



# Work from Home Pilot – Buena Vista, VA

## *Findings and Recommendations*

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## About Main Street America

Main Street America has been helping revitalize older and historic commercial districts for nearly 40 years. Today it is a network of thousands of neighborhoods and communities, rural and urban, who share both a commitment to place and to building stronger communities through preservation-based economic development. Main Street America is a program of the nonprofit National Main Street Center, Inc., a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Since 1980, over 2,000 programs have used the Main Street Approach, our time-tested framework for community-driven, comprehensive revitalization. The National Main Street Center conducts research to document our impact by annually collecting statistical information on the preservation, revitalization, and economic activities in local Main Street programs throughout the country.



## About the Main Street Approach

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The Main Street Approach™ is the National Main Street Center's framework for community revitalization. Centered around Four Points (see below), the Approach offers community-based revitalization initiatives with a strategic, adaptable framework for downtown transformation that is easily tailored to local conditions. The Main Street Approach underwent a refresh in 2015 to become more responsive to economic context, strategy-driven, and outcome-oriented.



Every community has a unique set of place-based assets, anchors, and consumer markets that contribute to a healthy business district. Leveraging those assets through a targeted economic development strategy requires a thorough understanding of the marketplace. One of the best ways to help retain existing businesses and recruit new ones is to prepare information about your existing customer base and better understand potential new customer segments that could be served by your business district. Your local commercial revitalization program provides an important benefit by developing a comprehensive analysis of the district market that aligns community vision and consumer data with strategies that drive the organization's revitalization programming. Through the Main Street Approach, we work together with organization leaders to understand market data and develop comprehensive strategies to deliver comprehensive Main Street transformation. This approach accomplishes several goals:

- Builds local knowledge and understanding of your district's economy to create a foundation for successful revitalization.
- Identifies current strengths of the business mix and existing business clusters.
- Supplies relevant consumer data to the revitalization program so it can help existing businesses become stronger.

- Identifies opportunities for future business attraction and business cluster expansion; and
- Builds a strategic framework for niche development, including real estate development, business development, promotions, marketing, branding, etc.

The Work from Home Pilot establishes a further market overlay for the downtown, providing opportunities for supporting retail and restaurants, new residential development and third space development that meets the needs of remote workers. Studies suggest remote workers bring additional wage resources as well, which provides additional spending capture for our Main Streets.

## The Work from Home Pilot – Virginia Main Street

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According to researchers at Ladders, a national online job search firm, 25% of all professional jobs in North America will be remote by the end of 2022, and remote opportunities will continue to increase through 2023. This represents more than 36 million workers and is an increase from the 6 percent pre-pandemic!! While the global pandemic has resulted in massive trend line expansions for many aspects for the way we live, work, and recreate, remote work has been perhaps the most visible shift. As a result, workers with ever increasing pace are being decoupled from where they work. And for the first time, in many decades, this shift has the potential for restructuring the fundamental economies of rural America.

In recognition of this trend, Virginia Main Street, over the last year focused on remote work as well as interconnected trend lines as part of a year-long community webinar series. An outcome of that work was the announcement in early 2022 of a new pilot initiative unique to Main Street and overall community development work. Rather than focus on the motivations of the individual remote worker, this pilot evaluates and analyzes the potential of a community to be positioned as a place of choice when it comes to both the retention and attraction of remote workers. While this pilot examines a broader geographic basis than the particular Main Street program area, commercial districts represent a key centerpiece in this work given the convergence and density needs of places that support remote workers. ***In addition, according to ZipRecruiter, the average annual salary in 2022 of a remote worker was \$92,046 (June 2022). This is more than 5 times the median individual income in Buena Vista. From a community perspective that represents strong potential for supporting growth and sustainability in the retail and restaurant sectors.***

In April 2022, five communities were selected to participate in this first ever *Work from Home Pilot* initiative. Participating Virginia communities include Luray, Harrisonburg, Highland County, Marion and Buena Vista. Each community received a day long assessment visit, data analysis through a new “Remotability Index,” and the herein contained findings and recommendations report. A second Phase will involve allow each of the communities to receive additional technical assistance on an aligned program and/or project resulting from the conclusion of phase one work.

