Kentucky River

Area Development District

COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

2026-2027



Prepared by Kentucky River Area Development District

Kentucky River Area Development District

Community Economic Development Strategy 2026-2027

Comprehensive Regional Blueprint for Growth, Resilience, and Transformation across Eastern Kentucky.

1. Executive Summary & Regional Overview

- **Executive Summary & Regional Overview** — High-level introduction to regional priorities and strategic goals.
- **2026 Update: Executive Summary & Regional Overview** — Key milestone updates and adjustments for the current planning cycle.

2. Regional Summary & Quantitative County Profiles

- **County Profiles** — Baseline demographic and economic metrics for Breathitt and Knott Counties.
- **Detailed County Profiles Continued** — Extended data analysis covering Lee, Leslie, and Letcher Counties.
- **Detailed County Profiles Continued** — Comprehensive evaluations for Owsley, Perry, and Wolfe Counties.

3. Strategic Infrastructure Alignment

- **Water Infrastructure & Resource Management** — Securing and expanding critical water assets (Section 1).
- **Regional Industrial Site Profiles & Infrastructure** — Enhancing site readiness and heavy asset capacity (Section 1).
- **Municipal Parcels & Regional Authorities** — Coordination frameworks and municipal management (Section 2).
- **Broadband & Digital Infrastructure Strategy** — Middle-Mile Foundation deployment (Section 1).
- **Broadband & Digital Infrastructure Strategy** — Data-driven expansion and last-mile connectivity (Section 2).

4. Economic Development & Workforce Strategy

- **Economic Resilience & Regional Transformation** — Core pathways for shifting and modernizing the regional economy.
- **Economic Development & Workforce Strategy** — Strategic vision for sustainable job growth.
- **Workforce & Business Action Plan** — Actionable steps for employer partnerships and talent pipelines.
- **Data Center Development: An Emerging Frontier** — Exploring technological infrastructure opportunities (Part 1).
- **Data Center Development: Economic Impact & Community Integration** — Maximizing local benefits from tech investments (Part 2).

5. Tourism, Health, and Leadership

- **Regional Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Asset Strategy** — Capitalizing on natural beauty and eco-tourism assets (Section 1).
- **County-by-County Tourism Profiles** — Localized tourism highlights and destination marketing.
- **Regional Health, Wellness & Healthcare Workforce Strategy** — Strengthening medical infrastructure and support systems.
- **Health & Wellness Action Plan** — Targeted community wellness initiatives.
- **2026 Board of Directors** — Leadership roster and governance directory.

CEDS EDD REPORT • KENTUCKY RIVER AREA DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

Strategic Plan Update & Regional Economic State of the Union

Comprehensive Regional Overview & Quantitative County Baseline Analysis

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY & REGIONAL OVERVIEW

The Kentucky River Area Development District (KRADD) serves as the designated Economic Development District (EDD) under the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) for eight counties: **Breathitt, Knott, Lee, Leslie, Letcher, Owsley, Perry, and Wolfe**. The region continues its multi-year transition from historical coal dependency toward a diversified economy focused on healthcare, advanced manufacturing, regional eco-tourism, and remote digital employment.

KEY REGIONAL ECONOMIC HIGHLIGHTS & INFRASTRUCTURE UPDATES

Resilience Disaster Recovery & CDBG-DR

Anchored by a $297.99 million HUD CDBG-DR allocation—80% ($238.4 million) of which targets Breathitt, Knott, Letcher, and Perry counties—July 2022 flood recovery focuses on relocating families safely out of floodplains. High Ground developments currently under construction include Skyview (Perry Co.), Olive Branch and Chestnut Ridge (Knott Co.), and Grand View and Thompson Branch (Letcher Co.), a priority underscored by February 2025 high-water events.

Workforce Labor Market Disparities

While Kentucky's statewide civilian labor force participation rate stands at 56.9%, KRADD regional labor force participation rates range from 34.3% in Owsley County to 47.4% in Perry County. Official county unemployment rates float between 5% and 12%; however, effective regional underemployment sits between 33% and 52%. Retraining initiatives led by EKCEP, H.O.M.E., and ReWork EKY continue re-skilling displaced workers.

Healthcare Sector Anchor

Healthcare remains the single largest employer in KRADD, accounting for 27.6% of total regional employment. Institutional expansions by Appalachian Regional Healthcare (ARH) in Hazard, Juniper Health in Jackson, and Pikeville Medical Center clinics expand high-wage job creation and regional medical capacity across Eastern Kentucky.

Broadband Fiber Expansion

Broadband expansion utilizes Kentucky Wired middle-mile fiber and state Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) grants. Owsley County leads the district with 100% Fiber-Optic Coverage, creating proof-of-concept hubs for remote tech work.

Industrial Key Regional Business & Industrial Parks

- **Coal Fields Regional Park (Perry Co.):** 385.7 acres; supported by a $40M City of Hazard water plant upgrade for tenants like Dajcor Aluminum and Sykes/Intuit.
- **Pine Ridge Regional Park (Wolfe Co.):** 117.7 acres; features a **$4 million** HCTC technical facility and $5M Search & Rescue/911 HQ.
- **Gateway Regional Business Park (Letcher Co.):** 283 available acres with gas/water/sewer hosting 8 businesses including Combs Transport.
- **Lone Oak & Crystal Creek:** Lone Oak Park (Owsley Co.) features 75.1 acres + 25,920 sq. ft. spec building; Crystal Creek (Lee Co.) converted to 110-acre housing.



2. REGIONAL SUMMARY & QUANTITATIVE COUNTY PROFILES

The baseline metrics below establish key demographic, economic, and educational benchmarks across all eight member counties within the KRADD Economic Development District.

County	2020 Pop.	Decennial Change	Median Household MHI	Poverty Rate	Civilian LFP %	High School+	Bachelor's+
Breathitt	13,718	-1.2%	$34,808	35.5%	42.8%	80.3%	15.3%
Knott	14,251	-12.8%	$41,761	25.9%	38.3%	72.9%	19.5%
Lee	7,395	-4.2%	$37,568	29.6%	41.4%	75.1%	9.2%
Leslie	10,513	-7.0%	$35,934	28.5%	37.5%	76.0%	10.0%
Letcher	21,548	-12.1%	$41,793	24.5%	43.1%	82.4%	12.5%
Owsley	4,051	-14.8%	$22,188	35.0%	34.3%	68.0%	7.1%
Perry	28,473	-0.8%	$42,181	25.0%	47.4%	80.4%	14.8%
Wolfe	6,562	-10.8%	$30,417	35.9%	36.5%	70.1%	8.7%

DETAILED COUNTY "STATE OF THE UNION" PROFILES

Breathitt County

County Seat: Jackson

2020 POP.	MEDIAN INCOME	POVERTY RATE	CIVILIAN LFP	HS GRAD %
13,718	**$34,808**	**35.5%**	**42.8%**	**80.3%**

Economic Drivers: Healthcare (Juniper Health anchor), Public Education, Public Sector Services, Small-Scale Manufacturing & Regional Logistics.

