



Tourism Business
Opportunity Assessment

Hinton, West Virginia

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report explores current and future opportunities for tourism business development in Hinton, West Virginia.

Using the context of the tourism value chain, this study:

- identifies marketable tourism products and attractions in the Hinton area,
- assesses the town's tourism capacity based on existing businesses and services,
- identifies gaps in Hinton's current tourism infrastructure, and
- outlines business-specific recommendations and next steps to develop and maintain a thriving tourism industry.

This study is one of a series of business opportunity assessments performed by Downstream Strategies for the Northern West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Center and the West Virginia Community Development Hub with regards to tourism development in specific West Virginia towns.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

With so many quality tourism products in the immediate area, Hinton is ideally situated to serve as a launching point for day trips and adventures to nearby destinations. The city's proximity to world-class recreation opportunities, its location near interstate highways, and its charming downtown give Hinton promising potential for development.

The following recommendations are provided to enhance Hinton's tourism products.

- 1. Pursue targeted business development downtown.**
- 2. Make it easier for people to access tourism activities.**
- 3. Build up Hinton's local workforce.**
- 4. Strengthen Hinton's tourism data collection.**

These items are outlined in full in the Recommendations section, followed by resources for achieving these goals and actionable next steps for the town to pursue.

ABOUT DOWNSTREAM STRATEGIES

Downstream Strategies is an environmental and economic development consulting firm located in Morgantown and Alderson, West Virginia. We are considered *the* go-to source for objective, data-based analyses, plans, and actions that strengthen economies, sustain healthy environments, and build resilient communities.

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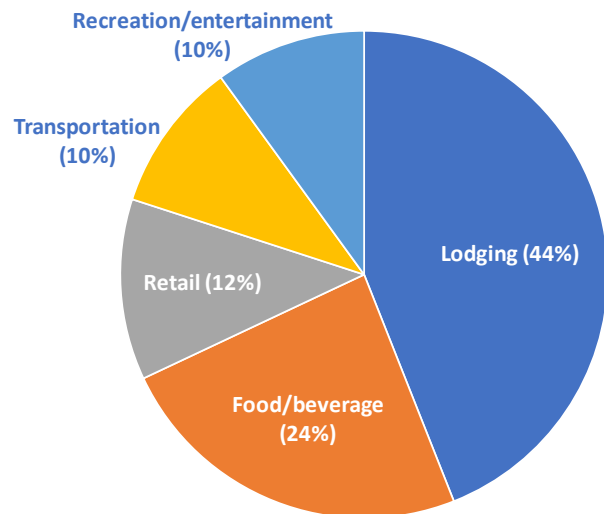
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TOURISM IN WEST VIRGINIA

Tourism is a growing industry in West Virginia. Trends at the statewide level show that increased investment in tourism development and promotion over the last five years have paid off (West Virginia Division of Tourism, 2016). Tourism added \$5.1 billion to the statewide economy in 2015. Nearly 16 million visitors stayed overnight in West Virginia in 2015. While 47% came to visit friends and relatives, 41% of overnight visitors came to the state on leisure trips influenced by marketing efforts (Longwoods Travel USA, 2015).

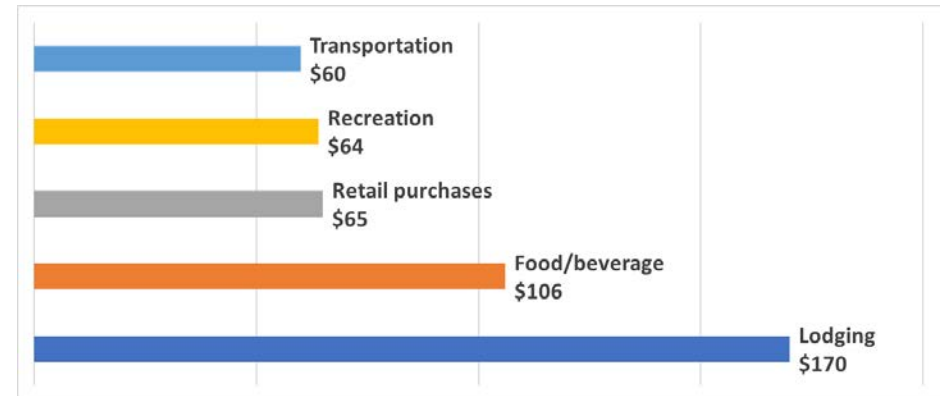
During their stays, visitors enjoy a range of activities such as shopping, dining, and visiting landmarks, parks, and historical sites. The average family/group spends \$465 over the course of their stay (Figure 2), which averages 2.7 nights in length (Longwoods Travel USA, 2015). This direct spending has a significant impact on local economies, and, as a result, many towns across the state are evaluating how they can leverage local resources such as natural assets and cultural heritage into tourism products.

FIGURE 1: TOTAL OVERNIGHT SPENDING BY SECTOR IN WEST VIRGINIA (2015)



Source: Longwoods Travel USA (2015).

FIGURE 2: AVERAGE PARTY EXPENDITURES ON OVERNIGHT TRIPS TO WEST VIRGINIA



Source: Longwoods Travel USA (2015).

The single greatest driver of tourism in West Virginia is **outdoor recreation** (Longwoods Travel USA, 2015). West Virginia's mountains and rivers offer some of the best opportunities for outdoor recreation in the nation. As a four-season destination within a day's drive for half of the country's population, outdoor recreation tourism in West Virginia is poised to grow.



Source: West Virginia Division of Tourism (2017).

