



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: Friday, April 3, 2026.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. Contact [Gage Harter](#) with any questions.


PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Wythe County
Program Title: The Reed Creek Blueway
Program Category: Education & Parks and Recreation

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Allyson Williams
Title: Public Information Officer
Department: Public Information and Grants
Telephone: 276-223-4522 Website: www.wytheco.org
Email: atwilliams@wytheco.org

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Stephen D. Bear
Title: County Administrator
Signature: 

2026 VACo Achievement Awards Program Submission

Program Title: The Reed Creek Blueway

County: Wythe

Category: Education & Parks and Recreation

Program Overview

Wythe County's Reed Creek is synonymous with fishing and paddling to locals. For generations, residents and visitors quietly found their way to Reed Creek and its tributary, Millers Creek, by following word of mouth directions, footpaths, and more often than not, routes that crossed private property without permission. The fishing was good. The paddling routes were peaceful. But the access was fragile, informal, unsafe, and entirely unsustainable.



County staff and leadership recognized both the challenge and the opportunity: Reed Creek was not just a local favorite. It was an untapped, destination-quality outdoor asset. At a time when travelers are increasingly seeking authentic, local, and experience-driven recreation, Wythe County saw the potential to transform this hidden resource into something that could serve residents while attracting visitors looking to disconnect, explore, and create lasting memories.

Rather than allow that gap to persist, the County launched a multi-year effort to build an expandable water trail system from the ground up. Through strategic easements, targeted grant funding, and committed local partnerships, the Reed Creek Blueway took shape. Two permanent public access points, Kents Lane Portage Park and Millers Creek Portage Park, anchored the system. What were once scattered "secret spots" have been transformed into a connected, clearly defined recreational corridor along Reed Creek, a tributary of the New River.

The result is a Blueway that is safe, legal, and free and delivers immediate local value. It preserves the natural character of the creek while opening the door to recreation, environmental education, and

heritage tourism. Residents now have reliable, equitable access to a resource that was always theirs but never fully accessible. At the same time, the Blueway positions Wythe County as a place where outdoor recreation is not just available but intentionally designed and thoughtfully managed. More than a paddling trail, the Reed Creek Blueway stands as a replicable model for how rural communities can convert informal use into lasting public infrastructure.

The Challenge

Reed Creek has long been one of Wythe County's most valuable natural resources, yet it remained largely inaccessible from a public infrastructure standpoint. Residents and visitors routinely sought out the creek for recreation, but without designated access points, they were often forced to park along roadways, cross private property, or navigate steep and unsafe entry paths.

This lack of formal access created multiple challenges. Safety risks were significant, particularly for families and novice users unfamiliar with the terrain. Property owners faced ongoing concerns related to trespassing and liability. At the same time, the County was unable to actively promote the creek as a recreational asset due to the absence of legal, publicly managed entry points.



Demand for outdoor recreation increased significantly following the COVID-19 pandemic, as both residents and travelers sought opportunities to spend time outdoors, recharge, and connect with nature. In a rural community with limited free recreational amenities, the need for safe, accessible, and well-managed outdoor spaces became even more urgent.

Wythe County faced a critical question: how to provide safe, legal access to a widely used natural resource without the cost and complexity of large-scale land acquisition or environmental disruption.

Innovation

Faced with these challenges, Wythe County developed an innovative, low-impact approach to outdoor recreation development centered on access rather than construction.

Instead of building a traditional park or heavily altering the landscape, the County focused on formalizing existing use patterns through strategic, targeted improvements. By securing easements rather than purchasing land, Wythe County was able to establish permanent public access at two key locations—Kents Lane and Millers Creek—while minimizing costs and preserving the natural character of the creek corridor.

The project leveraged a \$100,000 grant from the Virginia Outdoors Foundation to support essential infrastructure, including parking areas, signage, and basic amenities. These enhancements were intentionally designed to support users without overdeveloping the sites.

Equally important, the Blueway was designed as a system, not a single site. The two access points create a defined paddling route of approximately five hours, transforming Reed Creek into a navigable recreational corridor. This shift from isolated access points to a connected water trail represents a significant innovation in how rural localities can activate natural resources.



