



# Mountain Association

Strategic Plan  
2026-2030

# Building a New Economy, Together

## Dear readers,

We appreciate your interest in our work and our plan for the coming years. Over the past year, our staff and board have dedicated time to developing a new strategic plan to take us through 2030. This process involved examining our role in the region, having critical discussions about what we are seeing in our communities, and identifying key shifts we need to make with our work to meet current and predicted challenges in the coming years.

For 50 years, the Mountain Association has been a leader in demonstrating what a regenerative and diversified economy can look like in Eastern Kentucky and the wider region of Appalachia. As a Community Development Financial Institution, we have financed thousands of small, locally owned businesses, and supported them with in-depth technical assistance to sustain and grow their businesses over time. We've helped businesses, organizations and residents save millions on their energy bills through facilitating hundreds of efficiency upgrades and more than 100 solar projects.

We have worked at the community level to assist with identifying and implementing dozens of local projects, and built strong networks that have helped small towns thrive. Through research and strategic communications, we've also worked to inform public policy, especially around affordable energy, and elevated stories of the incredible people and work happening in our region.

This work has yielded lasting, positive outcomes for many individuals and communities over the last five decades, but still too many people in our region face significant hardships. Our new five-

year plan reflects the core challenges that people are facing today, including cost of living increases, affordable housing shortages, lack of affordable quality childcare in our region, and the many impacts of extreme weather. Accordingly, we've refined our approach and revised our strategic goals to guide us forward.

We acknowledge that the economic, environmental, and social challenges Eastern Kentucky faces are interconnected and complex. Solutions must address issues on the individual, community and regional levels, and must be rooted in place, culture and local knowledge, and must be accessible to all. With this plan, we are deepening our commitment to taking a community-driven, results-oriented approach in all our community economic development work.

Building the future we envision requires collective action—learning, planning, and working together to create an economy that truly benefits the people and places of Eastern Kentucky. We invite you to explore this five-year plan as both a guide to understanding what we are doing and as a call to action to join us in shaping a brighter future in Appalachia.

Sincerely,

**Hasan Davis | Board Chair**  
**Robin Gabbard | President**

**Cumberland River in Kentucky**  
Joshua Michaels, Unsplash





**The Mountain Association  
invests in people and  
places in order to build a  
new economy in Eastern  
Kentucky.**



**OPELL MEATS**  
Catlettsburg, KY



## Our Analysis

As we look to the next five years, we need to understand how we got where we are, consider where we want to go, and build on strategies that deliver results.

Nearly 20 years since the collapse of the coal industry, our communities in Eastern Kentucky are beginning to thrive and grow again. Decades of investment in local leadership and community development by organizations including Mountain Association and many allies and partners are coming to fruition.

**Seeds of hope** have been sown through countless small projects carried out by local leaders—new farmers markets, after school programs for kids, broadband expansion, and outdoor recreation opportunities, as a few examples. These seeds have been watered by resources like training, technical assistance, financing and targeted funding from public and private grants. Young people look at the changes and begin to imagine a future for themselves that doesn't require them to leave; those who have left consider coming home; and visitors look around and wonder if they might set down roots here, too.

This tipping point in community revitalization coincides with a sea change in the world of work. In the past, jobs were tied almost exclusively to physical locations. Traditional economic development spoke of this in well-worn phrases like “bringing in jobs” or “landing a factory.” Online work has been shifting that paradigm for years, but in the post-pandemic economy, we have learned the true extent to which many jobs don’t have to be linked to an office building at all. This bodes well for our approach to community economic development in Eastern Kentucky which is grounded in the idea of developing communities where people want to live and can afford to live. Our re-awakening downtowns, combined with the natural beauty of this area, provide an attractive quality of life. The opportunity for people to live here and not have to sacrifice a world-class job is a bright light at the end of a long tunnel.

## Rural Kentucky Economies

The coal communities of Eastern Kentucky literally fueled the growth of our nation’s economy, but despite their sacrifices, in the long-term, they have not benefitted from the prosperity they helped to create. The persistent poverty of this region is a harsh illustration of the failure of that old economy.