## Trends in Remote Work

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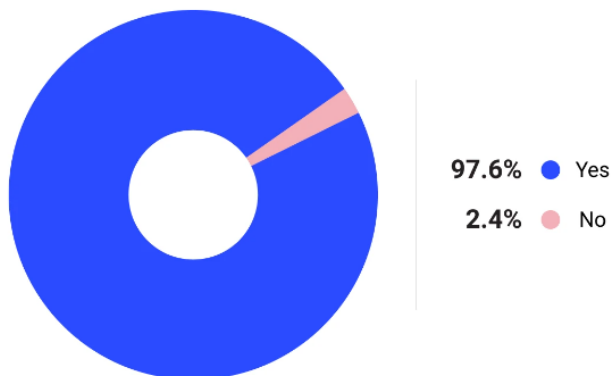
According to the 2021 State of Remote Work Report from [Owl Labs](#), 2021 was the year the world stayed remote, and 90% of the 2,050 full-time remote workers surveyed said they were as productive or more productive working remotely, compared to when they toiled in the office. Another 74% said after the pandemic, working from home is better for their mental health, and 84% reported that working remotely after the pandemic would make them happier, with many even willing to take a pay cut.

A January 2022 survey of 1,000 full-time workers from [Ergotron](#) corroborates the Owl Labs study, revealing that as workers have become more acclimated to hybrid and remote office environments since the onset of the pandemic, they are experiencing benefits to their physical and mental well-being. In fact, nearly 66 percent of the workforce has at least one day they can work remote. Taken together

these two findings indicate that American businesses are listening and looking beyond today to build more progressive workplace policies that will help employees thrive. The report concluded that leaders must rethink their workplace culture to be more inclusive of remote and hybrid work—this is the new normal.

And while some companies and governmental entities have tried to push back at this “new norm” of work by demanding a return to the office, statistics suggest there is a lot of push back from workers. In fact [4.5 million people](#) employees voluntarily quit their jobs in November, 2021 alone as evidence that the American workforce is waking up to their collective bargaining power, and hard-nosed employers are getting left behind in the dust. Even with a compromise of some calculation of days in the office, and some days of remote work, for rural communities there will remain the potential to capture these “hybrid-remote” schedule participants, especially those within a 2–3-hour commute from a major employment center. Ladders CEO [Marc Cenedella](#) predicts this decoupling of home and work will lead to the continued interest and growth of smaller cities and towns.

## Would you like to work remotely, at least some of the time, for the rest of your career?



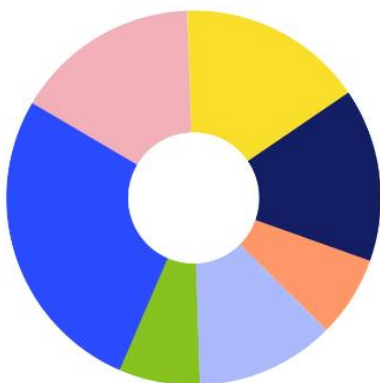
**2021 State of Remote Work**  
[buffer.com/2021-state-of-remote-work](https://buffer.com/2021-state-of-remote-work)



While the vast majority of remote workers prefer to remain remote, given the flexibility to live anywhere and balance their lives to a greater extent between work and home life, remote work is not without its challenges. Some of the most significant impacts a community can make on remote workers center

around the places and activities that allow remote workers to feel part of a community, spend time away from their home offices, and networking with others. The following chart highlights the biggest struggles faced by remote works:

## What's your biggest struggle with working remotely?



- 27% ● Not being able to unplug
- 16% ● Difficulties with collaboration and communication
- 16% ● Loneliness
- 15% ● Distractions at home
- 12% ● Staying motivated
- 7% ● Being in a different timezone than teammates
- 7% ● Other

**2021 State of Remote Work**  
[buffer.com/2021-state-of-remote-work](https://buffer.com/2021-state-of-remote-work)

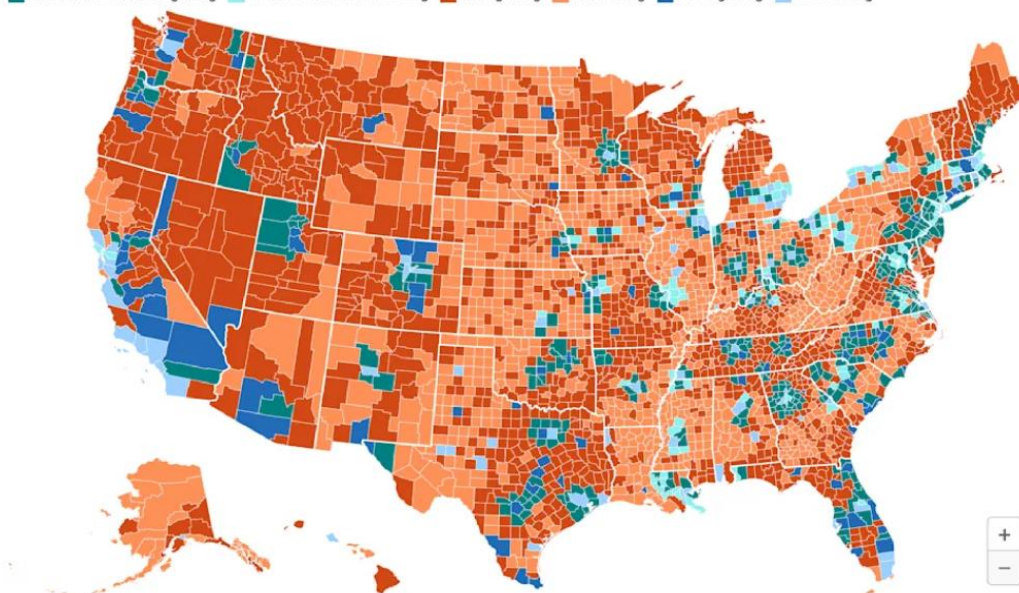


For communities looking to attract remote workers, this talent attraction economic development strategy can result in huge dividends, akin to the recruitment of a large employer. Consider the following: PayScale analyzed thousands of salaries and found that remote workers make 8.3% more than non-remote workers with the same job

title and qualifications. Among employees who make \$100,000 a year or less, the average remote worker makes approximately \$4,000 more on their yearly salary than the average office worker. Over the pandemic we actually began to reverse the course of migration patterns within the US of individuals moving from rural areas to more metropolitan areas. As this map demonstrates, the Shenandoah Valley for example has seen rural population net migration gains.

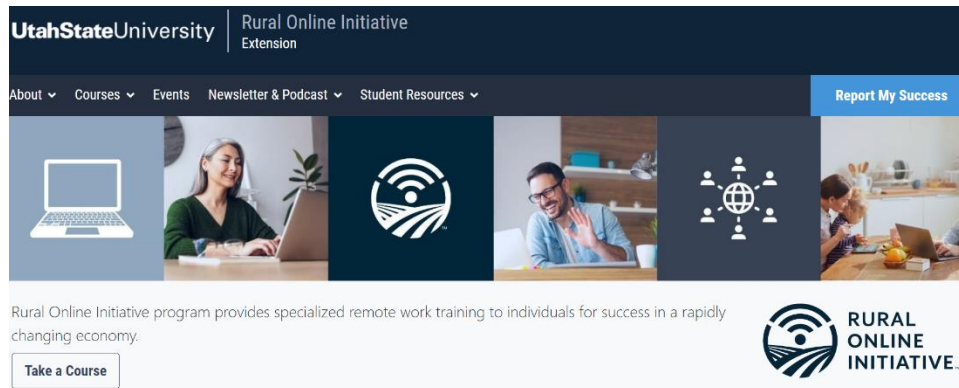
### Counties grouped by population change from 2020 to 2021 and urban-rural