The Reed Creek Blueway demonstrates that impactful recreation projects do not require large-scale construction. With strategic planning and partnership, local governments can deliver meaningful, scalable solutions that balance access, safety, and environmental stewardship.

Collaboration

The Reed Creek Blueway is the result of strong collaboration between local government, utility partners, community stakeholders, and regional organizations.

Because the County did not own the land needed for access, partnerships were essential. The Kents Lane site was made possible through an easement with the Joint Public Service Authority of Wythe and Bland Counties, while the Millers Creek access point was secured through an easement with Appalachian Power. These agreements provided long-term public access without the need for land acquisition, significantly reducing project costs and timelines.

The Virginia Outdoors Foundation played a critical role by providing grant funding that made implementation possible. Local partners, including the New River Conservancy and local litter prevention programs, are engaged in expanding the Blueway's role in environmental education and community programming.

The project was also shaped by the community itself. Residents who had long used these informal access points provided insight into usage patterns, float times, and safety concerns. Their input helped guide site selection and design, ensuring the final product reflected real-world needs.



This collaborative model demonstrates how rural localities can align public, private, and community interests to achieve shared goals.

Implementation

The Reed Creek Blueway was implemented through a phased, County-led process focused on efficiency, practicality, and long-term sustainability.

The project began with site identification and feasibility analysis, focusing on locations already used by the public but lacking safe infrastructure including access for emergency services. Once priority sites were identified, the County worked with landowners to secure easements, ensuring permanent and legal access



Following the award of grant funding in 2022, the County moved into the multi-year development phase. Site work included clearing and grading to create safe parking areas, installation of signage and wayfinding, and placement of amenities such as picnic tables and trash receptacles. Improvements were designed to enhance safety and usability while maintaining the natural environment.

County staff led all aspects of the project, from grant administration to procurement and construction coordination. This local leadership ensured the project remained aligned with community needs and was completed efficiently.

By 2025, both Kents Lane Portage Park and Millers Creek Portage Park were fully operational, establishing the foundation of the Reed Creek Blueway and positioning it for future expansion.

Results

The Reed Creek Blueway has reshaped how both residents and visitors experience one of Wythe County's most valuable natural assets.

Locally, the impact is immediate and meaningful. Residents now have safe, reliable, and equitable access to Reed Creek for paddling, fishing, and outdoor recreation. Long-standing safety concerns and trespassing issues have been resolved through clearly defined, publicly managed access points.



From a tourism perspective, the Blueway adds a new dimension to Wythe County's outdoor recreation offerings. Located near major interstate corridors, the access points attract visitors seeking authentic, nature-based experiences, an increasingly important segment of the travel market.

Outdoor recreation is proven to generate economic activity through visitor spending on food, fuel, lodging, and related services, with ripple effects that support local businesses and jobs. The Blueway contributes to this ecosystem by drawing new users to the area while encouraging longer stays and repeat visitation.

Equally important, the project establishes a scalable framework for future growth. Additional access points and connections are already being explored, with the long-term goal of linking Reed Creek to broader regional assets such as the New River.

The Reed Creek Blueway is more than a recreation project. It is a County-led investment in quality of life, a catalyst for tourism and economic activity, and a model for how rural communities can turn natural assets into lasting public value.



Executive Summary

The Reed Creek Blueway is an innovative outdoor recreation initiative that transformed informal and often unsafe creek access into a structured, accessible, and publicly managed water trail system led by Wythe County.

For generations, residents and visitors accessed Reed Creek through unofficial routes, creating safety risks and limiting the County's ability to promote the creek as a recreational asset. Recognizing both the local need and tourism potential, Wythe County led a multi-year effort to establish a structured Blueway system.

Through strategic partnerships and a \$100,000 grant from the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, Wythe County established two permanent public access points, Kents Lane Portage Park and Millers Creek Portage Park, using easements rather than land acquisition to reduce costs and accelerate implementation. These sites now provide safe, legal, and free access for paddling, fishing, and outdoor recreation.

The Blueway improves quality of life for residents while positioning Wythe County as a destination for authentic outdoor experiences. It supports tourism-driven economic activity, enhances public safety, and establishes a scalable model for future expansion.

The Reed Creek Blueway demonstrates how local leadership, strategic partnerships, and targeted investment can transform a natural resource into a lasting community and economic asset.