Outdoor recreation generated \$9 billion in consumer spending in 2016, as well as \$2.4 billion in salaries and wages and \$660 million in state and local tax revenue. And with 91,000 direct jobs in the industry statewide,

outdoor recreation employs nearly twice as many West Virginians as the coal industry.¹ (Outdoor Recreation Association, 2017)

Cultural and heritage tourism also plays a significant role in attracting visitors to the state: 45% of overnight visitors in West Virginia came to experience historic places and cultural activities in 2015 (Longwoods Travel USA, 2015).

Across the United States, 78% of all leisure travelers (118 million adults) participate in cultural and/or heritage activities while traveling. Cultural and heritage travelers spend an average of \$994 per trip and contribute more than \$192 billion annually to the U.S. economy. As baby boomers retire, the amount of heritage tourism (and overall travel expenditures) is expected to rise. (Mandala Research, 2009)

Compared with other types of travelers, cultural and heritage travelers are more frequent travelers and are more likely to participate in culinary

activities, including visiting farmers' markets, attending food and wine festivals, and enjoying unique dining experiences. Table 1 shows the most common activities cited by cultural and heritage tourists.

TABLE 1: PREFERRED ACTIVITIES BY CULTURAL AND HERITAGE TOURISTS

Activity	Percent
Visiting historic sites	66%
Attending historic reenactments	64%
Visiting art museums and galleries	54%
Attending arts and craft fairs or festivals	45%
Attending professional dance performances	44%
Visiting state or national parks	41%
Shopping in museum stores	32%
Exploring urban neighborhoods	30%

Source: Mandala Research (2009).

With its rich history and unique mountain culture, West Virginia offers plenty of cultural and heritage attractions—from historic sites and parks to fine art and traditional crafts.

¹ The coal industry employed 48,000 people in 2015, including jobs in mining, contracting, and processing facilities (West Virginia Coal Association, 2017).

COMMUNITY PROFILE: HINTON

Hinton is a town of approximately 2,500 residents located in Summers County, West Virginia (U.S. Census, 2017). Founded in 1880, Hinton grew rapidly in the early 20th Century with the development of the Chesapeake & Ohio (C&O) Railroad. Hinton became a C&O division terminal in 1905 and served as a major railroad hub for transporting coal mined in other counties to market. The downtown Hinton Historic District still features many of the buildings built from 1895 to 1907. (Blueprint Communities, 2013)

Hinton thrived through World War II but began to decline once the advent of diesel train engines in the 1950s reduced the number of jobs needed to repair and maintain trains. C&O's merger with Seaboard in 1980 brought further decline to Hinton. CSX continues to play a role in the town's economy, though to a much lesser extent than in years past. (Great American Stations, 2017)

Hinton is the county seat and the sole municipality of Summers County. Table 2 shows the largest employment sectors in Hinton.

TABLE 2: MOST COMMON OCCUPATIONS HELD IN HINTON

Employment sector	Percent
Management, business, science, and arts	32%
Production, transportation, and material moving	25%
Sales and office occupations	18%
Service occupations	16%
Natural resources, construction, and maintenance	8%

Source: U.S. Census (2015).

While Hinton had developed a tech presence in recent decades, several tech companies (including TSM and Computer Sciences Corporation) have closed in the last six years. Today, Hinton is the national headquarters for PracticeLink, an online physician recruitment company with 40 employees based in Hinton. Other companies based in Hinton include ManTech, Safe and Sound Security Systems, and Twin State Salon Supply Company.

Hinton is located at the confluence of three major rivers: the New, Greenbrier, and Bluestone rivers. Tourism began to play a major role in Hinton's economy upon the completion of the Bluestone Dam in 1949 (Blueprint Communities 2013). It is a gateway community to the New River



Source: Sarah Rogers (2017).

Gorge National River, as well as Bluestone and Pipestem State Parks, which provide many opportunities for outdoor recreation. Tourists enjoy world class fishing, kayaking, and rafting opportunities, as well as biking and hiking trails in the area.

Located just 10 miles off U.S. Interstate 64, downtown Hinton features a quaint historic district with over 200 buildings, churches, and homes overlooking the New River (Blueprint Communities 2013). In a town shaped largely by railroads, Hinton's Amtrak station remains a popular stop on Amtrak's Cardinal Line, which runs from Chicago to Washington, D.C.

Hinton features a number of restaurants and amenities that are operated through MountainPlex Properties, a holding company created by the owners of PracticeLink. MountainPlex runs businesses including the Market on Courthouse Square, The Guest House Inn on Courthouse Square, The Ritz Theatre, Otter & Oak Outfitter, and Historic Hinton's Hometown Radio AM 1380, along with several other historic residential and commercial property rentals. (MountainPlex, 2017)

TOURISM VALUE CHAIN

The tourism value chain refers to the system of tourism-related products and services that enhance a town's or region's overall economy.

Tourism products comprise the specific destinations, attractions, and/or activities that visitors want to experience. Examples include trail systems, scenic rivers, ski resorts, historic parks, and cultural festivals.

Having a strong tourism product is essential in attracting visitors to a destination; however, it takes a number of supporting services to develop and sustain a tourism industry. When visitors travel to experience a tourist product, they likely interact with several different services within the community. For instance, a family embarking on a weekend river float trip would likely eat at a restaurant, buy fuel and snacks at a gas station, stay overnight at a hotel or campground, and perhaps rent a kayak or purchase gear at a local outfitter.

As a result, tourism development requires investment in basic infrastructure of tourism-supporting services that will serve and attract visitors. These standard tourism services include:

- **Lodging** – hotels, motels, bed and breakfasts, cabins, campgrounds
- **Food and beverage** – restaurants, grocery stores, food providers
- **Outfitters, tour and guide services** – gear shops, rentals, shuttle services
- **Shopping and entertainment** – retail shopping and other activities

These standard services enhance a tourist destination from a visitor's point of view and stimulate the overall economy by providing tax revenue and by creating and supporting local jobs.