We see similar dynamics in rural places across America and around the world—the result of what economists call the resource curse: places that are rich in resources become impoverished. Coal brought jobs, but at a great cost to the people and places where it was mined. When the jobs ended, people left. Many of our economic challenges are rooted in population loss across decades of boom-and-bust cycles. This was magnified in 2012 when cheap natural gas led to the collapse of the thermal coal industry, and more workers and their families left.

## Investment Owed

Our communities are owed a debt. That debt can be repaid with the investments needed to grow this burgeoning new economy, which takes more than just bringing in a new industry or a new job. We must rebuild entire local economies with all the elements of community that are needed to support economic growth—healthcare, childcare, housing, and infrastructure. This work is already happening. Local leaders and entrepreneurs have stepped up to the challenge of recreating their communities as places where people can live and will choose to live. They understand that the services and amenities that make a place livable are themselves economic drivers—grocery stores, coffee shops, bookstores, restaurants, recreation opportunities, health clinics and childcare centers. Old downtown store fronts are filling up to the point where there are waiting lists for available business spaces.

## Moving Forward

Over the next five years, we and our partners will continue to put the full force of our investment and programs behind the good work already underway in many places, and support communities that are just getting started. Many

of our towns have fine old buildings that have sat vacant too long—we will leverage the investments needed to bring them forward. Our schools, childcare and public facilities are struggling—we will help them reduce their overhead costs by saving on their electric bills and increase resiliency through energy efficiency, solar power and energy storage. We have a long-standing housing crisis, made worse by frequent flooding—we will collaborate with housing partners so that as our population rebounds, our people have good homes to live in. We will support communities as they create natural disaster recovery plans that will address having to rebuild every few years and that will result in more resilient economies. We will support businesses that continue to need critical technical assistance and financing so their enterprises can thrive and serve their communities into the future with things like healthy food, reliable infrastructure, and a good quality of life.

The work here can be an example for rural places everywhere: When local leaders and local entrepreneurs take control of their own economic future and create communities where people want to live, the people come, and the jobs follow.

# Our Vision

We envision a vibrant Eastern Kentucky with a strong, sustainable regional economy, where communities prosper, where everyone has what they need to thrive, and where people tell their own stories and create their own future. To realize this ambitious vision, we recognize that our work must engage effectively with all people and the wide range of other programs and organizations that share our commitment to this brighter future.

## The Foundation

We have identified the following pillars as essential to building a new economy:

### Communities

Vibrant communities offer economic opportunity and a good quality of life for all residents and newcomers.

With this foundation solidified, the region can be a place where people want to live, work and play; where everyone can feel welcome in their community; where there are abundant opportunities to work with dignity or start a business; and, where anyone can thrive. No one can build this foundation alone. It will take many people, business owners, community leaders and organizations, and intentional, long-term investment at scale, to see each element realized.

### People

People have what they need to thrive and opportunities to build generational wealth. More people are able to be civically engaged and take on leadership roles in their communities.

Given this analysis and building on the Mountain Association's strengths as an organization, the next pages describe our goals for furthering these elements of a new economy.

### Natural Resources

Communities have healthy land, air, and water, and can readily recover after natural disasters.

### Systems and Infrastructure

Accountable government and private industry actively support and invest in infrastructure improvements necessary for thriving communities.





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**RED HAVEN FARM**  
Irvine, KY



# Our Approach and Values

The Mountain Association invests in people and places in order to build a new economy in Eastern Kentucky. We are committed to building strong relationships that promote collaboration, trust and hope in the communities we serve. In our work of rebuilding and strengthening Eastern Kentucky's economy, we will pay particular attention to addressing the unique challenges faced by low-income communities and small business owners.

## Goals

### 1. Invest in the people building diversified local economies.

We will strengthen pathways to success for entrepreneurs, businesses and nonprofits by offering flexible capital and robust technical assistance, with particular attention to addressing the challenges faced by low-income entrepreneurs and community organizations.

