

'RTM Artisan Trail Network News Release

'Round the Mountain Regional Artisan Trail hopes to lure visitors off Interstate 81 and connect them to Southwest Virginia artisans

ABINGDON, Va. – December 11, 2007 - 'Round the Mountain: Southwest Virginia's Artisan Network has grown to more than 200 members in a year and is developing interactive driving trails to lure the region's visitors off Interstate 81 and connect them to artisans and other creative points of interest in Southwest Virginia.

"Our region is seeing a transformation and is getting noticed by visitors seeking cultural and heritage experiences, the fastest growing segment of tourism," said Diana Blackburn, executive director of 'Round the Mountain, an increasing network of artisans throughout 19 counties and 4 cities in Southwest Virginia.

'Round the Mountain is creating the Regional Artisan Trail Network and partnering with HEARTWOOD: Southwest Virginia's Artisan Gateway that is to be built in Abingdon at Exit 14 of I-81.

"Southwest Virginia's Artisan Gateway will serve as a 'trail head' for visitors into the region," said Blackburn. "Serving as a gateway into Southwest Virginia, HEARTWOOD will direct visitors off of the interstate to explore the mountains and valleys of the region and to experience communities and their cultures. These driving trails will help them plan their trip."

Visitors to the new artisan center can discover the diversity of the region's craft culture through displays, videos and interactive maps of the 'Round the Mountain Regional Artisan Trail Network, Blackburn said.

'Round the Mountain is encouraging its members to become trail sites and be placed on an interactive web-based trail map of Southwest Virginia that also will be featured on the group's website www.roundthemountain.org. The interactive driving trail map will link visitors to 'Round the Mountain member profile pages and individual business information and will include video streaming, mapping, a trip-planning component, and directions to studios, farms and other craft and cultural venues.

"Actually, we didn't have to look far to get advice on how to develop artisan trails," said Blackburn. 'Round the Mountain is using the Wythe/Bland Artisans and Heritage Trail which launched this summer as a prototype.

Frances Emerson, who works with Wytheville's museums programs, was a leader in developing the trail highlighting artisans and heritage sites in Wythe and Bland counties. "It is very important to find out who the artisans are in your area, what they make and to determine whether they want to be on the trail. It's important to get the artisans involved very early in the process."

The Wythe/Bland trail map (http://museums.wytheville.org/artisan_trail.pdf) is currently only in print form, with the brochure posted on the counties' websites, but this growing trail, that includes many 'Round the Mountain members, will be included on the interactive version when it is launched.

"It's important to be flexible with your trail development, too, because we found there were a number of artisans who didn't have home studios they could open for visits and tours, and we added historic resources as sites," said Emerson.

Also important to tourism are places to stay and eat while following the artisan trail, said Blackburn. "Restaurants, for example, have to meet four or more criteria such as displaying local art on their walls, regularly having live music, offering locally grown produce or a selection of Virginia indigenous food, serving Virginia heritage recipes, or being in an architecturally significant building. Actually, having a unique, regional claim to fame is one of the qualifying points."

Bed and breakfasts, campsites, cabins and inns of cultural importance qualify for inclusion on the RTM artisan trail, said Blackburn.

"The focus for the artisan network trail is on authenticity and quality. The trail must celebrate the cultural diversity of the region and reflect positively on its heritage," said Blackburn. All trail sites must provide interpretation of the artisan aspect through exhibits, material, demonstrations, maps, brochures, videos or other expressed written materials, according to Blackburn, "and all locations must be accessible by two-wheel drive vehicles."

Another artisan trail already in existence in nearby eastern Kentucky has provided experience and information on how to develop this network, Blackburn said. Described as an "online guide to finding diamonds in the rough," the Kentucky Artisan Heritage Trail, developed in 2000, includes more than 600 businesses associated with 17 driving trails.

The Kentucky Artisan Heritage Trail (www.kaht.com) was developed by the Eastern Kentucky University's Center for Economic Development, Entrepreneurship and Technology to connect the artisans scattered throughout the state's Appalachian region with would-be tourists on the web.

A survey provided by the KAHT showed that 83 percent of those 600 businesses associated with the trails feel the program is helping attract customers. According to a state study, the Kentucky trail contributed \$237,000 to the local economy between 2001 and 2003, and 17 of the 51 counties involved in the artisan trail program saw an average growth rate of 8.6 percent.

While it is too early to assess the impact of the Wythe/Bland trail, one artisan trail site studio and a member of 'Round the Mountain, says the trail and the artisan network need to be "developed and nurtured."

Evelyn Lahman, a hand weaver, who operates Mill Creek Studio in Rural Retreat, said 'Round the Mountain "is still a young child, and I've seen an increase in phone calls to my studio just from being listed on the website.'

"I think when tourist season starts up again and people are looking for things to do when they visit our region, it will be important to be on the trail network."

For more information on the development of the 'Round the Mountain Regional Artisan Trail, trail criteria and application for inclusion on the trail, visit www.roundthemountain.org.

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About 'Round the Mountain: Southwest Virginia's Artisan Network: 'Round the Mountain was created in 2004, as a result of funding from Governor Mark Warner's Virginia Works Initiative. Recognizing the assets of the 19-county region, Governor Warner announced \$100,000 in Appalachian Regional Commission funds to develop an artisan initiative in southwest Virginia to further develop the region as a major cultural and heritage tourism destination. A group of interested individuals representing state and local government, planning districts, the small business community, arts organizations, economic development, tourism and artisans began the planning process; the organization is operated by a board of directors. Other funding partners include Virginia Department of Community and Housing Development, the Virginia Tobacco Indemnification and Community Revitalization Commission, Virginia Commission for the Arts and Virginia Tourism Corporation.

The 'Round the Mountain service area includes Bland, Buchanan, Carroll, Dickenson, Floyd, Franklin, Giles, Grayson, Lee, Montgomery, Patrick, Pulaski, Russell, Scott, Smyth, Tazewell, Washington, Wise, and Wythe counties, and the cities of Bristol, Galax, Norton and Radford.

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