Industrial & Infrastructure Assets: Panbowl Lake Industrial Park (31 acres with municipal utilities). Capital water and sewer expansions actively under development to increase site load capacity. Primary beneficiary of scattered-site post-flood replacement housing.

Tourism & Community Assets: Honey Festival, Southfork Elk Viewing Station, Elkview Campground, Sugar Camp Golf Course, Panbowl Lake Recreation Area, Kragon Historical Preservation.

Demographics Baseline: Pop: 16,100 (2000) | 13,878 (2010) | 13,718 (2020). Bachelor's degree+: 15.3%. Disability rate (under 65): 26.9%.

Knott County

County Seat: Hindman

2020 POP.	MEDIAN INCOME	POVERTY RATE	CIVILIAN LFP	HS GRAD %
14,251	**$41,761**	**25.9%**	**38.3%**	**72.9%**

Economic Drivers: Outdoor Eco-Tourism, Higher Education, Artisanal Crafts, Technical Trades & Vocational Training.

Industrial & Institutional Assets: Alice Lloyd College (Pippa Passes), Knott County Area Technology Center. Designated hub for Olive Branch and Chestnut Ridge "Higher Ground" subdivisions on master-planned elevated terrain outside flood risk zones.

Tourism Economy: Mine Made Adventure Park (ATV and equestrian trails), Carr Fork Lake, Knott County Sportsplex, bi-annual trail rides.

Demographics Baseline: Pop: 17,649 (2000) | 16,346 (2010) | 14,251 (2020). Bachelor's degree+: 19.5%. Broadband subscription rate: 84.1%.

DETAILED COUNTY PROFILES (CONTINUED)

Lee County

County Seat: Beattyville

2020 POP.	MEDIAN INCOME	POVERTY RATE	CIVILIAN LFP	HS GRAD %
7,395	$37,568	29.6%	41.4%	75.1%

Economic Drivers: Institutional Corrections, Eco-Tourism, Small Business Development, Agriculture.

Industrial & Institutional Assets: Lee County Industrial Park (27.6 acres hosting Jackson Energy Cooperative, Lee County Building Supply, UK Extension). Reopening of Lee County Adjustment Center generated ~240 direct local positions.

Infrastructure Innovations: Repurposed former 110-acre Crystal Creek Industrial Park into dedicated residential flood-relocation housing managed by Beattyville Housing Authority.

Tourism Economy: Gateway to Red River Gorge, Hollerwood Offroad Park, Leeco Campground, world-class rock climbing, paddling at the confluence of three forks of Kentucky River, Woolly Worm Festival.

Leslie County

County Seat: Hyden

2020 POP.	MEDIAN INCOME	POVERTY RATE	CIVILIAN LFP	HS GRAD %
10,513	$35,934	28.5%	37.5%	76.0%

Economic Drivers: Healthcare & Social Services, Public Education, Frontier Nursing Heritage, Natural Resources, Eco-Tourism & Small Commercial Development.

Industrial & Institutional Assets: Stinnett Industrial Site, Frontier Nursing University Historic Campus (Wendover), local municipal utility and public infrastructure support services.

Tourism & Community Assets: Mary Breckinridge's Wendover Historic Site, Hurricane Mine Memorial, Kentucky Veterans Cemetery South East, Trace Branch Campground, Confluence Recreational Area, Nixon Center (Tim Lee Carter Building & Willie Sandlin Pool), Biggerstaff Hiking Trail.

Demographics Baseline: Pop: 12,401 (2000) | 11,310 (2010, -8.8%) | 10,513 (2020, -7.0%). Bachelor's degree+: 10.0%.

Letcher County

County Seat: Whitesburg

2020 POP.	MEDIAN INCOME	POVERTY RATE	CIVILIAN LFP	HS GRAD %
21,548	$41,793	24.5%	43.1%	82.4%

Economic Drivers: Regional Healthcare, Retail Trade, Light Manufacturing, Natural Resources.

Industrial Assets: Gateway Regional Business Park in Jenkins (283 available acres with complete gas/water/sewer utilities hosting 8 active businesses), Whitesburg Industrial Site (4 acres), Swannee Tipple Industrial Site in Isom (4 acres).

Infrastructure & Healthcare: Cardiac/specialty expansion via Pikeville Medical Center Whitesburg Clinic. Development site for Grand View (92-acre, 115-unit) and Cottages at Thompson Branch "Higher Ground" subdivisions.

Tourism Economy: Pine Mountain State Park, Bad Branch Falls Nature Preserve, Fishpond Lake, Little Shepherd Trail, Mountain Heritage Festival.



KENTUCKY RIVER AREA DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT (KRADD)

Economic Resilience & Regional Transformation

Facing Historical Hardships & Pandemic Disruptions

The eight-county Kentucky River Area Development District (KRADD) region—encompassing Breathitt, Knott, Lee, Leslie, Letcher, Owsley, Perry, and Wolfe counties—has historically navigated profound economic and structural hardships. Long before recent global shocks, the steep decline of the traditional coal economy impacted Eastern Kentucky, resulting in widespread mining job losses, sharp reductions in coal severance tax revenues, municipal budget strains, and sustained population outflow.

Compounding these structural downturns, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented operational disruptions across the region. The prolonged public health crisis exposed deep local vulnerabilities, notably a stark digital divide due to inadequate broadband coverage and an extraordinary regional reliance on the healthcare sector. In response, local governments and utility providers strategically deployed American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds to address critical water, sewer, and community infrastructure needs while pivoting toward long-term economic recovery.

Emerging Regional Brightspots & Economic Diversification

Despite compounding challenges—further heightened by severe weather events including the 2022 flash floods and February 2025 riverine flooding—the KRADD region is actively turning hardship into a national model for rural resilience. Key regional brightspots are fueling an economic transformation:

Site Readiness & Industrial Expansion

Targeted utility and transportation investments across regional business parks—such as Gateway Regional, Lone Oak, and Panbowl Lake—are positioning Eastern Kentucky to attract light manufacturing, metal fabrication, logistics, and regional health services.

Broadband & Digital Infrastructure

Rapid expansion of middle- and last-mile fiber networks (anchored by Kentucky Wired and regional telecom partners) is bridging the digital divide, unlocking remote work opportunities, and supporting modern commercial operations.

