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'Spearhead Trails' aims to boost tourism in Southwest Virginia

By [Steve Igo](#)Published November 12th, 2009 | [0 Comments](#)

NORTON — Southwest Virginia officials and representatives of private organizations have shouldered their packs, pulled on their boots, and are ready to embark on an epic hike to transform the region's tourism potential.

On Thursday, about 100 people took in a presentation of a five-month analysis of a major regional trails development effort on the launching pad across Lee, Scott, Wise, Tazewell, Buchanan, Russell and Dickenson counties. Holding up the countdown at this point is an infusion of fuel in the form of state and federal dollars to get the initiative off the ground.

Thursday's unveiling of the "Spearhead Trails" comprehensive plan is the result of a years-long grass-roots effort that began to blossom last year when the Virginia General Assembly created the Southwest Regional Recreation Authority (SRRA).

"I was asked this morning, 'Is this the light at the end of the tunnel?'" said SRRA Chairman Jack McClanahan. "No. This is the cracking of the dawn of a new day in Southwest Virginia."

The "Spearhead" name comes from a rough geographical outline of the region, with the point at the Cumberland Gap in Lee County. But the point on Thursday was to make happen what the comprehensive plan proclaims can happen.

Envisioned is thousands of miles of trails incorporating all elements of trail recreational activities including off-highway vehicles (including all-terrain vehicles and motorcycles), bicycling, geocaching, hiking and camping.

The regional Spearhead Trails system would incorporate the 400 miles of existing hiking trails within the Jefferson National Forest and also "greenways" and "blueways," the latter referring to making the most of waterways such as the Clinch and Powell rivers for canoeing and kayaking.

"Southwest Virginia has tremendous potential. Huge potential," said Debby Spencer, CEO of We Make Things Happen (WMTH).



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Motorcycle Industry Council and local governments.

When conducting the study, WMTH staffers wondered why "this hasn't happened here yet. We're talking about a paradigm shift in the way Southwest Virginia looks at economic development," Spencer said.

The study claims that under the SRRA, the Spearhead Trails system has the potential to attract 200,000 visitors to the region and pump \$30 million annually into the region's economy as well as create up to 500 new jobs along with expansion of existing businesses and birth of new recreation and tourism-oriented enterprises including outfitters, private campgrounds, cabin rentals, hotels, restaurants, gift shops and supplier outlets.

For many years, advocates of what is now the Spearhead Trails initiative looked with envy at the wildly successful Hatfield-McCoy Trails (www.trailsheaven.com) system in West Virginia.

Hatfield-McCoy Trails Executive Director Jeffrey T. Lusk cheered for the Spearhead Trails initiative on Thursday. The authorizing legislation in West Virginia directed cooperation with Kentucky and Virginia in developing a super-regional system, and Lusk said it's high time the initiative was under way in Virginia.

"What we could see is that three states working together can develop thousands and thousands of miles of trails" for the common benefit of the super-trail region, he said.

The Hatfield-McCoy system encompassing several counties in West Virginia has 500 miles of trails, most devoted to off-highway vehicle enthusiasts, with plans to develop at least another 500 miles, Lusk said.

"It's an engine for entrepreneurship," he said, developed as an economic development project and not as merely a few locations where local ATV riders can do their thing. The West Virginia trails experiment has resulted in a projected \$1.2 million in rider permit sales this year from 30,000 riders. While still subsidized by state funds, Lusk said the Hatfield-McCoy Trails system looks to be self-sufficient when annual ridership tops 50,000 annually.

The Spearhead Trails initiative will be a "great economic engine" for Southwest Virginia, said SRRA Vice Chairman Mark Caruso. The region is located within a day's driving distance of millions of potential customers, he said.

"We're ready to move forward. We're ready to take the next step," Caruso said, but state funds are vital to launching the initiative, particularly in hiring a Spearhead Trails executive director and staff.

"We have everything we need. We have the formula for success. We could have the premier trail system in the Eastern United States if we push this to what it truly can be," Caruso said.

Getting there will be a tussle in tough economic times, said McClanahan, but Southwest Virginians have never been shy about taking on a challenge.

Caruso said the SRRA is up to the challenge of prying rare dollars out of Richmond even while acknowledging the state government's current budget-cutting situation.

"Oh, we've got mountains to climb and rivers to cross," said McClanahan.

But he likened modern-day lobbying for taxpayer dollars in Richmond to "an adventure" similar to what the early pioneers encountered when they first came to the region with little more to go on than a whole lot of gumption while wandering along wild game and Indian trails.

The Spearhead Trails system would also employ a department of trail rangers with full police powers to keep the trails safe for users. The Hatfield-McCoy Trails system employs rangers to patrol the trails, check for paid use permits, and enforce all safety regulations.

For more information visit www.spearheadtrails.com.

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