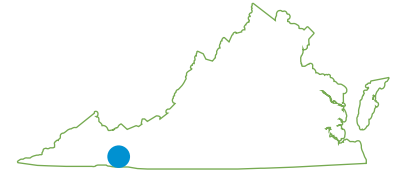


Profile: **Grayson County**



Supporting the Farm Economy with an Agriculture Economic Development Director



GRAYSON COUNTY, VA

Grayson County is a rural community in Southwest Virginia. Agriculture is its leading industry, but farmers there face serious financial challenges. Between 2002–2022, the county lost nearly 35 percent of its farms. Recognizing that farmers needed more targeted support to help with marketing, grant applications, community engagement, and more, the County created a paid agriculture economic development director position to help farmers prosper and thrive.

Situation

Grayson County is a rural place. Nestled in Southwestern Virginia along the Tennessee and North Carolina lines, its total population is around 15,000 people. No major interstates run through the county, and as Census of Agriculture data shows, cows outnumber people by more than two to one. “Agriculture is our number one economic driver in this county,” says Mitch Smith, the county’s deputy administrator. Virginia Cooperative Extension estimates that the economic impact of agriculture in the county is [around \\$80 million per year](#).

Still, farms in the county have faced challenges, especially in the last decade. According to the Census of Agriculture, between 2002–2022, Grayson lost 34 percent of its farms, [from 939 down to 616](#). [Major declines in dairy and tobacco](#) farming in particular led to financial hardship, especially for small and midsized farms.



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In 2018, well aware of both agriculture’s economic importance to the county *and* the challenges that many individual farmers faced, Grayson’s then-county administrator created a volunteer agricultural advisory board. (See [Agricultural](#)

Boards and Committees & Development Officers

fact sheet.) Comprised of farmers and agricultural professionals, the board met regularly to strategize ways to better support the farming community. After several meetings and discussions, they shared ideas and feedback with the county administrator. They wanted to fully engage him and secure a government champion to help further their work, which would be key to any proposals they put forward.

Approach

As their first major action, the advisory board conducted a [SWOT analysis](#) themselves to identify the county's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. John Fant, a military veteran, farmer, and former county supervisor who served on the board, says, "We listed all these things in our analysis, and one of the things that popped out was that we needed somebody focused on agriculture. We have a great cooperative extension person here," he continues, "but that person is limited in what they can do when it comes to recruiting, marketing, and emphasizing certain economic things."

Another member of the advisory board, Brantley Ivey is also a farmer as well as a county supervisor. He agrees with Fant's recollection. "That was the number one thing we came up with," he said. "If agriculture is paying the bills, we need to be giving more support from the county to our farming community."

The board and some like-minded leaders lobbied the county to create an "agriculture economic development director" position. Given the county's limited budget, this was not an easy task. However, the "sell" was made slightly easier because it aligned with Grayson's comprehensive plan, which expressed a desire to strengthen agriculture. The board made sure to emphasize that when making their pitch.



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JOHN FANT,
AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

"If farming is an important component of your county, then you need to have somebody focused on making sure that the industry is well represented and talked about, so it continues to thrive," says Fant. "We do that for everything else. Most counties have an economic development agency or an industrial board. If you're doing it for manufacturing, then you ought to be doing it for agriculture."

"I think rural counties can get caught up on thinking that the 'silver bullet' for economic progress is to fill their industrial parks with Amazon and Walmart distributors," Ivey says. "But that's not a silver bullet. I'm not saying we shouldn't go after outside businesses to move into our county, but in the meantime, we need to support the businesses that keep our county going. When it comes to economic development, let's look inward a little bit. When we already have an established industry like agriculture in our county, why wouldn't we support and grow the established industry instead of bringing in a new one?"

Although Grayson County has one of the smallest budgets in the state, county leaders listened to the advisory board and their allies—and ultimately agreed to create the role. The emphasis on agriculture's economic impact, as well as the alignment with the comprehensive plan and the vocal support of allies in government, helped make the difference.

The role started off as part-time in 2019. This was a good way for the county to "ease into" the change. Someone was hired to fill the position, and that person immediately went to work helping farmers with marketing their products, identifying grant opportunities to support their business, and more. When their first hire left the part-time role for a new job opportunity, county leaders doubled down. In 2021, they changed the

role into a full-time position and hired a new director to devote more time to helping farmers flourish.

