

HOUSING NEEDS ASSESSMENT

New River Gorge Region,
West Virginia



BOWEN
NATIONAL
RESEARCH

2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction	
A. Purpose	I-1
B. Geographic Scope.....	I-2
II. Executive Summary	
Geographic Study Areas.....	II-1
Demographics.....	II-3
Economy & Workforce.....	II-6
Housing Supply.....	II-8
Other Housing Factors	II-11
Community Input.....	II-13
Housing Gap Estimates.....	II-14
Recommended Housing Strategies.....	II-15
III. Regional Overview and Study Areas	
A. New River Gorge Region, WV.....	III-1
B. Study Area Delineations.....	III-2
IV. Demographic Analysis	
A. Introduction.....	IV-1
B. Population Characteristics.....	IV-2
Total Population.....	IV-2
Population Density.....	IV-6
Population Traits (Married, Education, Poverty, etc.....	IV-8
Migration Patterns.....	IV-17
C. Household Characteristics.....	IV-28
Total Households.....	IV-28
Households By Age.....	IV-33
Households By Tenure.....	IV-37
Households By Size.....	IV-42
Households By Income.....	IV-46
V. Economic Analysis	
A. Introduction.....	V-1
B. Workforce Analysis.....	V-1
Employment By Industry.....	V-2
Typical Wages by Occupation.....	V-5
Wages and Affordability.....	V-6
Total Employment.....	V-12
Unemployment.....	V-13
At-Place Employment.....	V-15
Tourism and Seasonal Employment.....	V-16

- C. Employment Outlook..... V-19
 - WARN Notices..... V-19
 - Top Employers..... V-20
 - Economic Development..... V-23
- D. Personal Mobility..... V-26
 - Commuting Mode and Time.....V-26
 - Commuting Patterns..... V-32
- E. Conclusions..... V-33

VI. Housing Supply Analysis

- A. Overall Housing Supply..... VI-2
 - Housing By Tenure..... VI-2
 - Housing Age and Conditions..... VI-4
 - Housing Costs and Affordability..... VI-5
 - Housing by Units in Structure..... VI-6
- B. Rental Housing Supply Analysis..... VI-8
 - Multifamily Rental Housing..... VI-8
 - Non-Conventional Rental Housing..... VI-25
 - Seasonal/Recreational Housing VI-30
- C. For-Sale Housing Supply..... VI-33
 - Historical For-Sale Analysis..... VI-34
 - Available For-Sale Analysis..... VI-37
- D. Planned and Proposed..... VI-43

VII. Other Housing Market Factors

- A. Development Opportunities..... VII-1
- B. Development Costs and Government Regulations..... VII-12
- C. Housing Program Identification VII-42

VIII. Housing Gap Estimates

- A. Housing Gap Demand Components..... VIII-3
- B. Rental Housing Gap Estimates..... VIII-5
- C. For-Sale Housing Gap Estimates..... VIII-7

IX. Community Input Results and Analysis

- Stakeholder Survey..... IX-1

Addendum A – Field Survey of Conventional Rentals

Addendum B – Non-Conventional Rental Survey

Addendum C – Fayette County Overview

Addendum D – Nicholas County Overview

Addendum E – Raleigh County Overview

Addendum F – Summers County Overview

Addendum G – Beckley Community Overview

Addendum H – Hinton Community Overview

Addendum I – Summersville Community Overview

Addendum J – Methodology and Limitations

Addendum K – Qualifications

Addendum L – Glossary

Note: For-sale housing data and non-conventional rental data provided upon request.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE

The New River Gorge Regional Development District retained Bowen National Research in June of 2024 for the purpose of conducting a four-county Housing Needs Assessment of the New River Gorge Region in the state of West Virginia.

With changing demographic and employment characteristics and trends expected over the years ahead, it is important for the local government, economic development representatives, real estate professionals, developers, investors, stakeholders and its citizens to understand the current market conditions and projected changes that are anticipated to occur that will influence future housing needs. Toward that end, this report intends to:

- Provide an overview of the present-day New River Gorge Region.
- Present and evaluate past, current and projected detailed demographic characteristics.
- Present and evaluate employment characteristics and trends, as well as the economic drivers impacting the area.
- Determine current characteristics of major housing components within the market (for-sale/ownership and rental housing alternatives).
- Evaluate ancillary factors that affect housing market conditions and development (e.g., potential housing regulatory barriers, development opportunities, and identification of potential housing programs).
- Provide housing gap estimates by tenure (renter or owner) and income segment.
- Collect input from community members including area stakeholders, in the form of an online survey.

By accomplishing the study's objectives, government officials, area stakeholders, and other interested parties can: (1) better understand the region's evolving housing market, (2) establish housing priorities, (3) modify, expand, or introduce local government housing policies, (4) attract and encourage residential development and investment, and (5) enhance and/or expand the region's housing market to meet current and future housing needs.

B. GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE

Study Area Delineation

The primary geographic scope of this study is the four-county region known as the New River Gorge Region in the southern portion of West Virginia and referred to as the Primary Study Area throughout much of this study. This region includes the counties of Fayette, Nicholas, Raleigh and Summers which are considered Secondary Study Areas. Lastly, three individual communities, including the municipalities of Beckley, Hinton and Summersville, are included in this report and are referred to as Submarkets.

Maps of the region, the Secondary Study Areas and Submarkets are included in Section III. Individual summaries of each county and the selected submarkets are included as addendums to this report.

II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the housing needs of the New River Gorge Region of West Virginia, which encompasses the counties of Fayette, Nicholas, Raleigh and Summers, and to recommend priorities and strategies to address such housing needs. To that end, we have conducted a comprehensive Housing Needs Assessment that considered the following:

- Demographic Characteristics and Trends
- Economic Conditions and Initiatives
- Existing Housing Supply (Rental and For-Sale) and Development Pipeline
- Various Other Housing Factors
 - ✓ Development Opportunities
 - ✓ Development Costs and Government Regulations
 - ✓ Housing Program Identification
- Input from the Community (Survey of Stakeholders)

