

ECONOMY

# 'The parkway is suffering. If we don't do something to protect it, we are going to lose it'

*The Blue Ridge Parkway receives more visitors than the Yellowstone, Yosemite and the Grand Canyon national parks combined. But it has had to put off many maintenance projects over the years due to lack of funding.*



by **Ralph Berrier Jr.**  
November 6, 2023



A motorcyclist passes by the entrance to the Blue Ridge Parkway on U.S. 52 at Fancy Gap. Photo by Ralph Berrier Jr.

Privacy - Terms

For three years, the portion of the Blue Ridge Parkway that passed by Mary Sink's family farm was a road to nowhere.

The scenic byway had been closed since May 22, 2020, after a 150-foot-long chunk of pavement collapsed down a mountainside following heavy rains. Nearly 15 miles of road were closed between the parkway's entrances at the top of Bent Mountain and at U.S. 220 in Roanoke County as repairs dragged on.

Sink, whose Clover Hill Angus beef cattle farm sits next to the Bent Mountain entrance off U.S. 221, said that her father-in-law joked that "it took less time to build the whole parkway than it took to fix this."

To be sure, construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway's entire 469-mile stretch across Virginia and North Carolina lasted two generations after ground was broken in 1935, but Sink's father-in-law had a point. It sure was taking a long time to fix 150 feet of road.

When the repairs were completed at a cost of \$2.5 million earlier this year and the parkway reopened June 8, Sink and other Bent Mountain residents cheered the return of tourist traffic to the community.

"We love the parkway," Mary Sink said. "We use it as a different way to get to places like Roanoke, Bedford and Vinton, and it's been good to see more people enjoying what we have here in the community. Its closure mattered a great deal to us."

The three-year closure irked Carolyn Ward, too. She is the CEO of the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation, a North Carolina-based nonprofit organization that serves as a chief fundraising partner and advocate for the parkway. Even though the parkway is a unit of the National Park Service — the most-visited NPS site, with more than 15.7 million travelers annually, according to park service estimates — the scenic road is often underfunded and has a backlog of deferred maintenance and repair projects totaling \$347 million, which is in addition to an annual maintenance budget of \$17 million.

Ward saw that when Yellowstone National Park was devastated by historic flooding and mudslides that destroyed roads in June 2022, the park service got some park entrances opened within days, and the rest reopened by autumn.

"In Yellowstone, a road was washed out, completely gone, and they rebuilt that road in five months," Ward said, comparing the speed of that repair to the delays along the Blue Ridge Parkway.

"A slide 150 feet ... how many damn years did that take?"

She added: "If we spoke with unified advocacy, our voice would be made more powerful. If that happened, I wonder how long it would have taken for that road to be repaired."

The parkway needs more advocates, she said. A person might think that a scenic road that rolls through 29 counties in two states, bypassing more than 4,700 property owners along a 469-mile winding corridor that ferries millions of visitors

through the prettiest mountain scenery on the East Coast, would have an abundance of advocates, and the parkway surely does have its share of admirers and supporters.

But those myriad jurisdictions and property owners can be a diverse, unwieldy bunch when it comes to finding common goals and ideas for the parkway's benefit and future. The parkway's strength, its skinny, snakelike path flowing for hundreds of uninterrupted miles, is also its weakness. The road has no single central attraction or organized band of supporters.

To that end, the foundation embarked upon a project it calls **Blue Ridge Rising**, an initiative to unite the "gateway communities" along the parkway from Shenandoah National Park across the state line to Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The foundation describes Blue Ridge Rising's core mission as an effort to "strengthen cross-jurisdictional relationships, foster economic development within the region's gateway communities and establish a unified regional voice."

If the parkway doesn't find that common voice among supporters, the park's future is as rocky and rutted as a country road strewn with potholes.

"If we don't do something to protect it, we are going to lose it," Ward said.

