurs are key strategies for Buckhannon's economic development.

Recommended goals include:

1. Proactively encourage and provide support for innovation
 - Attract young professionals and other knowledge workers while retaining our current base. Specific areas of focus include information technology, data analytics, agribusiness, renewable energy, recreation, and entertainment.
 - Explore light industry in emerging areas such as solar and other renewable energy, hemp manufacturing, small-scale agribusiness, etc.
 - Provide support for community services, including broadband infrastructure, to assist development of new businesses and retention of current businesses.
2. Nurture current partnerships and seek out additional partners
 - Actively facilitate partnerships among Upshur County Schools, West Virginia Wesleyan College, St. Joseph's Hospital, City government, County Commission, Upshur Development Authority's new IDEA Center, and existing businesses to identify entrepreneurial opportunities and ensure technical and business development support.
 - Collaborate with organizers of statewide and regional pitch contests (WV High School Business Plan Competition, WV Collegiate Business Model Competition, WV Collegiate Business Plan Competition, Strong Mountain Communities' Social Entrepreneurship Competition) to attract appropriate new entrepreneurs to Buckhannon.
 - Facilitate additional creative placemaking initiatives, building on existing projects of Artistry on Main, ART 26201 activities, the renovation of the Colonial Theatre, Festival Friday events, and other local and regional arts and cultural groups.
 - Facilitate trades training and business support for emerging and long-standing tradespeople who have work skills, but lack experience in running a business.
3. Expand on existing assets
 - Build on opportunities for outdoor recreation by further developing, maintaining, and marketing the local walking trails, fishing, boating, bike trails. Host races and other recreational events.
 - Maintain a vibrant downtown and enhance collaborative marketing of retail shops, restaurants, music, art, dance, festivals, events, and other entertainment.

- Encourage more downtown businesses to remain open on Sundays to attract tourists traveling Route 33, particularly during ski seasons and summer months.
- Attract and retain retirees by developing appropriate housing options, additional public transportation, marketing enhanced medical services, targeting volunteer, continued learning, and recreational opportunities.

Buckhannon City government, business and economic development organizations, and educational institutions should strengthen existing partnerships, but also reach out to potential new partners across the state. Upshur County Schools and West Virginia Wesleyan College can partner with business and industry to ensure a prepared workforce. The City should collaborate with new and emerging groups working on innovative solutions for our state and region. Organizations such as West Virginia Development HUB, Generation WV, Coalfield Development Corp., Solar Holler, Strong Mountain Communities, and others are already working on models of job creation, training, and creation of vibrant communities. Buckhannon can learn from them and connect with their networks to provide synergy and contribute to the common mission of improving our state and region.

Education

The Constitution of the State of West Virginia, as stated in Article XII, Sections I and II, requires that the Legislature shall provide, by general law, a thorough and efficient system of free schools. Additionally, the general supervision of free schools shall be performed by the West Virginia State Board of Education. Guidance is provided through State Code, policies established through the State Board of Education (WVBE) and administered by the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE).

While the citizens of Buckhannon and Upshur County value the importance of education and recognize its value as stated by our founding fathers, it is understood that public education is mainly controlled at the state level as mandated by the State Constitution and Policies implemented by the WVBE. Consequently, local control and influence on the learning system is limited due state control and funding. However, the citizens of Buckhannon and the Upshur County community support education financially and through countless hours of volunteerism.

Goals to enhance education in Buckhannon include:

1. Establish a more functional relationship between the City of Buckhannon, Upshur County Schools (UCS) and Fred Eberle Technical Center (FETC) to augment the unique services each can utilize to support each other.
 - Develop a committee to meet at least quarterly to review initiatives, projects, and/or activities that may provide opportunities for cooperation between the City, UCS, and FETC.
 - Identify workforce needs, skills and trades, and implement programs for training that provides for the necessary certifications and skills to address contemporary needs of the City and Upshur County community.
 - Continue the establishment of community forums to receive valuable input from the community in identifying programs and opportunities that will benefit UCS students.
2. Continue to support the local school levy and any school bonds that may be put before the public.
 - Provide open public support for the continuance of the levy and bond initiatives.
 - Collaborate with Upshur County School system regarding the excess levy and bonds that will benefit the library, fire department, police department, and other city agencies.
3. Recognizing that education does not stop once a person graduates from high school, the City should collaborate with the state Workforce Development Office, West Virginia Wesleyan College, and regional community and technical schools to ensure that educational opportunities are available to the unemployed, career changers, retirees, and others.

