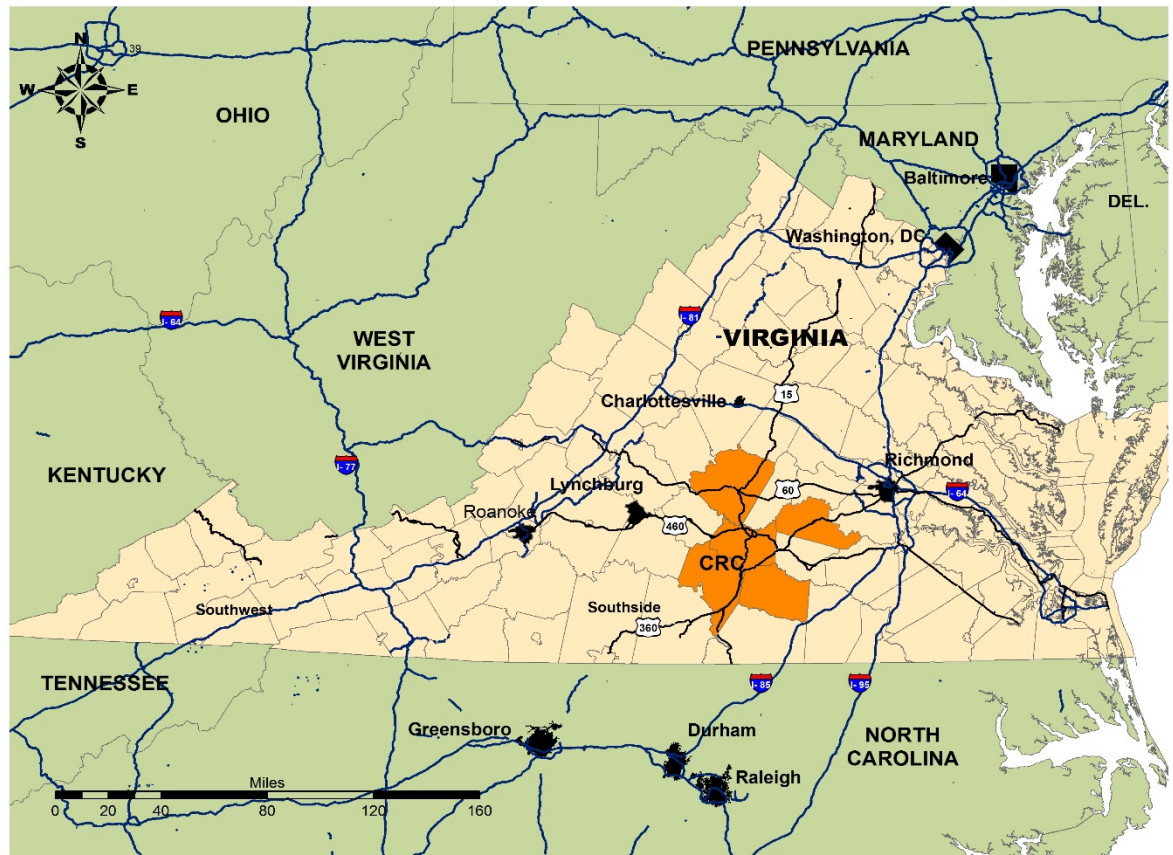


## 1 - OUR STORY

The Commonwealth Regional Council (CRC) presides over Virginia's Heartland, the south-central region of Virginia that includes the town of Farmville, the educational institutions of Longwood University, Hampden-Sydney, and Southside Virginia Community College, and the counties of Amelia, Buckingham, Charlotte, Lunenburg, and Prince Edward. The region is nestled between Lynchburg and Richmond and south of Charlottesville and harbors the best of rural Virginia's natural beauty, charm, and recreational opportunities. A long agricultural heritage is demonstrated by crops and pastures, vast forested areas, affordable land, and access to the James River, which have supported local industries for many generations. The educational institutions train local students as well as attract those from across the country, contributing to growing economic development and a vibrant downtown Farmville. The region lies at the crossroads of three major regional economies - Lynchburg, Richmond, and Charlottesville - providing its residents with access to large urban centers and work opportunities. These characteristics make the region unique and provide a foundation for success. Understanding how these characteristics can be nurtured and used most productively is the backbone of future development and improving quality of life in the area.

In order to grow beyond these foundational characteristics, other aspects of the economy require innovative solutions. The region needs to expand housing access for workers and families at all income levels. Trade education, skill building courses, and early work exposure are all areas for focused investment. Internet access through broadband is necessary to attract high paying, modern businesses. These and other issues must be addressed in a concerted effort to maximize sustainable growth.

In an increasingly globalized economy, localities must be diligent and proactive in planning for the future. As businesses have become more mobile, localities have made themselves more competitive for relocation. In order to benefit from this changing economic landscape, the CRC must work to make the Heartland region a more competitive business environment, able to



## 1 - OUR STORY

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compete regionally, nationally, and globally. This includes building a skilled workforce, diversifying the economy, and investing for the future through pre-school, primary, secondary, and higher education. This report provides a strategic way forward to meet three primary goals that can make the Heartland the right decision for businesses and families alike.