\* \* \*



A truck passes by the sign for the new Fancy Gap Country Store near the entrance to the Blue Ridge Parkway. Fancy Gap has seen a growth in the number of businesses near the parkway in the past two decades. Photo by Ralph Berrier Jr.

Ward grew up in Wytheville, and she recalled childhood days when her family would travel south on U.S. 52 to reach the Blue Ridge Parkway's entrance at the Carroll County community of Fancy Gap.

“That was our Sunday drive,” Ward said. “It was always so beautiful and curvy. It’s still just as I remember it.”

The foundation that she leads has given \$22 million directly to the parkway since 1997, plus millions more in matching funds, grants and other indirect contributions. Over the past 10 to 15 years, the foundation has taken a more active role in managing or funding parkway sites and activities that otherwise wouldn't be funded by the park service.

The foundation runs the Blue Ridge Music Center near milepost 213 in Carroll County and schedules the weekend mountain music programs at places such as Mabry Mill and Peaks of Otter, and it helped reopen the popular Bluffs Restaurant in North Carolina after it closed in 2010. The foundation has also paid for construction and renovation projects, such as repairs at Mabry Mill, and supported ecological work, such as conducting research to save bats from extinction.

Ward said that the parkway needs the foundation's help because of the parkway's unique size and shape, its popularity with visitors — and a lack of money. The parkway is free to the public — drivers, bicyclists, hikers included — making it

one of the few National Park Service units that does not charge entrance fees.

“The parkway’s annual operating budget [it receives from the park service] works out to about one dollar per visitor,” Ward said. “That’s not an adequate number. The Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation is here to bridge the gap between what the parkway receives and what it needs.”

The parkway has put off many maintenance projects over the years due to lack of funding. The park service has had difficulty finding workers for some jobs, with only about 60% of its seasonal positions filled this year, Ward said. The Otter Creek Campground in Bedford County closed in August due to a lack of staff, prompting the park service to offer refunds or direct campers to other sites along the parkway.

Even though the parkway receives more visitors than the Yellowstone, Yosemite and the Grand Canyon national parks combined, last year’s 15.7 million travelers were nearly 6 million fewer than the all-time high of 21.5 million in 2002, an astounding 28% drop. Some of that decline could be due to changes in methodology that the park service uses to estimate visitation, park managers have said, but much of the loss is due to road closures, fewer camping spots, overgrown trees that block views at overlooks and other reasons, according to park service surveys over the years.

“The challenges for parkway management are extraordinary,” Ward said. “With increased visitation, and a much smaller staff, the parkway is suffering.”

Help is on the way in the form of increased federal money from the Great American Outdoors Act passed by Congress in 2020, which set up funds that provide up to \$1.3 billion annually for making improvements to national parks. The [Blue Ridge Parkway expects \\$58.1 million](#) for parkway improvements over the next couple of years.

The parkway will also benefit from the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 and the infrastructure bill passed in 2021, said parkway spokesperson Leesa Brandon.

“A lot of good things are going to be happening on the parkway,” Brandon said, specifically pointing to a paving project north of Roanoke set to begin next spring. Other Virginia projects include bridge repairs over the James River and in the Carroll County community of Laurel Fork.

\* \* \*



A pickup truck pulls a trailer north along a stretch of the Blue Ridge Parkway in Roanoke County that reopened in June after a three-year closure due to a landslide. Photo by Ralph Berrier Jr.

This year, the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation held 39 meetings in locations along the parkway route, spending more than two hours of each meeting talking to local leaders from every county through which the road passes.

During those meetings, foundation and parkway managers heard many concerns and ideas from local leaders and landowners, which ranged from wanting better signs along the road to working more collaboratively to improve the visitor experience and increase the parkway's economic benefits. The parkway provides a \$1.3 billion economic impact and supports approximately 17,900 jobs through visitor spending, according to a 2022 park service report.

But that impact can be spread unevenly across a region that includes big metro areas such as Roanoke and Asheville, North Carolina, as well as hamlets such as Meadows of Dan and Fancy Gap and Sparta, North Carolina.