### 2. Strengthen the resiliency of our region.

We will facilitate energy savings projects for businesses, organizations, and households to grow financial resilience. We will work with community and business leaders on disaster planning that supports long-term community and economic resiliency in the face of frequent flooding.

### 3. Foster the vibrancy of our communities.

We will partner with communities to create positive economic change through listening, building connections, sharing resources, and offering guidance that improves quality of life and opportunity for all.

### 4. Influence the story.

We will create impactful communications that lift up local voices and provide accurate analysis to inform decision-makers, the media and the public.

### 5. Look inward.

We will attend to our organizational health by maintaining strong systems to support our work, by fostering a culture of learning and innovation, and by holding ourselves accountable to those we serve through assessment, reflection and continuous improvement.

## Priorities for the Next Five Years

We will leverage our resources over the next five years to support growth and sustainability in these key economic sectors that continue to experience large investment gaps:

- Affordable and Available Housing
- Quality Childcare
- Healthy Food Access
- Resiliency and Disaster Recovery

These sectors, especially childcare and food access, are typically made up of low profit margin businesses, in which mainstream financial institutions have underinvested for decades. Mountain Association has an obligation as a Community Development Financial Institution to increase our investment in high-risk sectors like childcare facilities and grocers in order to assist communities with these foundational needs.

Additionally, the existing housing crisis – compounded with flooding disasters – has called us in to be stronger supporters of the incredible housing nonprofits in the region. We will continue to use our capital tools to complement their work while also doing intentional outreach to build adjacent industries such as plumbing, carpentry, and electrical services to help counter the long waits and high costs people in our region experience. We will also seek ways to contribute to supportive public policy in these areas.

Though we will sharpen our attention on these sectors, we will continue to provide excellent service and support to the full array of businesses and organizations crucial to a diversified economy, as we have over the last 50 years.

## GOAL 1

# Invest in the People Building Diversified Local Economies

We will strengthen pathways to success for entrepreneurs, businesses, and nonprofits by offering flexible capital and robust technical assistance, with particular attention to addressing the challenges faced by low-income entrepreneurs and community organizations.

## Why This Goal?

Our clients are the individuals driving the growth of local economies and actively building thriving communities. They work hard each and every day to get their restaurant off the ground, start a childcare business in a childcare desert, or build safe housing for flood victims. Our history of partnering with incredible small business owners and community leaders to provide flexible capital and supportive technical assistance will continue over the next five years.

We will continue to recruit highly skilled consultants to help business owners with needs such as marketing, accounting and website development, with a special focus on consultants who are themselves small businesses within Eastern Kentucky. We will also continue to adapt these program offerings to meet the unique challenges faced by low-income entrepreneurs and community organizations, ensuring they have the tools to overcome barriers too often faced in our region.

## Initial Activities

### Capital

Continue to provide flexible loans with a particular focus on increasing capital deployment to affordable housing, quality childcare, healthy food access and resiliency efforts.

### Support

Provide support services to businesses and organizations with priority to entities working on housing, childcare, food access and resiliency efforts.

### Outreach

Concentrate in-person outreach on low-income communities and further explore how to reduce barriers to starting or growing businesses.





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IGA  
Salyersville, KY



## GOAL 2

# Strengthen the Resiliency of Our Region

**We will facilitate energy savings projects for businesses, organizations, and households to grow financial resilience. We will work with community and business leaders on disaster planning that supports long-term community and economic resiliency in the face of frequent flooding.**

## Why This Goal?

Extreme weather impacts our mountain communities with ever-increasing frequency. Over the next five years, we will work to increase the number of facilities in the region with battery back-ups, with special attention to community centers and schools. These facilities are key to resiliency and disaster recovery as they often serve as relief centers during extreme temperatures and as shelters or recovery hubs after a natural disaster. These changing weather patterns are combined with higher utility rates, leading to increased interest in energy savings.

