
Nicholas County, Kentucky

Kentucky Association for Economic Development
Community Assessment Team Report

Visit: April 10, 2007

Final Report: June 1, 2007

Presented by:



Community Assessment Report

NICHOLAS COUNTY, KENTUCKY

How the Assessment Came About

Discontented with the growth and development of their community, members of the Nicholas County Industrial Development Authority met with Darlene Bussell, Development Specialist with the Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development. After hearing their concerns, Ms. Bussell suggested they request a Community Assessment from the Kentucky Association for Economic Development. KAED President/CEO Mike Mangeot, along with KY Cabinet for Economic Development liaison Ann Morris, attended a meeting with Lanny Hutchinson, Chair of the Nicholas County Industrial Development Authority, and Ms. Bussell to discuss the Community Assessment Program. Shortly thereafter, the community asked to have an assessment conducted.

The KAED Community Development Committee discussed the situation in Nicholas County and recommended to the KAED Board of Directors that an assessment be performed. With financial support from Kentucky Adult Education the assessment was then scheduled and the process began.

A pre-assessment survey was performed by KAED. The online survey was opened March 12-23 and based on the survey results, an assessment team was recruited by KAED.

A one day format was utilized for the assessment. Members of the assessment team arrived the day before the assessment and took a tour of the community and discussed the issues that were raised in the survey and other data sources.

On April 10, the assessment team met with approximately 40 members of the local community for a day-long, facilitated discussion about Nicholas County and the issues it faces. This report is the outcome of the survey, visit and impressions of the Team Members. The findings and recommendations for next steps will be presented to the community on Friday, June 1 in Nicholas County. A follow up visit to gauge the community's progress will also be scheduled within the next 6-12 months.

The Team

- Phil Kerrick, President/CEO, Capital Community Economic/Industrial Authority
- Martha Fightmaster, Associate, Program Support, KY Adult Education
- Darrell Ishmael, Community & Business Development Manager, East Kentucky Power
- Ann Morris, Development Specialist, KCED
- Darlene Bussell, Development Specialist, KCED
- Steve Dale, Director, Central Kentucky Economic Division, KCED
- Mike Mangeot, President/CEO, Kentucky Association for Economic Development
- Facilitator: Steve Kay, Roberts & Kay Consultants

Survey Results

An on-line survey using www.Zoomerang.com was used as a pre-assessment tool to gather opinions prior to the visit. (A complete copy of the survey results can be found in the Appendix of this document.) The survey was open March 12-23, 2007 for anyone in the community to respond. It was distributed via email and promoted by the local planning team.

301 residents of Nicholas County answered the survey; 69% were female and 31% male; 22% were under the age of 25; 60% had lived in Nicholas County for over 21 years while 16% had lived in the community for less than 10 years.

Additionally here is a breakdown from the results of the question regarding civic involvement and volunteer activities:

Board member of appointed government entity	4%
Board member of Chamber, Industrial Foundation or Mainstreet	3%
Board member of civic club, arts or other non-profit org.	16%
Board member of regional, state or national org.	4%
Elected official	3%
Leadership position in church	18%
Volunteer with youth activities	25%
Volunteer in K-12 schools	12%
Other – civic club, hospital volunteer, etc.	14%

An overwhelming majority of the survey respondents (81%) are dissatisfied in varying degrees with the growth and development of the community, and as well as the future of Nicholas County (75%).

The survey asked respondents to grade various local attributes related to economic development and the community. The highest rated items were (combined “Excellent” and “Good” Scores):

Tourism Development Activities	24%
Agricultural Development/Future	22%
Education Leadership	20%
K-12 Education	20%
Infrastructure	15%

A number of items were rated on the average scale such as: Community Spirit, Community Appearance, Political Leadership, Business Leadership, Higher Education Opportunities and Regional Cooperation.

There was very strong consensus regarding the attributes of the community that are not positive in the eyes of the respondents. Following is a table of the lowest scored attributes of Nicholas County (combination of “Poor” & “Unacceptable” scores).

Local Cooperation	61%
Retail Services	71%
Economic Development Activities	76%
Technical Training	80%
Attractive to Youth/Young Adults	86%
Job Opportunities	90%

Respondents were asked to list three positive changes they had experienced in recent years. Cited most often were civic related activities such as the Relay for Life, renovation of the Neal Building downtown, and Saturday’s in Carlisle. Interestingly, a significant number of respondents (8%) indicated that there had been no positive events over the past 2-3 years.

Not surprisingly, when asked about negative changes in the community over the same time period the closing of the Jockey plant was cited the most times (34%), followed by issues with drugs in the community and politics.