All the localities will have to come together to increase economic benefits for everyone along the parkway, Ward said.

"There's a difference between a weekend in Asheville and a weekend in Sparta," Ward said. "Not everyone wants an Asheville experience. The plan is to become more cohesive, unified and more holistically managed."

To that end, the foundation is holding a Blue Ridge Rising Summit on Dec. 5 and 6 in Blowing Rock, North Carolina, that will bring together more than 200 people from along the parkway to learn about the results from past meetings and to schedule next steps for implementing the plan.

"Natural resource protection, marketing and promotion for tourism, trail connections, the economy ... all of these conversations can be elevated if we are looking through a regional lens," said Brandon, the park service spokesperson. The parkway's management is supportive of the foundation's Blue Ridge Rising plan, she said.

"By harnessing the power of that collective voice, there's power in big and small ways," Brandon said.

\* \* \*



Leaves and branches of a red maple tree frame a vehicle near the Lost Mountain overlook of the Blue Ridge Parkway. That stretch of the parkway had been closed for three years following a landslide in 2020. Photo by Ralph Berrier Jr.

Jill Peterson and her husband moved to a Carroll County farm from New Mexico several years ago, and the couple now owns the Frontera Roots clothing and gift store in Fancy Gap, a baseball toss from the parkway's stone bridge that crosses U.S. 52.

Fancy Gap has blossomed into a small tourist hub over the past 20 years, with three restaurants and several gift shops near the parkway entrance. Most of the businesses were started in old, existing buildings by Margaret and Charles Barnhardt, who opened a deli, a garden center and an antique shop in the early 2000s. Peterson bought her store from the Barnhardts two years ago.

"It's a gold mine here," Peterson said of her store's location at the parkway entrance. "I never dreamed it would be this amazing. We're steadily busy, and in the fall, we're crazy busy. You wouldn't believe how many different languages you hear spoken in here."

The parkway brings thousands of travelers through the area, especially on October weekends when the leaves blaze in oranges and reds.

Peterson said that she wishes parkway management worked more closely with business owners, especially in small communities such as Fancy Gap, where people don't know how to easily share ideas with park officials or make requests.



A year or so ago, she said, a group of older ladies who were craftmakers came to her store to sell their wares and to share some local contraband — Blue Ridge Parkway maps.

“Guard these with your lives,” the ladies told Peterson. Parkway maps are hard to find other than at the road’s visitors’ centers.

Peterson wishes she just had a way to get maps to share with visitors. The parkway and the foundation websites have maps, but she’d love to have old-fashioned, paper maps.

Across U.S. 52 from Peterson’s shop, Mary Lynn Gaydos scooped ice cream at Fancy Gap Country Store, which she and her husband, Mark, opened this summer in a building that has housed various shops over the years. Business has been brisk, she said, and the couple, who are both bluegrass musicians, plan to offer mountain music shows in the coming months.

While taking a break from serving orders of barbecue, “smashed” potatoes (covered in barbecue), hot dogs and collard greens, Mary Lynn, said she, too, would love a stack of maps.

“People come in here all the time looking for a physical map of the parkway, if one exists,” she said. Fancy Gap does not have a visitors’ center, so she’d like her store to be a go-to stop for parkway tourists.

“We’d gladly put shelves in here filled with parkway maps and other items,” she said. She was not familiar with the Blue Ridge Rising initiative, but she said she supported anything that increased the number of travelers on the parkway.

“This is a growing community here,” Gaydos said. “There’s a good vibe here. More business promotes more business.”

Back on Bent Mountain, Mary Sink said that traffic has increased since the parkway reopened and has helped local businesses, which include Grateful Produce and the Treehouse Tavern restaurant.

“I’m so happy to see more people enjoying what we have in the community,” Sink said. “The Blue Ridge Parkway needs more public attention. It needs more money to increase tourism.”

