

Building Capacity for Economic Resilience in Jackson, Kentucky

Technical Report

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Acknowledgements, Honor Pledge & Disclaimer

Acknowledgements

My largest thanks go to my grandparents, Marsha and Tom Smith, who have instilled in me a great love for the mountains of Kentucky. Without my grandmother's support, many unsolicited insights, and remarks about how the air is somehow easier to breathe in her old Kentucky home, I may not have found my passion for all-things Appalachia. Thank you, Nana.

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*This report is dedicated to my distant but ever-inspiring Appalachian roots.
Pictured: Great-Grandparents and Jackson Residents, Hazel Goff and William "Clif" Daniel*



Honor Pledge

“On my honor, I pledge that I have neither given nor received help on this assignment.”

Disclaimer

The author conducted this study as part of the program of professional education at the Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy, University of Virginia. This paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of the course requirements for the Master of Public Policy degree. The judgements and conclusions are solely those of the author, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Batten School, by the University of Virginia, or by any other agency.

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Key Terms

Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)

Economic Development Administration (EDA)

Economic and Community Development Director (ECDD)

Eastern Kentucky (EKY)

Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

Industrial Development Authority (IDA)

Kentucky River Area Development District (KRADD)

Serving Our Appalachian Region (SOAR)

United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

West Virginia Community Development Hub (WVCDH)

Key Definitions

Capacity: “The inherent knowledge, skills and resources that enable communities to meet their immediate needs and prepare for their future needs” (Dumont and Evans, 2022).

Executive Summary

This report was developed for the City of Jackson, Kentucky, to examine how the city can build lasting economic resilience by strengthening its capacity for local leadership and development. Following the collapse of its primary industries—coal, timber, and rail—Jackson faces significant structural

barriers: high disability and poverty rates, limited institutional capacity, and the ongoing strain of natural disasters. But despite these challenges, the community does not lack ideas or ambition. It lacks the staffing, structure, and resources to move good ideas forward.

The purpose of this report is to provide Mayor Laura Thomas with policy alternatives that address these capacity constraints and help position Jackson to pursue economic development more effectively. Three alternatives were analyzed:

1. Hire a Full-time Economic and Community Development Director;
2. Engage a Core Intermediary to Modernize and Implement the Strategic plan;
3. Engage the Community in Strategic Planning Workshops.

These alternatives were evaluated based on four criteria: (1) Effectiveness at securing grant funding, (2) Costs, (3) Administrative feasibility, and (4) Sustainability. **While each offers potential benefits, hiring a full-time ECDD scored highest across all criteria.** This option would give Jackson a dedicated point person to coordinate funding, lead strategic initiatives, and build long-term partnerships—addressing the city’s most urgent administrative and operational gaps.

To implement this recommendation, Jackson should pursue federal or philanthropic funding to support the initial costs of the position, and formalize partnerships with regional organizations for recruitment and onboarding. This will ensure the role is not only feasible, but also rooted in local values and priorities.

“We buy local, we shop local...
why don’t we invest in local?”

—Katie McCaskey,
Micropolitan Manifesto



Jackson's path forward depends on its ability to act—not just to envision progress, but to carry it out. Investing in internal capacity is the first and most necessary step toward creating that future. By prioritizing professional leadership and sustained coordination, Jackson can unlock the potential of its people and projects and build the foundation for a more resilient local economy.

Introduction

Jackson, located in Appalachian Eastern Kentucky, is experiencing prolonged economic decline following the collapse of its core industries: timber, coal and the railway. While this pattern is familiar across the region, Jackson has remained especially vulnerable—constrained by limited local capacity, underutilized resources, and a municipal government stretched thin. As the only incorporated city in Breathitt County, the terms “Jackson” and “Breathitt” are often used interchangeably, though this report focuses specifically on the city while acknowledging the interconnectedness of the two.

Breathitt County is classified as continuously distressed by the Appalachian Regional Commission. The county’s poverty rate is 17.1 percentage points higher than the national average; 29.3% of residents live with a disability; the unemployment rate remains high at 8.7%; and only 16.5% of adults have completed any postsecondary education (Breathitt County, Kentucky - Census Bureau Profile, n.d.; Hernandez, 2025; KACO, 2025; US EPA, 2014). Additionally, employment opportunities are dominated by government jobs, which account for 30.4% of local employment, primarily in education, public administration, and waste management, alongside the healthcare sector, which provides 15.9% of jobs (Breathitt County, Kentucky - Census Bureau Profile, n.d.). These statistics, combined with substantial health and environmental pressures, paint a clear picture: Jackson is in need of meaningful, sustained investment—and the capacity to utilize it (See Figures [1](#) and [2](#)).

These vulnerabilities are compounded by strained and overwhelmed strategic leadership capacity, leaving Jackson unable to fully leverage support from government and nonprofit initiatives designed to address such crises. Recent historic floods in EKY further exposed these weaknesses, underscoring the urgency of building resilience and capacity within the community. As the Urban Institute aptly states, “If the least resource-rich coal communities do not have the capacity to access the investments they need the most, the promise of a just transition will fail” (Junod, 2024).

Over the past year, I explored a variety of economic development initiatives that could support Jackson’s future—from ecotourism and small business growth to main street revitalization. But through conversations with the Mayor and other local leaders, it became increasingly clear that no single initiative could succeed alone in giving Jacksonians the growth they deserve. Many promising ideas—like positioning Jackson as a workforce hub for the nearby Red River Gorge—require interconnected investments in housing, public spaces, workforce development,

and more. In theory, all of these could be tackled at once. In practice, there's only one person—the Mayor— on staff, working full-time, to lead this work.

The city's limited capacity forces difficult trade-offs: Do you pursue housing without a strategy to attract residents? Do you invest in third places - like bowling alleys, coffee shops and movie theatres - without the consumer base to support them? Do you seek partnerships with other local governments and organizations without someone dedicated to maintaining the relationships? Each conversation I had returned to the same question: Where do we start, when we can only do one thing at a time?

That's why, rather than propose a standalone initiative, this report focuses on capacity-building as a strategy in and of itself. Economic development requires a foundation of leadership, coordination, and continuity—and right now, Jackson is being asked to do too much with too little. By investing in local capacity, the city can create the conditions for multiple projects to succeed, rather than hoping one project will transform everything. Building that foundation is not just a first step—it's the only way to make the next steps possible.

Figure 1: Health and Climate Indicators and Critical Service Gaps in Jackson Compared to State and US Averages

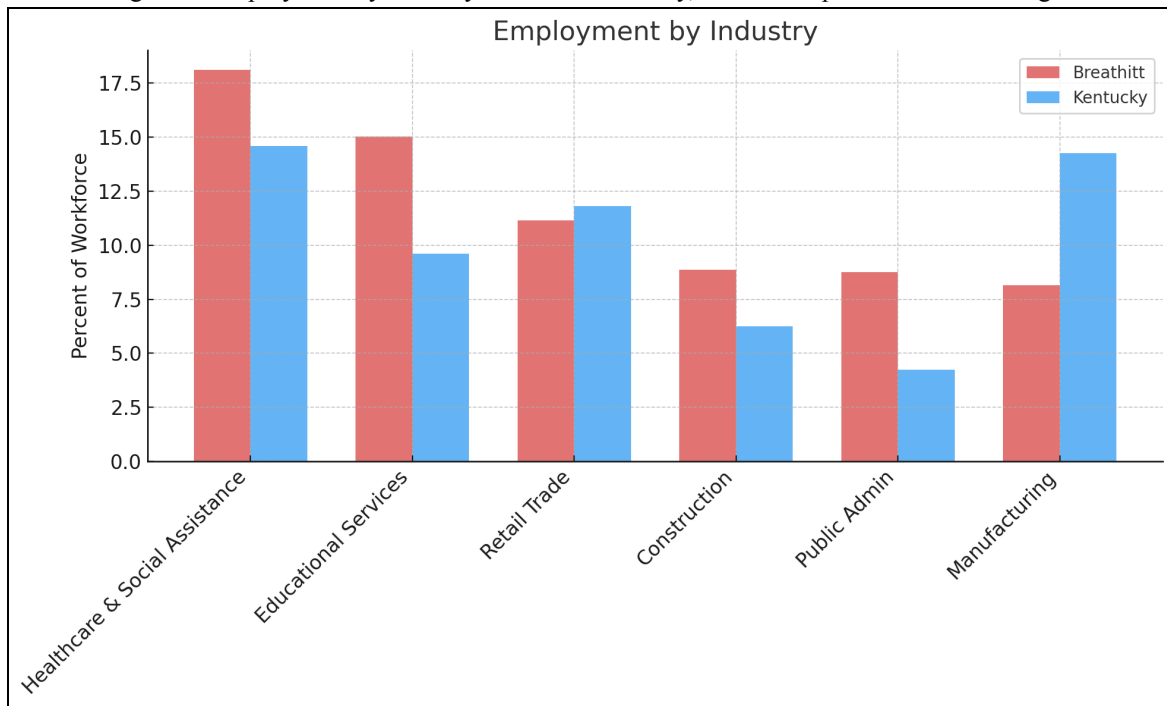
HEALTH INDICATORS					
INDICATOR	VALUE	STATE AVERAGE	STATE PERCENTILE	US AVERAGE	US PERCENTILE
Low Life Expectancy	28%	22%	95	20%	97
Heart Disease	9.5	7	93	5.8	97
Asthma	12.8	11.6	86	10.3	94
Cancer	7.4	6.8	69	6.4	71
Persons with Disabilities	29.3%	18.6%	90	13.7%	98

CLIMATE INDICATORS					
INDICATOR	VALUE	STATE AVERAGE	STATE PERCENTILE	US AVERAGE	US PERCENTILE
Flood Risk	33%	12%	90	12%	92
Wildfire Risk	11%	3%	93	14%	82

CRITICAL SERVICE GAPS					
INDICATOR	VALUE	STATE AVERAGE	STATE PERCENTILE	US AVERAGE	US PERCENTILE
Broadband Internet	20%	15%	70	13%	78
Lack of Health Insurance	2%	6%	15	9%	13
Housing Burden	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Transportation Access Burden	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Food Desert	Yes	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Source: (US EPA, 2014)

Figure 2: Employment by Industry in Breathitt County, KY as compared to State Averages



Source: (PolicyMap, 2025)

Problem Definition

The collapse of the timber, coal and the railway in the City of Jackson, Kentucky has led to severe economic decline, worsened by systemic disinvestment and a lack of strategic local leadership. While government and nonprofit programs increasingly provide funding, technical assistance, and capacity-building resources, the Mayor of Jackson struggles to access these due to limited local capacity and a consequent inability to mobilize available resources effectively.