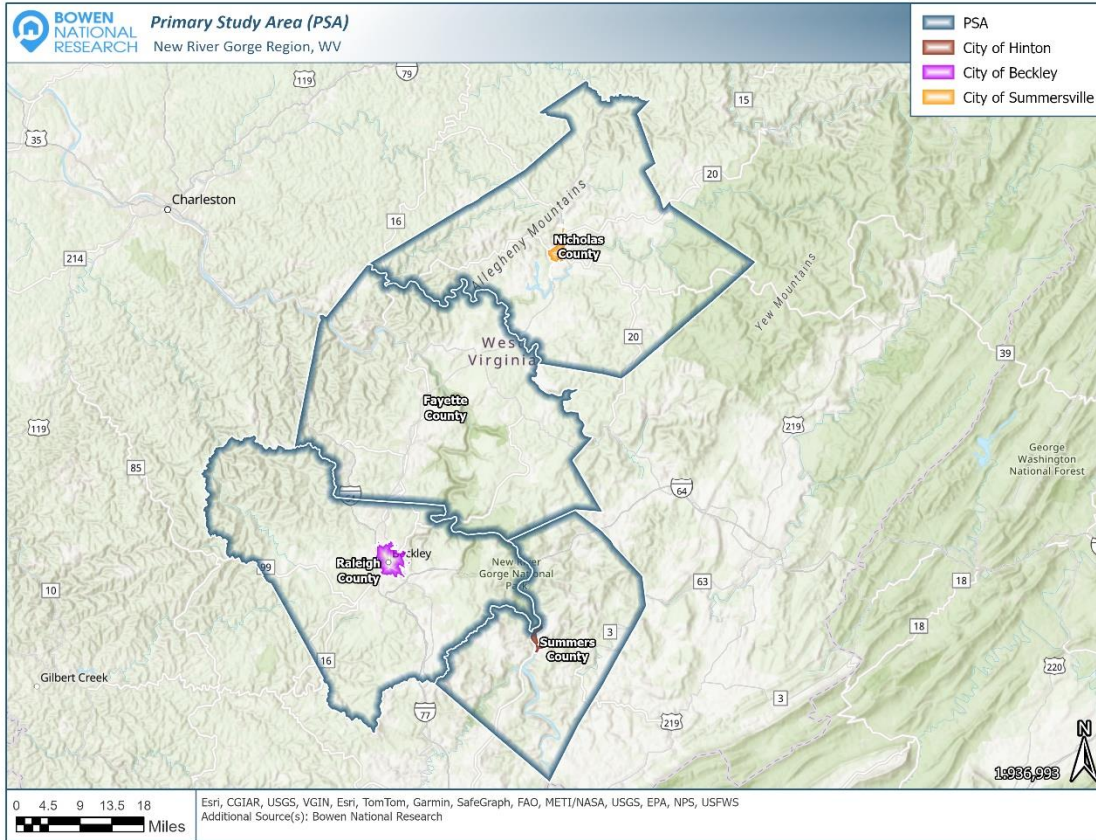
Based on these metrics and input, we were able to identify housing gaps by affordability and tenure (rental vs. ownership). Using these findings, we developed an outline of strategies that may be considered for implementation. This Executive Summary provides key findings and recommended strategies. Detailed data and analysis are presented within the individual sections of this Housing Needs Assessment.

Geographic Study Areas

This report focuses on the Primary Study Area (PSA), which consists of the New River Gorge Region of West Virginia, which includes the contiguous counties of Fayette, Nicholas, Raleigh and Summers, along with supplemental data and analysis of three municipal submarkets within the region. The following table summarizes the various market areas included in this report.

New River Gorge Region Study Areas	
Study Area	Description
Primary Study Area (PSA)	New River Gorge Region (Combined Counties of Fayette, Nicholas, Raleigh and Summers)
Secondary Study Areas and Submarkets	Fayette County Nicholas County <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City of Summersville Raleigh County <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City of Beckley Summers County <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City of Hinton

A map of the PSA (New River Gorge Region) and its counties is provided below. Maps of individual counties and submarkets are provided in Section III.



The following table includes key geographic, demographic, income and households by tenure data that serve as an introduction for each study area, giving a sense of size, affluence and household types that comprise each of the four counties in the region.

New River Gorge Region – Overview of Key Demographic Data						
County	Square Miles	2024 Population	2024 Population Density *	2024 Median Household Income	2024 Renter Households Share	2024 Owner Households Share
Fayette County	668.24	39,004	58.4	\$49,631	22.9%	77.1%
Nicholas County	654.40	24,091	36.8	\$45,681	19.7%	80.3%
Raleigh County	609.36	74,118	121.6	\$55,513	25.6%	74.4%
Summers County	367.72	11,425	31.1	\$46,068	23.3%	76.7%
Region	2,299.73	148,638	64.6	\$51,787	23.7%	76.3%

Source: 2010, 2020 Census; ESRI; Bowen National Research

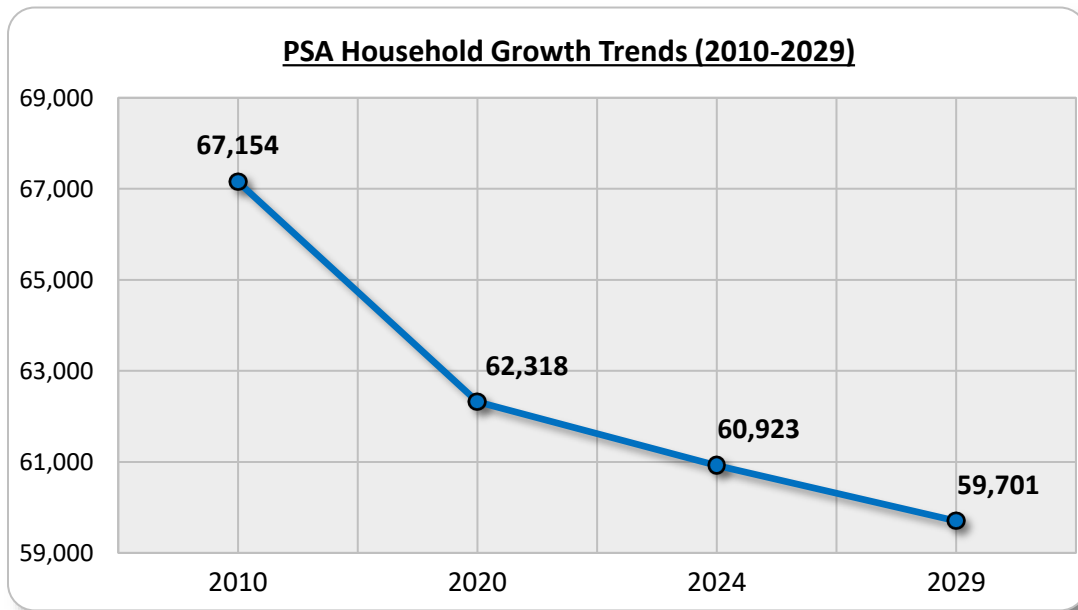
*Persons per square mile

While there are many similar socioeconomic and housing characteristics (shown throughout this report) between the four counties in the subject region, Raleigh County is the population center of the subject region and has the highest renter household share (25.6%) and the highest median household income level (\$55,513). Details of each county’s demographics, economics and housing supply are included in this Executive Summary and throughout this study.