In addition to these primary tourism-related services, other associated services play a vital role in sustaining a viable infrastructure for tourism. For instance, a resort destination planning to attract large numbers of visitors each year will require an adequately-sized water and sewage treatment plant, waste management, and good roads in order to operate. Local banks and insurance will be needed to serve the primary tourism services. These businesses will expect access to broadband internet, nearby emergency services, and schools for the children of their employees.

The associated and supporting services to the tourism infrastructure include:

- **Infrastructure** – buildings, water, wastewater, waste management
- **Transportation** – roads, railroads, bus service, gas stations
- **Telecommunications** – cell service and internet
- **Emergency and health services** - fire, police, ambulance, hospitals, pharmacies
- **Schools and training opportunities**

Most of these supporting services rely on the management or involvement of the town administration and/or local governing agencies. Involvement and buy-in from local and county leadership is therefore essential to the success of tourism development.

COMMUNITY TOURISM ASSESSMENT

TOURISM PRODUCTS OVERVIEW

Hinton is a gateway city to many of southern West Virginia's most prized recreational amenities.



Source: Dave Bieri (2017).

Hinton is located on the **New River Gorge National River**, which encompasses over 70,000 acres of land along 53 miles of the New River. The New River is renowned for its recreational opportunities and is a major destination for commercial whitewater rafting trips. **Sandstone Falls**, located nine miles north of Hinton, is an iconic feature of the New River. (NPS, 2017a)

Located just five miles south of

Hinton, **Bluestone State Park** is a destination for camping, hiking, fishing, swimming, and boating in beautiful **Bluestone Lake**. The **Greenbrier River** joins the New River at its confluence in Hinton. With its gentle rapids and scenic beauty, the Greenbrier caters to family-friendly river adventures and is one of the top recreation attractions in West Virginia.

With world-class fishing on the New and Greenbrier rivers and Bluestone Lake, Hinton has become a major center for **kayak angling**. The "Golden Mile" from Bluestone Dam to Hinton is renowned for bass fishing opportunities. Hinton has hosted major statewide and national kayak angling tournaments in the last two years, each of which generated more than 150 participants (Ford, 2017).

Pipestem Resort State Park is a year-round resort 14 miles southwest of Hinton with beautiful mountain views. **Three Rivers Avian Center** (TRAC) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to wild bird conservation that offers tours at its 103-acre facility seven miles north of Hinton (TRAC, 2017).

Hinton is also within a 30-minute drive from **Winterplace Ski Resort** in Ghent, West Virginia.

The following marketable tourism products currently lie within the downtown Hinton Historic District:

The **Hinton Railroad Museum** contains historical artifacts of the C&O Railroad. The museum also features a model train exhibit, uniforms, and tools used during the time of John Henry, the legendary "Steel Driving Man." (NRGCVB, 2017)

The **Veterans Memorial Museum** displays war-time artifacts ranging from the modern day to early frontier battles. General Douglas MacArthur's footlocker and a vintage 151A2 Jeep are also on display. (NRGCVB, 2017)

The **Campbell-Flannagan-Murrell (CFM) House Museum** is the oldest residence still standing in the Hinton Historic District. The museum takes visitors back in time to glimpse how families lived during Hinton's heyday as a railroad town. (CFM Museum, 2017)

Built in 1929 and restored in 2009 with state-of-the-art digital projection and sound, the **Ritz Theatre** offers movies every weekend and provides space for live performances, conferences, and special events (Ritz Theater, 2017).

The City of Hinton operates the **Wild Water Express**, a water park with a newly-built water slide. The park re-opened with the new slide in 2017 and attracted visitors from multiple counties. (Meadows, 2017)

The City also plans to build an amphitheater in the Rail Yard District per plans created by the Thrasher Group in 2016 (Cutright and Hylton, 2016).

Special events in Hinton include: John Henry Days (July), the West Virginia Water Festival (July/August), Festival of the Rivers (September), and Hinton Railroad Days (October)

Key tourism activities include rafting, kayaking, fishing, hiking, biking, swimming, horseback riding, paddle boarding, and jet skiing.

TOURISM PRODUCTS ASSESSMENT

Hinton is located within close proximity to a number of West Virginia's premier outdoor recreation destinations. Over 1.3 million people came to the region to visit the New River Gorge National River, Bluestone National Scenic River, and Gauley River National Recreation Area alone in 2016 (NPS, 2017c). Downtown Hinton generates visitors as well, though to a lesser extent, through its popular Amtrak station and features several cultural heritage tourism attractions.

PRODUCT GAPS AND BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES IDENTIFIED

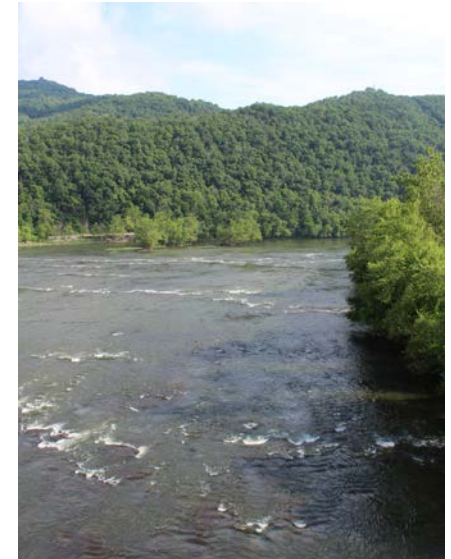
River opportunities: Hinton's rivers are among the town's strongest assets. The New and Greenbrier rivers and Bluestone Lake are among West Virginia's most scenic and popular water resources. While the lower section of the New River is world renowned for whitewater rafting opportunities, the Upper New is a family-friendly river perfect for boating and tubing. The New River also flows year-round, whereas water levels on the Greenbrier can get too low in the summer to float easily.

