

SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2025.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your 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
Program Title: Hitachi Energy Arena Revitalization
Program Category: Community Development, Economic Development & Land Use

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VACo Achievement Awards Program Submission

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Program Overview

Wythe County's Hitachi Energy Arena Revitalization is a transformative public-private initiative that rescued an underperforming County-owned facility and turned it into a regional destination for sports and entertainment.

Originally imagined as an agritourism asset, the facility debuted as the Appalachian Regional Exposition Center or the APEX Center if you're local. The 90,000-square-foot arena, located in the heart of Wythe County just off Exit 77, where Interstates 77 and 81 merge along a key transportation corridor, was envisioned as a major economic driver for the region. Despite its potential, the facility failed to take off, lacking permanent infrastructure and facing programming challenges almost from day one. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic compounded these issues, halting events entirely and leaving the brand-new facility underused. The future was uncertain.

Rather than sell the building at a loss, Wythe County leaders reimagined its purpose. Through an innovative partnership with Apex Drive Holdings, LLC, a professional sports operator, Wythe brought professional hockey to the region. The Blue Ridge Bobcats were born... and so was Roar County. A strategic naming rights agreement with regional manufacturer Hitachi Energy helped rebrand the facility and fund major upgrades. The County committed to the arena's success too – funding the installation of 3,586 new seats with ADA accessibility, paved parking lots, and a full interior overhaul.

This multi-year revitalization effort was led by Wythe County staff, emphasizing local leadership and accountability. Today, the arena hosts thousands of fans per game, bolstering shoulder season tourism in Southwest Virginia. Outside of hockey season, the arena is poised to host year-round events such as

concerts, vendor fairs, and trade shows with an iceless capacity of 5,400. The revitalized facility has shifted from a symbol of stalled potential to a thriving anchor for economic development and community pride.

Hitachi Energy Arena stands as a replicable model for other small communities. The arena is proof that even post-pandemic, rural localities can breathe new life into underperforming assets with vision, partnership, and innovation.

The Challenge

The Appalachian Exposition Center was a bold vision. Unfortunately, it was largely underrealized.

Constructed to serve as a state-of-the-art regional venue for livestock shows, expos, and entertainment events, the 90,000-square-foot facility sits in a highly visible location near Interstates 77 and 81 in Wythe County, where more than 60,000 vehicles travel by on an average day. When the facility opened, community members and leaders alike hoped it would become a hub of activity, attract tourists, and generate economic momentum in Wythe County and Southwest Virginia.

But that vision never fully materialized. Even as a new facility, the APEX Center faced early struggles with consistent programming and facility limitations. The venue lacked adequate permanent seating, a concrete floor, full staffing, and key accessibility features that would have made it suitable for high-traffic, high-volume events. As these limitations became more apparent, public enthusiasm waned, and bookings remained infrequent.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic. The shutdown of public gatherings removed any opportunity for momentum. Events were canceled, plans shelved, and the building, though new, sat mostly empty, drawing increasing criticism from taxpayers. The APEX Center became emblematic of stalled potential. By 2022, conversations in the community turned toward whether the county should cut its losses and sell the facility, an outcome that would have left the taxpayers with a significant financial shortfall and little to show for a major investment.

Innovation

Faced with this challenge, Wythe County chose innovation over liquidation. Rather than selling the APEX Center for pennies on the dollar, the county sought a way to reimagine the space. That opportunity arrived in the form of Apex Drive Holdings, LLC, a private-sector sports and event management company with experience operating teams in the Federal Prospects Hockey League (FPHL).

Together, County staff and Apex Drive Holdings developed a plan to bring professional hockey to Wythe County and transform the APEX Center into a fully equipped arena. A long-term, performance-based lease was established that tied rent payments to ticket sales, ensuring shared investment and reducing taxpayer risk. The County committed to critical infrastructure improvements, most notably the installation of permanent seating, ADA-



The Wythe County Board of Supervisors announces a new professional hockey partnership at the former APEX Center in Spring 2023.

accessible walkways, and paved parking lots, while the private partner took on event programming, operations, and other planning enhancements to get the arena winter-ready. The Bobcats debuted in October 2023 in their home barn and went on to welcome approximately 35,000 fans during their inaugural season, but the transformation was just beginning.

As the Bobcats pounced towards their second season, the County and Apex Drive Holdings entered into a naming rights partnership with Hitachi Energy, a global company with a major plant in neighboring Bland County. The five-year agreement brought in new revenue and helped rebrand the facility as the Hitachi Energy Arena, aligning it with a well-known, trusted corporate partner in the region. The result was more than a cosmetic change. It was a complete pivot in purpose, audience, and long-term strategy.

Collaboration

The revitalization of the former APEX Center was only possible because of strong, sustained collaboration between local government and private enterprise. Wythe County staff, led by the Deputy County Administrator, coordinated all facets of planning, procurement, and communication. County departments worked together to handle everything from financial planning to compliance and site logistics.

Apex Drive Holdings brought both professional sports management and private capital to the table. Their leadership handled day-to-day arena operations and oversaw key upgrades that were outside the county's scope to bring the sports arena to life. Their commitment to launching and growing the Blue



Ridge Bobcats professional hockey team brought both economic and community momentum.

Hitachi Energy entered as a third essential partner in the second year of the project. As naming rights sponsor, the company helped

give the venue a new identity while reinforcing the message that this was a facility for not just Wythe County, but for the region beyond its borders. Hitachi's involvement also sparked interest from other businesses, building a sense of shared ownership and community buy-in.