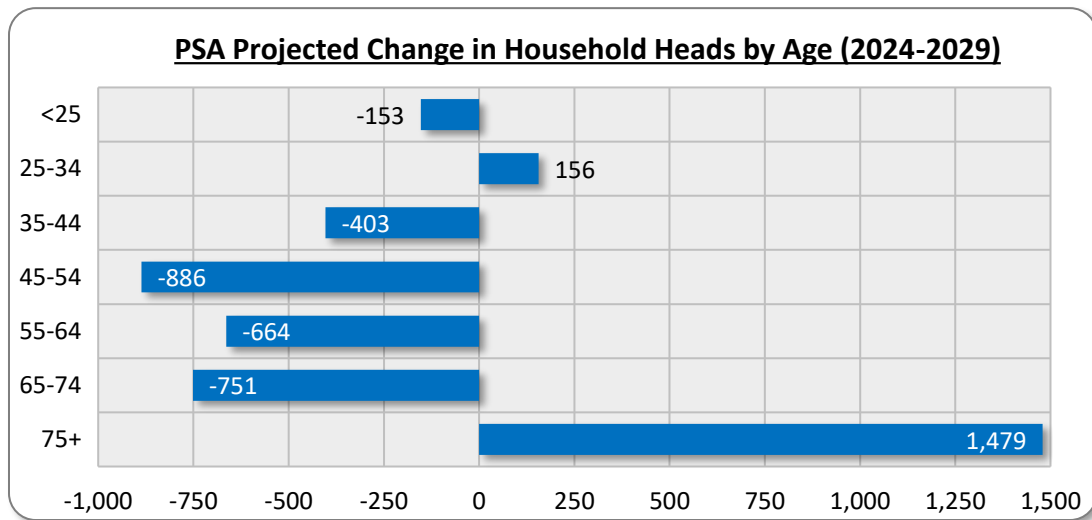
Demographics

Despite the fact that the overall number of households in the subject region declined since 2010 and is projected to experience a modest decline through at least 2029, housing needs will persist. Between 2010 and 2020, the number of households within the PSA (New River Gorge Region) decreased by 7.2% (4,836 households). In 2024, there are approximately 60,923 households in the PSA, which represents a 2.2% decrease in households between 2020 and 2024. The number of households is projected to decrease by an additional 2.0% (1,222 households) between 2024 and 2029. Overall, the percentage decrease in households within the PSA between 2010 and 2020, and the projected percentage decrease in the PSA from 2024 to 2029 are both larger than the corresponding percentage decreases for the state (2.7% and 0.2%) for both time periods. As such, the rate of household decline in the PSA has exceeded that for the state in recent years, and this trend is projected to continue over the next five years. It should be noted that other factors such as households living in substandard or cost-burdened housing, people commuting into an area for work, future economic developments, pent-up housing demand, availability of existing housing, and product in the development pipeline affect the total housing needs in a market. These factors are addressed throughout this report.

The following graph illustrates overall household growth trends for the region.

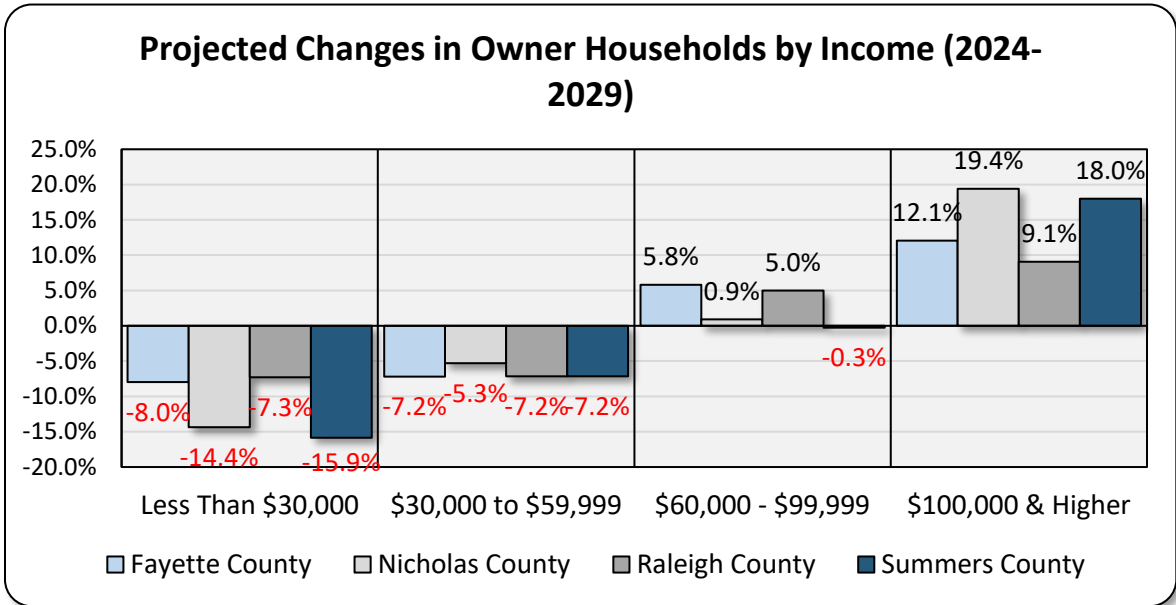
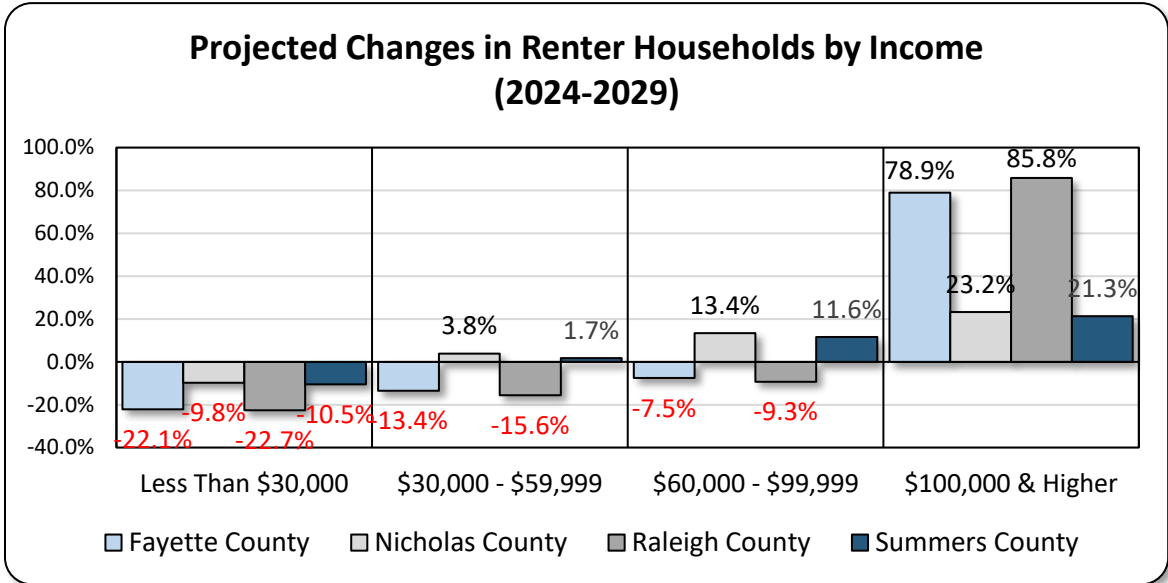