When the role was transitioned to full-time, the county also expanded the scope of work. The [responsibilities and goals of the agricultural economic director](#) are to:

- Identify, develop, and recruit emerging agricultural and horticultural opportunities;
- Lead in the pursuit and vetting of new business opportunities in the areas of agriculture, food security, livelihoods, and economic growth;
- Provide technical leadership for the planning, review, research, and implementation of agricultural economic expansion initiatives;
- Develop marketing opportunities for locally produced products using local and regional events and state programs;
- Develop and coordinate agri-tourism events with the Director of Tourism.

Outcomes

So far, say Smith, Fant, and Ivey, the results have been impressive.

The full-time agriculture economic development director started out with a focus on farmer and community engagement. Since 2021, she has expanded and strengthened the county's annual agricultural fair, where the community can highlight their agriculture and traditions. She hosts a regular Friends of Agriculture breakfast and invites farmers, agricultural leaders, and the public to break bread together. And she organizes an annual awards banquet for Grayson's farming community. The event uplifts success stories, celebrates jobs well done, and honors a few high-achieving farmers with cash prizes, plaques, "hall of fame" status, and public recognition. In recent years, the crowd at this banquet has ballooned, and the Virginia Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry and the Commissioner of Agriculture have both driven 5 hours from Richmond to attend.



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According to farmer Sarah Torres, all these efforts help build community, make farmers feel valued and appreciated, and raise awareness of the importance of local food and farms.

Beyond building community and raising awareness, the director helps market local agriculture. She maintains a website—www.farmgrayson.org/—that promotes Grayson County agriculture to consumers and offers locally-relevant resources. She helps write and navigate grants for farmers and farm businesses, bringing more outside money into the county's agricultural community. She represents the county at events, manages the agricultural advisory board, engages with local schools, oversees a community commercial kitchen, and markets products, making sure businesses and buyers understand the value of Grayson-grown products. She also serves as a "connector" among the farming community, which is especially helpful for new and beginning farmers in the area who may need more help meeting people and accessing expertise. And in the aftermath of Hurricane Helene, which caused major destruction from flooding in Grayson, she has helped connect farmers with disaster relief.

It is worth noting that, [between 2017 and 2022](#), the Census of Agriculture shows an 86 percent increase in Grayson's market value of products sold, a 92 percent increase in farm-related income, and a 361 percent increase in net farm income. These increases cannot be deemed causally related to the new position—but the county's emphasis on supporting agricultural economic development that began in 2019 likely played a part.

"We're very grateful for the support," says Torres, who runs a dairy with her siblings. In the last year or so, the agriculture economic development director has helped them take steps toward adding a creamery on their farm, offering assistance with various grant proposals and business planning, setting up advisor visits to the farm,

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**SARAH TORRES,
FARMER**

and giving encouragement during a daunting process. The creamery will boost the farm's economic viability and direct marketing capacity. “I don't know what we would've done if it hadn't been for her I know that other people feel the same way. We're not the only ones she's doing these things for. She does it for any farmer who asks for help.”

Lessons Learned

Along the way, Grayson County leaders have learned several important lessons about supporting the local agricultural economy. For one, it is essential to actively engage with the farming community. Creating opportunities to learn from farmers and agricultural leaders—such as through an agricultural advisory board and regular public gatherings, like agriculture breakfasts—is essential to making sure that whatever solutions are implemented are grounded and truly necessary. In addition to actively engaging the farming community itself, it is key to connect meaningfully with influential local leaders and the public so that they can understand the importance of agriculture.

For another, counties should not underestimate the importance of collecting good, usable information before launching into an idea. That is why the SWOT analysis was so useful. In Grayson County's case, it was this process conducted by the agricultural advisory board that helped them understand tangible steps they could take to meaningfully support the agricultural economy.

These analyses do not always have to be extremely formal, nor do they have to be expensive.

Finally, leaders in Grayson County learned that working to build social capital goes hand in hand with increasing direct economic and marketing opportunities. Efforts to better engage the community around agricultural issues—such as inviting them to agriculture awards ceremonies or county fairs—can lead to greater support for local farmers. When combined with specific tactics like applying for grants and promoting products, the multi-focused approach of the agriculture economic development director has yielded real benefits.

“If agriculture is a part of [a community's] economy and they have an interest in supporting it, I think the position is well worth the investment,” says Smith. Speaking from her perspective as a farmer who has worked directly with the agriculture economic development director, Torres agrees. “This is who we are. We're a farming county. And so, to me, the position is definitely worthwhile. I realize it is an expense, and yes, our budget is tight, and it gets tighter all the time. But to me, if you take that away, you're denying one of the pillars of our county economy, and you're shooting yourself in the foot. So I would advocate for this position. I think that it's important.”



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