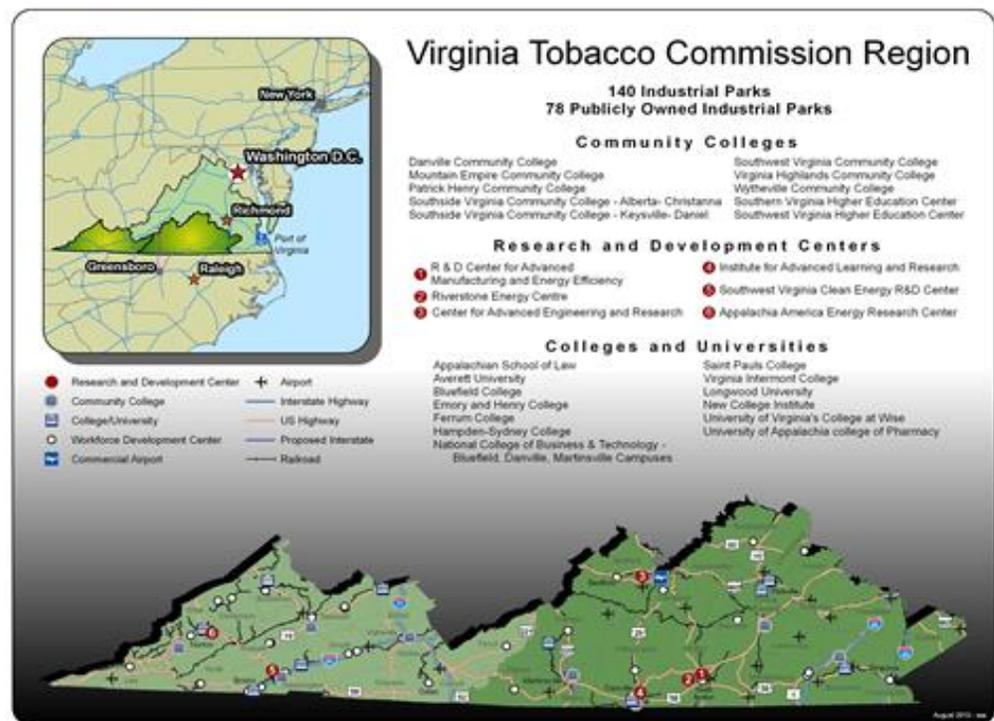


# Virginia Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission



June 2016

Stakeholder Input Sessions Summary Report

## BACKGROUND

Legislation passed in the 2015 General Assembly session (Code of Virginia sections 3.2-3100 et seq., requires several enhancements and changes to the Tobacco Commission’s grant processes and other organizational aspects, effective July 1, 2015. One provision is the development and adoption of a biennial strategic plan. The planning process was initiated in 2015 with assistance from the Center for Rural Virginia. Review of existing economic development plans within the region combined with focus group input resulted in the identification of six key economic drivers:

1. **Leadership and Community Capacity** which includes building the capacity of three interdependent elements which are individual leaders, organizations and the community as a whole
2. **Education and Workforce Development** which includes all segments of the education pipeline including colleges, universities, community colleges, training programs, career and technical education and K-12 education
3. **Access to Quality and Specialty Healthcare** including having access to diverse means of healthcare delivery through telehealth and other programs
4. **Infrastructure**, including broadband, water, sewer, natural gas, transportation and capital construction
5. **Entrepreneurship and Small Business** encompassing the business, community and regulatory climate to support startups and small business expansion
6. **Regional Assets and Opportunities** including the elements that contribute to a regional identity including quality of life, tourism opportunities and downtown redevelopment.

Executive Director Evan Feinman contacted the Performance Management Group (PMG), an office within the Center for Public Policy in the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs at Virginia Commonwealth University, to assist in designing and conducting two stakeholder input sessions in support of the Commission’s strategic planning efforts. This report summarizes the findings from those sessions.

## METHODOLOGY

Input sessions were scheduled for April 18 in South Boston and April 26 in Abingdon Virginia. PMG staff met with members of the Commission’s Strategic Planning Committee in Roanoke on March 29 to finalize desired outcomes and processes. Committee Co-Chairs Melissa Neff Gould and Becky Coleman prepared and distributed a press release to newspapers within the region to help advertise the Commission’s efforts and solicit participation. All Commissioners were tasked with sharing information about the sessions throughout their diverse professional networks.

Each session was scheduled for three hours. Input was solicited and captured on three questions:

1. What current operations and policies could be improved?
2. What policies and procedures are currently working well and should continue?
3. What are the highest priority economic drivers and what types of projects should be funded under those drivers?

Participants sat at small tables to form ad hoc working teams of five to eight people each to address the three topics of interest. Thirteen teams were formed in South Boston and twelve work teams in Abingdon. An approximate total of 160 participants shared their insights and suggestions. Input was captured on flip charts at each table and briefly reviewed at set times during the sessions.