Ward, the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation CEO, said her group is working on that. With more businesses, residents and local leaders at the table, everybody wants their piece of the parkway pie, especially now during apple pie season.

“When everybody wants a piece of pie, you don’t say, ‘There’s no more pie,’” she said. “You just make a bigger pie.”

## POLITICS

# A debate over a drag show and Juneteenth event threatened the June Bug Center's funding. Supporters came to its defense.

*County supervisors considered cutting funding for the arts nonprofit, then voted to provide the money after all. Here's a look at some of what was going on behind the scenes.*



by **Ralph Berrier Jr.**  
 July 31, 2023



Floyd County supervisors discuss the June Bug Center at their June 27 meeting. From left: Kalinda Bechtold, Jerry Boothe, Joe Turman, Linda DeVito Kuchenbuch, Levi Cox. Screenshot.

Supporters of the June Bug Center rallied in defense of the Floyd nonprofit arts and education center during the two weeks when its county funding hung in the balance after it hosted a drag show and participated in a public Juneteenth celebration, newly released emails and social media messages show.

According to messages obtained by Cardinal News through a Freedom of Information Act request, some members of the Floyd County Board of Supervisors sought to alleviate concern that the board would eliminate \$4,500 in county funding for the longtime community arts center after a Roanoke group held a drag show there on June 24.

“I do not plan on cutting funding to the June Bug Center,” supervisor Jerry Boothe wrote to a county resident in a June 29 email. “Unfortunately I am one vote of 5.”

Ultimately, county funding for the center was preserved, but even so, budget cuts could be in store for the June Bug Center and other county-funded agencies, based on another supervisor’s emails and messages.

“I have no intention of cutting the JBC money unless it is part of cutting ALL the outside agency stuff,” supervisor Kalinda Bechtold wrote to a Floyd businesswoman in a thread of Facebook messages on June 30.

Bechtold continued: “[I]magine how much extra cash our folks would have to support things they like if it wasn’t being taken to support all this other stuff!”

Bechtold had seconded supervisor Levi Cox’s motion to eliminate the June Bug Center’s funding during the board’s June 27 meeting, three days after the drag show was held inside the center’s small theater. Cox made his motion after a local minister spoke during a public comment period and called the drag show “disgusting, vulgar and perverse,” citing photographs of the event he had seen that showed children in attendance.

After Cox’s motion was seconded, a brief discussion followed, which included supervisor Linda DeVito Kuchenbuch saying that singling out one agency’s funding could be a “slippery slope” that the board should not go down. Supervisors then punted the issue to the board’s July 11 meeting, when they approved the budget resolution with the June Bug Center funding intact with no discussion.

The budget passed 4-1, with Cox casting the lone “no” vote.

During the 14 days between the two meetings, supervisors heard from both supporters of the June Bug Center and those who opposed the drag show, with supporters writing most of the correspondence, according to messages released to Cardinal News.

“Floyd County is blessed with a diverse population of citizens who get along amazingly well in spite of divergent political and social differences,” wrote one supporter who said he lives in the Montgomery County community of Pilot near the border with Floyd County.

“Please don’t become the laughing stock [sic] of SW VA by canceling funding to one of Floyd’s valuable cultural assets because a minister finds a bully pulpit in which he can draw attention to himself and a supervisor decides she has the right to decide [what] national holidays should be observed in Floyd.”

That last line refers to Bechtold, a first-term Republican from Indian Valley, who said during the June 27 meeting that her concerns about the June Bug Center had less to do with the drag show and more to do with the organization’s participation in a Juneteenth event on June 17 that was sponsored by Floyd C.A.R.E. (Community Action for Racial Equity). The June Bug Center operated an information table along with other local nonprofits during the community event at Warren G. Lineberry Community Park in downtown Floyd.

“I don’t like them coloring outside the lines with getting into racial equity,” Bechtold said during the June 27 meeting. Bechtold has been criticized for the “coloring outside the lines” comment about an event that highlights people of color.

