



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2023.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Wythe County, Virginia
Program Title: Appalachian Hockey as Economic Development
Program Category: Community & Economic Development

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Appalachian Hockey as Economic Development

Can hockey be an economic development? Wythe County believes so - and is making it so. Hockey at the APEX Center is unconventional economic development that will have a huge regional impact through a sport not traditional to Appalachia.

In November 2022, Wythe County announced that it will lease its Appalachian Exposition Center (APEX Center) to Apex Drive Holdings, LLC (ADH). ADH's renewable 10-year lease will bring minor-league hockey, other indoor sports, concerts and events to the center. Will hockey work in Appalachia? If so, it seems logical that some of that

support should come from thousands of daily visitors from traditional hockey markets who stay in the 3,000 lodging rooms within five miles of the facility in Wytheville and Wythe County.



That's the case with the APEX Center, Wythe County's developing tourism destination at the intersection of Interstates 77 and 81. Wythe County supervisors and administrators determined in 2016 to develop a 5,330-seat, 90,000-square foot multi-purpose entertainment facility in the center of the county that is ideal for community involvement and economic development.

Wythe County partnered with Virginia Tech's Office of Economic Development to conduct a market and financial feasibility study to determine if a proposed

“Appalachian Agricultural Exposition Center” met a need in the region. After the study, the Wythe Board of Supervisors voted to develop the APEX Center to support concerts, agricultural shows, community events and other types of large events to attract visitors to the area and complement local quality of life initiatives. The board invested over \$12 million acquiring the land, construction and regulatory requirements.

Skepticism ruled in the community after the building was finished in 2019 as some residents called out the Board for funding and supporting a pipe dream, even as the County and its Joint Industrial Development Authority attracted other major economic investments.

When COVID-19 hit, all non-essential activities came to a halt. Once things started to reopen, the facility hosted a few large events like dirt bike racing, monster trucks, and rodeos. While the Apex Center was originally created for agricultural expos and large events, the county knew the center had potential beyond those events.

In 2022, after the authority created by the County to run the venue struggled to engage and sustain an audience, the County looked at alternatives from selling the building to finding a lessee to operate it. A county resident connected the County with the owner of a minor league hockey franchise in Winston-Salem, NC. After months of negotiation, the County and owner moved forward to create a partnership designed to grow a sport, attract visitors, bring in concerts and generally make the space an economic development magnet.

The hockey arena project in Wythe County, Virginia, is one of regional significance, demonstrating a different approach to economic development: that diversified economic development is most easily achieved by attracting new visitors to the community to spend money that would not otherwise have been spent there.

The Federal Prospects Hockey League (FPHL) currently plays a 60-game season between October and April.

With this in mind, the plan is for the Apex Center to host at least 30 home hockey games a year. In addition to hockey, the ADH plans to promote concerts, youth and league sports,



skating events, conventions, expos and other large public draws. With all of these activities, county leaders expect tourism levels to increase drastically, bringing in a new crowd to our predominantly outdoor tourism county. The county will generate income from the lease revenue, admissions tax, meals and lodging taxes, increased sales tax and development of nearby county-owned property.

What makes the APEX Center project so regionally significant? Consider that if 30 annual hockey events bring 3,000 visitors per event (a frequent result in this league's markets), that's 90,000 attendees. If two-thirds of them come from outside of Wythe County, that's 60,000 visitors. A projected average spending of \$125 per person, per

