

**Planning Our Future
The Harlan County Project**

FINAL REPORT NARRATIVE

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Title of Project: Planning our Future: The Harlan County Project

Grant Period: January 1, 2017-June 30, 2018

Grantee Name: Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College

Project Director: Robert Gipe, instructor

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College Appalachian Studies students collaborated with the Harlan County Community Foundation in an ongoing strategic planning process funded by the Brushy Fork Institute at Berea College focusing on downtown development in Harlan County.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

- The community planning process employed consultants from BLDG, Center for Great Neighborhoods, and Yard, Inc., a coalition of community development organizations working in downtown Covington, Kentucky. SKCTC ATP students were part of community meetings facilitated by these consultants.
- Each student in the class conducted research and read material that allowed them to explore best practices from other communities in the Appalachian region and beyond.
- Each student attended at least one meeting where the strategic plan for downtown Harlan will be discussed.
- Each student in the class produced their own written analysis of what is going on in downtown Harlan and present their own research-grounded ideas on what might work as a community development strategy.
- Each student's ideas were reflected in strategic planning documents produced in collaboration with the community planning consultants, and other community members outside the class.
- Eleven of the students involved made an oral presentation and were involved in the creation of a poster for the Appalachian Teaching Project conference in Washington DC in December 2017.
- Several of the students made a presentation at the Appalachian Studies Association conference in Cincinnati Ohio in April, 2018.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

- Creation of a strategic plan for development of downtown Harlan, Kentucky.
- Research partnership between Harlan County communities and SKCTC.
- Development of leadership and civic capacity among the students engaged in the project.
- Enhancement of student and community awareness of the work of the ARC at all levels.
- SKCTC student participation in the ATP conference in Washington DC, December 1-2, 2017
- SKCTC student creation of a poster for the above-mentioned conference.
- SKCTC student presentation at the Appalachian Studies Association conference in Cincinnati, April 2018.
- Research addressing the following goals in the ARC strategic plan:
 - **Goal 1: Economic Opportunities**
Invest in entrepreneurial and business development strategies that strengthen Appalachia's economy.
 - **Goal 4: Natural and Cultural Assets**
Strengthen Appalachia's community and economic development potential by leveraging the Region's natural and cultural heritage assets.
 - **Goal 5: Leadership and Community Capacity**
Build the capacity and skills of current and next-generation leaders and organizations to innovate, collaborate, and advance community and economic development.

Our work began with the hiring of former ATP student Carrie Billett during the summer of 2017 to do a community engagement process that focused on the Belk Building in downtown Harlan, and then spread throughout Harlan County. The Belk Building had been donated to local nonprofit organizations by attorney Otis Doan for use in the public interest. Billett worked for Christian Outreach for Appalachian People (COAP), a housing and community development organization based in Harlan County, through the summer of 2017, engaging people throughout Harlan County. She delivered a report on her findings in September, to the first of three

community meetings held during the fall. Fall 2017 ATP students helped to organize and coordinate these meetings.

In late October, Billett produced a report about her findings. The following are excerpts from Billett's report:

The Belk building is an 80 year old, 30,000 square foot, three story building located at 118 East Central Street, downtown in the city of Harlan, Kentucky. The building was vacant for several years before concerned citizens expressed an interest in turning it into a center for the arts. With their interest and effort as impetus it was generously gifted to a coalition formed by the Harlan County Community Foundation, COAP, inc. and the Appalachian Program at Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College. The coalition initiated this community engagement and listening project out of a desire to ensure that the activation and long term use of the Belk building is informed by the wants and needs of the community. Between May 23 until August 17 I engaged with more than 277 people. I attended community events and spoke about the project at 10 community meetings. I engaged one-on-one with at least 77 people. When I talked with people I guided the conversation but let it focus on the speaker's community and interests. Some people were very interested in discussing what could happen specifically in the Belk building and downtown Harlan. Other people were more interested in discussing their local community or general small business development. I considered all of this input relevant and valuable. Underlying themes in these engagements were the need for more access to education, more amenities, more choice, more options for career paths locally and the need for more jobs and better paying jobs. People imagined many solutions.