Within the PSA (New River Gorge Region), projected household growth is most significant among younger adults (ages 25 and 34) and senior households (ages 75 and older). In 2024, approximately 13.5% of PSA households are less than 35 years of age, while 30.6% are between the ages of 35 and 54, and 55.9% are aged 55 or older. The distribution of households by age in the PSA is slightly more weighted toward senior households (ages 55 and older) as compared to the state distribution, where 53.1% of households are aged 55 or older. Between 2024 and 2029, households under the age of 35 are projected to remain relatively unchanged in the PSA (though notable growth is expected to occur among households between the ages of 25 and 34), while households between the ages of 35 and 54 are projected to decline by 6.9% (1,289 households). Households ages 75 and older in the region are projected to increase by 1,479 or by 14.7% over the next five years. These changes in households by age are likely to have an influence on housing demand in the region.



Growth among moderate- and higher-income households will drive demand for more market-rate housing alternatives, while the large bases of lower income renter and owner households and limited availability of housing product will contribute to the ongoing need for affordable housing alternatives. In 2024, the largest share (53.2%) of *renter* households in the PSA earns less than \$30,000 annually, while over half (51.8%) of *owner* households earn less than \$60,000 annually. Overall, the distribution of renter and owner households in the PSA is slightly more weighted toward the lower income cohorts as compared to the distribution within the state of West Virginia. Between 2024 and 2029, projected renter household growth is confined to households earning \$100,000 or more in the PSA, while owner household growth is expected to occur among households earning \$60,000 or more. The details of households by income and tenure (renters and owners) are provided in Section IV of this report, starting on page 46.

The following graphs illustrate county household growth by tenure (renter vs. owner) projections between 2024 and 2029.



Additional demographic data and analysis are included in Section IV of this report.

Economy & Workforce

Several metrics in the PSA (New River Gorge Region) economy have exhibited significant improvements in recent years and the region appears to be well positioned for continued economic growth that will influence housing. The economy in the PSA (New River Gorge Region) is heavily influenced by the healthcare, accommodation and food services industries, retail, education, and public administration industries. Other industries of significance include manufacturing and entertainment services. The vast majority of the largest employers in each of the PSA counties have business activities associated with one of the aforementioned sectors. Due to the natural outdoor attractions within the PSA, most notably the recently (2020) designated New River Gorge National Park and Preserve, tourism in the region has a significant influence on the economy, particularly in certain counties during peak season. As West Virginia experienced record tourism numbers in 2023, this influence is expected to persist and expand. The tourism industry also contributes to numerous seasonal employment opportunities in the area, with peak season typically occurring between June and September. However, housing availability and affordability may present challenges for these seasonal employees. Overall, wages within the PSA are roughly 9% to 12% lower than wages at the state level. Housing affordability, particularly home ownership, is an issue for a significant share of individuals working within the most common occupations in the area. This is despite relatively affordable home prices and rents compared to many markets. A detailed discussion of local wages and housing affordability is provided starting on page V-6.

From 2014 to 2024, total employment within three of the four PSA counties (Fayette, Raleigh, and Summers) increased, while total employment decreased by 6.5% in Nicholas County. Between 2014 and 2024, at-place employment (number of individuals employed within an area regardless of their area of residence) decreased in Fayette, Nicholas, and Raleigh counties, while Summers County experienced an increase. In 2024, the unemployment rates in Raleigh and Summers counties are below that of the state level, while the unemployment rates in Fayette and Nicholas counties are roughly one percentage point below their respective unemployment rate in 2019 (pre-COVID). As such, there have been some notable improvements in the local economies since 2020. The recent and upcoming economic and infrastructure development projects in the PSA (see table on pages V-23, 24 and 25 for list of projects) will likely contribute to further economic and quality of life improvements within the region. In addition, the notable number of inflow commuters in each county, particularly those with lengthy commutes, represent a notable base of potential support for future housing development. These commuters are discussed in further detail on the following page. While the positive economic activity will contribute to the ongoing demand for housing in the PSA, it is important that an adequate supply of income-appropriate housing is available to maximize the potential benefits for each county in the region.

A large number of workers commute into each county on a daily basis, many of which travel more than 50 miles each way, representing a potential base of support for regional housing. Raleigh County has the largest workforce (32,829) and largest number of inflow workers (17,791) in the PSA (New River Gorge Region). Fayette County has the second largest number of inflow workers (4,839), followed by Nicholas County (3,123) and Summers County (1,261). Regardless, these inflow workers for each county in the PSA represent a base of potential support for future residential development. Although all inflow workers represent possible future residents for an area, workers with lengthy commutes (more than 50 miles) typically have the highest probability of relocating to the area of their employment. While Raleigh County has the largest *number* (6,856) and respective share (20.9%) of such workers, inflow workers comprise between 17.0% (Fayette County) and 20.8% (Summers County) of the total inflow workers in the remaining counties. This equates to 1,584 individuals in Fayette County, 1,404 workers in Nicholas County, and 462 workers in Summers County. It is also important to understand that *current* residents with lengthy commutes represent households that may potentially relocate outside an area. Within three of the four PSA counties, there is a higher number of residents with lengthy commutes than there are inflow workers with lengthy commutes. As such, Raleigh County is the only PSA county where the number of residents with commutes of 50 miles or more (4,139) is less than the number of inflow workers with this commute. Regardless, with a total of 27,014 people commuting into the subject counties for work on a daily basis, 10,306 of which commute more than 50 miles each way, there is a significant opportunity to attract such commuters to become residents of the region if adequate and affordable housing is offered.

