



Rally SWVA is giving “placemaking” a face in Southwest. *Placemaking* is an intentional, multi-faceted approach to leveraging local community assets that promote and encourage the economic vibrancy of a community. Launched in 2015, **Rally SWVA is an action learning mini-grant program designed to build community leadership capacity and reinforce collaborative communities across the broader region of Southwest Virginia**. It is a signature program of OPPORTUNITY SWVA, a collaborative effort to increase entrepreneurship in the southwest part of the Commonwealth.

Originally launched in the coalfield region, OPPORTUNITY SWVA now spans four planning districts, which encompasses nineteen counties and three cities. From Lee County to Montgomery County, Opportunity SWVA is highlighting opportunities for entrepreneurs, aligning resources and cultivating a spirit of entrepreneurship throughout the region. Through collaborative partnerships that include 33 steering team members representing 25 organizations, the initiative is working to rally existing and emerging economic and community development efforts to create thriving entrepreneurial communities that will accelerate progress for both new and established ventures (www.myswvaopportunity.org). The regional effort organized to implement the *Blueprint for Entrepreneurial Growth and Economic Prosperity in Southwest Virginia* (<http://aproject.org/resources/reports/#tab-blueprints>). As with all programs or initiatives completed by OPPORTUNITY SWVA, **Rally SWVA** is designed to be replicated in communities throughout SWVA but also the state. All program materials are designed to be part of a toolkit readily shared with other communities and steering team members stand ready to share expertise and assist other regions in implementation as the needs arise.

How does **Rally SWVA** work?

Rally SWVA provides participating communities a \$3,000 **Rally Grant** for accomplishing a meaningful and visible project. The program is designed to recruit new leaders, build leadership capacity through skill development and provide opportunities to practice those skills on a worthy community initiative. Creating collaborative community teams and developing effective leaders help build leadership capacity that enables the community to move forward with increasingly ambitious community revitalization and redevelopment efforts. Citizens see visible signs of progress in their towns and new “sparkplugs” or emerging leaders are identified and recruited into the effort.

Sponsored by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, the Virginia Tourism Corporation, the Appalachian Regional Commission and The University of Virginia’s College at Wise, the program is investing \$36,000 in twelve SWVA communities while engaging over 100 citizens in local projects. The initiative is expanding to include eight additional communities in 2017. One wouldn’t think that a \$3,000 mini-grant would be an effective tool or catalyst for the start of a community revitalization program! However, what **Rally SWVA** communities have experienced is nothing short of amazing. When citizens begin inquiring about positive, visible changes in their town, they want to

become involved. Throughout the process of implementing a project and utilizing the modest funding, citizens learn skills related to project management, building consensus, holding effective meetings, conflict resolution and many other skills they identify as priorities for their team's development.

Towns engaged in a regional effort such the Clinch River Valley Initiative, Spearhead Trails or other efforts are taken in **Rally** cohorts for a six month process. This timeframe often falls between the time when a community submits a grant application for a CDBG grant or other funding opportunity and the notice of the grant award is received. **Rally SWVA** enables the community teams to maintain momentum during the lull between application and award and at the same time, build skills and a sense of team so that when the award is made, they are ready to tackle their larger, more complex projects. Communities identify their own projects through facilitated sessions.

Why **Rally SWVA**?

Rural communities across the nation, especially those adversely affected by the decline in the energy sector are facing significant and complex challenges. Many communities have been ravaged by the dependency on a single-industry economy and are faced with having to reinvent themselves. Traditional economic development efforts to attract large, industrial projects help to bring jobs to a region but these are rare. Communities throughout SWVA are launching asset-based, place-based economic strategies that promote entrepreneurship and create towns and spaces which are attractive to industry prospects. Many communities in Southwest Virginia are facing double-digit unemployment yet the region has tremendous assets and a track record of regional cooperation. **Rally SWVA** provides a forum for towns to imagine a different future and identify local assets and talent to begin building leadership infrastructure with a mind toward action.

After a successful pilot in the towns of Dungannon, Cleveland and Damascus (one in each of the planning districts 1, 2 and 3) **Rally** expanded into five additional communities, Haysi, Pocahontas, Chilhowie, Tazewell, and Coeburn. Spring 2017 Rally Communities include Honaker, Lebanon, Narrows and St. Paul. Rally SWVA has been instrumental in bringing attention to these communities and assisting with preparing them for tackling larger projects once their initial **Rally** project is completed.

Why is **Rally SWVA** unique?