Without strengthened local capacity, external investments from regional and national funders will continue to fall short, leaving Jackson's economic decline unaddressed and sustained.

Background

Client Overview

My client is Mayor Laura Thomas of Jackson, Kentucky. She is responsible for the city's day-to-day operations, overseeing municipal employees, preparing departmental reports for the City Council, and presenting the budget and ordinance message. She also serves as Jackson's primary liaison with county, state, and federal entities, calls special meetings, and signs all official notes, bonds, and contracts on behalf of the city (L. Thomas, personal communication, December 10, 2024). The Mayor plays a key role in shaping Jackson's policies and future, making her office essential in addressing the city's economic challenges.

This analysis aligns closely with the Mayor's goals and organizational needs. Her office is innovative and deeply committed to creating meaningful change. However, her tenure has been overrun by responding to the immediate demands of the historic and devastating 2021 and 2022 floods (L. Thomas, personal communication, October 11, 2024). These crises have made her more determined to shift focus toward proactive policies that address both the city's immediate needs and its long-term future. Strengthening local capacity is essential right now because Jackson's economic struggles demand experienced, sustainable leadership and the right resources to tackle critical issues like housing, food insecurity, the opioid crisis, and small business development.

While initially focused on workforce and industry development, many conversations with local leaders, residents, investors, business owners and others have recentered this project to focus on strengthening the local government's capacity. Developing and diversifying Jackson's economy requires the city and county to have the bandwidth to pursue these projects effectively.

Appalachia, as characterized by Cassie Chambers Armstrong in her novel *Hill Women*, is full of quiet leadership - of individuals "...tak[ing] on the roles that governments or nonprofits play in other communities" (Chambers Armstrong, 2020, p. 48). Jackson has been proudly run by quiet leadership for a long while, and while this is a strategy that has helped Jacksonians survive, Jackson needs to invest in its capacity so it can plan for a future farther than tomorrow. Without sufficient capacity, progress in other critical areas will remain limited. By addressing the city's capacity constraints, the Mayor will be better positioned to lead the community toward sustainable development while ensuring the city is equipped to meet the needs of its residents.

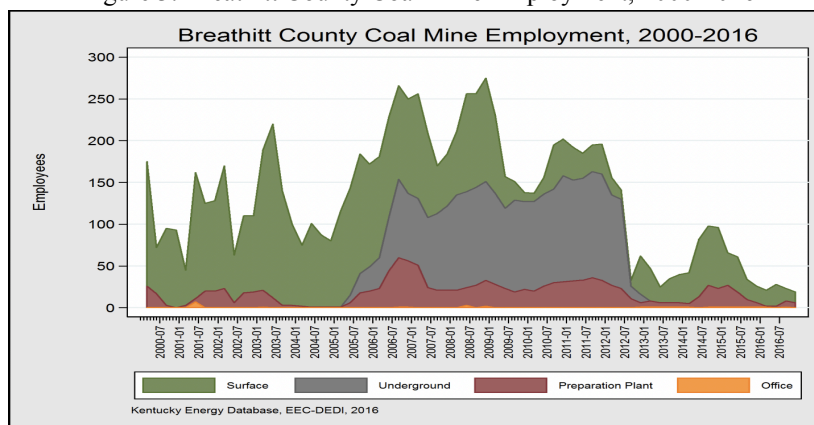
History of the Problem

The economic decline in Jackson, Kentucky began with the gradual loss of timber and coal, but has been deepened by years of inadequate experience and collaboration in the local government. This background analysis situates Jackson's experience within the historical, structural, and policy-driven dynamics that have shaped the region's struggles and opportunities. First, I will outline the historical narrative of Jackson's dependency on extractive industries, detailing how this reliance led in large part to the current economic instability. Next, I will explore the structural causes of this dependency, which have perpetuated cycles of boom-and-bust economic activity across Appalachia. Then, I will review existing external funding and support programs, examining why they have often failed to deliver meaningful change for Jackson and some opposing points of view. Finally, I will argue why Jackson matters - highlighting the stakes of maintaining the status quo and the unique opportunities presented by investing in the city's future.

Coal

In her thesis on rural communities, Eleanor Krause, a Kentucky native and Harvard graduate, uses the term “shrinking cities” to describe communities like Jackson experiencing sustained economic decline, high unemployment, and outmigration following the collapse of key industries like coal and timber (Pallagst et al., 2009). Once a thriving coal community, Breathitt County saw employment in the coal industry decline by 98% from 1950 to 2016, with approximately 23 individuals working in mines in Breathitt County by 2016 (Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet & Department for Energy Development and Independence, 2017). This dependency on coal left the region vulnerable when the industry's presence vanished.

Figure 3: Breathitt County Coal Mine Employment, 2000-2016



Source: (Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet & Department for Energy Development and Independence, 2017)

Historically, Appalachian communities like Jackson depended entirely on the coal company for healthcare, education, groceries, clothing, furniture, miner's tools, and even currency (Oneida & Us, 2024). The control that coal companies had over whole cities was significant. Consider that coal companies would pay their employees in "privately issued currency," called scrip, which was invaluable and irredeemable anywhere other than the stores owned by the coal company that issued them (West Virginia Mine Wars Museum, N.D.). When the coal companies collapsed, they took infrastructure, jobs, and economic lifelines, leaving the region without a plan or a future. In her book *Hill Women*, Chambers Armstrong says, "Those who were powerful in the mining business found ways to have a powerful influence over local government. They lobbied for policies that kept taxes on coal low, which meant local communities received less revenue. They fought against increased worker protections. To compete with the lower price of coal mined elsewhere, miners decreased the wages they paid to their employees rather than cut into their own profits" (Chambers Armstrong, 2020, p. 53). The legacy of that influence lives in the governance styles of many Appalachian communities today. Quiet leadership by community groups is how these communities managed to survive, but "...these communities deserved - continue to deserve - better" (Chambers Armstrong, 2020, p. 55).



"These communities deserved -
continue to deserve - better."
—Cassie Chambers Armstrong,
Hill Women

Timber

Like coal, timber was once a staple of Jackson's economy that eventually collapsed leaving the city in an economic drought. Dr. Stephen D. Bowling, Jackson City Council Member, Librarian, and Historian, writes "Between 1900 and 1923, Breathitt County was the undisputed lumber capital of the world" (Bowling, 2022). This legacy was short-lived, though, as the lumber company, Mowbray-Robinson Lumber Company, had depleted most of the county's stock of oak, poplar, hickory, and walnut trees by 1923. Operations and production soon ceased due to over-forestation and poor land management, and the "world's largest operating sawmill" hastily closed (Bowling, 2022). While E. O. Robinson carried on to create charitable funds "...for the practical demonstration of reforestation and the betterment of the people of Eastern Kentucky" (University of Kentucky, 2023), timber was yet another industry capitalized by outsiders to the region who left few resources, opportunities, or plans in their wake.

The Railway

The railway is another key industry influencing Jackson's history, serving as a vital connection to the rest of the state until the mid-20th century. At its peak, the railway facilitated daily travel for hundreds of passengers, with trains running multiple times a day through Jackson. However, the development of new mountain roadways and increased automobile ownership in the 1920s and 1930s led to a decline in train ridership. In response, the L&N Railroad sought permission in 1949 from the Kentucky Railroad Commission to reduce the number of trains from Lexington to Hazard due to a decrease in ridership. Despite protests from local officials, citing "...a moral obligation in exchange for the profit they collected from the area" (Bowling, 2023), the Commission permitted the reduction starting on March 1, 1949.

By late 1955, the L&N Railroad filed paperwork to end all passenger service to the mountains due to lack of usage. After legal proceedings, the last passenger train departed from Jackson on June 14, 1956, marking the end of an era (Bowling, 2023). This transition underscores a broader pattern in Eastern Kentucky's history, where infrastructure developments primarily served industrial interests, such as coal transportation, rather than fostering sustainable local growth. The cessation of passenger services not only isolated communities but also highlighted the region's exploitation for external profit, leaving lasting impacts on its socioeconomic fabric.

This is part of Jackson's story - a stark example of how the Appalachian mountains have been extracted from, leaving its communities unprepared for life after its decline. This legacy continues to define Jackson's economic landscape, demonstrating how dependency on extractive industries, while initially lucrative, ultimately left the community unprepared for its inevitable economic decline.