High-Ground Community Development

Innovative housing and commercial initiatives, such as the Skyview development in Perry County and Chestnut Ridge in Knott County, are establishing flood-safe, modern neighborhoods that permanently relocate families and municipal assets out of vulnerable floodplains.

Healthcare Anchor Growth

Regional medical institutions, including Appalachian Regional Healthcare (ARH) and Juniper Health, continue to expand specialty and dental services, serving as both major employment drivers and essential community stabilization assets.

Outdoor Recreation & Asset-Based Tourism

Communities across the district are leveraging Eastern Kentucky's natural topography, river corridors, and mountain trails to foster eco-tourism, downtown revitalizations, and small business entrepreneurship.

Path Forward: By pairing rigorous, data-driven planning with visionary community investments, the KRADD region is moving beyond short-term survival toward lasting economic transformation. Through unified local leadership, targeted infrastructure modernization, and community resilience, Eastern Kentucky is building a diversified economic foundation designed to thrive for generations to come.

KENTUCKY RIVER AREA DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

Strategic Plan Update & Regional Economic State of the Union

CEDS EDD REPORT

1. 2026 UPDATE

Executive Summary & Regional Overview

The Kentucky River Area Development District (KRADD) serves as the designated Economic Development District (EDD) under the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) for eight counties: Breathitt, Knott, Lee, Leslie, Letcher, Owsley, Perry, and Wolfe. The region continues its multi-year transition from historical coal dependency toward a diversified economy focused on healthcare, advanced manufacturing, regional eco-tourism, and remote digital employment.

Key Regional Economic Highlights & Fiscal Year Updates

- **Disaster Recovery, CDBG-DR & Climate Resilience:** Anchored by a $297.99 million HUD CDBG-DR allocation—80% ($238.4 million) of which targets Breathitt, Knott, Letcher, and Perry counties—July 2022 flood recovery focuses on relocating families safely out of floodplains. High Ground developments currently under construction include Skyview (Perry Co.), Olive Branch and Chestnut Ridge (Knott Co.), and Grand View and Thompson Branch (Letcher Co.), a priority underscored by February 2025 high-water events.
- **Workforce & Labor Market Disparities:** While Kentucky's statewide civilian labor force participation rate stands at 56.9%, KRADD regional labor force participation rates range from 34.3% in Owsley County to 47.4% in Perry County. Official county unemployment rates float between 5% and 12%; however, when factoring in discouraged workers who have left the active labor market, effective regional underemployment sits between 33% and 52%. Retraining initiatives led by the Eastern Kentucky Concentrated Employment Program (EKCEP), H.O.M.E., and ReWork EKY continue re-skilling displaced energy sector workers.
- **Healthcare Expansion Sector Anchor:** Healthcare remains the single largest employer in KRADD, accounting for 27.6% of total regional employment. Institutional expansions by Appalachian Regional Healthcare (ARH) in Hazard, Juniper Health in Jackson, and Pikeville Medical Center clinics expand high-wage job creation and regional medical capacity.
- **Industrial Site & Public Works Infrastructure:**
  - **Coal Fields Regional Business Park (Perry Co.):** 385.7 total acres. Supported by a $40 million City of Hazard water treatment plant upgrade expanding municipal utility capacity for tenants like Dajcor Aluminum, Sykes/Intuit, and logistics providers.
  - **Pine Ridge Regional Business Park (Wolfe Co.):** 117.7 total acres. Developments include a $2 million EDA/ARC/RCAP-funded Hazard Community and Technical College (HCTC) technical education facility and a $5 million Wolfe County Search & Rescue / 911 Regional Headquarters.
  - **Gateway Regional Business Park (Letcher Co.):** 283 available acres with full municipal gas, water, and sewer connections hosting 8 active businesses. Recent tenants include Combs Transport and Taylor Made Metal.
  - **Lone Oak Industrial Park (Owsley Co.):** 75.1 available acres featuring a 25,920 sq. ft. speculative building.
  - **Crystal Creek (Lee Co.):** Repurposed 110-acre industrial site successfully converted into residential housing managed by the Beattyville Housing Authority.
- **Broadband & Telecommunications:** Broadband expansion utilizes KentuckyWired middle-mile fiber and state Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) grants. Owsley County leads the district with 100% Fiber-Optic Coverage.

DETAILED COUNTY PROFILES (CONTINUED)

Owsley County

County Seat: Booneville

2020 POP.	MEDIAN INCOME	POVERTY RATE	CIVILIAN LFP	HS GRAD %
4,051	$22,188	35.0%	34.3%	68.0%

Economic Drivers: Agriculture, Remote Digital Work, Eco-Tourism.

Industrial Assets & Fiber Leadership: Lone Oak Industrial Park (75.1 available acres featuring a 25,920 sq. ft. speculative building). County-wide high-speed fiber-optic deployment positions Owsley as a regional proof-of-concept hub for remote tech employment via Teleworks USA.

Tourism Projects: Sag Hollow Golf Club, South Fork Kentucky River access, cabin developments for eco-tourism lodging, ongoing construction of 200-acre Sturgeon Creek motorsports park.

Perry County

County Seat: Hazard

2020 POP.	MEDIAN INCOME	POVERTY RATE	CIVILIAN LFP	HS GRAD %
28,473	$42,181	25.0%	47.4%	80.4%

Economic Drivers: Regional Healthcare Hub, Advanced Manufacturing, Business Process Outsourcing (BPO), Higher Education.

Industrial Assets: Coal Fields Regional Business Park (385.7 total acres) hosting Dajcor Aluminum, Sykes/Intuit, and FedEx Distribution. Supported by $40M water system overhaul by City of Hazard.

Healthcare & Post-Flood Infrastructure: Hazard Community & Technical College (HCTC), Galen College of Nursing, ARH Medical Center (expanded oncology/cardiac). Kentucky Trail Town; Leatherwood Offroad Park, Skyview "Higher Ground" relocation neighborhood.

Wolfe County

County Seat: Campton

2020 POP.	MEDIAN INCOME	POVERTY RATE	CIVILIAN LFP	HS GRAD %
6,562	$30,417	35.9%	36.5%	70.1%

Economic Drivers: Outdoor Eco-Tourism, Service Industry, Public Education, Regional Emergency Services.

Industrial Assets & Facilities: Pine Ridge Regional Business Park (117.7 acres). Recent developments include a **$4 million** HCTC technical training facility and a $5 million Wolfe County Search & Rescue/911 Regional Headquarters.