A resident of Copper Hill emailed Floyd County Administrator Linda Millsaps and the supervisors asking for clarification of how “coloring outside the lines” can disqualify an agency from county funding, and whether there is a requirement for “coloring inside the lines.”

“Can you please refer me to the local code or other documentation that defines the standard of ‘coloring inside the lines,’” the email read.

The writer also asked if the county has a policy that restricts nonprofit groups from participating in events “tied to racial diversity.”

“Is it the position of Floyd County that participation in racial diversity programs disqualifies an entity from receiving funding,” the email reads. “Can you provide the documentation outlining this government policy?”

If the writer received a response to his email, it was not included in messages released to Cardinal News.

The June Bug Center’s board of directors sent a three-and-a-half-page letter to the board of supervisors that addressed “inaccurate statements” made during the June 27 meeting, the letter read.

The June Bug board explained that the county funding is a match for a \$4,500 grant from the Virginia Commission for the Arts Creative Community Partnership program to fund after-school programming that would include activities such as old-time mountain music, robotics, a Lego club, drama, a computer club and more.

The June Bug board strongly rejected the claim that participating in the Juneteenth event went against the center’s mission. Its letter pointed out that the center’s strategic plan specifically calls for the center to build “new partnerships with other local organizations.”

The strategic plan calls for the June Bug Center to improve by “[r]ecruiting and engaging more volunteers to help out with the June Bug Center’s operations and getting more community members motivated to grow the center.” The plan also states that the center must be more visible in the community by showing up at “festivals, hosting workshops, having tables at fairs, or vendor events.”

Providing information about the organization during the Juneteenth celebration fulfills those goals, the letter implied.

Several of the emails involved an exchange between June Bug Center board president Emily Gruver and Bechtold to schedule a meeting to discuss the funding issue. Those emails were cordial, and it appears that Bechtold, Gruver and one other June Bug Center board member met for lunch at the Floyd Country Store on July 5.

In an email before that meeting, Bechtold repeated her earlier position that, even though she doesn't like drag shows, the center has the right to host any event it wants without interference from local government. She said that she seconded Cox's motion to rescind funding in order to have a broad conversation about county spending on nonprofit groups, in general.

"Please understand that I don't care about the rental to the drag show folks," Bechtold wrote to Gruver on June 30. "I had to second the motion in order to have a discussion. It does not mean that I will agree with the motion or will vote for it. The door that was opened for me was the opportunity to finally get accountability and oversight for the organizations that receive county funds and the boards and committees that have BOS appointed representation. The JBC being at the Juneteenth event was not taken well by many. That optic opened a door for me that Levi and Joe [most likely board chair Joe Turman] did not see coming.

"It is of utmost importance for me to be a good steward of the tax payer's hard earned money and ensure that the monies are being used for only their intended purposes. I ran on not raising taxes, and personal freedom."

Representatives from the June Bug Center declined to provide details about what was discussed between Gruver and Bechtold during the July 5 meeting, but instead referred to the letter the June Bug Center board sent to supervisors.

Gruver also sent at least two emails to Cox to discuss the June Bug Center funding, but it appears that she never received a reply from the supervisor.

The only message from Cox that was released as a result of the Cardinal News FOIA request is a text message of a photo from the drag show that he forwarded without comment to Millsaps, the county administrator. The photo appears to have been a screenshot from a social media site for Downtown Divas, the Roanoke group that sponsored the drag show and rented the June Bug Center facility.

Bechtold has not responded to messages from Cardinal News since she issued a one-paragraph statement on July 4 to reporter Michael Hemphill that gave her reasons for seconding Cox's motion to rescind the June Bug Center's funds. That email was similar to other statements she has made about wanting to increase oversight of local funds that county organizations receive.

Bechtold did appear in a YouTube interview with Del. Marie March, R-Floyd, that was posted shortly after the board voted to keep the funding for the June Bug Center. Bechtold repeated that she believed the government had no right to tell the June Bug Center what events it could book.