Structural Roots

Jackson and many other Appalachian communities have long been single-industry localities, shaped by the legacy of coal and timber. Dr. Tom Gunton, a resource and environmental planning professor, explores the factors contributing to that dependency through his work on staple economies. Gunton argues that staple towns, which are towns "...organized around the extraction of a staple economy" (Gunton, 2003), are shaped by their dependence on industries like coal, which provide initial economic growth but ultimately restrict diversification and resilience. Gunton explains, however, that the stability of such economies is inherently temporary, as they are highly susceptible to external market shifts and downturns. According to Gunton's "dependency school" theory, places like Jackson struggle to achieve long-term stability because they rely on large, externally controlled corporations. These industries make critical investment

and development decisions that local governments cannot influence, leaving these communities with limited agency over their economic futures when they exit a community.

The 'resource curse,' often seen in Appalachian coal communities, underscores how economic dependence on extractive industries hinders long-term economic stability (Douglas & Walker, 2016). This concept connects directly to the challenges Jackson faces today: its reliance on coal and timber left it vulnerable to economic shocks and shifts. Additionally, external programs designed to aid recovery often fail due to the very dependency and lack of capacity they aim to address (Douglas & Walker, 2016). Douglas and Walker ultimately suggest that policymakers should focus on economic diversification and investment in human capital to mitigate the adverse effects of resource-dependent economies.

The feasibility of increasing local capacity is complicated, though. Gunton argues that state and federal support for these communities is limited by the nature of the support they can provide. He found that support often focuses on increasing the presence of extractive industries, like Walmarts and data centers, rather than fostering economic diversification through investments in small businesses and entrepreneurship, ecotourism, post-secondary education, and main street revitalization. The result is what Gunton calls a “staple trap,” in which the local economy remains dependent on an industry or employer with no moral obligation to the welfare of a community (Gunton, 2003). This continued dependence on a single industry creates a cycle of unsustainable growth and economic instability, leaving leadership in towns like Jackson unable to escape the cycle of dependency, boom, and bust.

Jackson's Leadership

While Jackson's economic challenges stem from external forces - the decline of coal, timber, and the railway - building a robust future requires acknowledging internal governance barriers as well. The historical narrative explains how Jackson arrived at this point, but it is not the reason for the continued absence of strategic planning and coordinated leadership many years after these industries disappeared. Timber died in 1923, the last passenger train rolled through town in the 1950's, and coal has been on the way out for decades. Yet, the local government has failed to implement a long-term vision for Jackson's future, exacerbating existing challenges and leaving the city without the governmental capacity to pursue meaningful change.

Compounding these issues is Jackson's long standing dependence on voluntary associations to fill governance gaps. While community engagement is essential, overreliance on volunteer leadership - such as from the City Tourism Airport, and the IDA Boards - has stretched the

community's capacity to its limits (L. Thomas, personal communication, December 10, 2024). Instead of investing in professional and experienced city leadership, Jackson has depended on its volunteers for many traditionally governmental functions, such as flood recovery efforts and economic development. Participatory action research from the Economic Transition Team of the Alliance for Appalachia finds that "Central Appalachian activists lack support in knowledge sharing, training, funding, and organizational capacity building while dealing with policies that are poorly written and implemented" (Wriston, 2021). Volunteers should help shape Jackson's future, but they are not equipped to and should not be expected to carry the full weight of implementing change.

Historically, local governance in Jackson has faced challenges related to fragmented leadership, reactive policy making, and limited cross-sector coordination. These issues became particularly apparent during the 2021 and 2022 floods, when the absence of a formal recovery plan required the rapid formation of a recovery committee composed of both citizen leaders and elected officials. While the response demonstrated a strong community spirit, it also highlighted the need for more proactive planning and strengthened leadership capacity to effectively manage future crises. As a result, even well-intentioned external funding and support programs have often failed to produce lasting change. Structural economic barriers play a role, but so too does the absence of a shared strategic framework that could help Jackson fully leverage outside opportunities.

Solutions Background

This lack of capacity is not unique to Jackson. A recent Brookings Institution report highlights that building rural governments' capacity is critical to fostering independence from extractive industries (Bartik, 2020). The report identifies over 400 programs across 13 departments, 10 independent agencies, and more than 50 offices and sub-agencies offering support for economic and community growth in rural areas (See [Figure 5](#)) (Pipa and Geismar, 2020). Yet, despite the availability of this support, rural areas like Breathitt County struggle to access it (Junod, 2024; Hernandez, 2025).

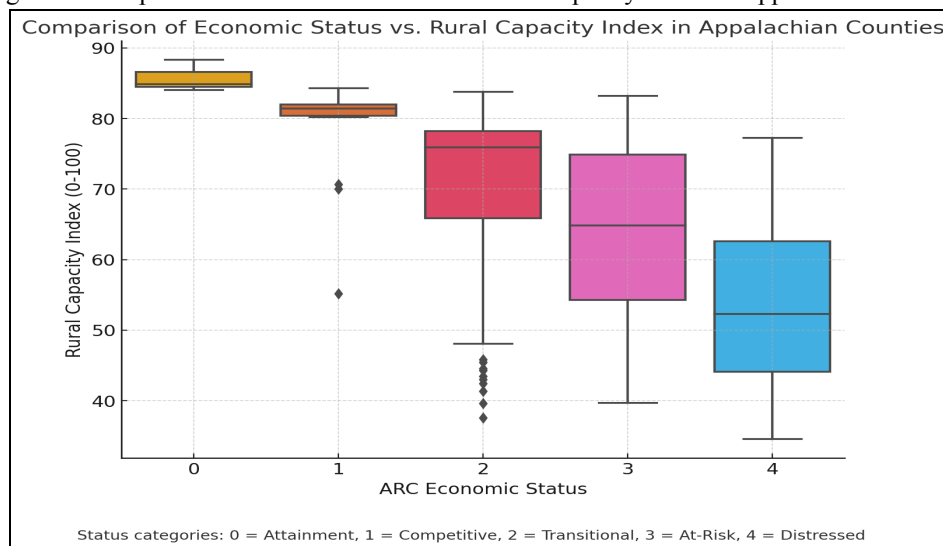
The EDA's Coal Community Commitment (CCC) program, for example, aims to support COVID-19 recovery through investments in economic diversification, job creation, capital infrastructure, workforce development, and employment programs specifically for coal communities (EDA, n.d.). While this initiative appears to be an ideal catalyst for economically distressed counties across Appalachia, an Urban Institute review of coal community support

programs reveals that most coal-dependent counties with persistent poverty received no CCC funding (Junod, 2024).

Abigail R. Hall, an economics professor at the University of Tampa, explains why this disconnect exists and the Appalachian communities most in need of support often face barriers in accessing it. She identifies two contributing factors: First, external funders face the “knowledge problem of top-down planning,” where federal and state agencies like the ARC and Rural Partners Network must balance broad objectives with the constraints of limited funding (Hall Blanco, 2024). This dynamic often limits their ability to take risks on less conventional or higher-need applicants. Second, agencies like the ARC operate within funding structures emphasizing efficiency and accountability to compete for government resources, which can inadvertently favor communities with more developed grant-writing capacities or political networks (Hall Blanco, 2024).

Data from the ARC and Headwater Economics reinforce this point. A comparison of economic status and rural capacity across all Appalachian counties—as defined by the ARC—shows a clear pattern: counties with greater economic success also tend to have higher rural capacity. Economic status is assessed using an index based on a three-year average of the unemployment rate, per capita market income, and poverty rate, benchmarked against national averages (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.-c). Breathitt County, designated as “distressed,” ranks in the bottom quartile for rural capacity at just 21% (Hernandez, 2025). Without deliberate efforts to increase its capacity, Jackson will be excluded from regional initiatives and funding.

Figure 4: Comparison of Economic Status vs. Rural Capacity Index in Appalachian Counties.



Source: (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.-b; Government Spending Open Data | USAspending, n.d.; Hernandez, 2025)