By facilitating energy savings projects, we are helping businesses, local governments and nonprofits stabilize energy costs and free up funds to invest in things like deferred maintenance or better wages and benefits. Each kilowatt of energy saved is increasingly important as global energy demand climbs. We will also continue to tell the stories of each project via our communications channels to show resiliency in action and further increase interest in these types of projects. Additionally, we will continue our work at the regional level to share lessons learned and study successes outside of Kentucky.

## Initial Activities

### Expertise

Provide expert technical assistance and flexible financing for energy efficiency, solar and battery initiatives, with expedited support to projects related to housing, childcare, food access, and wider community resiliency.

### Workforce

Support local employment opportunities and pathways within the energy field, and grow the capacity of contractors.

### Education

Teach and learn alongside regional partners about effective resiliency efforts and disaster recovery.

## GOAL 3

# Foster the Vibrancy of Our Communities

We will partner with communities to create positive economic change through listening, building connections, sharing resources, and offering guidance that improves quality of life and opportunity for all.

## Why This Goal?

As a community economic development entity, we believe change must come from within a community. Eastern Kentuckians have a deep understanding of the needs within their local economy and the best solutions to fill those needs and create lasting impacts. We will continue to work alongside our communities to develop unique, place-based strategies that address their needs. We will ground these solutions in community knowledge, supported by our extensive research, and informed by insights from regional and national partners about successful approaches in other areas.

We will support communities with their ideas from concept development through to opening day, whether it takes one year or ten. We will also continue to use our ability as a Community Development Financial Institution to finance community projects that so often do not have the right level of investment to come to fruition.

## Initial Activities

### Resources

Provide coaching, tools, and resources to communities.

### Redevelopment

Develop 479 Main, our downtown revitalization project in Hazard, and widely share lessons learned.

### Demonstrations

Support a variety of new economy projects in both Perry and Floyd counties, the coalfield communities where we have offices.

### Networking

Continue our support of networks like What's Next East Kentucky?! and the Central Appalachian Network that serve as a source of inspiration and learning for our communities.



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DOWNTOWN  
Hazard, KY



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JOYFUL JAMS  
Prestonsburg, KY



## GOAL 4

# Influence the Story

**We will create impactful communications that lift up local voices and provide accurate analysis to inform decision-makers, the media, and the public.**

## Why This Goal?

The work going on every day in Eastern Kentucky to build a new economy is inspiring. To foster increased hope within the region – and to allow people outside the region to see what is really happening here — we must continue to tell the stories of this work. Through these stories, we will shift the narrative about Appalachia and illustrate the many opportunities there are for investing in this region. Combining our communications and policy expertise, we will continue to amplify the voices of people in Eastern Kentucky. Our efforts to do this have already proven successful. For example, alongside our partners, we drove public comments in utility cases at our State's Public Service Commission that were instrumental in several outcomes preventing huge spikes in utility rate increases.

Additionally, over the past several years, we have also been exploring the news journalism space in our region to determine if there is a need for our investment, whether it be our time and expertise, or our financial capital. This has gained momentum with the establishment of a Rural News Fund in Appalachia in 2024, for which we serve on the steering committee. We believe strong news outlets promote informed civic engagement and strengthen democracy, and we will continue to find meaningful ways to support this work.

## Initial Activities

### Policy

Continue to advocate for supportive policies at the state and federal levels, particularly those related to energy costs and savings.

### Spotlight

Work with local, regional and national media to pitch op-ed and multimedia stories crafted alongside our communities, especially about efforts related to housing, childcare, food access and resiliency.

### Journalism

Support sustainability and innovation in the local journalism space.

### Engagement

Use social media in creative ways to engage new audiences and to promote civic engagement.

## GOAL 5

# Look Inward

**We will attend to our organizational health by maintaining strong systems to support our work, by fostering a culture of learning and innovation, and by holding ourselves accountable to those we serve through assessment, reflection and continuous improvement.**

## Why This Goal?

Our history of excellence over the past 50 years resulted from a strong operations team constantly looking for ways to improve our efficiency, foster a supportive work culture that increases staff retention, and build our staff's professional development. This team also supports our fiscal sponsorships of several entities and runs the back offices for our two affiliate organizations: Kentucky Center for Economic Policy and Kentucky Natural Lands Trust, allowing us to significantly amplify our impact.