Tourism & Housing: Key gateway for Red River Gorge Geological Area, Creation Falls, Campton Lake, underground mine kayaking, zip-lining, Swift Silver Mine Festival. 89.1% broadband subscription rate; 72.5% homeownership.

Strategic Alignment & CEDS Implementation Roadmap (2026–2030)

The synthesized metrics and county profiles above establish the empirical foundation for KRADD's CEDS Strategic Action Plan. By aligning CDBG-DR disaster relief, EDA infrastructure investments, and broadband expansion across all eight counties, KRADD continues to build regional resilience and foster long-term economic diversification.

3. COUNTY-BY-COUNTY TOURISM & ASSET PROFILES

SECTION 2

LETCHER COUNTY

Pine Mountain Hub

Natural & Driving: Lilley Cornett Woods, Bad Branch Falls, Pine Mountain, Fishpond Lake, and scenic driving routes along KY-160 featured in regional Backroads of Appalachia motorsports routes.

Recreation & Events: Golfing, hiking, artisan/antique shopping, local crafts, and the annual Mountain Heritage Festival in historic downtown Whitesburg.

KNOTT COUNTY

Motorsports & Trails

Motorsports & Equestrian: Mine Made Adventure Park and Knott County ATV Center—regional destination for ATV/UTV riding, racing, and rock crawling—hosting annual Spring & Fall Trail Rides.

Water & Sports: Boating, fishing, swimming, and camping at Carr Creek Lake; sports and community events hosted at the Knott County Sportsplex.

LEE COUNTY

Climbing & Waterways

Rock Climbing & Water: Internationally recognized premier destination for world-class rock climbing in the Red River Gorge region. Beattyville offers three-forks river access and paddle fishing.

Community Assets: Designated Trail Town amenities, hiking, mountain biking, annual Woolly Worm Festival, historic downtown, and military history museum.

BREATHITT COUNTY

Elk & River Recreation

Wildlife & Waterways: Southfork Elk Viewing Station regular tours; Panbowl Lake public fishing pier; Douthitt Park baseball fields and river canoeing access.

Culture & Events: Annual Honey Festival, Sugar Camp Golf Course, and extensive horseback riding trail networks.

LESLIE COUNTY

Trail Town & Forest

Trail Town & Forest: Hyden is a designated Kentucky Trail Town ("Cradle of the Copperheads" off-road network) with access to Daniel Boone National Forest, ATV/UTV, equestrian, and hiking trails.

Water & Festivals: Buckhorn Lake and Middle Fork Kentucky River; host to annual Mary Breckinridge Festival and Osborn Bend trail systems.

OWSLEY COUNTY

Adventure & Heritage

Adventure Projects: Ongoing 200-acre Sturgeon Creek project (Wildlife Adventure trail network) and historical county jail conversion into a boutique bed & breakfast.

Culture & Recreation: Sag Hollow Golf Club, South Fork paddling, horse shows, Pioneer Museum, Booneville rock quarry, and annual Daniel Boone Festival.

WOLFE COUNTY

Gorge Heartland

Gorge Landmarks: Chimney Top Rock, Creation Falls, Campton Lake, ziplining, world-class rock climbing, mountain biking, and unique underground mine kayaking paddle tours.

Lodging & Events: Expanding eco-cabins, wilderness cabins, full-service campsites; host to annual Wolfe County Swift Silver Mine Festival in Campton.

PERRY COUNTY & HAZARD

Regional Trail Hub

Trail Town Hub: Designated 20th official Kentucky Trail Town (Hazard); off-road staging area for Leatherwood Offroad Park and Backroads driving routes.

Resorts & Events: Buckhorn Lake State Resort Park offering boating, lodging, and mountain views; Black Gold Festival and Perry County Fall Festival.

4. STRATEGIC INFRASTRUCTURE ALIGNMENT

SECTION 2

UTILITY & TRANSPORTATION INVESTMENT STRATEGY

To sustain and scale tourism growth, KRADD coordinates public utility and transportation investments to reinforce high-use recreational corridors. By prioritizing state highway paving and embankment stabilization along Backroads of Appalachia driving routes, extending water lines to backcountry trailheads, upgrading wastewater treatment capacities near regional lakes and parks, hardening flood-prone access bridges, and expanding cellular/fiber coverage, the district ensures that Eastern Kentucky's outdoor adventure and motorsports economy operates on a safe, resilient foundation.

COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (CEDS)

EIGHT-COUNTY REGIONAL DISTRICT ALIGNMENT

BREATHITT KNOTT LEE LESLIE LETCHER OWSLEY PERRY WOLFE

SECTION 1

WATER INFRASTRUCTURE & RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

1. PUBLIC WATER SYSTEMS & REGIONAL COLLABORATION

The Kentucky River Area Development District (KRADD) region features 17 public water systems, 10 of which operate their own water treatment plants, collectively serving 34,606 households for their potable drinking water needs. Recognizing the vital role of water infrastructure, KRADD actively leads regional water management planning through structured collaboration with the Kentucky Infrastructure Authority (KIA) and the Kentucky River Regional Water Management Council (established pursuant to KRS 151 and KRS 224A under Senate Bill 409).

This coordinated planning framework utilizes KIA's statewide Water Resource Information System (WRIS) geo-database to map system capacities, evaluate infrastructure gaps, and establish project rankings. A dedicated Infrastructure Coordinator within KRADD facilitates these activities—bridging local utilities, municipal/county leaders, and state/federal funding programs. These include the Cleaner Water Program (ARPA), the Kentucky WWATERS Program (HB 563/HB 1), State Revolving Funds (SRF), CDBG, ARC, and USDA Rural Development. Project rankings and regional priorities are formally maintained in the Strategic Projects section of the CEDS report and the annual WRIS project profile database.

2. WASTEWATER MANAGEMENT & INFRASTRUCTURE IMBALANCE

Despite extensive drinking water distribution networks, a severe infrastructure imbalance remains: only approximately 20% of households in the KRADD region are connected to centralized municipal or package wastewater treatment plants. The remaining ~80% of households rely on on-site septic systems, failing decentralized units, or illegal straight-pipe direct discharges into local streams and river basins.

This stark contrast highlights a critical disparity between drinking water delivery and sanitary wastewater management across the region, underscoring an urgent need for continued capital investment in sewer line extensions, centralized plant upgrades, straight-pipe remediation, and watershed protection to safeguard public health and Eastern Kentucky waterways.