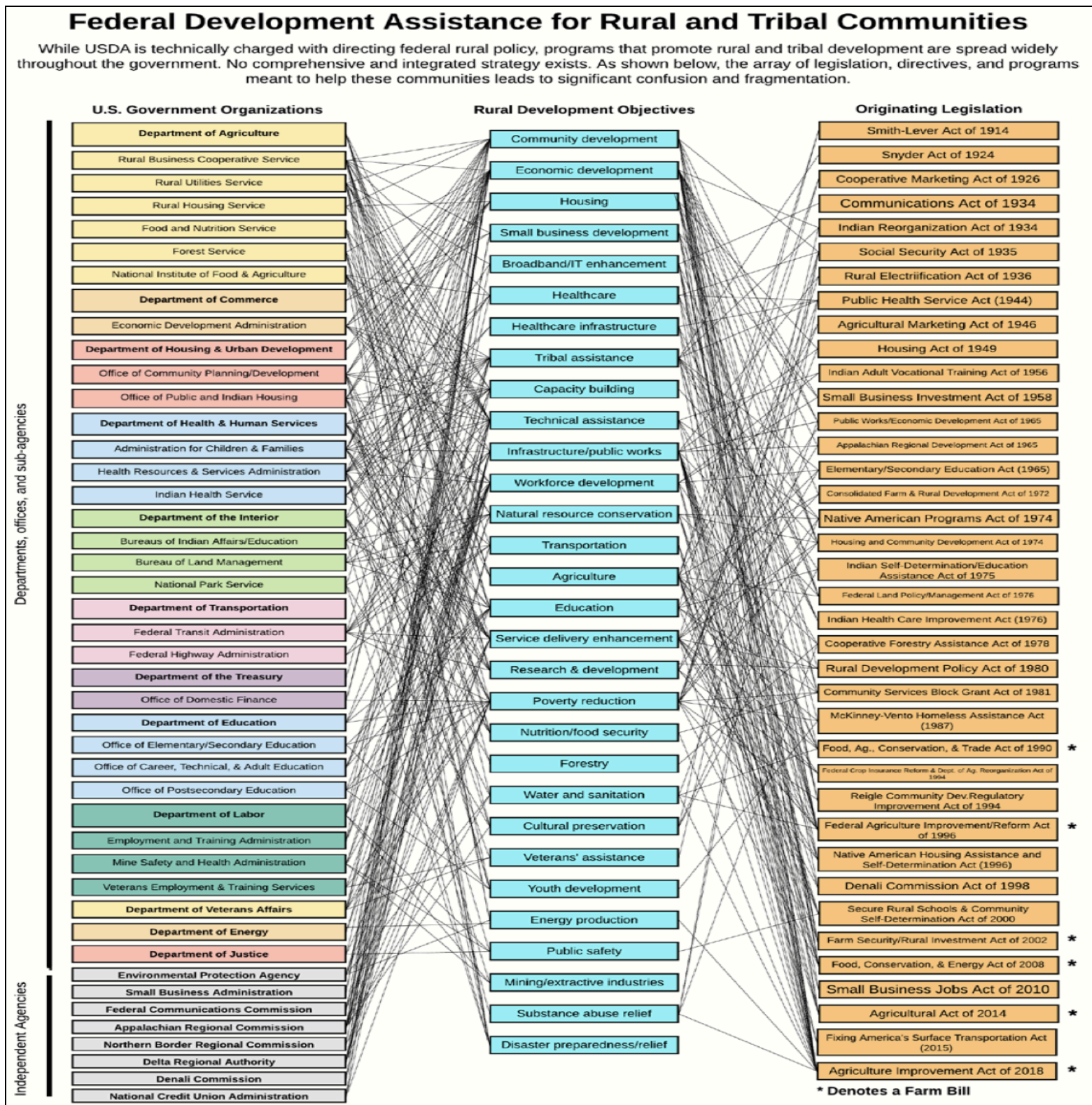
The local community is acutely aware of this strain. DCMC, Jackson’s flood recovery consultant, facilitated community needs assessments and public meetings across the city and county.

Participants called for collaboration among leaders, stronger use of existing frameworks, and better alignment of local, state, federal, and private funding (DCMC Partners, 2025, p. 36). The problem isn’t a lack of ideas—DCMC’s report outlines several promising economic development initiatives. The barrier is capacity: the ability to turn ideas into action.

To make progress in economic development, Jackson must begin by building strong local capacity. Based on the community’s priorities, the city’s history, and lessons from peer localities, the following steps are essential:

- **Increase collaboration between city and county governments.** They share the same challenges and should be working toward the same goals.
- **Prioritize strategic planning in budgeting.** Jackson must creatively leverage its limited resources to build economic resilience.
- **Strengthen partnerships with local organizations and neighboring governments.** Regional collaboration can multiply impact and build credibility with funders.

Figure 5: Intricate Web of Assistance Opportunities Available for Rural Areas Offered by the Federal Government



Source: (Pipa and Geismar, 2020)

Opposing Perspectives

The most prominent opposing view suggests that while potentially significant, the cost of capacity-building programs in rural areas is too high to justify their existence due to the programs' need for long-term, sustained support. When the funding is used up, communities often have to return to square one (Butler Flora, 2015). It is also argued that such programs, even if sustainable, require a level of local buy-in that does not exist in rural America without economically inefficient incentives. While these are important perspectives to consider, external funding and local buy-in are not primary evaluative metrics for this APP.

Limitations of the Data

The literature on disadvantaged, rural, coal-dependent communities is predominantly qualitative, driven by regional experts and think tanks (Scallly et al., 2020). While there is a general consensus on root causes and the types of resources needed, findings often differ due to variations in local government structures. Most studies focus on historical economic trends, the effectiveness of rural development programs, and future projections for coal regions. However, a significant limitation is the lack of state-specific insights that could illuminate the challenges faced by communities in Appalachian Kentucky. While there are many shared strengths and weaknesses in Appalachia, state-level governance impacts the resources available to local governments. Meaning that different Appalachian states deliver different services and opportunities to their counties. Insights on how programs vary across state lines would be useful in evaluating potential solutions.

Additionally, a 2020 Urban Institute report highlights that policymakers often lack access to high-quality rural data, which hinders their ability to craft policies that accurately address the realities of rural areas. The report identifies several key reasons for this gap:

1. “The indicators of prosperity in rural places are distinct and require different measures from urban measures...
2. Differing definitions of “rural” places also complicate analysis... [and]
3. Small populations make rural data collection and reporting challenging” (Scallly et al., 2020).

Currently, the most commonly available data on rural communities pertains to educational attainment and economic mobility, but it rarely includes information on institutional capacity

(Scally et al., 2020). This gap leads to policies that are often ill-suited for rural areas, such as Jackson, which require tailored strategies to address their specific needs.

Why does Jackson matter?

Consider the words of Kentucky Governor, Andy Beshear: “[Eastern Kentucky] is a region that deserves our country’s thanks and investment. The people of Eastern Kentucky mined the coal that powered our country through two world wars and helped build the strongest middle class the world has ever seen” (Office of the Governor, 2024).

Jackson, Kentucky, with its 2,128 residents, embodies both the challenges and opportunities of Appalachia (Data USA, n.d.). The town boasts extraordinary ecotourism and entrepreneurial potential, from the nearly extinct American Chestnut Farms and the Appalachian Horse Project to the iconic Red River Gorge. There is an economic incentive for investing in Appalachia, too, as “Unmet capital demand from small businesses represents a \$70 billion growth opportunity in [the region]” (Next Street, 2024).

Kentucky’s hills also shelter some of the region’s 80,000 occurrences of rare species, including bobcats and elk, offering a treasure trove of biodiversity (The Nature Conservancy, n.d.). Beyond its natural wealth, Jackson is a testament to the resilience and pride of Appalachians, where a deep-rooted work ethic and generational ties create a unique sense of community and belonging.

Eastern Kentucky’s hills are more than landscapes; they are home to generations of perseverance, hard work, and familial bonds. The people of Jackson should not be forced to choose between enduring poverty and leaving the place their families have called home for generations. This is not merely a local issue but a national one: the loss of towns like Jackson would represent a failure to honor and preserve a legacy that powered the nation through its most formidable challenges.

Investing in Jackson is not just about preserving its history or biodiversity - it is about securing a future where the contributions of Appalachians are recognized and valued. The region’s potential for ecotourism, cultural heritage, and economic revitalization offers a compelling reason to act. Failing to do so would not only be a disservice to the people of Jackson but also to the nation that owes much of its strength to the grit and determination of Appalachians.

Methodology

The purpose of this report is to propose, analyze, and evaluate policy options that address the need for economic development in Jackson, Kentucky. The following section identifies four evaluative criteria used to evaluate the proposed policy alternatives. The remainder of the report focuses on the outcomes of those evaluations and proposes a path and a plan forward.

Evaluative Criteria

The criteria below were selected for their applicability to Jackson’s history, culture, and location in Appalachia.

1. Effectiveness at Securing Grant Funding
2. Costs
3. Administrative Feasibility
4. Sustainability

Criteria are defined below:

1. **Effectiveness at Securing Grant Funding - *low, medium or high*:** Does the proposed policy have a low, medium, or high likelihood of helping Jackson secure grant funding—particularly from federal sources? Grant revenue is critical for jumpstarting economic development in Jackson, where local funds alone are insufficient. Because grant data at the local and state levels are often incomplete, this analysis focuses on federal grants awarded to municipalities for projects beyond essential infrastructure (e.g., water, sewer). The ability to attract competitive external funding will be a key determinant of success for each alternative.
2. **Costs:** The following two criteria address the costs required to implement each alternative.
 - a. **Costs to Jackson:** Do the financial demands placed on the City represent a low, medium, or high burden? This criterion assesses whether the investment required is proportionate to Jackson’s fiscal capacity and the expected return on investment.
 - b. **Costs to External Organizations:** While secondary to Jackson’s internal costs, this criterion evaluates how much additional strain a policy might place on external partners, such as regional nonprofits or federal agencies.
3. **Administrative Feasibility - *low, medium or high*:** The following two criteria address the administrative feasibility of implementing each alternative.



- a. **Staff Capacity:** Does Jackson have the personnel and internal resources to carry out the alternative effectively? This includes staff time, skill sets, and administrative bandwidth.
- b. **Legal and Regulatory Considerations:** Does implementation require minimal, moderate, or significant legal or procedural changes? Alternatives that build on existing structures and avoid complex compliance challenges will score higher in feasibility.

4. Sustainability - *low, medium or high*

- a. **Political Turnover:** Will the policy remain effective amid shifts in political leadership or budgetary priorities at the local, state, or federal level?
- b. **Disaster Recovery:** Does the policy support Jackson's ability to prepare for, respond to, or recover from natural disasters - especially flooding? This reflects the need for durable, crisis-ready economic planning given the region's vulnerability.

Policy Alternatives

The policy alternatives section outlines the proposed solutions to the economic stagnation problem in Jackson, Kentucky. The three proposed policy alternatives are:

1. Hire a Full-time Economic and Community Development Director
2. Engage a Core Intermediary to Modernize and Implement the Strategic Plan
3. Engage the Community in Strategic Planning Workshops

An overview and background are provided for each alternative, and the evaluation of the policy alternatives against the four selected criteria is featured in the green box under each alternative.