Among many nuanced strategies, leveraging the existing higher education institutions in the region will be necessary to improve workforce training initiatives. Simultaneously marketing regional development sites to new businesses, such as an inland port and data centers, will diversify the economic structure and increase high skill employment. Using development grants from regional, state, and federal resources to advance infrastructure quality will provide attractive opportunities for businesses.

Completing this plan and creating the strategies outlined within it would not be possible without community involvement. Surveys of constituents, community stakeholder meetings, and cooperation between CRC and local leaders was crucial to creating a representative and holistic CEDS plan. Likewise, the success of the plan rests on community support for it. Engaging community members to the fullest extent possible is a central component of community and economic development for the people of the Heartland.

With this plan, the CRC has the background, analysis, goals and strategies to make the Heartland an area of choice for future generations of families, entrepreneurs, and businesses.

## OUR VISION

***VISION: To promote a powerful, connected, and resilient Heartland economy by working with localities to improve quality of life, leverage education, and strengthen infrastructure.***

The vision for the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for Virginia's Heartland region was developed from stakeholder interviews that helped build understanding of where the region stands today and where it wants to go in the future. The results of these surveys also offer key insights into the needs of the regional economy.

Several important themes emerged from these results. The Heartland region has a wealth of resources to expand its economy, such as available, inexpensive land and natural resources like timber and waterways. Coordinated connections between various existing sectors of the economy can help grow their potential and unlock future success. Investment in education creates better job opportunities for local students, as well as improves the region's attractiveness to businesses. A well-educated workforce signals to businesses that the region can support its labor needs and increases regional competitiveness. The Heartland region has three higher education institutions that could serve as a resource for job training and advanced educational attainment for local students. More accessible healthcare facilities and training can complement and strengthen the existing healthcare and human service sector. Commitment to improving broadband infrastructure would open the door for a local information technology cluster. Lastly, tourism, recreation, and rural charm continue to promote the region and improve quality of life for residents with little public investment.

This vision statement outlines how Virginia's Heartland becomes the right choice for relocating individuals, families, and businesses in the Commonwealth and around the country. It highlights the foundation that it must build on to expand its economy and improve quality of life for its citizens. Three broad goals have been crafted to guide the development of the region, based on strengths and weaknesses assessed by reports, studies, and stakeholders.





## OUR GOALS

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Twenty-first century economic development requires connecting businesses, workers, and resources in productive and novel ways. Virginia's Heartland region has an abundance of low-cost land, recent capital investment, and access to a variety of opportunities to increase human capital within its labor force. The CRC has established three primary goals to bring long-term economic development to the region.

### Strengthen the region's workforce

The region must have a strong workforce to attract and sustain businesses. Technically skilled workers, of course, earn higher wages than low-skilled workers. Education and skill level are integral factors in determining employee wage rates relative to experience. However, strengthening the workforce is also about human development and quality of life. Having access to skill-building programs increases the number of opportunities a person can choose from, increasing job satisfaction among employees and reducing worker turnover and training costs for businesses. An aging population poses a challenge for employers to meet their labor needs. Trade education and other early age work exposure gives valuable experience to ambitious young people who can fill the skills gap left by retirees. Building and retaining a competitive workforce will prepare workers for the demands of high-paying, modern jobs and increase overall well-being within the regional economy.

### Broaden the region's businesses & industry

Economic diversity is critical to the healthy development of the Heartland for several reasons. First, a diverse group of businesses need supportive industries and local supply chains to successfully remain in operation. More businesses operating in the area creates demand for workers and input goods. Subsequently, schools, daycare centers, construction companies, and other businesses supporting the population's needs will open. These businesses can both compete with and complement one another, improving product prices and innovation. Regional industrial clusters, like those found in Silicon Valley, financial hubs like Charlotte, North Carolina, and large manufacturing centers scattered across the southeast can form around a small initial group of interconnected businesses. In addition, diversifying the industrial composition of a region prevents economic catastrophe when a dominant industry declines or experiences other external shocks. This increases the resiliency of the region's economic structure, which in turn supports additional growth.

### Leverage education for growth and gain

Education provides the first steps toward strengthening a region's workforce and improving its attractiveness to businesses. Additionally, higher education institutions can provide support in community development. Not only do university students provide demand for restaurants, human services, and other businesses, they also support development with community service work, large-scale volunteer efforts, and other programs typically utilized by low-income areas. For example, Longwood University's Small Business Development Center is a valuable local partner in workforce development. The Heartland is home to multiple institutions of higher education, spanning a broad spectrum of studies, both professional and liberal arts. Building relationships with local higher education institutions can be exceptionally beneficial to the region, institutions, and workers. Likewise, strategic investment in pre-school and primary and secondary education lays the foundation for a reliable work force into the future.