KENTUCKY RIVER AREA DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

REGIONAL INDUSTRIAL SITES & AUTHORITIES PORTFOLIO

EIGHT-COUNTY REGIONAL DISTRICT ALIGNMENT

BREATHITT KNOTT LEE LESLIE LETCHER OWSLEY PERRY WOLFE

SECTION 1

REGIONAL INDUSTRIAL SITE PROFILES & INFRASTRUCTURE

1. REGIONAL INDUSTRIAL SITE PROFILES

PANBOWL LAKE INDUSTRIAL PARK

Panbowl Lake Industrial Park provides light-industrial and professional commercial acreage within the City of Jackson. The park features heavy utility infrastructure, including a 12-inch water main directly serving the parcel. It serves as a community healthcare anchor following major investments by Juniper Health, while retaining 31 contiguous available acres for business expansion or service-sector development. Guided regionally through cooperative multi-county development frameworks involving the Pineridge Industrial Authority, the site benefits from broader economic initiatives spanning the surrounding sub-region.

LEE COUNTY INDUSTRIAL PARK

Lee County Industrial Park combines public service infrastructure with commercial space, located along the primary transport corridor near Beattyville. Ten acres of the original tract were transferred to the UK Extension Office, which maintains the remaining undeveloped section. Equipped with existing 6-inch water and 8-inch sewer services, the park is suited for light assembly, civic operations, and commercial supply distribution.

GATEWAY REGIONAL INDUSTRIAL PARK

Gateway Regional Industrial Park is the premier multi-county industrial hub in the Letcher County sub-region. Positioned directly adjacent to four-lane US-23, the site offers heavy power infrastructure—including dual 69kV transmission lines and an on-site electric substation—making it ideal for advanced manufacturing, logistics, and energy-intensive operations. Supported regionally by the Coalfields Industrial Authority—a multi-county organization driving industrial site capacity across Eastern Kentucky—the park offers 260+ buildable acres, multi-provider fiber-optic broadband, and a diverse roster of commercial and industrial tenants.

SECTION 2

MUNICIPAL PARCELS & REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

2. MUNICIPAL SITES & REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

WHITESBURG INDUSTRIAL SITE

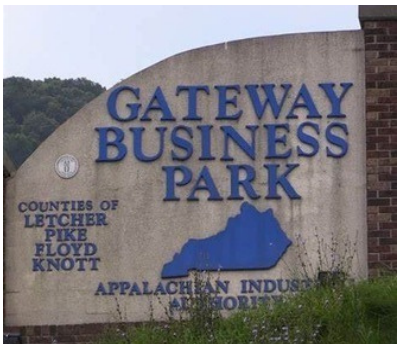
Situated directly within the city limits of Whitesburg, the Whitesburg Industrial Site provides immediately accessible utility hookups, including a 10-inch municipal sewer connection. The site hosts key public infrastructure, regional environmental monitoring assets (KY Mesonet), and commercial wood products manufacturing, offering infill acreage for light commercial or municipal support operations under regional industrial development frameworks.

LONE OAK INDUSTRIAL PARK

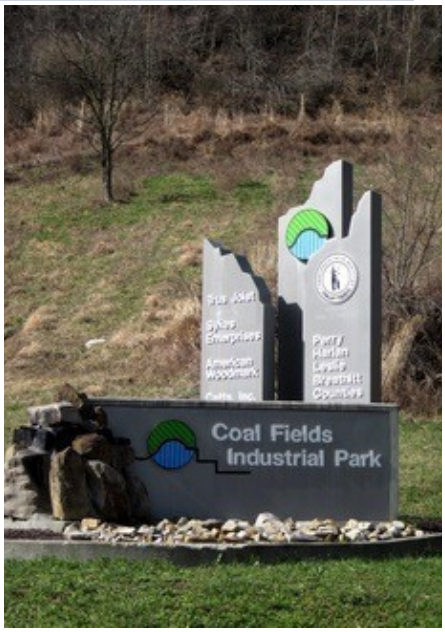
Lone Oak Industrial Park serves as Owsley County's primary site-selection asset. The property features over 75 contiguous acres and holds a standalone 25,920-square-foot speculative industrial building ready for immediate tenant fit-out or manufacturing occupancy. Served by a 6-inch water main and 8-inch sewer main, the park supports heavy metal fabrication while offering ample greenfield space for prospective expanded facilities.

COALFIELDS INDUSTRIAL AUTHORITY

Coalfields Industrial Authority operates as a multi-county organization driving industrial site capacity across Eastern Kentucky. It provides strategic support and oversight to major industrial hubs in the sub-region—most notably empowering key logistics and advanced manufacturing locations such as the Gateway Regional Industrial Park—to enhance infrastructure readiness, attract commercial tenants, and expand buildable acreage.







KENTUCKY RIVER AREA DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

Regional Tourism & Outdoor Recreation Asset Strategy

BREATHITT | KNOTT | LEE | LESLIE | LETCHER | OWSLEY | PERRY | WOLFE

1. OVERVIEW & RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE INTEGRATION

SECTION 1

As traditional coal mining employment has declined across Eastern Kentucky, asset-based eco-tourism, outdoor adventure, and motorsports tourism have emerged as vital catalysts for regional economic diversification. The eight-county Kentucky River Area Development District (KRADD) region—encompassing Breathitt, Knott, Lee, Leslie, Letcher, Owsley, Perry, and Wolfe counties—is situated in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, featuring an abundant network of mountain lakes, rivers, sandstone arches, waterfalls, winding ridge highways, and expansive forest trails.

To capitalize on these natural and topographic assets and attract visitors from across the nation, resilient infrastructure is foremost in the strategic plan to augment regional tourism. Developing flood-hardened access corridors, maintaining smooth and storm-resilient paved state highways, extending municipal water and wastewater services to high-traffic recreational hubs (such as the Red River Gorge corridor and state park basins), building storm-resistant trailhead facilities, and expanding fiber-optic broadband into rural lodging areas ensure that the region's visitor economy can withstand natural hazards and drive long-term economic growth.

2. REGIONAL TRAIL & MOTORSPORTS FRAMEWORK

SECTION 1

First Frontier Appalachian Trails Authority

Established under House Bill 156 in 2017 (originally the Kentucky Mountain Regional Recreation Authority and renamed in 2021), the Authority operates under a comprehensive master plan to connect and expand off-highway vehicle (OHV/ATV), UTV, dirt bike, equestrian, and hiking trail networks across 18 Eastern Kentucky counties.

Backroads of Appalachia

A premier 501(c)(3) non-profit economic development initiative that leverages Eastern Kentucky's dramatic, winding mountain highways to drive vehicular motorsports tourism. By mapping, promoting, and hosting events along specialized sports car and motorcycle routes—such as those traversing Pine Mountain, KY-160, KY-7, and regional scenic bypasses—Backroads of Appalachia brings thousands of automotive enthusiasts, motorcycle rallies, and car clubs directly into local downtowns, gas stations, restaurants, and lodging establishments, turning scenic highway infrastructure into an economic engine.