Billett found that most of the community's interest and concerns could be grouped into three main categories: 1) Small business and affordable space; 2) Communication; and 3) "Something to do." Again excerpts from Billett's report on each of the three categories:

Small Business and Affordable Space Many people talked about small businesses that start and fail. People attributed this in part to the well known high unemployment rate in the county reducing the amount of discretionary income residents have, but people also felt that over priced commercial properties were making it increasingly difficult to do business.

Communication People talked about marketing and advertising within the county and expressed feeling isolated from other regions in the county, not knowing what was happening socially and feeling unheard. People also talked marketing and advertising outside the county. Many mentioned concern for how the county might be portrayed to others and wanting to have control of our story; but also concern that those outside the county just don't know the assets that we do have.

"Something To Do" Community members I spoke with expressed a desire for more options. Many talked about driving several hours to Knoxville, Kingsport, Johnson City or Lexington to shop for clothing or home goods. People also discussed stopping for food, groceries, coffee and entertainment and spending a lot of money in one trip. People want more food options, from

restaurants to grocery stores. People described being bored with the current options. Many questioned whether the county's moist status played a role in limiting options. Several people discussed the limited local grocery stores and access to diverse foods and even fresh vegetables. Local selection is often very limited and poor quality.

In closing, Billett had the following to say, which she put under the heading, **What Should be Done With the Belk Building?:**

What goes into the Belk building will not solve the economic depression the county faces, but it can be part of the whole county moving forward together. The community shared an overwhelming wealth of ideas and desires but each person spoke of a desire for the elusive "something to do." Many of the ideas shared by people looking for something to do could be found in an arts center. The flexibility of an arts center is its most compelling feature. It could be used for education, for community building, for social and historical preservation work as well as technology, music, culture, food, comedy, theater, and design as well as traditional fine arts and crafts.

The Belk building could be made a mixed-use building and house event space, gallery space, and meeting space with an information center focused on local and regional arts programming, open regularly to the public on just the first floor. There would be room to grow with studio spaces, shared work spaces or office spaces and other ventures on other floors. This could be art-focused but also be an aid in launching small businesses and entrepreneurs by helping them establish themselves before they take on the challenge of high overhead. When people come into downtown Harlan for programming offered at the Belk building they would also be interested in dinner and drinks and shopping and relaxing and spending time with family and meeting new people. This opens up more opportunity for existing businesses to grow and for new openings. This activity could bring in enough resources to make it more viable to open small businesses or encourage owners to be more flexible with buyers and renters when they see activity already happening downtown. As this growth starts people will want to join in.

My community engagement work and listening focused on the needs and wants of the community and not on the financial viability of the suggested project. However, this plan for a variety of programming and flexible space offers room for both success and failure as well as room for grant-funded ventures to run alongside privately funded ventures. This idea does not directly meet the underlying need for jobs and economic development, but the Belk building could be a part of creating a Harlan County where people want to stay, a place where new companies see opportunities for growth in the traffic and activity downtown, a Harlan County where adventurers will want to put down roots with the mountains outside their door.

The rehabilitation of the building is key to this plan, but the design of the programming and ongoing strategies for integration in the community will help create the participation needed. In the feedback I presented earlier we saw clearly divides that exist in the community. The Belk building cannot remedy old slights but it could serve as a hub and a connecting point, setting new standards for communication, outreach and community involvement. It will not be enough

to create a space; continued programming and continued intentional engagement with the community are essential to success.

Billett's report pointed the way to a more collective discussion of what needs to happen in our county, both to program and renovate the Belk Building and to rebuild our county's economy. Billett's work created a perfect segue into the work of our Covington-based consultants, led by the design firm BLDG and the work of the Fall 2018 ATP class. In September, October, and November, Cate and Jay Becker of BLDG, Joe Nickol of the urban design firm MKSK, and Sarah Allan of the non-profit Center for Great Neighborhoods collaborated with the SKCTC Appalachian Program and ATP students to hold monthly community planning meetings.