Innovativeness: Regional collaboration is hailed as a key to economic and community development success, but true collaboration is rarely achieved. **Rally SWVA** has brought together twenty-five entrepreneurship, small business support, economic development and community development organizations together to positively affect the future of communities. Leveraged organizational expertise, funding and other resources has led to igniting a passion within the community, developed leadership capacity and given hope to community leaders.

Transferability: All materials and processes involved in **Rally SWVA** and OPPORTUNITY SWVA become part of a toolkit which is readily available and shared with communities across the commonwealth. In fact, initiatives such as **Rally SWVA** are used as models across the state.

Community Commitment and Leverage:

The community teams that work with **Rally SWVA** in each locality are a diverse group made up of local government, entrepreneurs, and citizens. Each team member brings a unique background of knowledge and skills, as well as resources. The **Rally** process fosters teamwork and enables the community to achieve something together toward their shared revitalization goals. **Rally** gives the community an opportunity to leverage small amounts of funding in various, creative ways. Several of the communities that participated in **Rally** leveraged local and state funding to complete their projects. Communities that received state or federal funding for larger downtown revitalization grants were able to use **Rally** funds as leverage.

Measured Objectives:

Rally SWVA facilitates a process that walks each community through identifying the strengths and needs of their community. In doing so, teams develop strategies and projects that will lead to improved outcomes for their community. Each community has focused on tangible, momentum-building investments to strengthen community engagement and foster a spirit of progress. Examples include business locator kiosks, town reader boards, wayfinding signage, and a quick-implementation gathering place next to a historic town structure ideal for pop-up events or food trucks.

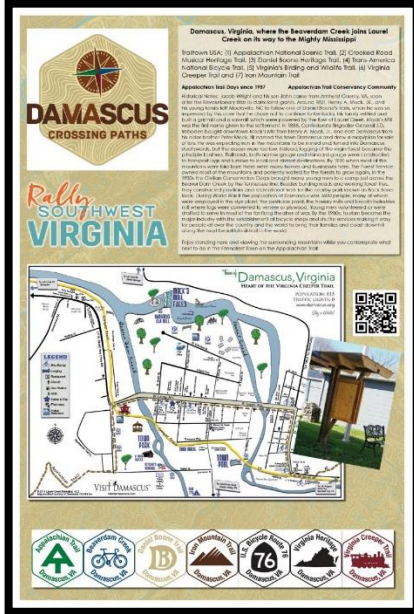
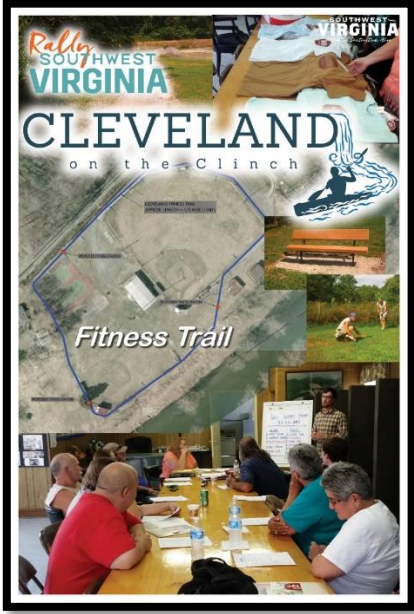
Damascus, a trail town where seven trail systems traverse through the community, experiences thousands of visitors each year. However, they face the challenge of attracting trail users to visit their downtown restaurants and shops. The development of the business locator kiosk in strategic locations addresses this problem, and informs and directs trail users of the amenities in the town.

While a little more than one year out may be too soon to calculate the aggregated direct impact of **Rally SWVA**, the outcomes of engaging the public, building partnerships, implementing successful projects, and attracting and supporting local businesses can be contributed to the **Rally** program.

Since Dungannon's **Rally** participation, which focused on communicating the vision, progress, and opportunity in the community, the community has seen two new businesses start, with an additional five on the horizon. The town recently offered a business free rent for one year in their old town hall and currently offers other incentives such as tax breaks and free business licenses for the first year.

Secondary Benefits:

Rally SWVA community projects contribute to making the community more attractive for business development. The community projects can also have a direct benefit for local entrepreneurs when their skills are utilized to bring a project to life, which has been the case for several projects. One project recently engaged the inmates of a local prison as part of the community team by having them construct a sign for the town. Additionally, Opportunity SWVA has learned that entrepreneur support is vital to building the entrepreneurial culture in SWVA, but support mechanisms such as **Rally SWVA** that focus on community and business development must be in place as well.



Spring 2017
Communities

- Honaker
- Lebanon
- Narrows
- St. Paul