		PSA (New River Gorge Region) Commuting Patterns by County						
		Workforce Flow			Workforce Commuting Distance			
		Inflow Workers	Resident Workers	Total Workforce	Less than 25 Miles	25 to 50 Miles	50+ Miles	Total Workforce
Fayette County	Number	4,839	4,470	9,309	6,181	1,544	1,584	9,309
	Percent	52.0%	48.0%	100.0%	66.4%	16.6%	17.0%	100.0%
Nicholas County	Number	3,123	3,663	6,786	4,235	1,147	1,404	6,786
	Percent	46.0%	54.0%	100.0%	62.5%	16.9%	20.7%	100.0%
Raleigh County	Number	17,791	15,038	32,829	19,938	6,035	6,856	32,829
	Percent	54.2%	45.8%	100.0%	60.8%	18.4%	20.9%	100.0%
Summers County	Number	1,261	965	2,226	1,450	314	462	2,226
	Percent	56.6%	43.4%	100.0%	65.1%	14.1%	20.8%	100.0%

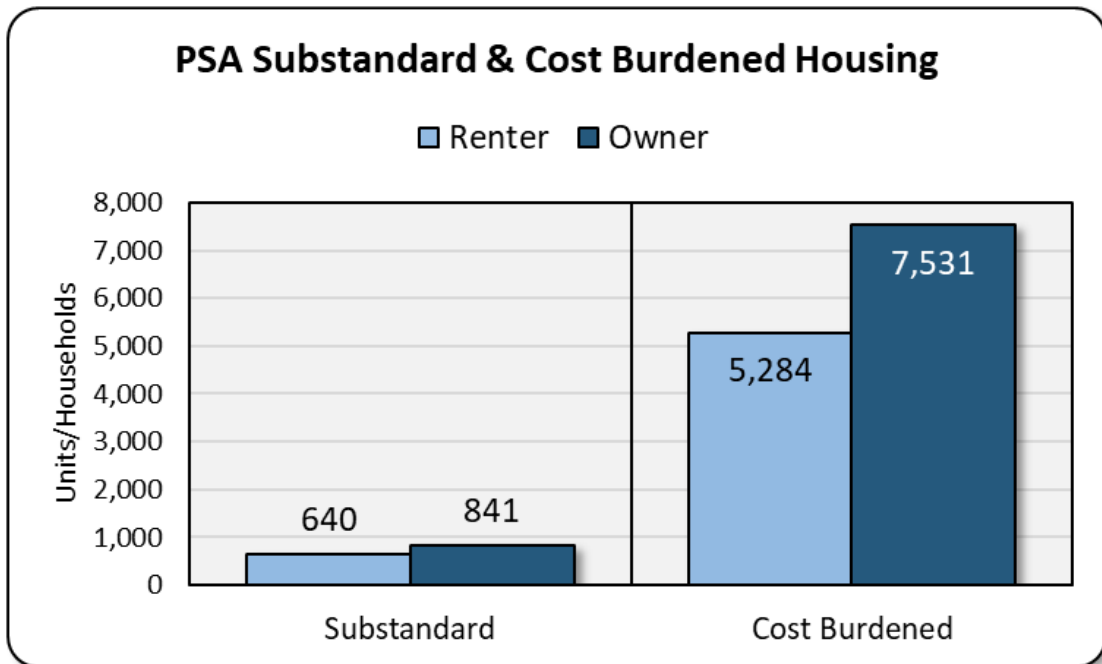
Source: U.S. Census, Longitudinal Origin-Destination Employment Statistics (LODES)

Note: Figures do not include contract employees and self-employed workers

Additional economic data and analysis is included in Section V of this report.

Housing Supply

Housing quality and affordability remain challenges for area households, as evidenced by the fact that nearly 1,500 occupied housing units in the region are considered substandard and over 12,800 households are housing cost burdened. For the purposes of this analysis, substandard housing is considered overcrowded housing (1.01+ persons per room) or housing that lacks complete indoor kitchens or bathroom plumbing. The shares of renter and owner households in the PSA that experience overcrowding (2.7% and 0.7%, respectively) are very similar to the shares for the state (2.5% and 0.8%, respectively). The shares of renter-occupied (1.8%) and owner-occupied (1.1%) housing units with incomplete kitchens or bathroom plumbing are similar to the corresponding shares for the state (1.6% and 0.7%, respectively). Overall, approximately 640 renter-occupied housing units and approximately 841 owner-occupied units in the PSA are considered substandard. While the PSA has a lower median household income than the state, the lower average gross rent in the PSA results in a lower share of cost burdened renter households (paying more than 30% of income toward housing costs). The region has a higher share of cost burdened owner households. Regardless, there are approximately 7,531 owner households and 5,284 renter households in the PSA that are housing cost burdened, of which 4,137 owner households and 2,916 renter households are *severe* cost burdened (paying over 50% of income toward housing). As a result, affordable housing alternatives should be part of future housing solutions.



The multifamily rental housing supply is operating with limited availability among all housing affordability levels across the entire region. A total of 65 multifamily apartment properties containing a total of 3,316 units within the PSA (New River Gorge Region) were surveyed. Typically, healthy, well-balanced markets have rental housing occupancy rates generally between 94% and 96%. The surveyed rentals within the PSA have a combined occupancy rate of 99.5%, indicating very limited availability among all surveyed multifamily product types. It is worth noting that there are no available housing unit types (Tax Credit and government subsidized) that serve lower income households. There are a reported 571 households on wait lists for multifamily rentals in the region, with the largest numbers of households waiting for rental housing in the counties of Fayette and Raleigh. In addition, it appears that the largest number of households on wait lists in the overall region are for the most affordable rental housing alternatives, either Tax Credit or government-subsidized rentals. These wait lists demonstrate the level of pent-up demand for a variety of rental housing by affordability level. While the following table summarizes the surveyed properties in the region by program type, additional details of all properties surveyed are included starting on page VI-8 of this report.

Surveyed Multifamily Rental Housing – New River Gorge Region, WV				
Project Type	Projects Surveyed	Total Units	Vacant Units	Occupancy Rate
Market-rate	19	761	18	97.6%
Market-rate/Tax Credit/Government-Subsidized	1	150	0	100.0%
Tax Credit	10	446	0	100.0%
Tax Credit/Government-Subsidized	11	373	0	100.0%
Government-Subsidized	24	1,586	0	100.0%
Total	65	3,316	18	99.5%

Source: Bowen National Research

Note: Total number of projects shown in this table may not equal totals shown in subsequent tables due to how mixed-income projects are reported.

As the following table illustrates, there are limited multifamily rental vacancies across the entire region, representing development opportunities in each county.