Several key gaps currently prevent Hinton from maximizing river recreation opportunities. While Summers County features 16 existing public river access points, there is little in the way of signage or information directing visitors to these access points. No maps currently exist marking these public access points for visitors and river users.

Hinton should collaborate with other nearby towns to create **designated water trails** on the New, Greenbrier, and Bluestone. A water trail is a designated route along a lake or river specifically designed for people using small boats such as kayaks and canoes. Sometimes called "blue trails," water trails are the aquatic equivalent of a hiking trail on a body of water. (National Water Trails System, 2017)

Once a river has received designation as an official water trail from the West Virginia Department of Transportation's Recreational Trails Advisory Board, project leaders can apply for state and federal funding to

develop and enhance boat launches and create trail maps, signage, and marketing materials (Try This West Virginia, 2017). Official water trails in West Virginia currently exist on the Coal, Cheat, Cacapon, and Elk rivers. Given existing recreation on the New, Greenbrier, and Bluestone, water trails for these rivers would provide strong, marketable tourism products that would spur further development of river-based recreation services in Hinton and the surrounding area. Hinton could learn from the success of the Clinch River Valley Initiative (CRVI) in Southwest Virginia, which has successfully brought together seven small towns along the Clinch River to collaboratively market their water trail as a regional tourism product (CRVI, 2017).



Source: Sarah Rogers (2017).

Trail opportunities: The Summers County Commission is proposing trail expansion to extend the Mary Draper Ingles Trail and Great Eastern Trail along the New and Bluestone rivers. Using Hinton as a key trail connection point, the trails would potentially include a loop within Hinton that would connect Hinton's downtown bridge over the New River with the Southpoint bridge at the southern end of town. Given Hinton's proximity to other recreation destinations, these trails could potentially be linked with the newly-approved Southern West Virginia Bike Trail Network. The County Commission is working with Region 1 Planning and Development Council to propose a planning grant from the Department of Transportation; however, since the land for the proposed trails is owned by the Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) and leased by the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (WVDNR), the project would need buy-in from these entities in order to move forward. (Woodrum, 2017)

TOURISM SERVICES

Table 3 and Table 4 summarize the primary and supporting tourism services available in Hinton:

TABLE 3: PRIMARY TOURISM SERVICES

Service type	Description	Assessment
Lodging/accommodation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Guest House Inn - B&B • Crape Myrtle House & Every Once in a While - B&B • Chestnut Revival - B&B • Bass Lake Park - camping • Berry's Campground - cabins/camping • Bluestone State Park - cabins/camping • Misty Mountain Retreat - home rental • Greenbrier Recreation & Chalets - cabins • Greenbrier River Escape - home rental • Peg's Peak - home rental • Sandman Motel - motel 	<p>GAPS: Few rooms are available overall, with only six available in the downtown historic district. The city lacks a traditional hotel and has a need for a hotel with 30-50 rooms.</p>
Food/dining	<p>Restaurants:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chessie's • The Market on Courthouse Square • Kirk's Restaurant • Big Four Drug Store - ice cream • Chestnut Revival - coffee shop • Dairy Queen, McDonald's, Pizza Hut, Subway <p>Groceries: Kroger, Save-a-Lot, and Kirk's Market</p>	<p>STRENGTH: Hinton has several popular restaurants and supports two chain grocery stores. The success of these restaurants could encourage additional dining establishments to locate in town.</p>
Tours/services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cantrell's Ultimate Rafting - guided New River rafting trips • Otter & Oak - outdoor store • PC Outdoors - fishing and hunting gear store • New River Trophy Outfitters (Sandstone, WV) 	<p>STRENGTH: With the New, Greenbrier, and Bluestone rivers in Hinton's backyard, the city could support expanded opportunities for outdoor services. The opposite riverbank from downtown Hinton has adequate space to develop river access.</p> <p>GAPS: Hinton has poor river access from downtown and very poor signage directing the public to river access points.</p>
Shopping/entertainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Big Four Drug Store & Gift Shop • Eclectic Corner Christian Bookstore • Grandma's House Antiques • Hinton Floral & Gifts, Inc. • New River Antiques • Riverside Floral and Monument Shop • Vicky's Boutique • Magic Mart • Chestnut Revival (weekly open mic) • Rivertown Gallery • The Ritz Theater & Performing Art Center • Willowwood Country Club 	<p>STRENGTH: Hinton supports several attractions downtown and is in close proximity to many more in the wider area.</p> <p>GAPS: While Hinton still has a number of stores, the town struggles to maintain diverse retail options downtown.</p>