KENTUCKY RIVER AREA DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & WORKFORCE STRATEGY

STRATEGIC VISION, REGIONAL OBJECTIVES & ACTION FRAMEWORK

BREATHITT KNOTT LEE LESLIE LETCHER OWSLEY PERRY WOLFE

STRATEGIC GOAL & REGIONAL OBJECTIVES

REGIONAL STRATEGIC GOAL

To enhance the quality of life of residents of the KRADD region through job creation and job retention. Promote economic growth and expansion by maintaining a strong, healthy industry base that will foster internal industry growth while projecting a pro-business image to prospective companies.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Recruit new business and industry into the eight-county district.

Work directly with existing businesses on retention and physical/operational expansion.

Provide technical and administrative support for new and existing commercial enterprises.

Promote industrial parks across member counties to increase regional site selection visibility.

Encourage industrial site enhancements through strategic plans that define sought-out business sectors, ready-to-build sites, move-in ready facilities, expansion plans for current businesses, and advertising support for local job openings.

Promote regional tourism assets and eco-tourism initiatives.

Encourage a cooperative, multi-county regional approach to economic development.

Enhance the region's economic base and general prosperity by encouraging existing businesses to expand operations and employment.

Attract targeted economic development projects that enhance growth and improve citizen quality of life.

Assist local workforce development partners with targeted programs and training initiatives.

Promote programs that offer specialized workforce education and skill certification.

Improve public access to employment information, career pathways, and job openings.

Increase the marketable skills and career adaptability of the region’s workforce.

SECTION 1

MIDDLE-MILE FOUNDATION & LAST-MILE EXPANSION

1. NETWORK ARCHITECTURE & FUNDING ALIGNMENT

MIDDLE-MILE FOUNDATION & LAST-MILE EXPANSION

The full operation of KentuckyWired—the Commonwealth's 3,000-plus-mile open-access middle-mile fiber-optic network—serves as the foundational digital backbone connecting every county across Eastern Kentucky. By establishing high-capacity interconnection points throughout the region, KentuckyWired enables local internet service providers (ISPs), telephone cooperatives, and cable operators to extend "last-mile" Fiber-to-the-Home (FTTH) connections to previously unserved and underserved rural communities.

POST-ARPA FUNDING ALIGNMENT & GAP CLOSURE

With federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) infrastructure funds fully obligated, the region has transitioned to next-generation state and federal broadband funding streams to systematically eliminate remaining coverage gaps in topographically challenging hollows and isolated rural corridors:

- **Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program:** Capitalizing on Kentucky's $1.1 billion federal allocation administered through the Kentucky Office of Broadband Development to fund high-speed deployment (minimum 100/20 Mbps) in certified unserved and underserved project areas.
- **U.S. Department of the Treasury Capital Projects Fund (CPF):** Deploying rural last-mile grant allocations to extend fiber infrastructure into unserved residential and commercial clusters.
- **USDA Rural Development ReConnect Grants & Loans:** Securing targeted federal loan and grant combinations specifically designed for persistent rural dead zones where high buildout costs previously hindered private deployment.

KENTUCKY RIVER AREA DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT
BROADBAND & DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY

SECTION 2

DATA-DRIVEN DEPLOYMENT & CIVIC MODERNIZATION

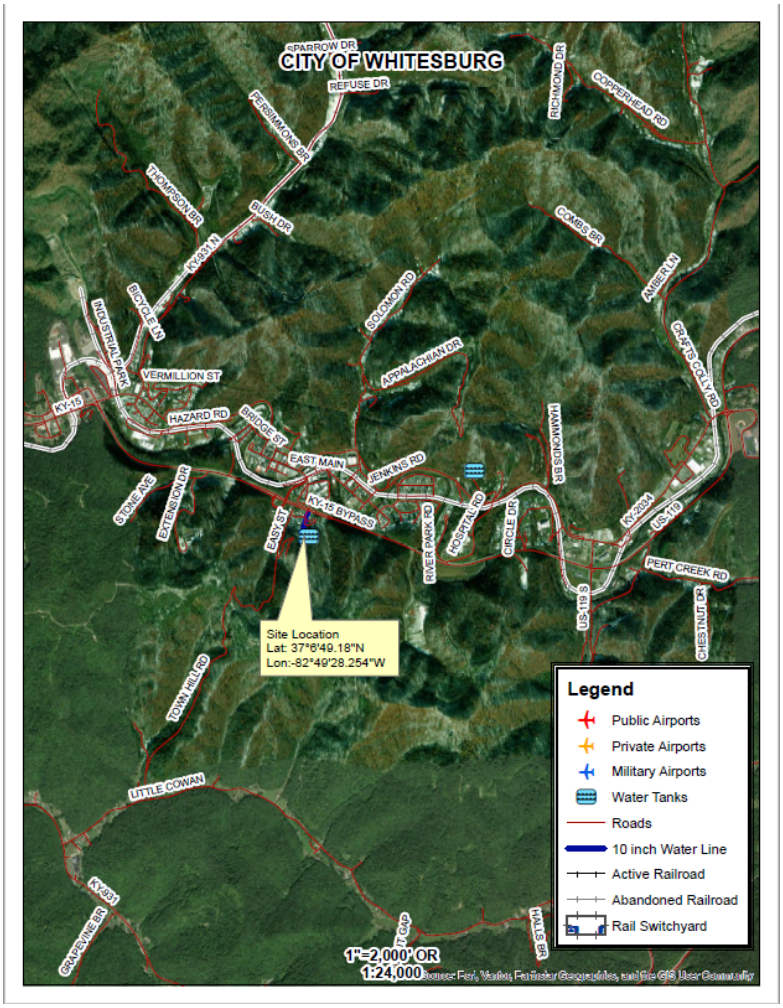
2. REGIONAL INTEGRATION & CIVIC SERVICES

DATA-DRIVEN DEPLOYMENT & CIVIC MODERNIZATION

To maximize the impact of grant allocations, the district relies on continuous GIS mapping and local broadband availability evaluations. This data-driven approach ensures that incoming state and federal funding directly targets lingering coverage dead zones without duplicating existing service.

Beyond residential and commercial connectivity, high-speed fiber expansion powers local civic infrastructure:

- **Municipal E-Government Services:** Modernizing local government portals to expand online public access, digital permitting, and automated utility bill processing.
- **Emergency Management Readiness:** Integrating storm-hardened, redundant broadband connections into municipal hubs to support emergency notification systems, real-time disaster response, and public safety communications during severe weather events.