Due to the state control of education through laws, policies, and regulations there are restrictions on what be done at the local level to afford substantial change to the education system. The committee is well aware of the many needs and issues facing our students both now and in the future. However, support for public education is a must and needs to be undertaken in as many ways as practical. The citizens of Buckhannon and Upshur County support education and efforts must be maintained to strengthen that support.

Government Services

Buckhannon's City Hall and the Upshur County Courthouse are located only blocks apart, and the municipality and the county have a long history of working together in various roles and yet quite separately in others.

Existing cooperative efforts span both semi-governmental and non-governmental entities including, but not limited to:

The Upshur County Development Authority
The Buckhannon Upshur Convention and Visitors Bureau
The Buckhannon Upshur Chamber of Commerce
The Airport Authority
The Office of Emergency Management
Emergency Medical Services

Through survey data, stakeholder input and town hall observations, the Planning Commission learned that the citizens of the greater Buckhannon community -all within Upshur County – would like to have more cooperation between municipal and county government entities that may lead to efficiencies in purchasing and management.

Recommendations to be made include, but are not limited to:

- City Police / County Sheriff purchasing of vehicles and equipment
- Administrative bulk purchasing by cooperative city and county entities and sub-entities for office supplies, software, computers and equipment
- Cooperative fire protection

There are a number of cooperative areas in which both the City and the County can work together. In the area of fire protection, the county has multiple departments – mostly volunteer fire departments in the non-City covered areas. The City of Buckhannon has a professional fire department that also utilizes a large number of volunteers. The City's fire department covers 65% of the runs within the county in an area that represents 95% of the county's economic activity. The City of Buckhannon's Fire Department is working toward becoming a certified entity that may lead to lower insurance rates for the citizens of the areas in which it covers. Currently, there is no central audit of equipment between squads in the county which leads to duplication of equipment.

Recommendations to be made include, but are not limited to:

- Fire Training Facility in Buckhannon that other county squads may use
- A county-wide system equipment audit
- Singular county-wide system of mapping based on the system Buckhannon uses

Because many of the public service districts within the county source their water from the Buckhannon Utility Board, it would be recommended that the county's PSDs work in

conjunction with the Buckhannon Water Department for future planning of water line extensions and replacements to adequately account for both demand and fire suppression.

Because the Buckhannon Community extends beyond the City's physical limits, there are number of transportation areas that should be investigated for joint city/county efforts – especially when these paths of transportation cross in and out of the City's limits.

Recommendations to be made include, but are not limited to:

- Sidewalks beyond city limits
- Trails (hiking and biking)
- River access (In city and county)

The State of West Virginia allows for cooperative efforts between municipal and county governments. Upshur County is the only county in West Virginia to have a singular municipality within it of this size. Were an agreement made between the two entities created to form a micro statistical area for United State Census purposes before the 2020 census, the Buckhannon MSA would change from being 21st in population to 7th in the state. This would attract more investment into the area while creating new opportunities for efficiencies to be found by taxpayers in the greater Buckhannon community.

Further, Upshur County may be unique in West Virginia in that it has a single municipal government and no other municipalities within the county. This provides an opportunity for cooperative government agreements that do not have multiple lines of conflict with additional municipalities.

Healthcare

Healthcare was not a component of the 2015 plan, but with West Virginia at the bottom of the list for many healthcare problems such as obesity, heart disease and diabetes, it is appropriate to include healthcare in this 2025 iteration. The Mountain State ranks 44th overall in United Health Foundation's 2018 rankings and comes in last in four categories: deaths attributed to drug addiction, obesity, smoking, and diabetes.