When asked “What one project would you like to see the local leadership embrace?” the respondents focused on three areas: Business/Economic Development, Activities for Youth/Teens and Dealing with the Drug Problem.

Team Impressions

The Team’s directive was to determine in what realm of economic development Nicholas County could compete and what its competitive edge is. Also, they were charged with providing suggestions and resources to help accomplish the goals of the community.

The team was impressed with the response rate to the survey, which was the highest percentage of community participants (4.4%) that anyone could remember. The consensus of the team heading into the assessment was that while the community had experience in manufacturing, primarily in the textile (“cut & sew”) industry, they were struggling in identifying alternative industries that would match their existing skill set. With more and more textile industries moving offshore, some members of the team felt that continuing to target these companies would result in a “race to the bottom” of economic development. Additionally, the team felt that the community was waiting on the Kentucky Cabinet for Economic Development to bring them an industrial client and were not being proactive enough in developing their own existing businesses and recruiting new businesses.

Community Discussion Results

Steve Kay, of Roberts & Kay Consultants, led the community discussion to pinpoint the challenges that Nicholas County residents feel are their biggest obstacles to economic development.

While the number of community participants was small compared to the number of surveys completed, the attendees were very engaged and concerned about the future of Nicholas County. The facilitated conversation covered a variety of topics: Lack of jobs, inaccurate perceptions of the Industrial Foundation and/or their lack of success in recruiting businesses, concerns over the value of education, lack of opportunity in the community and a concern over the drug problems in the community to name just a few topics. Following the conversation, the group broke into smaller groups to discuss challenges and opportunities more specifically. After reviewing the comments and notes made during these breakout sessions the assessment team concluded the community should focus on five general areas.

The Team recommends that Nicholas County focus on:

1. Community Development
2. Education
3. Economic Development Focus
4. Cooperation
5. Tourism

Team Recommendations

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

One concern of the team was the number of vacant and/or rundown properties within Carlisle and the negative image they project. We also noticed home sites in the county that were adjacent to junk yards. Land values are reasonable and affordable which is an advantage, but, this advantage could be threatened by the lack of zoning and enforcement. The team strongly urges the implementation of land use ordinances, county wide zoning and stricter enforcement of existing regulations.

Within the next 6 Months:

- Host a series of public meetings to educate the community on the benefits of land use ordinances and county wide zoning. Present case studies from other communities that show the increase in property values following zoning implementation
- Review existing Planning and Zoning ordinances and consider additional regulations for abandoned or “nuisance” properties.
- Since the community does not have the resources for a full time enforcement position at this time, leadership should meet with state officials to discuss stricter enforcement at the state level.
- Implement a county wide repair/ “Pride” program to clean up downtown and the Main Street corridor

Within the next 12 Months:

- Explore the possibility of funding full or part time code enforcement personnel.
- Investigate restarting the “Main Street” Program.

Local Community Development Workgroup: Tom Ockerman, Larry Wills, Kay Shankland, Ernie Carmicle, Ricky Broderick, Mike Hughes, Sue Kirby, Alex Kazunas

EDUCATION

Prior to the team's visit we reviewed educational attainment levels for Nicholas County from a 2006 Council on Postsecondary Education report. What we saw caused a great deal of concern:

- 37% of residents had less than a high school diploma or GED
- 62% of graduates are under prepared in one or more academic subjects
- 37.9% are under prepared in math
- 51.7% are under prepared in English

The attendees identified the following barriers to education in Nicholas County:

- Poverty – Issues such as transportation and the expense of child care limit access to KY Adult Education programs and other postsecondary education opportunities.
- Parental education levels – “If I didn't need an education, neither do you”.
- Uncertain Future – A lack of hope and/or prospects for jobs have devalued education. There is a sense of apathy throughout the community and a lack of work ethic was cited during the team visit.

The availability of a skilled and educated workforce is one of, if not the, single biggest attribute that companies look for when expanding or locating a business. Additionally, a more educated workforce demands more cultural amenities thus improving the quality of life in the community.

Economic development is about education, period. Without a better educated workforce, the economic outlook for Nicholas County is dim.

Within the next 6 Months:

- Develop a long term agenda for education that elevates reading, writing and math skills for residents of all ages in Nicholas County.
- Pull all service agencies together to develop strong and seamless system of education, training and support that will produce a greater number of higher functioning adults.
- Look into implementing the “Go. Earn. Do.” Program through Kentucky Adult Education. This program is designed to increase the pool of GED holders in order to improve the total employee pool.