PMG documented all written suggestions and sorted similar ideas into like categories to identify areas for operational improvements, areas of excellence, and high priority economic drivers and key types of desired projects.

## **AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

### **Communication**

1. Grantees and potential grantees reported sometimes experiencing difficulties in accessing information on funding cycles, past grant awards and outcomes, meetings and deadlines, and funding policies via the TRRC website.
2. Increased outreach to the public is suggested to help citizens better understand the mission and history of the Commission, its funding sources and the many success stories throughout the region.

### **Consistency**

1. Greater transparency and consistency is needed regarding funding priorities and strategies and who makes the final funding decisions. What are the specific evaluation criteria that are used? What funding formulas are in place?
2. Initial grant award requirements should remain in place for the life of the project and not change until completion. Need more consistent oversight and follow through on investments to help ensure everyone is meeting their obligations and requirements are consistently applied and enforced.
3. Increase consistency of reporting requirements, lead time on data requests and allocation standards.

### **Coordination**

1. MOUs should be required of and honored by all project parties.
2. Commissioners can be more engaged in projects and actively participate in local related events. Networking opportunities between commissioners and regional partners should be increased.
3. Roles and expectations between the Commission, regional and local economic development professionals and organizations, COEs and other institutes of higher education, and funding partners can be better clarified and communicated. The Commission should serve as a liaison to related state and federal agency partners.

### **Flexibility**

1. Programs and funding decisions can be more agile to meet the changing needs of businesses, especially for small businesses and startups.
2. Some projects require a longer timeline to demonstrate success such as R & D projects and infrastructure improvements and greater flexibility in expectations is needed.
3. Consider more flexibility in grant cycles or rolling submission deadlines to greater position the Commission to support quickly emerging and time sensitive opportunities.

### **Match Requirements**

1. Current matching fund requirements are difficult for some localities to meet and concern was expressed that “wealthier” localities have a competitive advantage. More flexibility is needed regarding match requirements, especially the cash amounts, based on a formula that determines relative ability to meet.
2. Provide assistance on obtaining matching funds through philanthropic organizations or other sources.

### **Outcomes**

1. Increase analysis of funded projects to better document successful and unsuccessful projects and the factors that influenced those outcomes. Communicate these findings to localities, stakeholders and funding partners.
2. Develop clear policies regarding Commission funding and project sustainability. Should there being a funding timeline limit or will some projects be supported for a long time?

### **Policies**

1. Re-evaluate the funding distribution based on current economic conditions and challenges throughout the entire region served. Make sure it makes sense and is equitable.
2. Focus on projects that directly support Commission goals and have the broadest community benefits. Don't distribute funding too widely.
3. Many awards are very large. Consider reserving a portion of funding for smaller projects under the various Commission programs.

## Priorities

1. Numerous priorities for future funding were mentioned:
  - a. Agriculture infrastructure and R & D
  - b. Broadband
  - c. Community facilities
  - d. Credentialing and certification programs
  - e. Downtown revitalization
  - f. Historic preservation
  - g. Incentives to train, attract and retain teachers and professors
  - h. Infrastructure
  - i. Jobs training and workforce development
  - j. Marketing local and regional assets and potentials
  - k. Quality of life initiatives
  - l. Recreational and cultural tourism
  - m. Scholarships and tuition assistance
  - n. Small business
  - o. Transportation
2. Provide incentives for entities to work together on regional projects with shared responsibility for grant liability and progress reporting.

## Processes

1. Some parts of the application process are redundant and take too much time. Different sets of criteria for large projects versus small may be helpful.
2. Consider a pre-application process. Planning grants may be useful to properly prepare for larger or more complex projects.
3. Vet projects more carefully at the local level and the Commission level. Make sure decisions are based on project merit and not political considerations, especially if commissioners are involved. Use a consistent scoring method.
4. The online application can be more user friendly and the time stamp needs to be upgraded. Number projects in the order they were received instead of alphabetically.
5. Provide a “coach” for grantees throughout project development to help them understand and meet all requirements, especially if they don’t have a proven track record of successful completions.
6. Revamp the reimbursement process to make it less cumbersome and time intensive for grantees.

## Structure

1. Reduce the number of elected officials to a minority of commissioners. Increase representation of business interests and citizens.

## WHAT IS WORKING WELL

### Access

1. Regional staff members, conducting meetings in various locations throughout the region and being available and approachable greatly contributes to receiving information and gaining technical assistance.

### Accountability

1. Financial reporting and accountability have improved and information is more transparent. Annual reports have helped free up unused funds.

### Data

1. The Commission is collecting valuable data on workforce development and other relevant topics and willingly shares this information. The use of external groups for research and evaluation helps drive data-driven decision-making.