Overall Surveyed Multifamily Rental Housing – New River Gorge Region, WV					
Study Area	Projects	Units	Vacant	Vacancy Rate	Occupancy Rate
Beckley	16	1,143	11	1.0%	99.0%
Hinton	1	102	0	0.0%	100.0%
Summersville	8	287	0	0.0%	100.0%
Fayette County	22	819	7	0.9%	99.1%
Nicholas County	10	319	0	0.0%	100.0%
Raleigh County	29	2,020	11	0.5%	99.5%
Summers County	4	158	0	0.0%	100.0%
PSA	65	3,316	18	0.5%	99.5%

Source: Bowen National Research

Note: Submarket data is included within each respective county total and share when applicable

Non-conventional rentals, such as houses, duplexes and mobile homes comprise the vast majority of rental housing in the region, most of which is not affordable to most low-income households and has limited availability. Non-conventional rental housing, which is essentially any rental housing unit not in a multifamily apartment, consists of 11,421 units which comprise 80.7% of the rental housing stock in the PSA (New River Gorge Region). Bowen National Research conducted online research between November and December of 2024 and identified 44 non-conventional rentals that were listed as *available* for rent in the PSA. When the 44 identified available rentals in the region are compared with the estimated 11,421 non-conventional rentals, the overall vacancy rate is approximately 0.4%. This is a very low vacancy rate and demonstrates the lack of available rentals among this product type. While the limited available supply in Fayette and Nicholas counties prevents us from drawing any reliable conclusions on rents in these counties and no available units were identified in Summers County, most of the available units in Raleigh County have rents above \$1,000. When considering the fact that utility costs for much of this product could exceed \$200 per month, it is likely that the overall housing costs of non-conventional rentals exceed \$1,200 per month. As such, these rentals are likely unaffordable to most area renters.

Overall, there is a relatively limited amount of for-sale housing available for purchase in the New River Gorge Region. Based on information obtained from Realtor.com, we identified 254 housing units within the PSA (New River Gorge Region) that were listed as *available* for purchase as of January 8, 2025. There are two available inventory metrics most often used to evaluate the health of a for-sale housing market. These metrics include *Months Supply of Inventory* (MSI) and *availability rate*. Overall, based on the area's average monthly absorption rate of 62 homes, the region's 254 homes listed as available for purchase represent approximately 4.1 months of supply. Typically, healthy and well-balanced markets have an available supply that should take about four to six months to absorb (if no other units are added to the market). The PSA's inventory is on the lower end of the healthy range of supply. However, when comparing the 254 available units with the overall inventory of 46,486 owner-occupied units, the PSA has a vacancy/availability rate of 0.5%, which is well below the normal range of 2.0% to 3.0% for a well-balanced for-sale/owner-occupied market and reflective of a shortage of for-sale supply. These metrics point to a for-sale housing shortage in the region and a residential development opportunity for such product.

The following table summarizes key available for-sale supply information by county and municipal submarket.

Available For-Sale Housing by Study Area - New River Gorge Region, WV (As of January 8, 2025)							
Study Area*	Total Units	% Share of Region	Availability Rate / MSI	Average List Price	Median List Price	Average Year Built	Average Days on Market
Beckley	40	15.8%	0.9%/2.7	\$206,020	\$154,000	1957	94
Hinton	9	3.5%	1.5%/6.9	\$140,878	\$153,500	1943	67
Summersville	10	3.9%	0.9%/9.1	\$346,930	\$255,000	1972	112
Fayette County	46	18.1%	0.4%/3.0	\$284,426	\$176,950	1960	77
Nicholas County	46	18.1%	0.6%/9.2	\$319,689	\$202,500	1982	113
Raleigh County	123	48.4%	0.6%/3.1	\$272,283	\$194,000	1969	96
Summers County	39	15.4%	1.1%/22.9	\$256,518	\$175,000	1970	122
PSA	254	100.0%	0.5%/4.1	\$280,647	\$188,500	1970	100

Source: Realtor.com & Bowen National Research

*Submarket data is included within each respective county total and share when applicable

Among the individual counties in the PSA, Raleigh County, by far, has the largest number (123) of available for-sale homes, followed by Fayette and Nicholas counties, both with 46 available homes. Summers County has a total of 39 available homes. When compared to recent sales history and the overall inventory of owner-occupied homes in each county, the two larger counties of Fayette and Raleigh have the lowest Months Supply of Inventory (3.0 and 3.1 months, respectively). While the counties of Nicholas and Summers have MSIs of nine or more months, this is likely attributed to the low number of homes sold on a monthly basis in these two counties. To get a further sense of the available for-sale supply we derive an availability rate. With the exception of Summers County, which has an availability rate of 1.1%, the other three counties have availability rates of 0.6% or lower. All of these availability rates are below the range of 2% to 3% often seen in healthy and well-balanced markets. As such, there appears to be a shortage of for-sale housing among all four counties.

Additional for-sale housing supply information, including data and analysis of age of product, bedroom types, average square footage, prices per-square-foot and number of days on market, is included in Section VI.

Other Housing Factors

A total of 38 sites were identified in the region that can potentially support residential development, many of which appear to have access to public water and sewer utilities. The New River Gorge Region has a significant number of properties available for sale that could potentially support residential development. The investigation for sites within the region identified 38 properties that are potentially capable of accommodating future residential development via new construction or adaptive reuse. Of the 38 total properties, 12 contain at least one existing building that is not necessarily vacant and may require demolition, new construction, or adaptive reuse. The remaining 26 properties were vacant or undeveloped parcels of land that could potentially support residential development. As part of this analysis, we also targeted properties that were adjacent to or near

existing water and/or sewer lines. It should be noted that our survey of potential development opportunities in the New River Gorge Region consists of properties that were actively marketed for sale at the time of this report as well as those identified in person while conducting on-the-ground research. Details of these potential sites are included starting on page VII-2 of this report. It is likely that there are additional sites that could be potential locations for future residential development. Regardless, based on this analysis, it appears there is a sufficient number of potential housing development sites within the New River Gorge Region to support an increase of residential development. These sites should be leveraged to support local housing efforts.

The area housing regulations and certain residential development costs likely serve as barriers to residential development in the region. A review of several factors that affect local residential development costs were evaluated as part of this study to determine if any such factors may serve as a barrier to local residential development. The median price of vacant land for properties considered to be development opportunities in the New River Gorge Region is significantly higher than in surrounding counties, primarily due to the availability of large commercial sites in Raleigh County with access to water and sewer utilities. By comparison, many available development sites in surrounding counties are smaller and do not have access to sewer utilities. The comparatively higher price of land per acre in the region could be a barrier to residential development. Construction labor rates within the Beckley MSA and the Southern West Virginia nonmetropolitan area are generally lower for most occupations compared to the adjacent Charleston MSA and the state of West Virginia and are not considered to significantly impact residential development in the region. Water/sewer connection fees within the New River Gorge Region, as well as other government fees, should not negatively impact residential development in the region.