TABLE 4: SUPPORTING TOURISM SERVICES

Service type	Description	Assessment
Infrastructure	<p>Buildings: Hinton has a number of available historic buildings downtown, including several in the Rail Yard District that have been prioritized for redevelopment by the Hinton City Council.</p> <p>Water/sewer: The city sewer plant has a good customer base. Region 1 Planning and Development Council has been working with Summers County and the City of Hinton on water projects, primarily addressing septic systems outside of city limits.</p>	<p>STRENGTH: The availability of buildings will be an asset for Hinton’s business development moving forward. The city also has the overall infrastructure capacity to support growth.</p>
Transportation	<p>Hinton is located 11 miles (20 minutes) south of I-64 on West Virginia Route 20, 40 minutes east of Beckley. Hinton is located about 35 minutes from the Raleigh County Memorial Airport in Beaver, 50 minutes from the Greenbrier Valley Airport in Lewisburg, and over 1.5 hours from Yeager Airport in Charleston. An Amtrak station located in downtown Hinton is a popular stop on the Cardinal Line.</p>	<p>STRENGTH: Given its abundance of nearby tourism products, Hinton’s central location and proximity to an interstate highway position well for tourism.</p> <p>GAPS: Wayfinding is an issue in Hinton. Many of the main tourism attractions lack adequate signage to direct visitors to these destinations.</p>
Telecommunications	<p>Downtown receives 50 mbps broadband service and has good cell phone coverage.</p>	<p>STRENGTH: Whereas many small towns in West Virginia struggle with Hinton has strong internet access and cell service.</p>
Emergency/health services	<p>Summers County Appalachian Regional Hospital (ARH) is located in Hinton. Three medical facilities are located within 20 miles away in Beckley: Beckley ARH Hospital, Beckley Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center, and Raleigh General Hospital.</p>	
Schools	<p>Hinton is home to the Hinton Area Elementary School, Summers County Middle School, and Summers County High School. Limited higher education opportunities available in the county, but Concord College and West Virginia University (WVU) Institute of Technology are both 20 minutes away.</p>	<p>GAPS: Business owners and civic leaders in Hinton cite the lack of an educated local workforce as a major struggle.</p>

TOURISM SERVICE ASSESSMENT

With so many quality tourism products in the immediate area, Hinton is ideally situated to serve as a launching point for day trips and adventures to nearby destinations.

Service gaps and business opportunities

Lodging: Hinton currently faces a lodging deficit. The city’s only hotel closed several years ago, and its facility across the river from downtown was demolished. The greater Hinton area currently offers a large number of venues for camping and home/cabin rentals. While these accommodations are very popular with many

visitors, Hinton gets a small but steady number of business travelers and other tourists who seek traditional hotel accommodations.

With no hotel in town, downtown lodging options for such visitors are very limited. Hinton currently offers only six rooms downtown for overnight visitors. These rooms are all non-hosted bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodations located in several different home rentals owned by MountainPlex (Stiffler, 2017).

In 2003 Horwath Horizon conducted a hotel feasibility study in Hinton. The study indicated Hinton could likely support a 60–80 room hotel based on business travel demand primarily generated

by ManTech (Horwath Horizon, 2003). In the years since the report was prepared, however, ManTech has greatly reduced its staff and now employs a small staff of four in Hinton (Stiffler, 2017). Hinton's business climate has shifted in fourteen years since the Horwath Horizon study and, aside from PracticeLink, no longer maintains a strong tech presence. However, feedback from local businesses and civic leaders indicates that there is still a pronounced, albeit slightly reduced, demand for hotel accommodations in Hinton.

Based on anecdotal feedback from business owners and civic leaders, Hinton could likely support a small hotel with 30-50 rooms. While no firm visitation data exists for Hinton or Summers County, several sources cited incidents in which large groups seeking to stay in Hinton were forced to stay in other towns due to the lack of local lodging. Other anecdotal feedback indicated that the high price (\$139 per night) for upscale rooms at the Guest House makes it hard to compete with cheaper lodging options (around \$60 per night) at chain hotels in the Beckley area.

MountainPlex runs the Guest House properties, as well as two conference spaces, to meet the needs of business travelers related to MountainPlex's parent company PracticeLink. Given the need for increased lodging accommodations, MountainPlex is considering renovations to two of its buildings (the Rivertown Hotel and the McCreery Hotel) that could potentially provide hotel space. Yet due to the multi-million dollar estimates for remodeling each building, MountainPlex has no immediate plans to build a hotel facility in Hinton. (Stiffler, 2017)

The Hinton Technology Center building has been proposed in previous plans as possible location for a hotel, since the upper floor of the building is unoccupied (Cutright and Hylton, 2016). While this City-owned building has a parking garage with capacity for 80 cars, the building would require extensive renovations to converted the office space into a hotel.

Without stronger visitor data quantifying a clear demand for lodging, Hinton may likely have difficulty recruiting an independent investor or chain hotel to locate in the city. However,



Source: Sara Cottingham (2017).

Hinton should consider thinking outside the box to incentivize investment. If the city had a group of routine business travelers (for example, CSX rail workers) to serve as an anchor clientele for a hotel, they could perhaps leverage interest from an outside investor. And while locating a hotel downtown would be ideal to spur ancillary service growth in downtown dining and retail, the City should explore possibilities for locating a hotel closer to the interstate, which may be preferable for a small chain hotel.

Food/dining: Hinton has several popular restaurants that attract diners from other towns and counties. However, expanded downtown dining options would help to attract increased tourism growth to the Hinton Historic District.

Given the growth and current popularity of craft brewing, a brewery could offer a promising opportunity for downtown Hinton. As a product, beer has a good shelf-life, and costs for the ingredients, equipment, and other supplies are declining as the industry has taken off in recent years. With Hinton's central location and proximity to tourism products, a brewery facility with a bar and restaurant could attract visitors from throughout the region. Several properties in the Rail Yard could be retrofitted to house a brewery, including a former brewing facility. In addition, there is local interest in potentially using the former Ice House building as a storage warehouse for local honey distribution and location for a meadery.

Tours and outfitters: Hinton has several existing businesses catering to outdoor recreation. Cantrell's Ultimate Rafting still maintains an outpost in Hinton for river trips on the Upper New. PC Outdoors and New River Trophy Outfitters in nearby Sandstone offer fishing and hunting gear, and the Otter & Oak Outfitter and More store in downtown Hinton is an outdoor specialty shop with gear and clothing.