Policy Alternative 1: Hire a Full-time Economic and Community Development Director

Overview: This alternative proposes that the Mayor of Jackson collaborate with the County Judge Executive to hire a shared Economic and Community Development Director. Jackson has incredible economic potential in areas such as ecotourism, small business growth, and main street revitalization, but they require dedicated attention and strategic coordination. Hiring a dedicated director to oversee and manage all things economic and community development would strengthen the Mayor's economic development efforts, ensuring that these initiatives receive the focused leadership they need. Since economic development efforts in Jackson and Breathitt County are very closely connected, a shared city-county staff member would provide continuity, foster regional collaboration, and align workforce development and investment attraction efforts with broader economic goals.

Background: Currently, the Industrial Development Authority is the only formally shared city-county entity, and it functions as a volunteer-based entity, with eight appointees split evenly between the city and county. It lacks a dedicated director, paid staff, and a clearly defined scope. Hiring an Economic and Community Development Director who would coordinate directly with IDA would broaden the city and county's economic efforts to include initiatives beyond industrial development. A dedicated director would centralize leadership, streamline initiatives, and serve as a consistent point of contact for stakeholders—reducing the burden on elected officials and ensuring sustained progress on economic priorities. A dedicated staff member would provide the long-term strategic planning necessary for economic revitalization while ensuring that development efforts reflect local priorities.

This alternative directly addresses Jackson's limited local capacity by embedding full-time, professional expertise into city and county government—easing the reliance on voluntary associations and informal leadership networks that have carried much of Jackson's economic development. By establishing a shared ECDC, the city and county would institutionalize leadership that is strategic, consistent, and accountable. To promote transparency and support a strong selection process, the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky could serve as a neutral advisor and partner in the recruitment and onboarding process. By formalizing this role, the city and county would not only gain capacity—they would also create a mechanism for long-term economic planning that's resilient and rooted in local priorities.

Evaluation of Policy Alternative 1

Effectiveness at Securing Grant Funding: *High*

Hiring a dedicated ECDC would significantly enhance Jackson's ability to compete for federal and philanthropic funding. Appalachian counties with similar staffing models, like Forsyth, GA and Shelby, AL, have secured upwards of \$850,000 annually in federal grants—far exceeding Breathitt County's 2019 total of just \$48,000. An ECDD would allow Jackson to pursue grants more consistently, manage stakeholder relationships, and develop long-term strategies to transition from grant dependency to local revenue generation through tourism, investment contributions, and business partnerships. (See [Appendix 1](#) for a full breakdown)

Costs

1. Costs to Jackson:

The City has already allocated \$65,000 for an Economic Development Officer position, which could be restructured to fund a full-time ECDD. Total first-year costs are estimated at \$97,682, which includes salary, benefits, professional development, and travel. This salary is competitive within the region and exceeds the Mayor's own compensation. If external funding from government or private sources becomes available, the City and Countys' financial burden could be significantly reduced, allowing the position to become self-sustaining over time.

At the close of the 2023 fiscal year, Breathitt County had approximately \$316,622 available between their coal severance funds and dollars allocated for a grant writer's salary. Jackson received \$29,416 in coal severance funds in 2024. The city and county could draw from those balances to fund this position. (See [Appendix 2](#) for a full breakdown)

2. Costs to External Parties:

ARC- The ARC offers capacity-building grants of up to \$500,000, funding initiatives such as staff training, professional development, hiring for expanded services, and regional economic planning (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2024). The City of Jackson and Breathitt County could jointly apply for \$100,000 to fund an ECDD position, focusing on regional collaboration, reducing the burden on Jackson's local development district (KRADD), and enabling long-term economic planning. Alternatively, each entity could apply separately in consecutive years, listing one another as a partner and securing up to \$200,000 in ARC funding while maximizing sustainability and impact (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2024). This would cost the ARC between \$100,000 to \$200,000. (See [Appendix 3](#) for a full breakdown)

The Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky- The City of Jackson and Breathitt County would partner with the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky to recruit a qualified and appropriately experienced candidate for this position. This organization is uniquely positioned to offer a network of qualified candidates, expertise in interviewing and identifying qualified applicants, and a regional perspective without local bias.

While the Foundation’s involvement does not require direct financial contributions, the organization would incur costs in personnel time of \$325. Additionally, the time required for supporting NGOs to adapt to this position, though unquantifiable due to limited personnel data, is a relevant cost. (See [Appendix 3](#))

Administrative Feasibility:

1. Staff Capacity: *High*

Jackson would not need to hire additional administrative staff to implement this policy, but existing personnel would need to divert time to oversee the hiring and coordination process. Key tasks include collaborating with the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky, reviewing applications, conducting interviews, and onboarding the selected candidate.

2. Legal & Regulatory Considerations: *Medium*

This alternative may introduce administrative and regulatory challenges. Specifically:

- City and council bylaws would likely require amendments
- The City and Council would have to jointly share the costs for this position

While these changes are not prohibitively complex, they introduce additional administrative steps that would need to be addressed before implementation. For these reasons, feasibility is medium, as it will require sign-off from the City Council and County Judge Executive.

Sustainability

1. Political Turnover: *High*

By creating a professional, shared city-county role, Jackson reduces its reliance on the Mayor’s office to lead economic development. This provides continuity across election cycles and lessens the disruption that political turnover can bring to long-term planning. Embedding the position within a shared structure and co-funding it with external support strengthens insulation from partisan or leadership changes. The Government Accountability Office warns that federal and state programs have different priorities, meaning reliance on grants could be unstable as political conditions shift (GAO, 2023), and this position would be insulated from those changes and would build overall protections within the city’s budget. A full-time ECDD also builds institutional memory and enables Jackson to remain engaged in regional economic strategy regardless of who holds office.

2. Disaster Recovery: *High*

Jackson’s recovery from recent flooding events has revealed the need for sustained, local capacity to manage crisis response and long-term planning. FEMA’s National Disaster Recovery Framework emphasizes that community-driven, locally led planning produces more equitable and resilient outcomes (National Disaster Recovery Framework, n.d.). A dedicated ECDD would serve as a central point of contact in times of crisis and lead efforts to integrate economic resilience into development strategy. This includes streamlining applications for recovery funds, coordinating with regional partners, and planning proactively for climate-related threats. For these reasons, this alternative is highly sustainable and responsive to the realities of Jackson’s vulnerability to future disasters

Policy Alternative 2: Engage a Core Intermediary to Modernize and Implement the Strategic Plan

Overview: This alternative proposes that Jackson partner with the West Virginia Community Development Hub, a high-capacity core intermediary, to modernize and implement strategic planning for economic growth. Core intermediaries are organizations with high-capacity that “...fill leadership gaps, collect data, serve as advocates and coordinate statewide efforts in dynamic, supportive ways” (Giovannetti, 2021). Engaging the WVCDH would expand Jackson’s capacity by providing the city with knowledgeable, experienced, well-connected advisors and advocates who, while working specifically on Jackson’s immediate needs, would also jointly work with other organizations and municipalities to ensure regional collaboration and success. These intermediaries offer critical services—including technical assistance, strategic planning expertise, and access to broader networks of funders and partners—that Jackson currently lacks. By doing so, they enable rural communities to overcome common barriers to progress. This alternative would allow Jackson to pursue more ambitious economic initiatives, attract external investment, and build long-term planning infrastructure that outlasts political cycles.

Background: The role of core intermediaries, as described in the St. Louis Federal Reserve’s chapter Core Intermediaries and Collaborations, underscores the importance of leveraging external organizations with regional expertise to bridge resource gaps in rural areas like Jackson (Giovannetti, 2021). Core intermediaries are instrumental in scaling services, attracting resources, and fostering stakeholder collaboration. The WVCDH has a proven track record of building capacity in similarly situated communities through initiatives like downtown revitalization and regional food systems development (Giovannetti, 2021).

While WVCDH is based in West Virginia, several organizations in Eastern Kentucky already serve as de facto core intermediaries. The Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky, for example, can receive grants on behalf of local governments, manage complex economic development projects, and offer grant-writing assistance. Despite their demonstrated effectiveness, these partnerships are often underutilized—partly because they haven’t been formally recognized or engaged in a strategic capacity. Jackson has an opportunity to change that. By leveraging these underused intermediaries more intentionally, the city can formalize support systems, expand capacity, and lay the groundwork for sustained economic revitalization.

Evaluation of Alternative 2

Effectiveness at Securing Grant Funding: *High*

Partnering with the WVCDH would significantly improve Jackson's ability to attract external funding. Floyd County's recent engagement with WVCDH led to \$6.85 million in total investments, including grants from the Department of Energy, private sector project investments, and regional partnerships through SOAR. Intermediaries offer more than just grant writing—they align projects with federal priorities, manage collaborations, and increase administrative readiness, all of which make Jackson a stronger candidate for competitive funding opportunities. (See [Appendix 4](#) for a full breakdown)

Costs

1. Costs to Jackson: *Low*

While WVCDH has no membership fee, the City of Jackson must apply for the Communities of Achievement Program and commit to two years of staff time to this relationship (Hub Communities of Achievement - The Hub, n.d.). This commitment would require the Mayor to reallocate a significant portion of her time, with an estimated cost of \$5,769. However, this does not account for potential travel expenses or training fees, as it is unclear whether the Hub covers these costs. (See [Appendix 5](#) for a full breakdown)

2. Costs to External Parties:

N/A

Administrative Feasibility:

1. Staff Capacity: *Medium*

The Mayor would need to dedicate approximately 17% of her full-time workload to this effort—likely requiring trade-offs with ongoing responsibilities related to flood recovery, daily operations, and constituent services. While the burden is temporary, it still presents a strain on an already overextended local government. However, the long-term outcome - building a broader support network and accessing new funding sources - justifies this investment. (See [Appendix 5](#) for a full breakdown)

2. Legal and Regulatory Considerations: *High*

Engaging WVCDH for strategic planning would not require major legal or regulatory changes but may involve procedural steps to formalize the partnership. The City of Jackson may need to pass a resolution or MOU to authorize collaboration with an out-of-state nonprofit. If city officials participate in WVCDH-led meetings, they must comply with Kentucky's Open Meetings Act, ensuring transparency (2022 - Open Records Open Meetings Guide.Pdf, n.d.). If grant funding is involved, the city must follow state financial reporting and procurement laws to manage funds properly. Additionally, any contract should clarify liabilities, fiscal responsibilities, and governing law to protect Jackson's interests. These changes are procedural and do not require intense or sustained administrative effort.