This collaboration extended beyond formal agreements. Through media outreach, public events, and strategic communications, leadership engaged residents directly, keeping the community informed, involved, and excited about what the arena could become. Wythe County and Southwest Virginia got a new home team to root for, both on and off the ice.

Implementation

The revitalization of the now Hitachi Energy Arena unfolded over an 18-month period beginning in early 2023. The County first addressed infrastructure issues that had hindered the APEX Center from reaching its potential. The county converted the dirt floor into a hockey-ready arena, installing the ice floor system and chiller equipment needed to create the playing surface and readying the facility for branding. A partially-renovated but hockey-ready arena was ready for game day.

During the 2024 off-season, a full seating installation brought 3,586 chair-back seats into the arena, improving comfort and visibility for hockey games and concerts. Accessibility improvements, including



ADA-compliant pathways and seating areas, made the space welcoming to all visitors.

The County also funded and managed a complete repaving and lighting of the parking lot and entrance areas, which had previously deterred high-volume attendance due to

dust, mud, and limited access. Meanwhile, exterior signage was added to reflect the new Hitachi Energy Arena name. Visible from the interstate, the signage reinforced the facility's transformation and drew regional attention to the project. The goal was not just to rename a building, it was to launch a new identity.

By fall 2024, just in time for the Blue Ridge Bobcats' second season in Wythe County, the revitalization improvements were completed. The facility opened with exhibition games and a "Pick-a-Seat Day," giving season ticket holders a firsthand look at the dramatic changes.

Results

One of the biggest questions was “Why hockey in Wythe County?” Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains, most Wythe County residents have never even put on a pair of skates. The answer lies partly in the



The ribbon cutting celebration of the newly rebranded Hitachi Energy Arena in June 2024.

roughly 90-minute drive up I-77 to catch the new rival Blue Ridge Bobcats in action. This rivalry has sparked excitement not only among local fans but also among visitors from across the region. Coupled with the existence of the Roanoke Rail Yard Dogs, a Southern Professional Hockey League team, just an hour North on I-81, and the picture becomes even clearer.

This steady flow of visitors traveling the interstate corridor is a boon for Wythe County’s economy. Game days bring increased ticket sales, which support the arena’s financial sustainability while also boosting revenue for nearby hotels, restaurants, and retail businesses. The synergy of sports entertainment and

regional tourism helps diversify the local economy beyond traditional sectors, creating new opportunities for growth.

The transformation of the APEX Center into Hitachi Energy Arena has been a resounding



success for Wythe County. What was once a stalled facility is now a vibrant center of community life and economic activity. The arena seats 3,586 fans for hockey and can host more than 5,400 people for

concerts and off-season events. Spectator feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, with the improved visibility, comfort, and amenities greatly enhancing the visitor experience.

Ticket sales for the 2024–25 season exceeded expectations, and event bookings continue to grow. Off-season programming, including a drive-thru holiday light display on arena property, has expanded the arena's role as a year-round attraction. Local restaurants, hotels, and retail businesses report increased foot traffic on game days and event weekends, bringing real economic benefits to the region.

Wythe County now generates new revenue through lease payments, admissions, and concessions tax, turning a dormant liability into an active asset. Equally important, the public perception of the arena has shifted. Once viewed as a symbol of missed opportunity, the facility is now seen as a model for turning around public investments through bold action and strategic partnership.

The story of the Hitachi Energy Arena revitalization is one of transformation, not just renovation. It shows what is possible when a locality chooses to view a stalled asset not as a failure, but as a foundation for reinvention. Rather than start over, Wythe County worked with what it had. And rather than carry the burden alone, it built a shared vision with private partners who had skin in the game. The result is a community asset that generates economic, social, and cultural value every time the doors open.

In Wythe County, a brand-new building that never got off the ground now soars. The puck drops here, and with it, a blueprint for rural revitalization in a post-pandemic world.

Executive Summary

The Hitachi Energy Arena, located off of Interstates 77 and 81 in the heart of Wythe County, is proof that with the right plan, partners, and perspective, a fresh start is always possible, even for a new facility that never quite took flight.

Originally opened as the Appalachian Regional Exposition Center, or the APEX Center, the 90,000 square foot arena was meant to be Southwest Virginia's agritourism jewel. Despite best efforts and intentions, the facility lacked critical infrastructure like adequate seating and compelling programming to draw crowds. Then, the COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to a halt.

Faced with the prospect of selling the building for a loss or letting it continue to gather dust as a taxpayer burden, Wythe County leaders chose to pivot. Partnering with Apex Drive Holdings, LCC, an experienced professional sports operator, Wythe brought hockey to town.

The multi-year revitalization effort has been realized in Wythe County. The Blue Ridge Bobcats brought fresh energy to the arena. A five-year naming rights deal with local manufacturer Hitachi Energy gave the arena a new brand. Wythe County backed the effort by investing in over 3,586 new seats, ADA accessibility upgrades, interior overhauls, and paved parking lots. Local staff led the charge every step of the way.

Today, the Hitachi Energy Arena hosts thousands of fans per game in season and offers concerts, trade shows, and community events the rest of the year, accommodating up to 5,400 guests without the ice. Once a dormant venue with unrealized potential, Hitachi Energy Arena is now a vibrant economic engine and a source of pride.