Given the abundance of recreation opportunities in and around Hinton, the city could support increased growth in outdoor recreation services. While many boating enthusiasts and locals already enjoy recreating on Hinton's nearby rivers, many more could be attracted with enhanced marketing and service development packaging Hinton as a destination. For starters, city leaders should enhance and increase signage to help visitors locate and access river recreation opportunities. Hinton would also benefit from creating a printed tourism guide detailing recreation opportunities in the area. This guide should be distributed at the New River Gateway Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) in downtown Hinton, along with other promotional handouts.

With river recreation, hiking, mountain biking, and skiing available within 30 minutes of town, Hinton could easily follow the lead of Ohiopyle, Pennsylvania, a small town on the Youghiogheny River that successfully packages itself as a multi-sport destination for outdoor recreation. Marketing opportunities for whitewater rafting, fishing, hiking, biking, and skiing, Ohiopyle offers boat and bike rentals, shuttle services, and outfitters shops along with restaurants and retail opportunities for visitors. (Discover Ohiopyle, 2015)

To package the town as a recreation destination, Hinton should focus on increasing river recreation amenities as close to downtown as possible. The railroad currently separates downtown Hinton and the Rail Yard from the river; however, riverfront recreation could be developed on the opposite bank of the New River across from downtown. Currently the best river access point from downtown Hinton is a small "beach" area located behind the Save-a-Lot and Advanced Auto Parts store. This river frontage

could be greatly enhanced with a riverfront park, and signage should be placed to direct visitors to the river.

Hinton would also benefit from establishing a central service hub to connect visitors with activities and service providers. This service hub would provide visitors with up-to-date information on available activities in Hinton and serve as a central booking location for all activities. This service hub could offer a business framework for finding and contracting guides, licensing tour providers, maintaining necessary insurance coverage, and providing collective marketing for all supported activities. While this enterprise could be run as a for-profit business, incorporating as a nonprofit organization would open the door to grant funding, which would likely be necessary for getting started without significant private investment. The New River Gateway Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) would be a natural collaborator for such an effort.

Retail shopping and entertainment: 59 of the 384 operating businesses, agencies, and organizations within the City of Hinton serve visitors, yet only 14 provide any type of retail service to tourists (Cutright and Hylton, 2016). While Hinton has struggled in recent year to support downtown retail, addressing Hinton's lodging deficiency would likely fuel a resurgence in downtown retail opportunities.



Source: Sara Cottingham (2017).

Infrastructure: Hinton’s historic buildings are a major asset to the city. The Hinton City Council has prioritized the Rail Yard District for downtown redevelopment and hopes to transform this area into an “evening market” destination for the region’s tourists to enjoy restaurants, theater, and other tourist amenities.

The Rail Yard District represents the city blocks extending from Front Street to Commercial Street and from Second Avenue to Sixth Avenue. The District is anchored by two fixtures: the historic C&O Passenger Depot, which still serves as Hinton’s Amtrak station, and the recently renovated Freight Depot, which serves as an event and meeting space owned by the City. In addition to the Freight Depot and Passenger Depot, the Rail Yard includes several buildings that have been prioritized for redevelopment, including:



Source: Sarah Rogers (2017).

- The **Ice House building**, a multi-story brick masonry warehouse that once served as Hinton’s ice storage facility; and
- The **Hinton Hardwoods building**, which once housed Hinton’s roller skating rink and, more recently, a cabinet making company.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With so many quality tourism products in the immediate area, Hinton is ideally situated to serve as a launching point for day trips and adventures to nearby destinations. The city’s proximity to world-class recreation opportunities, its location near interstate highways, and its charming downtown give Hinton promising potential for development. To realize its potential, Hinton should focus on improvements in the following key areas.

1. PURSUE TARGETED BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT DOWNTOWN

Building upon the town’s existing base of tourism services, Hinton should focus on pursuing business opportunities in lodging, food, and dining. Given the lack of traditional hotel accommodations in town, Hinton should promote opportunities for a small hotel with 30-50 rooms to locate either downtown or at a location near the interstate. Hinton should also promote opportunities for a brewery to locate in the Rail Yard, ideally with capacity for a restaurant and bar.

2. MAKE IT EASIER FOR PEOPLE TO ACCESS TOURISM ACTIVITIES

In 2016 more than 1.3 million people came within a 50-mile radius of Hinton to visit the New River Gorge National River, Bluestone National Scenic River, and Gauley River National Recreation Area (NPS, 2017c). Given Hinton’s proximity to three of West Virginia’s most popular river recreation destinations, the city should focus on tapping into the tourism potential of the New River, the Greenbrier River, and Bluestone Lake. To do this, Hinton should first seek to increase the town’s engagement with the rivers, starting with the New. The New River flows through Hinton’s downtown, yet river access points in town are poorly developed and aren’t clearly marked. While locals often know where to go to access their favorite swimming holes and kayaking trips, Hinton lacks comprehensive signage to show visitors how and where to access the river.

Following the model of other river towns such as Ohiopyle, Pennsylvania, and Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, Hinton should develop river opportunities with tourism in mind, making it easy for visitors and locals alike to have fun on the river. Hinton should focus on developing riverfront amenities as close to downtown as possible to establish a more direct connection with the river. Hinton should create a visitor guide outlining all available recreation opportunities and tourism services in the area and should consider establishing a tourism-oriented concierge service to serve as a hub for accessing recreation opportunities and should promote opportunities for recreation service providers, such as gear rentals and shuttle services, on the river in Hinton.

Hinton should also pursue the creation of designated water trails along each of these waterbodies and should collaborate with other nearby towns on collective tourism marketing strategies for these tourism products. Following the model of Clinch River Water Trail in Virginia, Hinton could develop water trails in concert with neighboring towns on the New, Greenbrier, and Bluestone to collectively strengthen the region's tourism products and services.

