Expanding opportunity across an entire geographic region means gathering input and evaluating priorities from dozens of communities, more than 3,500 participants and thousands of data points. This creative visioning process used art, storytelling, technology and deep dialogues to ensure a meaningful and analytical approach to crafting a livable future.

Skills and Capacity
Creative engagement, public opinion research, dialogue facilitation, action planning

Issues
Economic Security
Health and Well-Being
Housing Stability
Mobility

Partners
The Livability Consortium, New River Valley Regional Commission, Community Foundation of the New River Valley, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)
Sustainable Communities Initiative

Tools
Surveys and digital polling, CrowdGauge, arts engagement, focus groups, indicators, strategic funding, scenario planning, deliberative dialogue

Tool Spotlight
Arts Engagement
Music, theater and storytelling can illuminate values and explore challenges in unique and powerful ways, sparking dialogue and engaging new people.

Focus Groups
In-depth conversations with small groups allow deep exploration of needs and opportunities and can be easily tailored for different languages, settings and groups.

Digital Polling
Brainstorm anywhere. CrowdGauge and keypad polling make it quick and easy for hundreds of people to share and vote on ideas using mobile phones or handheld clickers.

Data Dashboard
An interactive online data portal shares extensive data and indicators about livability goals and conditions, allowing people to track progress and access critical information.

Virginia’s New River Valley (NRV) is a sprawling and diverse region with remote Appalachian towns and bustling cities. In 2011, a large coalition of partners launched a comprehensive regional conversation about a vision for the future and ways to improve opportunity across the board—from health to housing, energy to economy. The process emphasized deep community dialogues and creative activities that allowed residents to understand different perspectives and find common ground. It also highlighted the connections and tradeoffs between elements of opportunity (health, environment, economy) and specific policies or strategies.

The process combined that dialogue with extensive data analysis, mapping and scenario development, prioritization and action planning. But it did not end there: The Livability in Action initiative is now rapidly moving projects forward through strategic partnerships and collaborations among agencies, towns, funders and local organizations.
Art and Dialogue Build Understanding and Momentum for Change

Good community processes keep people informed and allow them to share their opinions. Great processes give people a chance to deeply understand the issues and challenges; other peoples’ perspectives; and the connections between values, policies and projects. NRV’s extensive process combined a wide variety of tools and activities to help residents build a nuanced understanding of the Valley and its possibilities, find critical common ground and build a coalition for better opportunity.

PARTNER

A strong partnership is the backbone of this initiative. The Livability Consortium is a group of 16 partners (local governments, nonprofits, funders, social service organizations and more) that all committed to fostering a meaningful conversation about the future of the region. They met regularly to guide and shape the planning process and now collaborate on implementation.

ENGAGE

More than 3,500 residents participated in the Livability Initiative, which offered a wide range of opportunities to engage and contribute.

- Quick surveys and polls, including mobile and digital options, allowed people to weigh in and offer thoughts in simple and engaging ways.
- Summits, meetings and focus groups (including Spanish-language options) allowed numerous participants to offer in-depth opinions, share stories and help generate ideas and priorities.
- Theater and music performances allowed residents to hear and experience each other’s perspectives in new ways, setting up meaningful community dialogues.
- Planning games, such as BUILT and CrowdGauge, and complex scenario planning analyses helped residents explore tradeoffs and strategies.

ASSESS

Organizers collected and used detailed data on indicators and regional conditions to inform all phases of the project. The information helped residents understand conditions and opportunities, shaped alternative future scenarios and is now compiled into an interactive data dashboard that allows people to monitor progress and inform their own work.

ACT

When the plan was complete, partners launched Livability in Action—a second phase designed to coordinate implementation. The data dashboard tracks progress on key indicators and includes a searchable database of dozens of regional projects underway. A community foundation also aligned its grantmaking with plan priorities to help drive implementation.

PARTNER

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Impacts for Opportunity

The NRV will probably always be diverse, with college towns and artistic hubs, aging suburbs and stretches of remote wilderness. These places and their residents have equally diverse assets and challenges related to opportunity. But the Livability Initiative helped this eclectic region identify shared concerns and hopes for the future and understand how challenges in affordability, housing, energy efficiency, health and mobility are related. The process shined a spotlight on critical aspects of opportunity that were poorly understood and helped identify common priorities. It also created a partnership and commitment to a continuing collaboration.

Results on the ground are already multiplying as well, and the Livability in Action dashboard makes it easy for stakeholders to track and learn about projects. Dozens of projects are underway locally or regionally, strengthening housing opportunities, enabling aging in place, fostering arts and culture, supporting agriculture, promoting watershed stability and addressing many other concerns.

### Housing Stability

Data gathered during the process helped partners understand the connection between an aging population and rising home energy costs. When affordability emerged as a clear priority, it prompted one town and a foundation to partner on solutions. They now have more than $80,000 in grant funding to launch a home modification program that will improve energy efficiency, make homes more age-friendly and lower housing costs for seniors.

### Economic Security

As the NRV transitions away from a coal economy, numerous projects are helping to develop new job skills and entrepreneurship. The Roving Computer Lab is one new resource that brings critical technology capacity to rural areas, helping start-ups train employees and organizations support job seekers.

More information: NRVlivability.org

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#### By the Numbers

- **18 Livability Goals Expanding Opportunity**
  - Support an aging population
  - Ensure affordability of housing, energy and transport
  - Enhance education and workforce readiness

- **77 Projects Underway**
  - By 2017, dozens of projects were already moving forward and expanding opportunity across the NRV

- **3,500+** people shared ideas about the NRV’s future
- **637** people joined performances and dialogues
- **16** diverse partners led the process
- **2** companion plans address critical challenges in housing and energy

Residents participate in a roundtable visioning exercise (New River Valley Regional Commission staff)