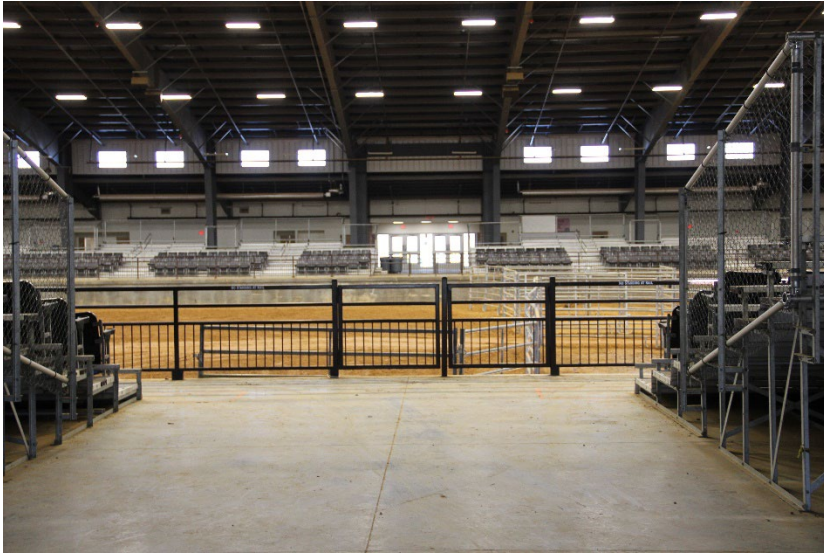
event (meals, concessions, tickets, retail, lodging) would generate \$7.5 million in annual direct spending in the local economy, \$23 million in indirect spending and \$775,000 in locally-retained taxes for Wythe County and the Towns of Wytheville and Rural Retreat. That doesn't count all of the other events the lessee intends to hold.

The Wytheville Convention & Visitors Bureau is counting on the regional draw and out-of-state overnight visitors to bring support to the new team. "Wytheville Convention & Visitors Bureau looks forward to working with ADH to market our region to visitors as a destination for sports, major concerts and expos," said CVB director Rosa Lee Jude.

THE SITE

Wythe County and partners prepared the Apex Center in anticipation that a partner of the size and scope of Apex Drive Holdings, LLC (ADH) would take note of the market and facility availability. Interest from two other unrelated hockey leagues indicate hockey's success can be successful in Wythe.

"Our options were to sell the Apex and take a huge loss or find the right partners to operate it and attract people to Wythe County," said Brian W. Vaught, chair of the Wythe County Board of Supervisors, at the introductory press conference. "This venue should both be managed by private enterprise and generate income for the County, and this agreement does just that. We welcome ADH and minor league hockey and support their efforts to become one of Wythe County's top tourism draws."



The County committed to convert the arena's dirt floor to concrete with an embedded ice rink, dasher boards, seating, locker rooms and concessions. Construction got underway in Spring 2023 after two rounds of project bidding and scale revisions.

THE IMPACT

In a county of just under 29,000 people, attracting 3,000 visitors per game provides not



just a measurable improvement in economic activity. It is game-setting. Hotel stays, motel stays, restaurant usage, quality of life, education, workforce and talent initiatives, housing, and other areas would all benefit from this infusion of money and new job creations. The 25 minor league semi-pro hockey players will need jobs, and local employers are already clamoring for the additional employees and promising

flexible schedules to accommodate travel, games and practices. The lessee has purchased a large housing unit to serve as the team living quarters.



The impact will extend to regional youth, adult and college sports, as well. The lessee expects to provide

recreational opportunities through youth hockey leagues and public skates, camps, adult hockey leagues, Division I men’s and women’s hockey and other recreational opportunities. The interstate access and proximity to local colleges and universities promises to build new partnerships beneficial to regional academics, including sports management, facilities management, HVAC, business and accounting.

SUMMARY

Wythe County knew that it had a site that could potentially bring thousands of people to the area to help with economic and community development. After waiting for the right lessee, Wythe County has leased the facility to a company that will be the FPHL’s first Virginia entry starting with the 2023-24 season joining Winston-Salem’s Carolina Thunderbirds as the two most central teams in the league. This project is a

dynamic community involvement movement that promotes health, wellness, recreation, tourism and job creation for Wythe County.

The development of this team and facility will not only help with jobs, but will create an ongoing ripple effect throughout the region of jobs needed in the lodging, food, and entertainment industries.