3. BUILD UP HINTON'S LOCAL WORKFORCE

One of the most pressing issues cited by civic and business leaders in Hinton is the city's lack of an educated workforce. Businesses struggle to find suitable employees to work basic service jobs, much less to fill skilled positions with companies like PracticeLink. For tourism to expand in Hinton, the town will need capable, trainable people interested in working in hospitality and tourism. As a result, Hinton will need to prioritize workforce readiness and training programs in anticipation of this need.

To start, Hinton should explore opportunities with New River Community and Technical College as well as with WVU Institute of Technology, both located in Beckley, and seek to establish programming in Hinton. Hinton currently lacks higher education and vocational programming and will need to develop opportunities for more rigorous programming to prepare local residents for employment.

4. STRENGTHEN HINTON'S TOURISM DATA COLLECTION

In order to encourage an outside investor for a hotel, Hinton will need to be able to quantify a clear demand for local lodging. For starters, Hinton will need a realistic estimate of the number of visitors coming to town each year. The New River Gateway CVB currently tracks the number of visitors coming to the CVB office in downtown Hinton; however, such data does not come close to accurately representing the total number of visitors coming to Hinton each year. Additional data would also help strengthen Hinton's pitch for a potential hotel investor. For instance, where do current visitors—such as those coming for recent kayak angler tournaments—

spend the night when they come to Hinton? And how many other potential visitors is Hinton missing by not having downtown accommodations available? To better capture this information, Hinton should spend the time and effort to develop more sophisticated methods of data collection. Hinton should reach out to the towns of Fayetteville and Lewisburg, to local National Park Service representatives, and to the WVU Tourism & Hospitality program for guidance and feedback on preparing visitor surveys and enhancing tourism data collection. Hinton should also consider contracting an outside firm to conduct a comprehensive visitor study.



Source: Sara Cottingham (2017).

RESOURCES

Hinton will need targeted assistance in many areas as it seeks to attract and develop new tourism-related businesses and services.

SMALL BUSINESS AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

First-time entrepreneurs in rural communities often start at a disadvantage. In West Virginia, as in much of rural America, those coming from geographically isolated, economically depressed areas may not have been exposed to thriving local businesses. Without experienced local mentors, they may find themselves lacking the basic understanding of management, accounting, and marketing principles needed to start and run a successful business.

As a result, training and technical assistance are vital for supporting business and workforce development. To encourage new businesses to form in Hinton, the town should develop a local education and training infrastructure to provide advice and encouragement to budding entrepreneurs.

Many resources are available.

- **The U.S. Small Business Administration's (SBA's) West Virginia District Office** in Clarksburg provides prospective, new, and established persons in the small business community with financial, procurement, management, and technical assistance. The SBA provides training and counseling on starting and/or expanding businesses, assists bank and non-bank lenders in securing SBA loans for their small business customers, and provides trainings for small businesses on how to do business with the federal government. (SBA, 2017)
- **The West Virginia Small Business Development Center (WVSBDC)** is a statewide network that provides assistance in all 55 counties. WVSBDC helps small businesses from the concept phase to established enterprises and offers training in business planning and development, coaching, financing recommendations, and more. WVSBDC can help compile the preliminary information and paperwork needed to open a

business legally, including information on licensing, taxes, insurance, recordkeeping, and the forms needed for hiring employees. WVSBDC can also assist with evaluating a business idea for feasibility and projected success and can provide hands-on assistance in obtaining loans. (WVSBDC, 2017)

- **The New River Community and Technical College** offers continuing education and workforce education training programs in Beckley, Ghent, and other locations throughout the region (New River Community and Technical College, 2017).
- **The New River Gorge Regional Development Authority (NRGRDA)** offers small business support in the areas of finance, employee and labor resources, environmental permitting, zoning, state and local taxes, existing government programs, training, media coverage, and more. NRGRDA offers a business coach to support small businesses free of charge and manages its own revolving and micro-loan programs. (NRGRDA, 2017)
- **The Hive Network** is a regional business accelerator located in Beckley, West Virginia. The Hive provides mentoring, coaching, technical assistance, and support tools to aspiring business owners. (West Virginia Hive, 2017)
- **HubCAP**, the West Virginia Community Development Hub's Communities of Achievement Program, offers support for communities as they take their community development efforts to the next level. The Hub's staff serve as coaches, connecting the community with capacity-building resources needed to achieve the town's goals. (HubCAP, 2017)

In addition, training and mentoring opportunities specific to hospitality and outdoor recreation industries are recommended.

- **West Virginia University (WVU) Extension** offers a tourism specialist who coordinates the WVU Rural Tourism Design Team. The Team provides research, training, and technical assistance support for sustainable rural tourism development throughout West Virginia. Partnerships with Recreation, Parks, and Tourism

Resources; Landscape Architecture; Graphic Design; Public Administration; and other colleges and departments at WVU provide a depth of knowledge and expertise strategically targeted to support the development of a sustainable tourism economy in West Virginia. (WVU Extension, 2017)

- **West Virginia Welcome**, designed by the West Virginia Hospitality Education and Training Program, is a collaboration between WVU's Hospitality and Tourism Program, West Virginia Department of Education's HEAT program, the West Virginia Hospitality and Travel Association, and the WVU Extension Service. The program offers introductory courses on hospitality, available as 45-minute online video courses and through two-hour classroom-style trainings. (WVU Extension, 2017)

MARKETING AND FINANCING

Hinton's existing tourism products need to be marketed more effectively in order to increase visitation. Hinton should identify potential marketing partners that would be willing to collaborate. Some potential partners include:

- West Virginia Division of Tourism,
- New River Gateway CVB,
- Southern West Virginia CVB,
- Bluestone State Park,
- Pipestem State Park,
- New River Gorge National River,
- Sandstone Falls Visitor Center,
- MountainPlex Properties,
- NRGRDA, and
- Winterplace Ski Resort.