March, however, did not approve of the drag show.

"To me, it's very off-putting, being a strong female, seeing men basically making fun of women," March said, as Bechtold sat next to her on a couch and nodded.

March repeatedly said she did not attend the drag show, but described what she said happened there based on videos and photos she saw later. She said that she was upset that children attended the show waving dollar bills during what she called a “striptease.”

March, whose time in the General Assembly will end in January following her lopsided primary loss to fellow Republican Del. Wren Williams, R-Patrick County, in June, said that she asked the attorney general’s office to look into whether the drag show violated Virginia law.

“We kinda dug into some state code to see if there’s any code against it and there is,” March said during the video. “There’s decency and being around minors, and we’ve sent this to the AG’s office to get an official opinion.”

A spokeswoman for Virginia Attorney General Jason Miyares said that she “cannot confirm or deny the request of any official Attorney General opinions.” A message sent to March from Cardinal News asking for details of her request was not answered.

March also slammed the county seat of Floyd, a one-stoplight town of 450 known for its dedication to bluegrass and old-time stringband music and for its funky shops and restaurants, and unnamed business owners for the “appearance of being liberal.”

“A lot of the liberal, left-leaning folks, they own the buildings in the downtown, they’ve been able to get the grant money to fund their business ventures,” March said, as Bechtold continued to nod in apparent agreement.

“So, when you come into Floyd, it looks very eclectic, it looks very artsy, it’s like it’s all artisans, when, in fact, it’s not. It’s like 70-some percent conservative Republican here. It’s the old-timey farmers, it’s conservative values. ... We’ve all managed to get along for the most part, but you bring this social clash to this area, people are very outraged.”

Bechtold later says in the video that the easiest way to deal with the “social clash” over the June Bug Center funding controversy is “to pull our tax dollars back from picking winners and losers” and that local government “shouldn’t be funding businesses and nonprofits.”

Bechtold reiterated her desire to reduce funding for nonprofits in a Facebook message exchange with a Floyd County woman who supports the June Bug Center and told Bechtold that center’s leaders believe that the supervisor is coming “after them.”

“I am not after them,” Bechtold replied. “You should hear me during budget workshops! I am after all of them! I really believe in constitutionally limited government and that includes spending.”

Bechtold also wrote to the woman that “big gov’t folks have a majority on the board.” She added, however, in reference to June Bug Center director Shannon Hardwicke, “don’t worry, she won’t lose her funding.”

Bechtold tried to maintain a consistent response while engaging across multiple fronts with June Bug Center supporters and those who criticized the drag show.

In one lengthy exchange that apparently occurred through Facebook messages, a woman criticizes Bechtold for voting to approve the June Bug Center budget grant and tells her that “our tax dollars you appropriate [are] going to the host of the drag queen show where children were handing money to ½ naked men.”

Bechtold correctly told the woman that no taxpayer money — local, state or federal — paid for the drag show. The sponsor paid the June Bug Center to rent the facility. Bechtold told the woman that the drag show rented the place the same way a church would also be allowed to do.

The woman was unsatisfied with the reply. What follows is an abbreviated version of the exchange.

Woman: “We are asking they leave our children alone!”

Bechtold: “It isn’t even close to being that simple. Do you really want government dictating moral issues?”

Woman: “I’m saying children being there. The adults have every right to be ignorant.”

Bechtold: “So again, how does that happen?”

Woman: “WE THE PEOPLE taking a stand.”

Bechtold: “That is a position for the people. What you are asking for is government intervention.”

The woman tells her to read some articles she forwarded, as the thread ends.

Bechtold had a more constructive thread of messages with a Floyd businesswoman who described herself as “liberal.” The woman told Bechtold, “I appreciate your perspective — which appears more genuinely & consistently Libertarian.”

Bechtold responded: “I think you and I agree on many issues, and the ones where we differ are truly personal choices, they don’t make either of us bad people. And I like a good discussion, too many will not explain their stance.”