A review of local zoning ordinances was also conducted to determine if current land use regulations could adversely limit or serve as a barrier to residential development. Note that several county and municipal jurisdictions in the New River Gorge Region are subject to zoning regulations. Unincorporated areas of both Fayette and Raleigh counties are subject to zoning regulations at the county level, while Nicholas and Summers counties do not have zoning ordinances for areas outside of cities and towns. Zoning regulations for unincorporated areas of Fayette and Raleigh counties primarily favor the preservation of agricultural and rural areas and lower-density development, while zoning regulations within municipalities include districts that allow for higher-density development. In the city of Beckley, certain residential zoning districts allow for building height maximums of up to 10 stories which permit vertical development. Multifamily dwellings are generally permitted by right or on a conditional basis in select residential and commercial zoning districts in several larger municipalities. Specifically, among the jurisdictions where residential zoning densities were identified, Summersville and Raleigh County (unincorporated areas) appear to only allow up to six units per acre, which limits the ability of a developer to do higher density residential product. Conversely, Beckley has zoning districts that

allow up to 29 units per acre for non-senior product and up to 72 units per acre for senior product. This puts Beckley in a more favorable position to attract multifamily development. Select municipalities in the New River Gorge Region also administer planned development districts that allow for large-scale residential and mixed-use development. While numerous areas in the New River Gorge Region are located in areas with public water service, there are several areas in the region that do not have access to public wastewater/sewer utilities. The lack of these infrastructure improvements limit large-scale residential growth in the region to areas with adequate sewer access. Therefore, areas of the region with flexible zoning requirements as well as access to water *and* sewer utilities are best positioned to allow for development of multifamily housing that will enable areas to more aggressively address housing shortages.

With nearly 50 different housing programs identified, the region has access to numerous potential resources to help address local housing issues. Overall, 46 programs (or organizations) were identified that could potentially be accessed to support housing preservation and development efforts in the subject region. This includes 24 federal programs, 12 state programs, and 10 county programs. These programs cover a variety of purposes, are available on a community or individual household level, and have various eligibility requirements. Advocates and/or residents should explore, utilize, and promote programs that best fit the area's goals. A listing of the programs, along with a summary of the programs starts on page VII-42. It is important to note that this listing of various housing programs likely does not include all such programs that are available. Therefore, area advocates should conduct additional research to determine if other programs are available.

Community Input

To gain information, perspective and insight about the New River Gorge Region's housing issues and the factors influencing housing decisions by its residents, developers and others, Bowen National Research conducted a targeted survey of area stakeholders. A total of 67 respondents representing community leaders (stakeholders) from a broad field of expertise participated in a survey that inquired about common housing issues, housing needs, barriers to development, and possible solutions or initiatives that could be considered to address housing on a local level.

Based on the feedback provided by area stakeholders, it appears that limited availability of housing units and affordability of housing are the most common housing issues in the New River Gorge Region. The region is most in need of affordable rental housing priced at less than \$750 per month and affordable for-sale housing priced at less than \$150,000. Duplex/triplex/townhome units were cited as the top need in the region, followed by ranch homes/single floor plan units and traditional two-story single-family homes. Stakeholders cited the need to clear blighted/unused structures to create land for new development, with many also citing a need to repair/renovate/revitalize existing housing. The cost of land, labor, and materials and housing units converting to short-term/vacation rentals appear to be

common barriers to residential development in the region. Most stakeholders noted that access to infrastructure and quality of schools are the most critical factors for the location of new residential development. Major initiatives and priorities cited by stakeholders to support housing development in the region include accessibility to key social services, renovating and repurposing buildings, and blight removal or mitigation.

Housing Gap Estimates

The PSA (New River Gorge Region) has an overall housing gap of 7,569 units for rental and for-sale product at a variety of affordability levels. It is projected that the PSA has a five-year **rental** housing gap of 2,586 units and a **for-sale** housing gap of 4,983 units. The largest gaps are in Raleigh County, which is not surprising given its size (number of households). While the largest rental gaps in most counties are for the product affordable to households earning up to 30% of AMHI (rents generally below \$520/month), there are also notable gaps for higher end product affordable to households earning above 80% of AMHI (rents generally above \$1,320) in Fayette and Raleigh counties. While most home price segments and affordability levels have some level of need, it appears the greatest for-sale gaps are for product which generally serves households earning between 81% and 120% of AMHI. At this income level, the product would be generally priced between \$176,000 and \$275,000.

The following tables summarize the approximate overall housing gaps that exist in each county and in the overall New River Gorge Region over the next five years. Detailed housing gap estimates among various income levels within each county are provided in Section VIII of this report.

Overall Rental Housing Gap Estimates (2024-2029)		
Area	Housing Gap (Units)	Share of Region's Gap
Fayette County	432	16.7%
Raleigh County	1,575	60.9%
Summers County	204	7.9%
Nicholas County	375	14.5%
New River Gorge Region	2,586	100.0%

Overall For-Sale Housing Gap Estimates (2024-2029)		
Area	Housing Gap (Units)	Share of Region's Gap
Fayette County	1,098	22.0%
Raleigh County	2,992	60.1%
Summers County	265	5.3%
Nicholas County	628	12.6%
New River Gorge Region	4,983	100.0%

Note: Number of units assumes product is marketable, affordable and in a marketable location. Variations of product types will impact the actual number of units that can be supported. Additionally, incentives and/or government policy changes could encourage support for additional units that exceed the preceding projections.

The preceding estimates are based on current government policies and incentives, recent and projected demographic trends, current and anticipated economic trends, and available and planned residential units. Numerous factors impact a market's ability to support new housing product. This is particularly true of individual housing projects or units. Certain design elements, pricing structures, target market segments (e.g., seniors, workforce, families, etc.), product quality and location all influence the actual number of units that can be supported. Demand estimates could exceed those shown in the preceding table if a county and/or its incorporated municipalities changed its policies or offer incentives to encourage people to move into the market or for developers to develop new housing product.

Recommended Housing Strategies

The following summarizes key strategies that should be considered to address housing issues and needs of the market. These strategies do not need to be done concurrently, nor do all strategies need to be implemented to create an impact. Instead, the following housing strategies should be used as a guide by the local government, stakeholders, developers and residents to help inform housing decisions.

Set realistic/attainable short-term housing goals, outline long-term objectives and monitor progress. Using the housing needs estimates and recommendations provided in this report as a guide, each county and municipal submarket should set realistic short-term (two to three years) housing development goals along with long-term (five years or longer) objectives to support housing. Short-term goals should be focused on establishing an Action Plan that outlines priorities in the region, such as broad housing policies, initiatives, and incentives that support the preservation and development of residential units. The findings and recommendations included in this report should serve as a guide for developing an Action Plan. Long-term objectives should include establishing a goal for the number of housing units that should be built or repaired and broadly outline the types of housing that should be considered, such as rentals and for-sale housing, as well as possible geographical locations (e.g., within walkable communities, along public transit corridors, selected neighborhoods, municipalities, townships, etc.). The goals should also broadly outline affordability (e.g., income levels) objectives and market segments (e.g., families, seniors, and disabled) that should be served. From such goals, interested parties should periodically collect key metrics (e.g., vacancy rates, changes in rents/prices, reassess cost burdened and overcrowded housing, evaluate housing cost increases relative to income/wage growth, etc.) so that they can monitor progress and adjust efforts to support stated goals.

