

TOWNS

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those industries have waned, communities have sought to find a new path forward.

Diverse towns, one shared vision

There are ten towns in the Mon Forest Towns partnership: Marlinton, Davis, Elkins, Richwood, Thomas, Parsons, Petersburg, Franklin, Cowen and White Sulphur Springs. These ten towns are now being linked in a new initiative designed to market them as part of a regional recreation destination.

The Mon Forests Towns partnership started in 2016 when the USDA began re-thinking how the forest impacts the people who live within its boundaries. According to Cynthia Sandeno, District Ranger for the USDA Forest Service, they began to hold community meetings to listen to the various stakeholders in the towns — mayors, town council members, chamber of commerce leaders, business owners. Their aim was to learn how the forest could help improve the quality of life in the area, especially in towns struggling to transition from extraction industries to tourism.

The Forest Service decided to bring in experts like Doug Arbogast, rural tourism specialist with the West Virginia University Extension Office. “Doug came in with his expertise,” said Sandeno, “and in no time we were seeing so much enthusiasm from other groups, like the USDA Rural Development and the Woodlands Development Group,” a lending organization headquartered in Elkins.

“We realized that all these Mon forest towns were trying to market themselves as recreation destinations,” explained Megan Mason Dister, AmeriCorps member working for the USFS. “But they were working alone. That is hard to do.”

So the group identified ten towns with unique histories and features but a common purpose: a desire to attract visitors to come not just to their towns, but to the region — the way beach regions like Myrtle Beach and the Outer Banks attract families for as long as a week or two.

New logo, new brand

Jessica Waldo, director of the Tucker County Visitors Center, said the idea is modeled after the Pennsylvania Wilds, an initiative that markets an entire two million acre region of that state as a destination. “WVU helped create the logo, the brand, the feel,” she said. “The goal is to boost the economies of the communities embedded in the forest and to improve overall quality of life.” The ten towns were identified, and a map was created that showed the physical links between the towns — highways, rivers, trails.

To formalize the partnership, each town council designated a representative to serve on the Mon Forest Towns board. Early this year, a memo of understanding was signed by each town. WVU, the Tucker Community Foundation and the Pocahontas County Convention and Visitors Bureau have been fiscal agents for the initiative.

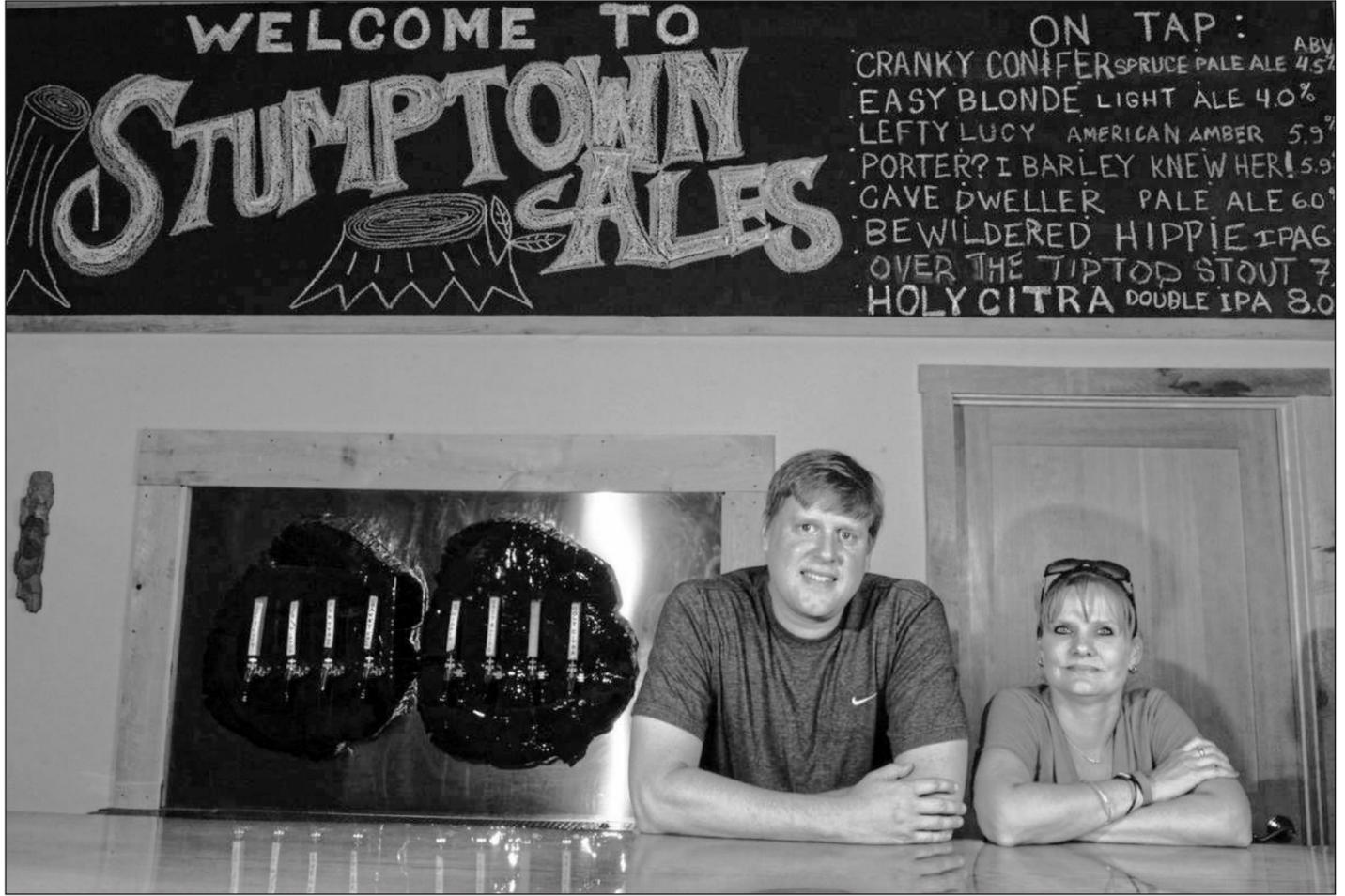
The partnership has sought out and received grant monies from the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation and others to provide resources for a regional sign plan. This has allowed them to purchase uniform signage for each town that will contain the bear logo, but will also allow for each town to customize it to highlight its unique features. Some of the towns have already erected the signs.