Healthcare providers in the area include St. Joseph's Hospital, Community Care of West Virginia, Davis Health System, and Stonewall Jackson Physicians Services. After 94 years of being sponsored by the Pallottine Missionary Sisters, the St. Joseph's Hospital was transferred to WVU Medicine in October 2015. This provides more resources to help patients. WVU Medicine sends specialists to Buckhannon in regular rotations. The hospital employs 450 people.

Community Care of West Virginia is headquartered in Buckhannon where it has also opened new clinic locations while having a presence in southern Upshur County. Community Care is a Federally Qualified Health Center and collaborates with St. Joseph's Hospital through labs. It operates CareExpress and Pediatrics to see walk-in urgent care patients.

Further, Davis Health System and Stonewall Jackson Physicians Services both have providers in the community in a number of specialties.

Fitness centers in the area include Buckhannon Fitness Center with 24-hour service through key-cards for its members. Recently added to this is Anytime Fitness in Tennerton. Almost Heaven Crossfit is a newer option to downtown Buckhannon, with coaches available to challenge participants and foster fitness. Finally, West Virginia Wesleyan College has its own wellness center with exercise equipment and classes that students, faculty, staff, and local alumni can access.

The greater Buckhannon community enjoys the Poundstone River Walk Trail - first constructed in 1999 with several extensions. The trail is now 3.8 miles of ADA-accessible asphalt and concrete. New hiking and biking trails at the Upshur County Recreation Park (behind Buckhannon Upshur High School) and new sidewalks in the City of Buckhannon have added to free public access to exercise options.

Recommendations observed, but are not limited to:

- The City of Buckhannon should work with the local healthcare community to develop and hire a diabetic educator.
- Initiate a collaboration with the local healthcare community to develop classes on life-style changes in nutrition, smoking cessation and exercise.
- Develop bicycle-friendly streets and promote walking/bike paths.
- Continue expansion of the Riverwalk Trail in coordination with both the Upshur County Commission and the Upshur Board of Education.
- Develop a bicycle rental kiosk through a public-private partnership.

- Work with existing businesses and organizations to develop more running/walking events including 5Ks, half marathons and similar opportunities.
- Expand public outdoor play areas for children.
- Mark distances for fitness loops in town.
- Coordinate with the Upshur County Board of Education and non-governmental organizations to foster activity in younger children
- Improve transportation options for citizens' access to medical appointments -both within the local community and to specialists found in neighboring areas.
- Collaborate with public and private entities to develop strategies to address the statewide substance-use disorder crisis.

Housing

The City of Buckhannon needs to assist in ensuring that a wide variety of safe, affordable, and versatile housing is available for current and future residents. Specific issues include availability of quality rental units, downtown loft housing, and handicap accessible housing for temporary residents, new knowledge workers, and senior citizens. These housing options should be affordable, but not limited to low-income requirements.

According to the US Census, the City of Buckhannon has approximately 5,700 residents. The general consensus is that, due to a lack of available land for residential development within the City limits, the only future of population expansion would be through extending those limits. However, there are other options to improve housing that the City may explore first.

Currently, there is a lack of public information on available rental units provided through digital communications. While some units have signs on them, individuals looking to move to the City or those who are unfamiliar with the City's various neighborhoods do not see these signs. This has led to companies complaining that attracting new employees to Buckhannon has become more difficult.