Sustainability

1. Political Turnover: *High*

Engaging the WVCDH for strategic planning and economic growth in Jackson is likely to be resilient through political turnover. The WVCDH operates as a nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting community-driven development initiatives across political spectrums (WVCDH, n.d.-b). Research indicates that community resilience efforts are more sustainable when they are community-led and insulated from political fluctuations (Morales-Burnett & Marx, 2022). A study on urban resilience governance emphasizes that efforts that center around resilience and a strong community “...benefit from being independent of politics and shielded from political turnovers given the long-term nature of the work” (Morales-Burnett & Marx, 2022).

Similarly, the WVCDH's approach of fostering local leadership and creating economic resilience plans tailored to each community's needs aligns with strategies that promote durability despite political changes (WV Daily News, 2024). Therefore, partnering with the WVCDH would likely provide Jackson with a stable framework for economic development that remains effective regardless of political transitions, making it highly sustainable.

2. Disaster Recovery: *Low*

While strategic planning contributes to long-term resilience, this alternative does little to support Jackson's immediate disaster recovery efforts. During crises—such as flooding—local governments must act quickly to deliver aid, restore services, and rebuild infrastructure. Diverting limited staff capacity toward planning may slow emergency response efforts. Though WVCDH can contribute to post-disaster redevelopment, its impact is long-term rather than immediate. As such, this alternative ranks low for its short-term disaster responsiveness. While this approach supports long-term resilience, it does little to address short-term recovery needs.

Policy Alternative 3: Engage the Community in Strategic Planning Workshops

Overview: This alternative proposes that Jackson leverage one of its greatest strengths—its people—to co-develop an updated strategic plan that reflects local priorities and builds trust in city leadership. This would entail a series of workshops inviting economic and community development professionals in Appalachia to guide and host the sessions for the purpose of creating a modernized strategic plan for Jackson. The Mayor would then be responsible for publishing the final product of these planning sessions, using the workshop discussions as a guide for its content. The final outcome would be a greater sense of shared ownership over Jackson’s future and strengthened public accountability for implementing that plan.

Background: Structured community-led planning workshops can build long-term capacity by equipping residents with the skills, networks, and voice needed to participate in decision-making. An additional benefit is that communities with high levels of engagement consistently report lower poverty and crime, higher median family incomes, and better public health outcomes (Wriston, 2021). Without strong civic engagement and leadership development, economic revitalization efforts risk being fragmented, externally driven, and misaligned with local needs.

Both the Brookings Institution and World Bank reports highlight the importance of community-led planning. The ACT NOW Coalition in West Virginia achieved notable success by prioritizing “community resilience through local planning” (Love & Powe, 2020). Similarly, the World Bank’s coal transition guidance underscores that early and continuous stakeholder engagement is crucial for reducing social conflicts and fostering sustainable outcomes. While these sources do not explicitly mention workshops, they offer a practical method to implement the community-focused strategies these reports advocate.

Community-led workshops could also enhance accountability in Jackson. A study by Awio, Lawrence, and Northcott on community-led initiatives in Uganda found that such efforts improved performance and accountability in public services, particularly in developing contexts (Awio et al., 2007). In Jackson, where there are no neighboring municipalities to serve as comparative accountability benchmarks, structured engagement can play a vital role in fostering transparency, innovation, and community alignment around shared goals.

Evaluation of Alternative 3

Effectiveness at Securing Grant Funding: *Low*

Community-led planning workshops can foster civic engagement, leadership development, and better alignment between residents' priorities and economic development goals. However, they do not, on their own, lead to increased grant revenue. Research from the GAO highlights that while federal grants are critical for community investments, they are not given on the basis of strategic plans alone, they are competitive and are awarded based on eligibility, feasibility, and administrative capacity (GAO, 2023). Similarly, the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development prioritizes projects that demonstrate clear implementation strategies, not just planning efforts, in their Community Improvement Grants (CDBG Community Improvement Grants | DHCD, n.d.). Community workshops alone are unlikely to increase Jackson's chances of securing grant dollars.

A limitation of the data is that very little quantitative analysis exists on the value of community-led planning workshops, especially in Appalachia. As the Brookings Institute points out, it is a recent revelation for many private and public investors that communities and their voices should be at the heart of all economic development work in rural places (Love & Powe, 2020). For these reasons, this alternative's effectiveness in acquiring grant revenue is low.

Cost

1. Costs to Jackson:

Hosting a series of six workshops is estimated to cost \$1,560, assuming no external facilitators are hired. This includes materials, outreach, and meeting logistics. The City can reduce costs through in-kind donations and volunteer support. However, converting the workshop outputs into a formal strategic plan may require additional professional support not captured in this estimate.

2. Costs to External Parties:

Supporting organizations, such as the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky, would likely incur about \$2,067 in personnel time to participate in and contribute to the workshops. This includes preparation, facilitation, and follow-up engagement across the six planned meetings. While these costs are modest, additional requests for implementation support, guest speakers, or plan facilitation would increase the burden on partner organizations. Still, this alternative imposes relatively little financial strain on external stakeholders. (See [Appendix 6](#) for a full breakdown)

Administrative Feasibility

1. Staff Capacity: *Low*

Organizing community-led planning workshops requires significant staff time and coordination, particularly from the Mayor's office and other key city officials. Given the existing workload - such as overseeing day-to-day operations, flood recovery efforts, and economic planning - dedicating staff time to organizing and facilitating these workshops could strain limited city resources. Research on local government capacity in small municipalities

indicates that staffing shortages and competing priorities are among the most common barriers to effective community development efforts (National League of Cities, 2004).

2. Legal and Regulatory Considerations: *High*

Conducting community workshops aligns with municipal governance structures and requires no major legal or regulatory changes. However, Kentucky's Open Meetings Act (KRS 61.800-61.850) mandates that if a group of public officials participates in a discussion that influences city policy, the meeting must be publicly announced and documented. Failure to comply could lead to legal challenges and transparency concerns (Statute.Pdf, n.d.).

To ensure compliance, Jackson should publish meeting notices, provide accessible documentation of workshop proceedings, and allow for public input in decision-making processes (Working Group on Legal Frameworks for Public Participation, 2013). This is all within the scope of what Jackson already does, which means it presents no additional regulatory barriers.

Sustainability

1. Political Turnover: *Medium*

According to the Urban Institute's report on Reimagining Community Planning Academies, community planning workshops hosted by local government agencies can be "subject to local government fiscal pressures and shifting political priorities" (Schilling et al., 2022). While in-kind gifts of materials and space may offset some of the costs needed from government budgets, the time, resources, and planning required from Jackson and external parties could be in danger in the case of an economic downturn or changing political priorities.

2. Disaster Resilience: *Medium*

While strategic planning workshops for economic development are not primarily focused on disaster resilience, they can indirectly strengthen long-term recovery efforts by fostering community engagement, leadership development, and coordinated planning. However, their immediate impact on disaster response is limited, as recovery efforts typically require urgent, localized action rather than long-term regional planning.

Research from FEMA emphasizes that disaster resilience is most effective when preparedness measures are integrated into ongoing community planning (Section 1, 2024). These workshops could provide some value in long-term resilience. However, in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, direct aid, emergency coordination, and immediate recovery efforts take precedence, and strategic planning efforts may divert resources away from these urgent needs. While economic development workshops contribute to long-term community resilience, their role in short-term disaster response is minimal. To enhance disaster preparedness, Jackson may need to complement these efforts with targeted emergency planning initiatives, which are outside the scope of this policy alternative.

Outcomes Matrix

	Alternative 1	Alternative 2	Alternative 3
Effectiveness			
	high	high	low
Cost			
to Jackson	Y1: \$97,581 Y2: \$99,891 Y3: \$102,662	\$5,769	\$1,560
to External Parties	\$200,325	N/A	\$2,067
Legal and Regulatory Considerations			
Staff Capacity	high	medium	low
Legal and Regulatory Considerations	medium	high	high
Sustainability			
Political Turnover	high	high	medium
Disaster Resilience	high	low	medium

Recommendation

Given that sustainability and effectiveness are the most important evaluative criteria for Jackson, **I recommend that the City of Jackson, Kentucky, pursue Alternative One: Expand the Scope of the IDA and Hire a Director.**

This option is the most likely to yield a high return on investment through increased access to grant funding, stronger strategic coordination, and long-term stability in Jackson’s economic development efforts. It also performs best on key sustainability measures—particularly its ability to withstand political turnover and support disaster resilience.

However, the tradeoff is clear: this is the most expensive alternative, both for the City and for external funders. While Alternatives Two and Three are significantly more affordable, their

impact is narrower and more uncertain. Alternative One requires an upfront investment—\$97,681 in the first year alone—but that investment is likely to be offset by increased external funding and grant awards over time.