## ECONOMY

# The economic impact of FloydFest's cancellation

*The long-running festival brings about \$4 million to Floyd and neighboring counties each year, but businesses say tourism is so big in Floyd that its absence won't hurt much.*



by **Ralph Berrier Jr.**

April 26, 2023



FloydFest 2023 had to be canceled over environmental and permit issues when organizers started working on a new festival site in northern Floyd County. An economic impact study found that FloydFest brings about \$4 million in spending to the region every summer. Courtesy of Across-the-Way Productions and Roger Gupta.

*Want more news from Southwest and Southside? [Sign up for one of our free newsletters.](#)*

You couldn't get a room in Tuggle's Gap.

The Tuggle's Gap Roadside Inn, a cozy 10-room motel located just off the Blue Ridge Parkway in Floyd County, was booked solid for late July. Rooms sold out in 48 hours after FloydFest organizers announced that the music festival would be held July 26-30 on a new site in northern Floyd County.



“We sold out at a great rate with a three-night minimum,” said Nick Bineck, who bought the 1930s-era motel, restaurant and gas station two years ago. “It was going to be a very good week for us.”

Then, FloydFest got canceled.

Organizers of the sprawling, multi-day music festival billed as FloydFest 2023 Forever pulled the plug on this year’s event due to environmental concerns and failure to get permits to construct roads and bridges on the 200-acre property just off U.S. 221 near the community of Check. The festival, which annually attracted up to 15,000 people during the 20 years it was held on a Patrick County site just off the parkway, was canceled April 5, as organizers continued to work with the Department of Environmental Quality in hopes of bringing FloydFest to the new site next year.

The cancellation isn’t expected to deal a major economic blow to Floyd County, local business owners and county officials say, but some businesses will feel the impact more than others. Restaurants, gas stations, grocery stores and lodging will bear the brunt of the cancellation.

“That was the biggest week we had projected,” Bineck said.

Much of FloydFest’s economic activity is self-contained at the festival itself, where people can eat, drink and even sleep on site. Even so, a lot of dollars are spent off-site by festival-goers who stop in the town of Floyd to buy meals, drinks and other products available at a number of locally owned shops in a downtown that is remarkably vibrant for a one-stoplight locale.

Across-the-Way Productions, Inc., the company that runs FloydFest, released an economic impact study two years ago that determined the festival brings about \$4 million in spending to Floyd, Patrick and some neighboring counties.

“Even the small piece of the pie that’s left in the county is important,” Bineck said of FloydFest’s economic impact.

Lydeana Martin, Floyd County’s Community and Economic Development Director, echoed those sentiments. She pointed out that many on-site vendors are local businesses and artists, and that regional nonprofit groups, which include Rotary clubs, scout troops and church youth groups, hold fundraisers at FloydFest. The festival’s organizers also donate thousands of dollars to charitable groups.

“The nonprofits always do well, and that’s huge in a small community like Floyd,” Martin said.

FloydFest also has served as a proving ground for some local businesses that got their start selling products at the festival before opening brick-and-mortar stores. Some Floyd businesses, such as Dogtown Roadhouse restaurant and music venue and Red Rooster Coffee, have large presences at the festival, which helps them make money to get through winter months when business in town slows down.

“FloydFest has been a terrific proving ground for small businesses here,” Martin said. “They can test products and messages to a large, diverse audience. They might serve more people in one weekend than they will in a whole year.”

FloydFest is what brought Bineck to the region and inspired him to buy the Tuggle's Gap motel. Bineck, 40, worked as a stage manager at FloydFest and later with Stage Sound, the Roanoke company that handles sound and lighting for the festival, before deciding to buy the venerable gas station, motor lodge and pine-paneled restaurant two years ago. FloydFest introduced him to the business potential the region offered.