### Flexibility

1. The Commission has demonstrated a willingness to shift or expand its focus as opportunities and demands shift. Investments in education and technology related projects provide examples. A wide variety of programs have had investments.
2. Support for innovative and creative solutions is strong, including meeting the needs of small businesses and entrepreneurs. Programs try to meet the needs of businesses in various development cycles.
3. The development of workforce infrastructure has taken place beyond rigid silos of bureaucracy.

### Funding

1. Strategic and appropriate funding decisions have been made and funding appears to be targeted to areas of highest need.
2. Funds are generally managed well and the capturing of unspent funds has improved, providing more capital for further investments.
3. The low interest loan program and grant funds should be continued. Commission funds are sometimes vital as local match to receive federal funding support.

### Input

1. The Commission pursues continuous improvement processes and actively engages stakeholders to gain their perceptions and ideas.

### Processes

1. The online application and reporting processes have been successful in helping to reduce time spent on those activities.
2. The timeframe between application, grant award and availability of funds is good. Processing drawdowns is efficient.

## Results

1. Funding for a wide variety of projects have helped create positive changes in:
  - a. Education
  - b. Healthcare
  - c. Industrial parks
  - d. Local economic development
  - e. Tourism
  - f. Utilities
  - g. Workforce
2. Investments have increased attention to the region and helped create a more competitive foundation for economic development activities. This has improved the ability to attract new companies and help existing businesses expand.

## Scholarships

1. Scholarships and student loans have helped many individuals who otherwise would not have been able to further their education and training.

## Staff

1. Commission staff are very accessible and responsive to requests for information and assistance. They demonstrate a passion for the region and what they do. They are willing to meet and discuss any issue.
2. Staff members are knowledgeable about and sensitive to the goals and needs of individual projects. They actively engage in projects and work in a cooperative manner with localities. The relationships between regional administrators and grantees are strong and valuable.
3. Feedback on ideas and applications is provided in a timely and candid manner. Their initial review of potential projects is very helpful and they provide guidance on the best possible funding to pursue. They provide beneficial feedback for projects that aren't approved for funding to help strengthen future applications.

## Structure

1. Commissioners stay in touch, are accessible and represent diverse interests that helps them capably represent the region. They take a problem-solving approach rather than being bureaucratic to help get things done.

## TROF

1. The TROF program is a success and its procedures are straightforward and efficient.

## **ECONOMIC DRIVERS AND SUGGESTED PROJECT PRIORITIES**

Economic drivers are listed by the number of comments received for that driver. Project descriptions under each economic driver are not listed in any order of priority.

### **Education and Workforce Development**

1. TRRC scholarships and tuition assistance.
2. Training for high demand occupations, as defined in partnership with regional businesses and industries, including STEM-H opportunities.
3. Efforts to retain and retrain existing employees and recruit new employees, and their spouses, into the region to support high demand jobs.
4. Training for K-12 educators to help them understand and support potential career opportunities and partner with regional businesses and industries to expose students to a diversity of options upon graduation.
5. Work-based education such as internships, apprenticeships and on-the-job training programs.
6. Training and support for small businesses and entrepreneurs.
7. Sustainable funding for proven workforce development programs.

### **Infrastructure**

1. Broadband, including “last mile” funding, and telecommunications projects (cellular, wireless and emergency communications), that help eliminate dead zones and digital divides for businesses, schools and residences.
2. Access to public utilities including water, natural gas, sewer and alternative energy resources.
3. Transportation infrastructure improvements including public transportation.
4. Development and marketing of industrial parks.
5. Protection and enhancement of architectural and cultural resources and tourism support.

### **Entrepreneurship and Small Business**

1. Financial assistance in the forms of grants or forgivable loans tied to performance agreements.
2. Low interest loans and revolving loan funds to provide access to capital for startup and expansion.
3. Cost share programs for small businesses to support entrepreneurship programs and internships.
4. Loan guarantees or interest rate buy downs to increase access to capital.
5. Technical assistance to small businesses to help them identify trends and opportunities, develop funding and sustainability plans and business training.
6. Regional programs that support marketing, education and funding.
7. Assistance to strengthen agribusinesses, Agritourism and ecotourism.

### **Access to Quality and Specialty Healthcare**

1. Improved access to physical, behavioral and oral health care through mobile health services, transportation assistance and tele-health capabilities.
2. Increased services for the elderly to help them access services and age in place to reduce stress on the current workforce.
3. Drug rehabilitation programs that incorporate job training and placement.

**Regional Assets and Opportunities**

1. Archeological and historic/cultural research that supports tourism.
2. Connecting communities to outdoor recreational opportunities and related businesses to support adventure tourism.
3. Historic preservation and repurposing of obsolete buildings with development potential.

**Leadership and Community Capacity**

1. Efforts to increase local and regional long-range planning, commitment and collaboration.