■ Exurban and suburban gaining 
 ■ Exurban and suburban losing 
 ■ Rural gaining 
 ■ Rural losing 
 ■ Urban gaining 
 ■ Urban losing



Map: The Economic Innovation Group • Source: Census Population Estimates • Created with Datawrapper

Not only can remote work serve the purpose of a talent attraction economic development strategy, but there is also an opportunity to retain the existing human capital in our rural communities. Recently, for example, the State of Utah in conjunction with Utah State University launched a “Remote Work



Certificate” program designed to prepare rural workers for obtaining job positions that allow for remote work. As part of this effort the Governor of Utah has encouraged state hiring to focus on opportunities to employ graduates of

this initiatives as part of the state’s effort to repopulate and retain talent in their rural communities. <https://extension.usu.edu/remoteworkcertificate/>

While still in its infancy as a community/economic development strategy, there have been a number of early adopters in the remote work attraction space. Most of the strategic focus from a tactical perspective has been in the area of developing incentives. Tulsa, Oklahoma has served as a leader in this space. Launched under a new organization called Tulsa Remote (<https://tulsaremote.com/>), to date this incentive program has attracted nearly 1,700 new residents to the community. Tulsa Remote provides and incentive of \$10,000 to accepted applicants and free desk space in a downtown cowork program. It’s worth noting that they market community affordability and networking among co-workers as key program attractions.

Other states and communities have gotten in this “game” since the initial phase of the global pandemic. They range from state programs in Vermont and West Virginia, to regional initiatives in Northwest Arkansas that provides some incentive funds as well as a bike. Given the data, incentives would seem to be a very small part of the overall equation to attract and retain remote workers.

In a national review of studies, publications, media articles and relocation data, it appears that there are a number of variables that make up an individual’s decision to move as part of their remote work flexibility. Unlike corporate relocations that tend to focus on things like available infrastructure (utilities, water, sewer), taxes, workforce availability, etc., and individual decision is likely more tied to livability and quality of life factors commonly found in magazine rankings, like “Best 10 Small Towns in the USA.”

As such, as part of this work with Virginia Main Street, we took a multiple input strategy to better understand and evaluate a community’s position relative to ability to be attractive for remote workers. The following outlines the methodology and data collection for our new “Remotability Index” as a way to assess areas of strength and potential barriers within this work.

## *Remotability Index*

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Given the infancy of this work across the country, we needed a way to better understand and compare communities relative to their potential attraction to remote workers. Some of this information is further shaped through conversations with Hamilton Lombard, Estimates Program Manager for the Demographics Research Group, at the University of Virginia, and someone who has completed a great deal of exploratory work in mapping county growth of remote work in Virginia.

As such, our methodology involved a combination of inputs to better understand both the data and local context for barriers and opportunities to attract and retain remote workers. Each community participate in a day-long site visit consisting of a community tour and set of focus groups aimed to better understand the perspectives from both the those employed as remote workers within the community, and community stakeholders that have roles in supporting and nurturing this market sector of employment. And finally, Main Street America’s research department developed a new “Remotability Index” to better understand critical indicators emerging as key to the attraction and retention of remote workers.