BUILDING REDEVELOPMENT

A wide variety of resources are available to help address abandoned, dilapidated, and brownfields buildings in Hinton.

- **West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Centers** promote economic development and environmental and public health protection through innovative redevelopment of brownfield sites. The Centers promote and coordinate the development of brownfield properties by providing training and technical assistance, facilitating site preparation efforts, engaging community involvement, and helping communities with grant writing and leveraging project funding. (WVBAC, 2017)
- The **BAD (Brownfield, Abandoned, Dilapidated) Buildings Program** is a statewide initiative run through the Northern West Virginia Brownfields Assistance Center. The program provides technical assistance and site analysis tools to enhance abandoned and dilapidated building programs. Failure to address BAD buildings imposes severe social and economic costs on neighborhoods. This program helps to identify, prioritize, and redevelop such buildings. The BAD Buildings Model and resources support West Virginia communities with limited local capacity and no abandoned/dilapidated buildings program. The program works with communities, generally at no cost, to create a complete building inventory and prepare a comprehensive redevelopment plan based on inventory findings. Applications for technical assistance provided through the program are accepted annually. (WVBAC, 2017)
- **Preservation Alliance of West Virginia** serves as the statewide grassroots organization dedicated to historic preservation in our Mountain State. With a commitment to preserve our unique cultural heritage, PAWV and its members support and promote historic preservation through education and outreach, advocacy, technical assistance, and heritage tourism development. (PAWV, 2017)
- The West Virginia Division of Culture and History's **State Historic Preservation Office** administers both state and federal historic preservation programs in West Virginia. The office aids federal

and state agencies, local governments, and the public in identifying and preserving the physical historic and prehistoric resources of West Virginia and also provides information and assistance for the state and federal Historic Preservation Tax Credit program. (WVDOC, 2017)

TRAIL DEVELOPMENT

To develop water trails on the New, Greenbrier, and Bluestone rivers, Hinton should connect with the following resources.

- **The Coal River Group (CRG)** manages the Coal River Water Trail, one of the premier water trails in southern West Virginia. The CRG maintains its own boat-rental business and livery service, Coal River Canoe & Kayak, at the nonprofit's headquarters in Tornado, West Virginia. Through a recent grant from the West Virginia Development Office, the CRG will provide mentoring and coaching to entrepreneurs interested in starting river recreation-based businesses. The CRG will offer expertise based on its experience in the watershed and can help connect promising individuals with further training and assistance programs available in the state. (CRG, 2017)
- **CRVI's Hometowns of the Clinch** program in Southwest Virginia offers a designation program for communities located in the Clinch River watershed to strengthen community engagement and create a unified image for the region (CRVI, 2017).

- The National Park Service's **Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance (RTCA) Program** supports community-led natural resource conservation and outdoor recreation projects such as rail trail and water trail creation. (RTCA, 2017)

Local and regional resources for land-based trail development include:

- Region 1 Planning and Development Council,
- NRGRDA,
- New River Gorge Trail Alliance,
- West Virginia Division of Highways,
- Active Southern West Virginia, and
- Greenbrier River Trail Association.

Given Hinton's proximity to the planned Southern West Virginia Bike Trail Network project, Hinton's proposed trail expansions could potentially link to the greater statewide trail network. Hinton and the Summers County Commission's proposed trail developments should connect with Region 4 Planning and Development Council, the New River Gorge Trail Alliance, NRGRDA, West Virginia Division of Highways, and Active Southern West Virginia to discuss possibilities of connecting trails to the Southern West Virginia Bike Trail Network.

NEXT STEPS

Tourism products

- Enhance river access and recreation opportunities in and around Hinton.
- Pursue creation of water trails on the New, Greenbrier, and Bluestone.
 - Connect with other towns located on the New, Greenbrier, and Bluestone to promote water trail opportunities in the three respective watersheds.
 - Contact the Recreational Trails Advisory Board at the West Virginia Department of Transportation to discuss creating water trails on the New, Greenbrier, and Bluestone.
 - Contact the CRG and other watershed organizations for guidance and mentorship moving forward.
- Increase and enhance signage to existing tourism attractions.
 - Create informational signage mapping river access points, restaurants, and other attractions.
 - Establish kiosks at river access points and around town to display this information.

Tourism services

- Promote business opportunities for:
 - a small hotel, and
 - a microbrewery.
- Create a printed visitor guide to help visitors access Hinton's recreation opportunities and tourism services.
- Coordinate with available small business development resources to determine how to best connect Hinton residents with business and workforce development training opportunities.
- Facilitate mentorship, marketing, and hands-on, ongoing business support to ensure the viability of new business initiatives.
- Contract an outside firm to complete a comprehensive visitor study to provide concrete data when recruiting hotel investors.

- Connect with the towns of Fayetteville and Lewisburg, to local National Park Service representatives, and to the WVU Tourism & Hospitality program for guidance and feedback on preparing visitor surveys and enhancing tourism data collection.
- Create an organization to act as a central tourism service hub.
 - Establish a core committee of town leaders.
 - Identify an existing entity to serve as a fiscal sponsor.
 - Solicit seed money from local foundations and companies to get started.
 - Apply for incorporation through the IRS and begin applying for grants through the fiscal sponsor.
 - Consider getting an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer to assist in developing the enterprise.

Infrastructure and basic services

- Use market data (including the findings in this report) to attract investment.
- Pair Hinton's available buildings prioritized for redevelopment with potential new businesses outlined in this report.
- Consider adopting the Downtown Appalachia Program model as a resource for continued redevelopment.

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