"I had worked in small hotels in Fredericksburg when I was younger," Bineck said. "I worked in the music industry a long time, but my passion was hotels. This place was for sale for a year during the pandemic. We've remodeled every room and really done right by the place."



Hotel Floyd opened in 2007 and has expanded to 40 rooms, most of them filled during summer weekends. Courtesy of Tim Holm and Hotel Floyd.

Kamala Bauers and her husband, Jack Wall, opened Hotel Floyd in 2007, just a few steps from Locust Street, where downtown Floyd pulses with bluegrass musicians, outdoor concerts and rock 'n' roll bands during the weekends. FloydFest week is one of her most lucrative of the year because guests pack the 40-room hotel at a premium rate, but she is confident her business, the town and the county will withstand the economic hit caused by the festival's cancellation.

"We're totally booked for FloydFest the day the tickets go on sale," Bauers said. "People stay here for one festival, then they reserve rooms as soon as they find out when the next one will be. On the day the tickets are released, whatever rooms

we have left are gone. We've had some cancellations [since FloydFest's announcement], but I'm not worried. I think we'll be 100 percent full that weekend."

She will lose a 10 percent premium she charges during FloydFest week, she said, but that loss is negligible.

"We'll just go back to our normal rates," she said. "Floyd has gotten so popular. There is so much demand for lodging in Floyd right now."



Tim Holm, accountant and head of property management at Hotel Floyd, stands behind the lobby's counter. Hotel owners say that the lodge will be full in late July, despite FloydFest's cancellation. Courtesy of Tim Holm and Hotel Floyd.

A quick scan of rooms available on Airbnb.com reveals no fewer than 30 places in and around Floyd, from houses to cabins to yurts, with some of those venues offering multiple beds at rates from \$63 to \$298.

Tourism has become a sizable part of Floyd County's economy, with visitors spending around \$26 million annually, according to the Virginia Tourism Corporation. That's up 18 percent over a 5-year period. FloydFest certainly helps boost

some of that visitor spending, but the county also generates its own tourism economy through an eclectic mix of entertainment and shopping options.



Owners of the Floyd Country Store expect crowds of bluegrass and old-time mountain music musicians will still line the sidewalks on Friday nights. FloydFest's cancellation could have an effect on tourism this summer, but county and business leaders say the town will still have plenty of visitors for concerts, restaurants and other venues. Courtesy of the Floyd Country Store.

The sidewalks outside the Floyd Country Store are filled with bluegrass and old-time mountain music pickers who come to hear and play music every weekend, especially during the weekly Friday Night Jamboree. The store draws hundreds of people for its weekly schedule of concerts and dances held inside the 113-year-old structure that includes a café and ice cream parlor.

Heather Krantz, who owns the store with her husband, Dylan Locke, is confident that the store and the rest of downtown Floyd will still be filled in July, despite FloydFest's cancellation. She said that she and Locke were looking forward to the festival's new location about 12 miles north of the store — which was roughly the same distance as the old festival site along the parkway, but along a direct route from Roanoke to Floyd.

“We were excited about the change of location and what it might mean for the county,” Krantz said. “We had talked to them about partnering in different ways. We’re aligned with FloydFest in the way that we’re all big believers in building community through music and dance.”

That said, town officials expect Floyd will be packed with visitors, despite the cancellation.

“Summer is very busy in Floyd,” town manager Andrew Morris said. “Folks really look forward to FloydFest, because we do see more people in town during the week, and we see some revenue off meals and lodging. But we have a lot of events through the summer that keep people coming in. Even this week, in the middle of April, the town is loaded with people.”

Some business owners have discussed scheduling additional concerts and other events during the week when FloydFest was scheduled, according to Bineck, but those details have not been worked out.

Even though many business owners expect the economic fallout from the festival’s cancellation to be manageable, many of them hope organizers can work with state officials to mitigate the environmental concerns on the property, and they look forward to when the festival takes place again. Bauers, who owns Hotel Floyd, is one of those.

“We totally stand by FloydFest,” she said.