At our second community meeting, on October 24th, our consultants, BLDG and their partners presented a slide show that recapped our first meeting on September 26th and revealed the process the Covington creative placemaking group uses in helping communities renovate buildings and rejuvenate neighborhoods. The slide show, entitled *The Belk Block*, is a convenient way to understand what happened in Harlan County this fall and where we are headed in 2018 and beyond.

Slides 1-7

The slide show began with the Covington group's takeaways from the September meeting, which was attended by nearly 200 people and was primarily a listening session. This meeting was attended by 30 ATP students, who also participated in administering the meeting. BLDG and their partners pulled out five quotes from the community's testimony to represent what we said:

- "We are disconnected, independent, and proud of it."
- "We have food, art and song that you have never experienced before."
- "Our hills and our hollers are like no place on earth."
- "We let it get bad waiting for someone else to do this for us."
- "Poverty is not our story."

These quotes were generally well-received and suggested to folks they would be listened to and heard in this process.

Slide 8 presents a summary of what is to be done:

1. Understand stories from relevant places
2. See how activation can uncover hidden potential
3. Test ideas for the Belk Block
4. Use as springboard for wider City and County initiatives

Slides 9-12 were quick looks at three other places: Thomas WV, Braddock PA, and the Hellman Creative Center in Covington. All three places focused on individual building renovations that a) had community-based processes and b) led to broader neighborhood change.

Slides 13-23 included images of a “space activation” in Covington that led to the formation of the Old Kentucky Makers Market. Slides included images of concerts, arts events, and neighborhood block parties going on in and around a building that was subsequently renovated based on a plan and program that developed at these social and cultural events. Presenter Joe Nickol from the BLDG group described these “activations” as monthly events planned by the community designed to bring people together to have fun and also talk about what they wanted for the building. That fun-having and brainstorming (plus a lot of planning, and fundraising, and hard work) became the Makers Market. Nickol suggested that we might follow a similar pattern for buildings and neighborhoods we wanted to rejuvenate.

Slide 24 laid out an agenda for us activating the Belk Building and the space around it, as a process not only for getting a program for the Belk Building, but for the rest of downtown Harlan. That agenda went like this:

1. Pick a Space
2. Pick an Amenity
3. Broadcast
4. Rethink, Evolve, Repeat
5. Develop

Slides 25-30 used overhead images of the Belk Building and surrounding blocks and introduced us to a set of “core activation elements” and how they would be introduced to the space over the next 36 months. Those elements are:

0-6 months

- Art
- Music
- Food & beverage
- Establishment of a performance space called “The Hearth”
- Lighting

Over the next six months, ATP students coordinated monthly space activation meetings on or near the site to keep the conversation going and keep the community engaged. We had the first of these meetings on December 8, 2017. Over 70 community residents came to the Harlan Civic Center to sit around a fire pit and make music, eat, and also look at inspiration boards prepared by a variety of community members for murals we are planning for downtown. Four more meetings followed, and they were integrated with our spring 2018 ATP class.

After the first batch of these activations, perhaps in months 6-12, BLDG suggested we might add

- Pop-up retail
- Potted landscaping

During months 12-18, BLDG suggested we might add

- Roof access to the Belk Building
- Highlighted access to the river

And during months 18-36, BLDG's slide show added the following to the area in and around Belk:

- Studio cottages on top of the Belk Building
- Other renovated buildings
- More public art
- More pop-up retail

These ideas were presented not as a plan, but as one way the process might work out.

Slides 31-37 outlined five committees that we might use to do our own space activations and continue our planning process through a series of social and cultural events. Nickol introduced five committees and described their function. The committees are:

- Site Prep
- Programming
- Art
- Food & Beverage
- Marketing and Branding

Slides 38 & 39, the last two slides in the BLDG show, gave us the following charge:

1. Choose a table based on your interest/skills
2. Get to know one another + pick scribe/spokesperson
3. Hone in on who we want to attract to the Belk Block
4. List strengths, weaknesses + new ideas for activation
5. Identify specific tactics, skills + roles for committee
6. Report out and collect contact info

And that was our second meeting. That meeting provided an important guidance for the ATP student work that ensued.

We reassembled in those committees at our third meeting on December 10th, which took place at the UK Extension Depot, and concluded with a concert by Brooklyn Collins and the Kudzu Killers at the Portal Pizza restaurant, in downtown Harlan. It was at the Depot meeting that we decided to hold our first activation event December 8th.