Based on the available information, the following goals for Housing in the 2025 Comprehensive Plan include:

- Update the Housing Survey to determine the current number and quality of dwelling units.
- Conduct a Housing Demand Survey to determine projected future housing requirements for the next five to ten years.
- Identify unbuilt lots within the city limits.
- Develop and implement an ongoing system of inspections and ratings of rental properties within the City.
- Identify uninhabitable structures within the city limits that may be redeveloped.
- Work with landlords to list their available units on digital platforms and news outlets.
- Identify additional housing alternatives for senior citizens who do need to live in low-income housing units.
- Develop contemporary, affordable, and convenient housing options, such as downtown lofts, for new knowledge workers attracted to Upshur County Development Authority's Idea Center and other entrepreneurial opportunities in the area.
- Ensure that information on local laws and zoning ordinances related to all types of housing units is easily accessible and always accurate.
- Create a Housing Authority or other entity that would be a public/private partnership to develop empty lots and/or redevelop uninhabited structures.

Infrastructure

In terms of jurisdiction, the City is responsible for water, storm and sanitary sewers, streets, sidewalks, and waste collection. Outside vendors provide services for natural gas, electricity, telecommunications, internet and television cable.

With a city the age of Buckhannon, some of the infrastructure is obviously very old with portions abandoned, unmapped, undersized and in need of upgrades and/or replacement to be able to stay current with needs, demands of expansion, and changing standards of operation. The City of Buckhannon took bold steps many years ago to acquire and operate the essential services provided to city residents today. Those services have been well managed over the years at what has proven to be a reasonable cost and benefit to residents as compared with private operators in many other communities in the State.

Goals moving forward include:

- The City should continue to lead by example in environmental sustainability, to support conservation of natural resources.
- Upgrade the storm sewer system where it is inadequate or non-existent in several areas of Buckhannon.
- Rebuild sewers and services in North Spring Street between Main and the railroad crossing, where unstable sub-soils are a significant issue.
- Develop pedestrian sidewalks in the several areas of Buckhannon where they are inadequate or non-existent.
- Develop safe bicycle access paths in all areas of Buckhannon.
- While the City is the primary source for the processing of water in the county they have little to no control over the distribution and conservation of that water by the PSDs. More reporting and cooperation is needed between the PSDs and those responsible for their operation.
- Develop a bypass from Corridor-H to southern Upshur County.
- Continue to improve pedestrian friendly access to downtown from nearby residential areas.
- Continue street paving, sidewalks, and safe crossings downtown and across the City.
- Continue to provide essential city services and meet or exceed regulatory standards
- Continue to provide adequate wages to attract and retain qualified personnel for all city operations.
- Facilitate the delivery of true high-speed internet service to city and area residents as it greatly assists the attraction and retention of jobs and residents to enjoy the benefits of this community.

Recreation

Buckhannon's natural and manmade beauty makes it a destination for many types of recreation with several projects such as the Colonial Theater renovation, the development of Trader's Alley, and continuing improvements to Jawbone Park already having a positive impact on the quality of life for our residents and visitors.

However, the Buckhannon River is vastly underutilized; the creation of handicap-accessible public fishing areas and the encouragement of boating operations by private enterprise being well within reach. Biking and walking trails are popular and should be expanded throughout the City and into the county areas. Parks could be better coordinated, and there is a need for indoor recreational facilities to accommodate needs during inclement weather and to host additional recreational options.

Specific goals include:

- Increase the bicycle friendliness of the City by improving on- and off-road bicycle options.
- Implement a bike-share program and evaluate to determine if there is need for expansion
- Improve the safety of people who live on the Vicksburg side of the river and must walk to the downtown area to participate in events such as Festival Fridays, The Strawberry Festival, etc.
- Increase the ability to utilize the river for boating and fishing particularly in the upper pool but also below the damn as well. Clear dead trees and silt to improve usage.
- Work with local business owners to determine their needs for the use of City, college or other private property to make water way recreation businesses viable.
- Connect the Riverwalk area to the off-road bike trails south of the city.
- Improve fishing access to the river, especially near the riverwalk trail.
- Explore ways to work with Allegheny Energy to increase the recreational use of Stonecoal Lake, including the evaluation of opportunities to develop picnic and swimming areas.
- Develop indoor recreational facilities available for various age groups and purposes.
- Improve and expand recreational leagues for children and adults.
- Create a City Parks and Recreation Department to focus on development and central coordination of recreational facilities.

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