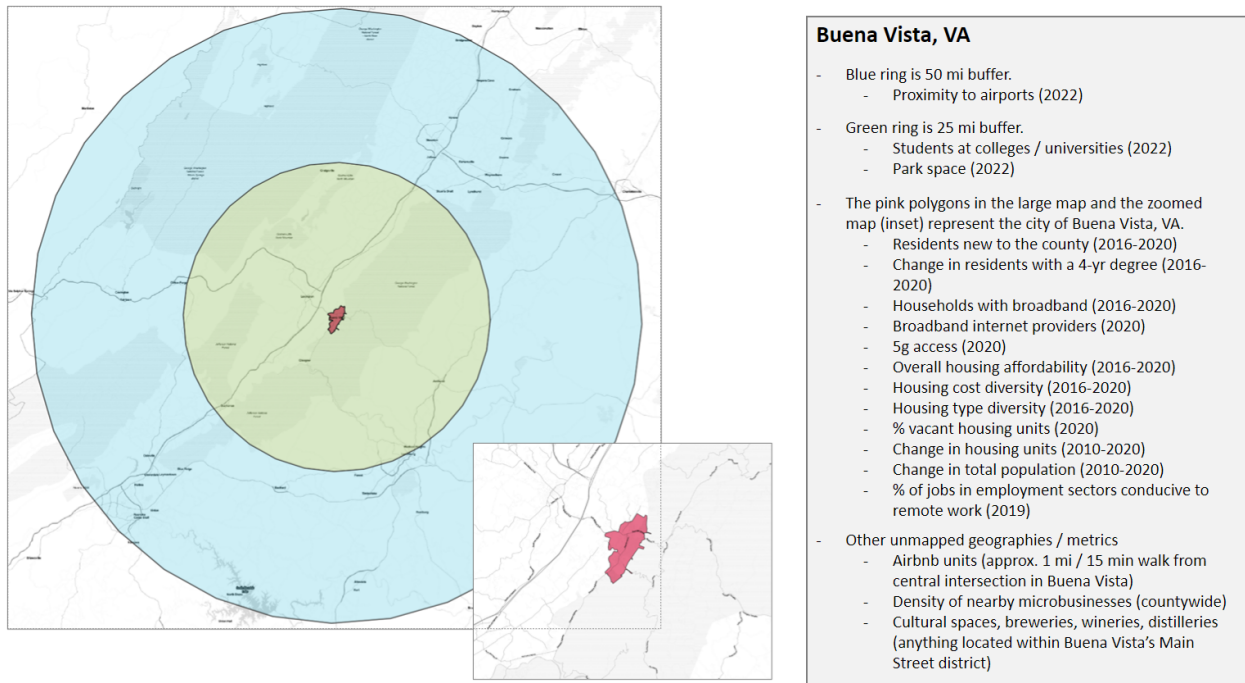
### ***Removability Index***

In total, we examined 24 data indicators, comparing each community to the average of all Virginia Main Streets. In addition, post visits, we examined a new data set from the U.S. Internal Revenue Service that provides migration pattern data focused on changes from 2019 to 2020. These (now 25) indicators are categorized into 12 segments ranging from Housing to Technology to Microventure Density Levels. It’s important to note what the Index is indicating and what it is not indicating. We feel the Index primary serves the function of highlighting areas of strength and weakness, thus providing an opportunity for discussion around these areas. However, it is not an assessment as to the impact of remote workers within the community. As having 5 new remote workers in one area may represent a much larger impact than 50 in another larger community. Context certainly matters. In review, the following chart outlines and defines each of the indicators and related sources:

Types of Metric	Specific Metric	Details on the Metric	Data Source
Remote Work Spaces	# Nearby Coworking Spaces	Pulling manually -- Search Google for "coworking" or "co-work space" within 15 minutes of Main Street district	Google Search
Technology Infrastructure	% Households with Broadband Internet Connections	ACS 2015-2019 -- Used all tracts intersecting each Main Street district	ACS
	Number of Broadband Internet Providers Offering Service in the Area	Modal count of broadband providers offering >= 35/3 mbps, counting all blocks within the city	FCC
	Number of Mobile 5G Providers Offering Service in the Area	Modal count of mobile service providers offering 5G service, counting all blocks within the city	FCC
Housing	% Vacant Housing Units	Took total housing unit vacancy rate for all blocks intersecting each Main Street district -- Note that values in z-standardized column have a flipped sign (ie., lower vacancy rates = higher Z value)	Decennial Census
	Net Change in Housing Units	Count of Housing Units in 2020 - Count of Housing Units in 2010, including all census blocks intersecting each Main Street district	Decennial Censuses
	Overall housing affordability	Ratio of Median Monthly Rent to Median Monthly Income for all tracts intersecting each Main Street district. A value below 3 would indicate the median household cannot afford the median rental price, if we use the HUD standard affordability threshold	ACS
	Diversity of housing types	Simpson's Index of Diversity, applied to types of housing within all tracts intersecting each Main Street district. Values nearer 0 indicate homogeneity; values nearer one indicate a heterogenous balance of housing types	ACS
	Diversity of housing affordability	Simpson's Index of Diversity, applied to rental housing rates within all tracts intersecting each Main Street district -- 4 buckets (< \$500, \$500 - 999, \$1000 - 1499, \$1500+); values nearer 0 indicate homogeneity; values nearer one indicate a heterogenous balance of rental housing available in the four price buckets	ACS
Third Spaces and Cultural Amenities	Count of Cafes, Breweries, Wineries, Distilleries, Etc.	Number of PPP loans in NAICS code 72; coded to winery, distillery; or brewery; or including the words "brew" or "coffee" in their business name, per 100 Main Street district residents.	PPP
	Count of Arts and Cultural Businesses, Organizations, or Spaces	Number of PPP loans with NAICS codes starting with 711 or 712 (arts spaces and organizations, museums and cultural amenities), per 100 Main Street residents	PPP
Airbnb Listings	Number of Airbnb listings	Manually searched Airbnb for the community name, then zoomed all the way in (maximum zoom) to the Main Street intersection / centroid, then zoom out seven clicks. Count # of listings for mid-October weeklong stay +/- 7 days	Airbnb Search
Recreation	Amount of Park Spaces Nearby	Using ParkServe TPL data, take total park square mileage within 25 mi of the Main Street district	Trust for Public Land
	Number of Trails Nearby	Try using Rails to Trails data? What is located within 10 mi of Main Street district	Google Search? Rails To Trails?
	Number of Blueways Nearby	Pulling manually for select set -- Search Google for blueways within 10 mi of Main Street district	Google Search
	Number of Boat Ramps Nearby	Manually searched Google Maps for boat ramps near the five communities.	Google Search?
Geographic Proximity	Proximity to large or midsize cities	Score 5 points if within one hour of a large or midsize city (100k +) 3 points if within two hours of a large or midsize city (100k +) 1 point if within three hours of a large or midsize city (100k +)	URCA / Developed for UN
	Proximity to major airports	Total number of enplanements within 50 miles of the Main Street district	FAA data
Institutions of Higher Learning	Presence of colleges or universities	Total number of students at higher ed institutions within 25 miles of the Main Street district	DHS data
Population Changes	Net change in population	Population in 2020 - population in 2010, including all tracts intersecting each Main Street district	Decennial Censuses
	Population of people who are new to the county	Count of residents who newly moved from outside the county and into each tract intersecting a Main Street district	ACS
	Change in population who has a four-year degree	Change in proportion of residents living in census tract intersecting the Main Street who have a four-year college degree, between ACS 2016 - 2020 5-year estimates and 2011-2015 5-year estimates	ACS
	Geographic Migration Patterns	Highest VA county and geographic area of the country moving to the county.	IRS
Remote-Friendly Employment	Number of jobs in employment sectors that are conducive to remote work	Proportion of all jobs that are in census blocks intersecting the Main Street district and in Information (NAICS 51); Finance and Insurance (NAICS 52), or Professional, Scientific, and Technical Services (NAICS 54) sectors	LODES
Microventure Density	Density of nearby microbusinesses	County-level metric of microventure density	GoDaddy Venture Forward