Our Branding and Marketing committee chose the name Harlan Community Spark Events for our series of activation events. Our first one, which focused on murals, was called Visualize. The December 8th activation event took place at the Harlan Civic Center and included eating, sitting

around fire pits, more music by Brooklyn Collins and the Kudzu Killers, and a discussion of what we wanted in a series of 4-6 murals to be created beginning in the spring of 2018. Community members created “inspiration boards” of mural content and images of murals elsewhere. These inspiration boards guided our discussions.

Through the Spring of 2018, ATP students led work on our mural plan, and on plans for the Belk Building. We repeated the space activation process in the Tri-Cities section of Harlan County and made plans to begin building renovation in the Summer of 2018.

Initial renovation will be integrated into a new community development and workforce training project, the Southeast Kentucky Revitalization Project (SEKYRP). In September, the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) awarded the Southeast Kentucky Community & Technical College Appalachian Program a \$596,250 grant as part of ARC’s POWER Initiative. The Southeast Kentucky Revitalization Project (SEKYRP), will provide workforce training designed to help the central Appalachian workforce participate in the renovation and re-invention of communities in the region. SEKYRP will train Eastern Kentucky workers in the construction trades, the hospitality industry, and design-related trades and connect them with employers and developers in their home communities. The project will train local workers to install solar panels; learn innovative, energy-efficient roofing solutions; and do mitigation of asbestos, mold, and lead; among other skills. SEKYRP will create brief, intense training opportunities to meet the needs of employers in bars, restaurants, hotels, bed and breakfasts, tourist attractions, and other hospitality employers. SEKYRP will also create partnerships with artists, design firms, media companies, and tourism entities to train workers to create public art, websites, audio and video messages, podcasts, signage and wayfinding graphics leading directly to improved livability and attractiveness of central Appalachian towns and cities.

During the fall of 2017, two other SKCTC classes were full participants in the planning process in addition to the ATP class, Humanities 202: Survey of Appalachian Studies I. All of the students in the ATP Survey of Appalachian Studies course and two English composition courses, a total of over 50 students, created individual research projects on aspects of sustainable community development, and/or use of the Belk Building. Topics included how to broaden legalized sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages, development of downtown housing, increasing the number of producers at the Harlan County Farmers Market, entrepreneurship in the form of painting businesses taking advantage of downtown development grants, development of equestrian parks, dark sky resorts, a Cawood Ledford Museum (the former UK broadcaster is a Harlan native) focusing on Kentucky basketball fandom, and festivals focusing on motherhood and gospel music. Students developed ideas for murals, recreation centers, road construction, ski resorts, and attractions designed to profit from the coming Appalachian Wildlife Center. The Appalachian Studies students were full participants in the fall community meetings, which happened at the same time as their class. These students also met with county judge-executive Dan Mosley to plan the ATP presentation. Our presentation on December 2 in Washington, DC described the work of the fall as well as their individual projects. Five of the eleven students who presented in Washington participated in a second class this fall which continued their work

on community development and dovetailed with the work of the community process described above.

PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED

Things went very well.

PROGRAM CONTINUATION AND SUSTAINABILITY

During the spring 2018 semester, seven students returned to take Humanities 203. Again, the class was organized around community meetings. The activation plan that came out of those meetings started with a plan for “creative placemaking” projects. In our case, that meant murals, and the ATP students in the spring 2018 class were an active part of a community-based process for defining what the community wanted its murals to be about. The Spring 2018 students also conducted a publicity campaign to encourage more people in the county to sell at the Harlan County Farmers Market.

During the summer of 2018 SEKYRP training in the construction trades will begin, as will a SEKYRP training for professional artists and community members in the creation of murals. Both these trainings will take place in Harlan County.

During the fall of 2019, work will continue on the murals as part of the next Appalachian Teaching Project.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our Covington partners helped our ATP students and our community learn more about a particular style of participatory community creative process. ATP students and others latched onto the social nature of it. The excitement created made a strong experience in the fall, and led to a chance for ATP students to exert even more leadership and find a channel for their energy in the spring. Also, at this point, the process has established the mural making discussion as central to thinking about recasting our narrative, central to our branding discussion.