## Initial Activities

### Efficiency

Streamline data entry and project management procedures.

### Data

Improve internal metrics tracking and program evaluations

### Stewardship

Continue our history of being responsible stewards of funds invested in our organization and our affiliates, and ensuring our revenue is a well-diversified mix of grants from various sources.

### Balance

Ensure our staff are engaged in professional development and collecting regular feedback to prevent burn-out and turn-over.



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Irvine, KY



# How We Plan to Measure Success

This plan directs our work through 2030 and acts as a road map to guide our detailed annual planning process. Each year, our teams set priorities and metrics they aim to meet or surpass, allowing us to work toward the ambitious goals outlined in this document. At the end of each year, we track progress, evaluate, and share results through our annual impact report.

Additionally, at the mid-point and at end of this five-year plan period, we will conduct a more in-depth assessment of our progress using a variety of measurements. At these points we will look at region-wide indicators like household income, county economic statuses measured by the Appalachian Regional Commission, and other economic data. We will also look at qualitative information gathered via community listening and feedback from our community advisory council. This helps us measure progress toward our desired results.



**SPIRITUAL SO SIMPLE**  
Ashland, KY



**JOYFUL JAMS**  
Prestonsburg, KY



**QUILTS MADE WITH LOVE**  
Berea, KY



**JEFF CHAPMAN-CRANE**  
Eolia, KY



**OPELL MEATS**  
Catlettsburg, KY

## Overall Desired Results in Eastern Kentucky

Entrepreneurs and business owners can easily access resources like affordable and flexible capital, quality training and technical assistance.

Businesses are functioning more effectively, generating quality jobs and creating meaningful income opportunities, particularly for low- and moderate-income individuals.

Businesses are saving energy; new jobs are created in the energy sector.

More options are available in our communities for affordable housing, quality childcare, and healthy food access.

Communities and small businesses are able to quickly recover in the event of a natural disaster.

Revitalization efforts in communities have demonstrated results, including new enterprises, more engaged citizens, and population stabilization.

A strong and growing formal and informal network of individuals and entities are working toward a shared vision of a brighter future.

Supportive policies in priority sectors are being considered or have been enacted.

Overall progress is being made in each area of the four pillars of a new economy.

# Measuring Success (Continued)

## Key Indicators by Goal

### Invest in the People Building Diversified Local Economies

- ▶ Loans and hours of support to businesses and organizations overall and to priority sector areas
- ▶ Investment leveraged
- ▶ Jobs created and/or retained
- ▶ Start-ups financed

### Foster the Vibrancy of Our Communities

- ▶ Hours of support to community members
- ▶ Number of new economy demonstration projects supported
- ▶ Progress toward redeveloping our downtown Hazard building

### Strengthen the Resiliency of Our Region

- ▶ Hours of support to businesses and organizations overall and to priority sector areas
- ▶ Grants obtained by clients through our support
- ▶ Energy savings dollar amounts achieved for businesses and organizations
- ▶ Metric tons of carbon reduced

### Influence the Story

- ▶ Hours of support to news or story-telling networks
- ▶ Policies enacted and number of utility cases influenced
- ▶ Number of stories and reach of stories
- ▶ Number of outreach engagements and presentations sharing our work

### Look Inward

- ▶ Results of program evaluations and metrics
- ▶ Audit results for our organization and affiliates
- ▶ Diversified mix of philanthropic, public and earned sources of revenue with majority of funds dedicated to programs.

Through this intentional process and its measurement, we are confident in the clarity of our direction and the progress we can achieve toward building a new economy.





**We invite you to follow along  
as we enter this next strategic  
plan and the next 50 years of  
investing in people and places  
in Eastern Kentucky.**

**Sign up for our monthly news-  
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media:**





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