# Local Data Summary – Buena Vista, VA

The following graphic outlines the various geographic boundaries used for the indicators within the Remotability Index. Much of the data was gathered from the city of Buena Vista. In doing so, we were initially trying to understand downtown’s opportunities and barriers to serving as a hub for remote workers within the larger context of the city. While important, it is further noted that data is only one input into the assessment. With the pace of change caused by the global pandemic we acknowledge that data is a laggard and thus may not reflect more recent economic, technology or societal shifts.



## Place – Remote Work Spaces

			# Nearby Coworking Spaces
AVG FOR ALL VIRGINIA MAIN STREET COMMUNITIES			
City of Buena Vista	Buena Vista	VA	0

## Technology Infrastructure

			% Households with Broadband Internet Connections	Z-Standardized Households with Broadband Internet	Broadband Internet Providers Offering Service in the Area	Number of Broadband Internet Providers Offering Service	Number of Mobile 5G Providers Offering Service in the Area	Number of Mobile 5G Providers Offering Service in the Area
AVG FOR ALL VIRGINIA MAIN STREET COMMUNITIES			58.6%		5.1		1.23	
City of Buena Vista	Buena Vista	VA	53.2%	-0.3	6	0.7	1	-0.3

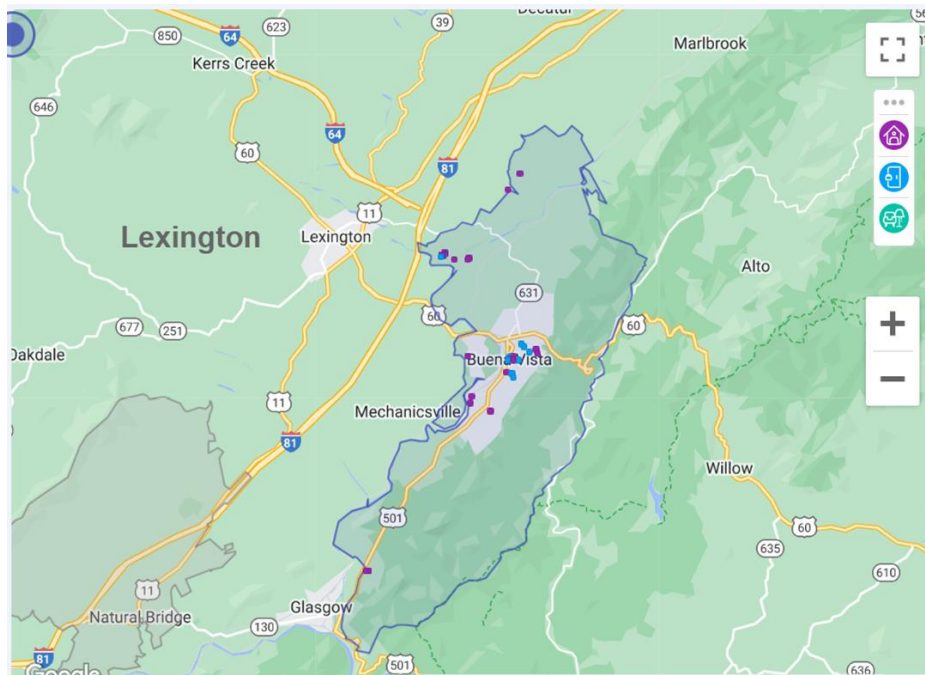
## Housing

			% Vacant Housing Units	Z-Standardized % Vacant Housing Units	% Change in Housing Units	Z-Standardized % Change in Housing Units	Net Change in Housing Units	Overall housing affordability	Z-Std overall housing affordability	Diversity of housing types	Z-Std Diversity of Housing Types	Diversity of housing affordability	Z-Std Diversity of Rent
AVG FOR ALL VIRGINIA MAIN STREET COMMUNITIES			17.5%		30.7%		76	6.42		0.51		0.53	
City of Buena Vista	Buena Vista	VA	22.9%	-0.4	20.0%	-0.3	16	5.14	-0.9	0.31	-1.4	0.52	-0.1