KRADD SPECIAL RESILIENCE & MITIGATION REPORT

Disaster Mitigation Framework & Strategic Action Plan

Updated with 2025–2026 Regional Mitigation Framework, Specialty Resilience Plans, & National Recognition

1. REGIONAL OVERVIEW & VULNERABILITY CONTEXT

The Kentucky River Area Development District (KRADD) region remains exceptionally vulnerable to natural hazards, with a pronounced susceptibility to frequent flash flooding and riverine flooding due to steep mountainous topography, narrow hollows, and valley-bound development. The region has endured compounding historic flood disasters—most notably the catastrophic flash flooding of July 26–30, 2022, followed by widespread riverine flooding in February 2025. In addition to severe flooding, steep terrain and dense forestry increase vulnerability to regional wildfires, making comprehensive, multi-hazard mitigation essential for long-term community survival and economic stability.

2. KEY CONCERNS & REGIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Compounding Disaster Recovery

Simultaneous recovery efforts from the 2022 flash floods and February 2025 riverine floods have placed extreme demands on local infrastructure, municipal budgets, and residential housing stock.

Precipitation & Runoff Risks

Increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events require modernized stormwater management systems, updated hydrologic modeling, and proactive ecosystem restoration.

Wildfire Risk Exposure

Forested ridges and mountainous topography present significant fire management challenges during drought conditions, requiring dedicated wildfire risk mitigation and wildland-urban interface (WUI) planning.

High-Ground Relocation

Moving displaced residents and critical public infrastructure out of 100-year floodplains into engineered high-ground developments (such as Skyview in Perry County and Chestnut Ridge in Knott County) remains a top regional priority.

3. REGIONAL GOALS

Enhance public safety and regional resilience across Breathitt, Knott, Lee, Leslie, Letcher, Owsley, and Perry counties by executing updated multi-hazard mitigation frameworks, integrating natural floodplain restoration, and building long-term disaster preparedness across all member communities.



4. OBJECTIVES & KEY RESILIENCE PLANS

Hazard Identification & GIS Mapping: Partner with FEMA, Kentucky Emergency Management (KYEM), and local leaders to maintain updated high-risk property profiles, integrating damage assessments from both the 2022 and 2025 federal disaster declarations.

Flood Plain Restoration Plan: Implement the regional Flood Plain Restoration Plan, prioritizing natural stream corridor restoration, riparian buffer protection, wetland re-establishment, and floodplain reconnection to naturally absorb peak flood surges and reduce downstream flood velocity.

Wildfire Plan: Execute the regional Wildfire Plan, focusing on forest management, wildland-urban interface (WUI) risk reduction, fire-break infrastructure, and enhanced inter-agency response coordination between local volunteer fire departments, county emergency managers, and the Kentucky Division of Forestry.

Funding Integration: Maximize federal and state grant alignment—including FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), Building Resilient Infrastructure and Communities (BRIC), Flood Mitigation Assistance (FMA), and HUD CDBG-Mitigation (CDBG-MIT) funds—to accelerate structural and non-structural hazard reduction projects.

5. STRATEGIES & BEST PRACTICES

Property Elevation & Voluntary Buyouts: Assist local jurisdictions in securing grant funding for voluntary acquisitions, buyouts, and structure elevations in high-risk floodways.

High-Ground Community Development: Support regional partners (such as the Housing Development Alliance and Team Kentucky) in constructing flood-safe housing developments and critical community facilities on elevated terrain.

Emergency Response & Local Preparedness: Support multi-jurisdictional quick-response teams, emergency shelter networks, organized donation management protocols, and secondary evacuation route planning across the district.

Hazard Mitigation Plan Execution: Maintain full compliance under the updated KRADD Regional Hazard Mitigation Plan, ensuring member cities and counties regularly review, update, and prioritize local mitigation projects.

Infrastructure Hardening: Relocate or elevate critical utility assets (including lift stations, water treatment components, and emergency communications infrastructure) above base flood elevations.

6. NATIONAL RECOGNITION

NADO Impact Award (July 2026)

In recognition of these innovative planning and preparedness efforts, KRADD was honored by the National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) at its July 2026 Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. KRADD was recognized for its exemplary work on its Disaster Mitigation Plan, celebrating the district's regional leadership in helping Eastern Kentucky communities adapt to evolving disaster risks and build long-term climate resilience.





WORKFORCE & BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

WORKFORCE & BUSINESS ACTION PLAN

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT & BUSINESS IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Implement a comprehensive business retention and expansion (BR&E) program, providing technical and administrative assistance to help local companies navigate regulatory issues and utilize existing state/federal incentive programs.

Work with local, county, and state agencies to develop innovative solutions for the infrastructure, workforce, and growth needs of regional businesses.

Encourage community and civic leaders to deepen their economic development expertise by attending specialized seminars sponsored by regional, state, and federal development organizations.

Expand and coordinate local industrial recruiting efforts in close partnership with the Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development.

Coordinate the development of small- to medium-sized, publicly owned industrial parks in strategic locations throughout the region, encouraging joint cost- and revenue-sharing frameworks between member counties.

Assist in critical infrastructure improvements, when necessary, to facilitate business attraction and retention in targeted regional growth corridors.

Coordinate continuously with local, regional, and state workforce development agencies to align training resources with industry demand.

Support regional colleges, technical schools, and universities in their endeavors to deliver a highly trained, modern workforce.

Develop and implement targeted programs that support local entrepreneurs in establishing and scaling successful businesses.

Work with regional agencies and higher education institutions to design and execute programs to retrain skilled workers for emerging technology, advanced manufacturing, and commercial sectors.



KENTUCKY RIVER AREA DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

DATA CENTER DEVELOPMENT: AN EMERGING FRONTIER

REGIONAL DIGITAL ECONOMY & INFRASTRUCTURE ALIGNMENT

BREATHITT KNOTT LEE LESLIE LETCHER OWSLEY PERRY WOLFE

REGIONAL PREPAREDNESS & STRATEGIC ADVANTAGES

DATA CENTER DEVELOPMENT IN THE KRADD REGION

The Kentucky River Area Development District (KRADD) is successfully navigating a transition away from its historical reliance on the coal industry toward a more resilient economy. As part of this evolution, large-scale and hyperscale data centers—massive facilities powering cloud computing, streaming, and artificial intelligence—have begun investigating Eastern Kentucky.

As developers seek prime national locations, the KRADD region has emerged as a highly competitive candidate. Here is a breakdown of why developers are drawn to the region, the anticipated economic impacts, and how local communities are proactively preparing.