Additionally, this recommendation challenges a long-standing local tradition of informal, volunteer-driven leadership. There is deep pride in Jackson’s model of mutual aid and quiet resilience—neighbors supporting neighbors without formal intervention. But that strength is now under strain. Relying on unpaid community efforts to sustain core economic functions is no longer viable in the face of complex challenges like grant navigation, strategic planning, and disaster preparedness.

As sociologist Robert Sampson notes, while community mobilization is a powerful force, it cannot replace formal infrastructure:

“Communities should be encouraged to mobilize via self-help strategies... but it is incumbent on government to mount aggressive strategies to address social and ecological changes” (Sampson, 2007, p. 172).

The community’s values and voices must remain at the heart of Jackson’s future—but they must be supported, not substituted, by professional leadership. A full-time ECDD ensures that the city can seize funding opportunities, respond quickly to emerging threats, and maintain consistent momentum across political cycles.

By investing in institutional capacity, Jackson positions itself not just to survive—but to grow. Alternative One offers the most direct and sustainable path toward economic revitalization, and it lays the groundwork for future community-driven development. For these reasons, it is the strongest choice.

Implementation Plan

Hiring a full-time Economic and Community Development Director requires a phased approach to mitigate challenges related to capacity, time constraints, and stakeholder coordination. Effective policy implementation hinges on clear sequencing, risk management, and strategic engagement with stakeholders. The ARC's capacity-building program evaluations by Westat identify common implementation barriers in capacity-building projects in Appalachia, including staffing shortages, lack of participation, and competition between localities (Kleiner et al., 2004). However, the ARC's capacity-building projects demonstrate that these barriers can be addressed through structured planning and risk mitigation strategies.

Potential Implementation Challenges & Mitigation Strategies

1. Staffing and Administrative Capacity

Issue: The hiring process may take longer than expected due to a limited pool of experienced candidates or excessive competition from other Appalachian localities seeking similar professionals.

Mitigation Strategy: The city should extend the hiring timeline if necessary rather than compromise on candidate qualifications. Partnering with organizations like the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky, KRADD, SOAR and One East Kentucky to market the role will ensure broader candidate outreach.

2. Geographic Isolation & Limited Applicant Pool

Issue: Jackson's geographic isolation may deter highly qualified candidates from applying, particularly those with the required regional knowledge.

Mitigation Strategy: The city could offer virtual work flexibility.

3. Community Competition for Economic Development Resources

Issue: Multiple communities in Eastern Kentucky are competing for the same talent, grants, and economic development funding.

Mitigation Strategy: The City could participate in existing joint economic development initiatives across counties, like One East Kentucky, which could increase available funding and foster long-term regional cooperation (www.goldenshovelayency.com, n.d.).

Implementation Plan

Phase 1: Necessary Approvals

★ *Months 1-2:* Approval from County Judge Executive and City Council

The first step is securing approval from the County Judge Executive, Judge Noble, to cost-share and co-supervise a shared ECDD. The Mayor should meet individually with the Judge to present a detailed job description, a cost-sharing proposal, and a governance structure for oversight and reporting. If cost-sharing is not approved, the Mayor should proceed with hiring the ECDD solely for the City of Jackson. This may require adjusting the proposed salary to reflect the city's sole responsibility for funding the position.

Next, the City Council must vote to formally allocate funds for the ECDD. Although a \$65,000 salary has already been approved for a similar position, the Council will need to confirm that these funds are designated for the restructured role—whether shared with the county or city-funded alone.

To secure Council approval, the Mayor and Kalista will deliver a presentation outlining:

- The projected economic impact of a dedicated ECDD
- Comparative data from similar municipalities
- A breakdown of external funding opportunities, including:
 - ARC's READY Appalachia program - up to \$500,000 for local capacity-building (READY Grants to Grow, n.d.)
 - Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky grants
 - Cost-sharing with the county

Council concerns around sustainability—particularly as this will be the highest-paid city position—should be addressed proactively. A compelling strategy includes:

- Presenting a near-ready ARC READY to Grow grant application
- Demonstrating how the ECDD will generate returns by securing external funding
- Emphasizing that this position is a foundational investment in long-term capacity

Phase 2: Hiring

- ★ *Month 3:* Post the position
- ★ *Month 4:* Begin first round interviews
- ★ *Month 5:* Final interviews and candidate selection

Once approval is secured, the hiring process should begin in Month 3 with a multi-platform recruitment campaign. The job posting should be distributed via LinkedIn, Indeed, and GovernmentJobs.com, as well as regional networks like SOAR, One East Kentucky, and

KRADD. A hiring committee should be formed with representatives from the IDA Board, the City Council, and the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky, which can offer both technical assistance and funding support.

The Foundation should also be invited to serve in a consulting role—helping to review applications, participate in interviews, and advise on candidate fit. The city may host a virtual information session for prospective applicants, providing an opportunity to learn more about Jackson’s economic development goals, available business incentives, and community priorities. If recruitment proves challenging due to Jackson’s rural location, the city should consider offering a relocation stipend or exploring a flexible hybrid work model. Special attention should be given to candidates with strong regional knowledge and prior experience in similar settings, to reduce risk and increase the likelihood of a successful hire.

Phase 4: Onboarding and Initial Project Development

★ *Months 7 - 12: Onboarding*

The onboarding process should begin immediately after the ECDD is hired and continue through Month 12. During this time, the Mayor and IDA should facilitate introductions with key partners, including state agencies, regional development organizations, local business leaders, and potential private investors. Building trust and establishing strong relationships will be essential during this early phase, especially as this is a new position for the city.

Within the first six months, the ECDD should be tasked with drafting a five-year strategic plan for Jackson’s economic development efforts. This plan should identify priority sectors, map out key funding opportunities, and establish benchmarks for progress. The city should commit to holding quarterly public meetings to provide updates, maintain transparency, and encourage ongoing community engagement. The ECDD should also begin tracking core metrics, such as the number of grants applied for and secured, new business projects launched, and estimated jobs created. Given the novelty of the position, expectations should remain realistic—recognizing that initial efforts will focus on capacity-building and foundational relationship development rather than immediate results.

Conclusion

Jackson, Kentucky has the opportunity to be a leader in Appalachia, to save itself from being more than a place haunted by the ghosts of industries past. The city has been compliant in its own economic decline, living in the long shadow of timber, coal and the railway. A combination of reliance on extractive industries and the city's own lack of capacity to turn ideas and plans into action have left the city stretched thin—rich in ideas, but lacking the leadership and infrastructure to bring those ideas to life.

This report has made the case for capacity-building as the most foundational, urgent, and strategic investment Jackson can make. By hiring a full-time Economic and Community Development Director, the city would not only gain additional professional expertise rooted in regional knowledge and values, but also a strong foundation for pursuing grants, coordinating partnerships, and advancing long-term economic planning. It also innately encourages a culture of collaboration by structuring the position as one shared by the city and county. While this alternative is more costly than others, its ability to capture future funding and strengthen resilience, all while keeping the community's voice the focal point of development, makes it the strongest and most sustainable option.

Jackson cannot afford to wait. The challenges it faces—natural disasters, economic stagnation, and the welfare of its people—will only deepen without the addition of experienced, full-time leadership. Investing in capacity is not a silver bullet, but it is the critical first step. With additional capacity, Jackson can begin to access the funding, partnerships, and planning support it needs to build a more resilient and robust future.

Appendix

Appendix 1. Effectiveness of Alternative One

Description: Comparative analysis of federal grants received for economically successful counties in Appalachia including only those with high rural capacity and at least one paid staff member working on economic development. I excluded grants that include any pertaining to water and sewage treatment and those delivered to housing authorities. Only grants made directly to counties, cities, or commerce entities housed within either the city or grant were included in this analysis.

Year	County	Economic Status	# of Federal Grants	Total Federal Funding	Grant Purposes
2019	Forsyth County, GA	Attainment	3	\$1,794,632.00	Staffing for Adequate Fire & Emergency Response, JMHCP Project, Law Enforcement Enhancement
2019	Shelby County, AL	Attainment	3	\$853,782.39	Airport Improvement, Domestic Violence Community Collaboration, Assistance to Firefighters
2019	Cherokee County, GA	Attainment	6	\$1,918,424.00	CDBG, Transit Bus Purchase, Cherokee County Juvenile Court, JAG Project, SWAT Team Equipment, Technology Upgrades
2019	Breathitt County, KY	Distressed	1	\$48,000.00	Community Facilities Grant

Sources: (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.-b; Government Spending Open Data | USAspending, n.d.; Hernandez, 2025)

Appendix 2. Costs to Jackson for Alternative One

Expense	Cost (1st Year)	Cost (2nd Year)	Cost (3rd Year)	Cost (4th Year)
Sponsoring a Job on Indeed and LinkedIn (one-time)	\$450	\$0	\$0	\$0
Basic Background Check (one-time)	\$20	\$0	\$0	\$0
New Laptop and Business Software	\$1,000	\$0	\$0	\$0
Training, Professional Development, and Travel Budget (annual)	\$7,500	\$7,500	\$7,500	\$7,500
Employee Support (40 hours from Mayor) (one-time)	\$962	\$0	\$0	\$0
Employee Support from IDA Board (10 hours) (one-time)	\$0	\$0	\$0	\$0
Benefits (35% of Salary)	\$22,750	\$23,433	\$24,135	\$24,860
Salary	\$65,000	\$68,959	\$71,027	\$73,158
TOTAL COSTS	\$97,682	\$99,892	\$102,662	\$105,518

Sources: (Free vs Paid Job Posts & Promotion Costs | Hiring on LinkedIn, n.d.; Hepp, 2024; Indeed Pricing: How Paid Job Posts Work, n.d.; Kentucky State Police, n.d.; Payroll Tax in Kentucky, n.d.; SalaryCube Editorial Team, 2024; The Cost of Hiring a New Employee, n.d.)