Funding will also help towns with technical assistance, business consulting and options for loans and grants through the Woodlands Development Group. Plans include a website — scheduled to roll out next month — with an interactive map of the entire region. Amenities like trails, lodging, restaurants, etc., will pop up with a click.

Much of the funding will be used for placing signs and kiosks throughout the communities and the national forest to help visitors locate businesses and attractions.

Results already noticeable

Citizens living in the Mon Forest region are already seeing the benefits of the partnership. “This will be great for the biking business,” says Joey Riddle, “because it will connect all the towns into a trail network and make the



SAM OWENS | Gazette-Mail file photo

Stumptown Ales owners Jonathan and Cindy Robeson stand behind the bar at their brewery in Davis in 2015.



MICHELLE ROSE | Courtesy photo

Jake and Nikki Tyler of Cherry River Roasting.



Courtesy photo

Anne Mitchell and Mark Hengemihle, owners of Knapp's Creek Lodge in Marlinton.



Courtesy photo

Joe and Mandy Riddle, owners of Joey's Bike Shop in Elkins, holding their children, Hallie and Henry.

sport more accessible. Mountain biking brings thousands of riders to the Mon Forest, who then spend money on gas, lodging, meals, attractions and shopping.

Anne Mitchell of Knapp's Creek Lodge is also excited about the partnership. “We don't have an advertising budget. I think the increased availability of information is going to allow more people to come and enjoy the area.” She

and Mark recently qualified for their 10-year outfitter and guide license to take clients fly fishing in streams in the national forest.

The stakeholders interviewed for this story shared a passionate enthusiasm about the future of this region as a destination for recreation vacations. The owners of Knapp's Creek Lodge, Stumptown Ales, Joey's Bikes and Cherry River Roasting are

typical of the new breed of small business owners in the region. They bring a vibe that is youthful, green, outdoorsy and healthy.

The Monongahela National Forest has always had an identity as a place to fish, hunt, hike and go camping. Now, thanks to efforts like the Mon Forest Towns partnership, that identity is expanding to include Airbnbs, breweries, bistros, ski shops, wine

shops, hostels, coffee bars, makerspaces and art galleries. The demand is fading for quilts and jellies and primitives that characterized the Appalachian boom of the 1970s. This new generation likes to travel light and avoid clutter. They are more interested in having experiences than purchasing goods.

The new tourist wants a place to get away; they want a break from crowded cities.

They want a place with dark skies, where they can do something as simple as gaze up at an array of stars on a clear night.

But they also want their amenities to be nearby. If a sign with a bear on it can help them find all that, then everybody wins.

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