Develop municipal-, county-specific and regional-level housing plans. As shown throughout this report, the three selected municipal submarkets and the four counties in the New River Gorge Region each have some unique demographic characteristics and trends, along with different housing characteristics and challenges. Efforts should be made to develop specific housing plans for each targeted submarket and county. It is also clear from this report that each of the four counties have many similar attributes and challenges, along with an interdependence with each respective county. It will be important that the county governments work together with each other and with other municipalities and townships to address mutual housing issues whenever possible. This may be in the form of joint grant applications, agreements over infrastructure, holding joint strategic housing planning sessions and/or work groups, supporting capacity building through the pairing of city-county resources, and increasing the impact of development incentives through the use of complementary policy tools. Additional discussion and examples of such strategies can be found on the Local Housing Solutions website at: www.Localhousingsolutions.org and the Housing Supply Accelerator Playbook at: <https://www.planning.org/housing-supply-accelerator/>.

Consider capacity building through organizational efforts and/or hiring professionals to spearhead housing efforts. A critical element to achieving housing goals is to have a person or organization with the capacity to take the lead on local housing efforts. In short, the region needs a “housing champion.” While the region currently has a housing steering committee, housing advocates may want to consider establishing a more formal housing committee, coalition or task force. This entity can use the findings from this report to develop an action plan for the region and possibly for the individual counties. It could also involve hiring a housing specialist that would be responsible for facilitating housing initiatives on a regular basis. This can be an individual already working for a local municipal or county government, or someone that works for a nonprofit group, the regional housing authority, or other housing advocacy group, or it can be a newly retained housing specialist with knowledge and experience in housing. This person, with oversight from a housing committee/coalition/task force, could research, organize and spearhead housing efforts.

Consider developing a centralized housing resource center. While housing information for the subject region can be found through a variety of organizations and online sources, there does not appear to be a single comprehensive online housing source for the region or for any of the four individual counties. The development of an online resource center should be considered that includes or directs people to development and housing resources (potential sites, building and zoning information, incentives, housing data, Housing Choice Vouchers, housing placement or counseling services, etc.) that can help both developers and residents. The subject area currently has the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority that offers a website (<https://nrgrda.org/>) that focuses on various economic development related data points and information, including potential economic development sites. It is recommended that an online housing website/webpage be developed that is formatted

similar to the New River Gorge Regional Development Authority website. It is worth noting that this website includes a survey of dilapidated and vacant buildings that could ultimately represent potential residential development sites. The results of this survey (a listing of properties) should be provided on the website to enable prospective developers of housing to more quickly identify potential development opportunities. This survey can be found at: <https://nrgrda.org/fayette-county-dilapidated-buildings-survey/>

Explore, implement and leverage existing state-level housing incentives to encourage or support the preservation of existing housing and the development of new residential units. The preservation of existing housing and/or development of new housing can be supported and encouraged through a variety of existing housing incentives and initiatives. As an example, the subject region currently has a *Build West Virginia Act* designation in Fayette County that should be promoted and leveraged to benefit from the various development incentives available through the program. Each of the other three counties in the region should explore applying for this same designation, for which this Housing Needs Assessment can be used as part of a community's Build West Virginia Act application. There are also five (5) Qualified Opportunity Zones (QOZs) within the subject region that offer various tax incentives to encourage residential investment and development. A list of the region's QOZs can be found at: <https://opportunityzones.com/location/west-virginia/#list>. These QOZs and their corresponding benefits should be promoted to support housing efforts in the subject region, while local housing advocates should actively market the QOZs to those groups that invest in this program. Such investment groups/funds can be found at: <https://opportunityzones.com/funds/>.

Explore and support housing policies, programs and incentives to support the preservation of existing housing and the development of new residential units, with possible emphasis on affordable workforce housing and senior-oriented housing. In an effort to support the development and preservation of more affordable housing alternatives, local governments should *consider* supporting projects being developed/preserved with affordable housing development programs (e.g., Tax Credit and HUD programs), providing pre-development financial assistance, waiving or lowering government permitting/development fees, implementing inclusionary zoning (requiring market-rate developers to include some affordable housing units), supporting a Housing Trust Fund, or supporting/expanding existing land banks. Code compliance/enforcement efforts should be an integral part of the region's efforts to ensure housing is brought up to code and maintained at expected standards. For properties that are not targets for local land bank acquisition, the region may also want to consider the removal of liens or reduction of fines on abandoned/vacant properties to encourage residential transactions of such properties, increasing the likelihood that such housing would be remedied or removed. Ultimately, housing initiatives should focus on those programs that support low-income households (seniors and families), workforce households, and first-time homebuyers. Additional housing is needed in order to have a healthy housing market, which will ultimately contribute to the local economy, quality of life and overall prosperity of

the New River Gorge Region. A list of various existing housing programs and organizations that should be explored for possible use in the New River Gorge Region is included in Section VII of this report.

Support efforts to develop residential product in locations that accommodates the housing needs of seniors and appeals to younger adult and younger millennial households. The demographic analysis of the New River Gorge Region illustrates that the region has a growing base of younger millennial (ages 29 to 34) and zillennial (micro-generation ages 23 to 33) households and senior households (ages 75 and older). Although many factors contribute to households by age characteristics and trends, factors such as housing product type, location and design aspects play roles in housing decisions made by certain household age cohorts. Such product will likely involve smaller units (e.g., one- and two-bedroom units), more amenities, and more maintenance-free housing alternatives. The development of housing near commercial corridors, in or near some of the walkable municipalities (e.g., Beckley, Fayetteville and Hinton), and near key community assets (e.g., medical providers, entertainment opportunities, and community services) that often attract younger households and support the needs of senior households. Additionally, there are several commercial corridors (typically along U.S. highways and state routes) that are well served by numerous community services and may be conducive to supporting new housing. Local stakeholders should consider these various areas for potential residential development.

Market the New River Gorge Region's housing needs and development opportunities to potential residential development partners. This Housing Needs Assessment of the New River Gorge Region documents the notable household changes/trends and economic growth occurring in the region, as well as the housing gaps that exist at a variety of price points for both rental and for-sale housing. This study also identifies nearly 40 possible developable sites and nearly 50 possible public and private sector housing programs that could be leveraged to assist in residential development. Local stakeholders should attempt to market the region to residential developers (both for-profit and nonprofit), real estate investors, lending institutions, housing advocacy groups and others active in the region and state. Housing advocates may want to organize a "Developers Day" and or host a housing forum to attract and educate residential developers and investors and to promote development opportunities of the region. Marketing of the region's housing needs and opportunities through trade publications, direct solicitation or public venues (e.g., housing and economic conferences) should be considered. The promotion of market data (including this Housing Needs Assessment), development opportunities, housing programs and incentives should be the focus of such efforts.