STRATEGIC ADVANTAGES FOR DEVELOPERS

The region's appeal is built on a foundation of industrial legacy and recent technological investments:

Legacy Power Infrastructure: Decades of energy production have equipped the area with high-voltage transmission corridors and industrial-scale substations. Data centers demand massive, uninterrupted power; utilizing this existing grid saves developers the immense cost of establishing new power corridors.

Advanced Fiber Connectivity: High-speed internet is essential for hyperscale facilities. State and federal investments, including the KentuckyWired middle-mile network and Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) funding, have transformed the region's digital infrastructure. Owsley County's 100% county-wide fiber-optic connectivity proves the area's readiness for high-bandwidth operations.

Reclaimed Mine Lands: While Appalachian topography can limit commercial building, reclaimed mountaintop removal and strip mine sites offer the vast, stable, and flat acreage perfectly suited for sprawling data center campuses.

Transferable Workforce: The downturn in coal left behind a highly skilled, adaptable workforce. The mechanical, electrical, and heavy-maintenance expertise native to mining translates seamlessly to the construction and 24/7 operation of tech facilities.

DATA CENTER DEVELOPMENT: AN EMERGING FRONTIER

ECONOMIC IMPACT & COMMUNITY INTEGRATION

ECONOMIC IMPACT

Data centers represent some of the most capital-intensive private investments available to rural communities:

Revenue Generation: Housing billions of dollars in high-value servers, these facilities generate immense property tax revenues that can permanently transform municipal budgets, funding public school districts, emergency responders, and infrastructure maintenance.

Job Creation: Beyond initial construction and supply-chain spending, data centers offer permanent tech and maintenance roles with above-median wages, creating high-tech career pathways that do not strictly require a four-year college degree.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITY SAFEGUARDS

Despite the lucrative economic upside, local governments are carefully managing the logistical and environmental realities:

Grid Capacity: To prevent these facilities from burdening the regional grid, local utility regulators and electrical cooperatives are drafting "large load tariffs" to ensure developers—not residential ratepayers—cover the required infrastructure upgrades.

Water Resources: Because evaporative cooling systems require significant water, communities are actively auditing local watersheds and municipal treatment plants to protect residential and agricultural water security.

Proactive Zoning: Recognizing the transformative scale of these projects, local leaders are taking a measured approach. By mid-2026, multiple Eastern Kentucky counties—including Letcher County, a KRADD community—enacted updated zoning regulations to responsibly manage and integrate data center development.

LOOKING AHEAD: FORGING A RESILIENT DIGITAL FUTURE

As the Kentucky River Area Development District looks toward the end of the decade, the potential integration of data centers represents a pivotal chapter in the region's ongoing economic evolution. By leveraging the physical legacy of the energy sector—vast tracts of reclaimed land, high-capacity electrical grids, and a highly capable workforce—the KRADD region is uniquely positioned to capture a share of the booming global digital economy.

However, the long-term success of this new frontier will rely on a balanced, highly strategic approach. By coupling proactive economic recruitment with prudent regulatory safeguards, local leaders aim to ensure that hyperscale developments enrich municipal resources without compromising ratepayer stability or environmental health. Ultimately, if managed with foresight and care, the data center industry could serve as a powerful catalyst in finalizing the region's transition from a single-industry past into a diversified, resilient future.

KENTUCKY RIVER AREA DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY (CEDS)

SECTION: REGIONAL HEALTH, WELLNESS & HEALTHCARE WORKFORCE STRATEGY

BREATHITT KNOTT LEE LESLIE LETCHER OWSLEY PERRY WOLFE

HEALTH PROFILE & ECONOMIC ALIGNMENT

STRATEGIC GOAL: HEALTH AS AN ECONOMIC DRIVER

To improve regional labor force participation and quality of life by expanding healthcare delivery, strengthening substance use recovery-to-work ecosystems, expanding active living infrastructure, and cultivating a resilient healthcare professional pipeline across the eight KRADD counties.

1. HEALTH OUTCOMES AND WORKFORCE RESILIENCE

Economic productivity in Eastern Kentucky is directly linked to community population health. High regional rates of chronic illness—including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, respiratory conditions, and substance use disorders—present systemic challenges to labor force participation and local economic resilience. Addressing health disparities through targeted infrastructure, clinical expansion, and preventative community health models is vital to supporting current businesses and attracting modern industrial employers.

2. HEALTHCARE INFRASTRUCTURE AS AN ECONOMIC ANCHOR

The healthcare sector represents one of the largest job creators and wage drivers within the KRADD district. Anchor institutions, including Appalachian Regional Healthcare (ARH), Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), local health departments, and rural health clinics, provide essential medical services while driving significant direct employment, supply chain demand, and regional payroll expenditure.

KENTUCKY RIVER AREA DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

HEALTH & WELLNESS ACTION PLAN

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Expand access to primary, preventive, and emergency healthcare services in rural communities.

Leverage high-speed fiber broadband infrastructure to scale regional telehealth capacity.

Integrate substance use disorder (SUD) recovery programs with technical education and job placement.

Develop career pathways to train and retain local healthcare professionals.

Enhance outdoor recreation and active living infrastructure to support community wellness and tourism.

PRIORITY IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

Telehealth & Digital Health Integration: Partner with regional health networks and internet service providers to utilize middle-mile fiber networks (including KentuckyWired and BEAD initiatives) to deliver specialized telehealth services to rural clinics, schools, and senior centers.

Healthcare Workforce Pipeline Development: Collaborate with the University of Kentucky Center for Excellence in Rural Health (Hazard), local community and technical colleges, and high school vocational tracks to expand nursing, emergency medical service (EMS), allied health, and behavioral health credentials.

Recovery-to-Work Ecosystem Expansion: Support partnerships between employers, recovery centers, and workforce development boards to implement fair-chance hiring, peer support specialist training, and transitional employment pathways for individuals in recovery.

Active Living & Community Wellness Infrastructure: Secure grant funding (including ARC, USDA Rural Development, and Land and Water Conservation Funds) to construct multi-use trails, public parks, recreational facilities, and downtown walkable infrastructure across member counties.

Rural EMS & Facility Modernization: Assist local governments and emergency services in securing grant funding for ambulances, modern diagnostic equipment, and facility upgrades to ensure rapid emergency response capabilities across remote geographies.

Food Access & Agricultural Health Initiatives: Coordinate with local farmers markets, community gardens, and agricultural extensions to expand access to fresh local produce in underserved food-desert areas, reinforcing regional farm-to-table supply chains.





KENTUCKY RIVER AREA DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

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