As part of our December 2017 community meeting, ATP students and others created inspiration boards for what our murals might be, what our message to the rest of the world might be. We continued working with ATP students and the community to create mural inspiration boards and forums for discussing them through the Spring of 2018. The inspiration boards and the space activation committees, the ATP class and other college classes working on community development projects in a context that was real, a context where students could see their work making a difference. The judge-executive coming to the ATP classroom and his genuine interest in helping them achieve their goals—because in many cases they were the judge’s goals as well—helped the students’ see the importance of their work. The interview process flowing into the community meeting process flowing into the space activation process helped people

see the work as connected. Folk in Harlan have embraced the process that began this fall, taken it and run with it.

The Fall 2017 ATP students and the SKCTC Appalachian Program staff wanted to get people stirred up. We wanted to change the mentality. We wanted to work with people to create a visible, realistic path forward. We wanted a concrete plan. We feel good about the job we did on the first three. The fourth, the concrete plan, has come into much better focus by the end of May. I suspect we will always be planning.

We did three meetings and hundreds of interviews during the summer and fall of 2017. We had five more meetings planned as part of our “space activation” process. We met with the Tri-Cities communities twice in early 2018 to start a space activation process there. Billett’s interviews took place throughout the county. They happened not just in the Tri-Cities and Harlan but in Wallins, Cawood, Pine Mountain, Clover Fork—all over. What Covington showed us is a model for one space and how it can activate, in this case, a whole downtown. They showed us also how to replicate the space activation process in other communities.

Carrie Billett had to leave. That created a transition issue. But Alexia Ault, who has essentially been a co-teacher of the last few SKCTC ATP cohorts, has come on board as coordinator of our POWER grant project, and the people in the network are now engaged in helping one another stay informed.

The first activation event happened with hardly any Appalachian Program staff support. Community members taking it on. The first community meeting, Let’s Talk!, was huge. 150 people there easy. People spilling out of the room. The people scared by the first mural inspiration boards—too radical!—made their own. A good conversation emerged, a recognition that we have a lot of walls, room for all kinds of different approaches. WYMT has done at least three stories on our process.

The POWER grant will give us some money to do renovations. We have mural money. We have an organizational structure. Appalachian Studies class in the spring will be doing more community development work, will build on the work of the class in the fall. Many students are returning for the second half of the two-course sequence.

There will be the work of the POWER grant to bolster what we have started. There is a plan. There will be murals. In the winter, former ATP students traveled to Coalfield Development and Corbin to get ideas and form partnerships. They took part in CEDIK and Power Zone trainings. We have branding money. We are engaging the community asking “What is the story we tell ourselves? What is the story we tell others?” And we have resources to frame that message and put it into the world.

Carrie Billett set us up with her extensive interviewing and community engagement. The first meeting in September was incredible. People were hanging out the windows, piled in the doorways. Everyone spoke, people seemed to feel agency, like the process was open, and we

have been able to sustain a vibe that this process belongs to the participants. By working with consultants who have a grounding in the arts and the creative placemaking movement, the process has had a wonderful creative feel. It has reinforced the sense that we are making something. And as has often been the case, the community college and its students have been one of our secret weapons. Students—not all of them young—have provided a dose of energy and hope and freshness to the work that has energized us all.

There is a process in place. A broad cross-section of the community has been engaged. Excitement, expectation is palpable. A sense of possibility. A sense that it should be fun. There are roles for people. There is a structure. It needs to be strengthened, but there is a structure.

We want to recruit business. We want to retain existing business. We want to retain people. We want to cheer ourselves. Give ourselves hope. Give others hope for us. We want to convince ourselves and others that we are worth taking a risk on economically. We put the electro shock paddles to ourselves with this project. We shocked ourselves back to life. We found a way to start.

ATTACHMENTS

A variety of images, Powerpoints, and files related to our project can be found at:

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/2fsg77ltyigt657/AABrHP7bQR_ohmNQ4gdTUT4ua?dl=0