Cost-Sharing: The City and County could share the costs of the position. According to Breathitt County’s 2023 Audit, they budgeted \$5,769 for a grant writer’s salary, \$110,000 for coal severance projects when their cash balance for their LGEA Fund was \$288,491, and had a cash balance of \$22,362 in their LGED Fund (Ball, 2024). In 2024, the City of Jackson received \$29,416 for their LGEA Fund (City of Jackson, 2024). Coal severance dollars, which are

distributed from the Commonwealth of Kentucky's Local Government Economic Development and Local Government Economic Assistance Funds, are to be used to "...assist eligible counties in diversifying their local economies beyond coal production and meet other community development needs" (Barnes, n.d., p. 8). If the city and county were to share the costs for this position, they should draw from their LGEA and LGED Funds first.

Appendix 3. Costs to External Parties for Alternative One

Costs to Jackson: In 2023, the ARC awarded:

- \$50,000 to Jacksonville State University to develop a targeted economic development plan to enhance regional collaboration and organizational capacity.
- \$50,000 to Cordova, Alabama, to support strategic planning for economic development and community revitalization.
- Nearly \$4 million to Appalachian local development districts (LDDs) to expand staff capacity and improve support for local governments and nonprofits in securing federal funding, averaging approximately \$97,000 per grantee.

Given this precedent, Jackson could reasonably request \$100,000 as they would be doing the same type of work as their LDD and they would lighten some of their LDD's workload.

Source: (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2024)

Costs to External Parties: The Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky has a dedicated community engagement professional for Breathitt County and Jackson, Zack Hall, who has agreed to support this effort. His salary is approximately \$45,000 (using a current job posting from the organization for his role), making his hourly rate ~ \$21.66.

$\$21.66 \times 15 \text{ hours} = \325 total cost for Zack's time

Source: (Community Engagement Officer JD, 2025)

Appendix 4: Effectiveness for Securing Grant Funding for Alternative 2

Floyd County, Kentucky, demonstrates how partnering with a core intermediary can enhance grant funding and attract investment. After joining the WVCDH in 2023, Floyd leveraged its Building Resilient Economies in Coal Communities initiative to rebuild from 2022 flood damage and address economic stagnation (Floyd County, Kentucky Community Case Study, 2025). This partnership has already secured \$6.85 million in funding, including \$100,000 from the Department of Energy, a \$5 million industrial park investment through SOAR, and a \$1.75 million private sector expansion creating 36 jobs (Floyd County, Kentucky Community Case Study, 2025; WVCDH, n.d.; Lewis, 2024; Team Kentucky, n.d.).

Given Floyd and Breathitt Counties' shared economic and geographic challenges, Jackson could achieve similar results by engaging a core intermediary like WVCDH. These organizations go beyond grant-writing by building coalitions, aligning projects with state and federal priorities, and strengthening long-term economic strategies. This approach would increase Jackson's competitiveness for funding while building the administrative capacity for sustained growth, making it a highly effective option for generating grant revenue.

Appendix 5. Cost for Alternative Two

Mayor Thomas' salary was \$50,000 in 2023 (Laura Thomas J | GovSalaries, n.d.). Assuming participation in the economics-focused program at WVCDH requires approximately 2 hours of meetings, 4 hours of communication, and 4 hours of training per month, which totals to 240 hours over two years (Hub Communities of Achievement - The Hub, n.d.).

Mayor Thomas' hourly rate:

$$\$50,000/52 = \$961.54$$

$$\$961.54/40 = \$24.04$$

With an hourly rate of \$24.04, her time cost for 240 hours is \$5,769.23.

Given that she would work 4,160 hours over two years with a 40-hour work week, 240 hours / 4,160 is 17% of her time.

Appendix 6. Cost for Alternative Three to Jackson

Description: Costs to Jackson to host community planning workshops, broken down by best guesses of how much time would be needed per session and best guesses on who would be responsible for executing those tasks. Costs were determined using the hourly rate of each individual - salaries are from 2023 and retrieved from GovSalaries.com.

Time	Frequency	Purpose	Who	Hourly Rate	Cost
1.5 hours	6	secure space, materials, and refreshments	Assistant City Clerk	\$18.04	\$162.36
2.5 hours	6	plan agenda, activities, and presentation	Mayor	\$24.04	\$360.60
2 hours	6	coordinate with external partners	Mayor	\$24.04	\$288.48
1.5 hours	6	session recap and documenting notes	Mayor	\$24.04	\$216.36
1.5 hours	6	marketing and answering community questions	Assistant City Clerk	\$18.04	\$162.36
2 hours	6	host session, set-up and breakdown	Mayor	\$24.04	\$288.48
Total Hours =	66				
Total Cost =	\$1,478.64				

Sources: (Nellie Combs | GovSalaries, n.d.), (Laura Thomas J | GovSalaries, n.d.)

Description: Costs to Jackson to host community planning workshops, broken down by assuming what materials would be needed and selecting the cheapest available option for each.

Material	Frequency	Cost
Meeting Space - Council Room at City Hall	6	\$0.00
Water - 80 bottles	6	\$10.72
Name Badges (300)	2	\$9
Total Cost =	\$82.30	

Sources: (Water Bottles, n.d.; Amazon.com: 300pcs Plain Name Tag Labels, Blank Name Badge with Permanent Adhesive Writable White Name Tag Stickers for School Office Home with Perforation Line, n.d.)

Appendix 7. Cost for Alternative Three to External Parties

Description: Costs to External Parties to support and lead community planning workshops. This assumes that the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky will support the project for 6 hours per session and each subsequent organization will dedicate 4.5 hours to their respective session.

Hourly rates were calculated using publicly available information on position salaries.

Organization of Presenters	Individual	Hours	Hourly Rate	Activity
Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky	Zack Hall, Community Engagement Officer	36	\$21.66	Travel (2 hours), Session Attendance / Leadership (1.5 hours), Session Prep with Mayor (2 hours), Collaboration with nearby counties for partnership opportunities following sessions (.5 hours)
Serving Our Appalachian Region	Director of Entrepreneurship	4.5	\$40.38	Present & Facilitate Workshop (1.5 hours), Communicate with Mayor (1 hour), session prep (2 hours)
Appalachian Regional Commission	Program Analyst - Leadership	4.5	\$31.25	Present & Facilitate Workshop (1.5 hours), Communicate with Mayor (1 hour), session prep (2 hours)
Consultant - specialization in strategic planning	Strat Planning Consultant	4.5	\$148	Present & Facilitate Workshop (1.5 hours), Communicate with Mayor (1 hour), session prep (2 hours)
OneEast Kentucky	Colby Kirk, President & CEO	4.5	\$66.52	Present & Facilitate Workshop (1.5 hours), Communicate with Mayor (1 hour), session prep (2 hours)
Total cost =	\$2,067.44			

Sources: (Community Engagement Officer JD, 2025; Roberts, 2013; Salary, 2025; Understanding the Cost of Hiring a Strategic Planning Consultant for Your Nonprofit, 2024)

Appendix 8: List of Interviewees

1. **W. Caleb Bates** – Public Relations at Hazard Community Technical College
2. **Darren Back** – Engineer at Kentucky Highway Department, Jackson resident
3. **Stephen Bowling** – Council Member, Librarian, Historian, lifelong resident
4. **Rachel Chambers** – Community Liaison at the Rural Partners Network
5. **Teresa Combs** – Works with Family Resource Centers in schools
6. **Annie Forest** – Appalachian Growth Fund Manager at REDF
7. **Reed Graham** – Agriculture and Natural Resource Agent, UK
8. **Ginny Grulke** – Founder of the Appalachian Horse Project
9. **Dr. Derrick Hamilton** – CEO of Juniper Health, Breathitt Action Team Committee Member
10. **Colby Hall** – Director of SOAR
11. **Zack Hall** – Community Engagement Officer at the Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky
12. **Erica Klevers** – Senior Recovery Specialist at DCMC Partners
13. **Judge Jeff Noble** – Breathitt County Judge Executive
14. **Ishmael Dwayne Little** – Property Valuation Authority Employee
15. **Virginia Meagher** – Retired Jackson Attorney
16. **Mayor Laura Thomas** – Mayor of Jackson, KY, Business Owner
17. **Stacy Trent** – Agent for Family and Consumer Sciences
18. **Stephanie K. Randolph** – Executive Board Member for Invest Appalachia, Deputy Director of Cassiopeia Foundation
19. **Chet Siegel** – Former Jackson City Schools Guidance Counselor
20. **Wayne Sizemore** – Jackson City Schools Superintendent

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21. **Kostas Skordas** – Director of Research and Evaluation at the Appalachian Regional Commission
 22. **Doug Terry** – Founder of Kragen Farm, Lifetime Jackson resident
 23. **Kristin Walker-Collins** – CEO of Foundation for Appalachian Kentucky
 24. **Colby Kirk** – President & CEO of One East Kentucky
 25. **Lindsey Wolfe** – Supervisor at People’s Bank

Appendix 9: AI Usage

In preparing this report, I used generative AI (ChatGPT) to support the editing and revision process. This included refining sentence structure, improving transitions, and enhancing clarity while preserving the original ideas, voice, and analysis. All data collection, research synthesis, policy evaluation, and substantive content were developed independently by the author. The use of AI was encouraged by the course instructor as a tool for improving written communication.

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