Within the next 12 Months:

- Develop vocational skills training opportunities (via on the job training and mentoring programs) in Nicholas County high demand occupations.
- Implement a local promotional campaign to increase the perceived value of education. The Council on Postsecondary Education has statistics that can be used for this program. Target employers, existing students, school youth, parents, unemployed, underemployed and self employed populations.
- Construct specific and aggressive recruitment approaches to move undereducated adults into skills upgrade programs.
- Implement leadership and entrepreneurial skills training opportunities using local resources.

Local Education Workgroup: Doris Ecton, Kimberlee Booth, Ricky Broderick, Renee France, Bonnie Sousley

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FOCUS

Nicholas County has some advantages over other communities, most notably, an available existing building designed for manufacturing. However, there remain challenges, most notably the condition of the building and the fact that it has low ceilings that are not suited to many manufacturing facilities today. Also the lack of available rail and highway accessibility are weaknesses. There is also a level of distrust with the Nicholas County Industrial Development Authority, largely based, we believe, on a lack of information and knowledge within the community of the authority's activities. We strongly believe that the community must become more proactive in developing and cultivating local businesses while becoming much more targeted in their recruitment process.

Within the Next 6 Months

- The Industrial Authority should conduct a skill set evaluation of the community to determine what types of companies and industries to target.
- Work with the local media to provide a monthly update on economic development activities in the community. The Logan LEADS program has done this very effectively.

Within the Next 12 Months

- The Industrial Authority should investigate the possibility of hiring a part time ED professional (possibly share the position with the Tourism Commission) to be the primary economic development contact person for the county.

COOPERATION

The community survey and discussion indicated a lack of cooperation and leadership within Nicholas County. When asked for examples of positive leadership, 25% of the survey respondents indicated that ***no one was providing leadership***. This is a very serious problem that needs to be addressed immediately.

Within the Next 6 Months

- Form a Core Leadership Group made up of non-elected officials from all parts of the community. The group's purpose will be to promote thought and communication throughout the community, to look at issues in a non-partisan and unbiased way and to establish conduits that will allow for the accomplishment of objectives.
- A first step should be the identification of community "Rally Points" that will provide easy wins for Nicholas County. These "low hanging fruit" should be easily doable, non-controversial, widely publicized and quickly done.
- Host quarterly meetings for city and county elected officials, business leaders, school officials, government groups and others to expand the core leadership group and further instill the sense of group value and significance.

Within the Next 12 Months

- Develop an article for the local paper to show the accomplishments that have taken place as a result of the plan.
- Assist the high school in developing a similar approach for students

Local Cooperation Workgroup: Woody Dugan (Co-Chair), Heather Allison (Co-Chair), Ricky Broderick, Doris Ecton, Sue Kirby, Aimee Ford, Julie Rogers, Alex Kazunas, Gladys Shrout

TOURISM

The team was impressed with the potential for tourism development in the community. There already exists a nearby State Resort Park (Blue Licks Battlefield) and established events like the Blackberry Festival. We also believe there is some limited potential in cultivating an arts community/retreat and building on the Arts Guild.

Within the next 6 Months

- Collect a comprehensive list of tourism assets and distribute to the community for cross promotion.
- Host a meeting of all tourism related organizations and develop a tourism theme for the community. Promote the theme in all tourism related materials and events.
- Begin investigating the possibility of implementing a restaurant tax to help fund tourism activities.
- Review the community website and make sure it is linked to county government, economic development, etc.

Within the next 12 Months

- Evaluate the potential for additional lodging in the community to support tourism development.
- Evaluate the potential to increase retail opportunities (restaurants, shops, etc.)
- Consider expanding the Blackberry Festival to include historic walking tours and other activities.
- Investigate opportunities for the Lake Carnico golf course to become a regional tourism distribution center or working out a lease agreement with the state.

Local Tourism Workgroup: Heather Allison, Ed Taylor, Julie Rogers, Aimee Ford

Appendix Table of Contents (provided on CD)

- **Assessment Materials**
 - Nicholas County Assessment Survey Results
 - Nicholas County Expansions/New Locations
 - June 1 Presentation/Recommendations
 - Nicholas County Final Report

- **Organizational Development Resources**
 - KCED's "Primer on Local Economic Development Organizations"
 - USDA's "Promoting Tourism in Rural America"
-Covers the major issues in rural tourism, including agritourism, cultural/heritage tourism, ecotourism, planning, marketing, economic impact and more. It provides web links to more than fifty full text "how to" information guides, manuals and handbooks for assisting local officials, communities, and citizens involved in tourism development and includes a section of resources organizations.