## Third Spaces

			Count of Cafes, Breweries, Wineries, Distilleries, Etc.	Count of Cafes, Breweries, Wineries, Distilleries, per Resident	Z-Std Third Places per Resident	Count of Arts and Cultural Spaces in the municipality (PPP recipients)	and Cultural Spaces in the municipality, per 100 Main Street District Residents (PPP)	Z-Std Number of Arts or Cultural Spaces per Resident
AVG FOR ALL VIRGINIA MAIN STREET COMMUNITIES			8.3					
City of Buena Vista	Buena Vista	VA	1	0.00	-0.5	1	0.452	-0.4

## Airbnb – 23 Units



### Outdoor Recreation

			Amount of Park Spaces Nearby	Z-Std Park Space Nearby	Number of Trails Nearby	Number of Blueways Nearby	Number of Boat Launches Nearby
AVG FOR ALL VIRGINIA MAIN STREET COMMUNITIES			165.3				
City of Buena Vista	Buena Vista	VA	432.4	1.1	1	0	4

### Geographic Proximity

			Proximity to large or midsize cities	Z-Std Proximity to Large or Midsize Cities	Proximity to major airports	Z-Std Proximity to Major Airports	Presence of colleges or universities	Z Std Presence of Nearby College or University Students
AVG FOR ALL VIRGINIA MAIN STREET COMMUNITIES			3.2		2,982,878		19,083	
City of Buena Vista	Buena Vista	VA	1	-1.5	407,122	-0.5	6,044	-0.4

### Population Shifts

			% Change in Population (2010-2020)	Z Std Change in Population	Net change in population	% of population who are new to the county	Z Std % Pop New to the County	Population of people who are new to the county
AVG FOR ALL VIRGINIA MAIN STREET COMMUNITIES					7,436	10%		752
City of Buena Vista	Buena Vista	VA	27%	-0.2	27%	16%	1.1	997

**Migration Shifts** according to the IRS for Rockbridge County, there were 1,448 domestic and foreign new residents coming into the County from 2019 to 2020. Of those, 31 percent were from a different state. While we cannot identify the specific state, the majority of filers were identified as being from “South.” The “West” was the second highest, likely California. From those within Virginia, approximately 10 percent were coming from Augusta County.

### Remote-Friendly Employment

			Change in population who has a four-year degree	Z Std Change in Population who Has a Four-Year Degree or More Education	% jobs in employment sectors that are conducive to remote work	Z Std % Jobs in Employment Sectors Conducive to Remote Work	Number of jobs in employment sectors that are conducive to remote work
AVG FOR ALL VIRGINIA MAIN STREET COMMUNITIES			1.9%		23.1%		180
City of Buena Vista	Buena Vista	VA	2.6%	0.2	13.0%	-0.5	32

## Microventure Density

High Micro Business formation suggests culture of entrepreneurship that is also attractive to remote workers.

- + Density of Micro Business per 100 population – 5.09 (Source GoDaddy) The national average is 2.8. Thus, there is tremendous ability to leverage this sector as well as these two groups often align around needs. A great example is the potential synergies with what is happening at the Ag Innovation Center.

## Overall Summary of Remotability Index

- + Average Z Scores of Virginia Main Street Communities – (2.0)
- + Average Buena Vista Z Score – (4.49)

## Data Summary

As they say...context is everything. In touring Buena Vista, data alone doesn't tell the full story of the area and its capacity to attract remote workers. The data would suggest that overall, Buena Vista scores much lower than average in comparison to the other Main Street Communities. However, there are some wonderful building blocks/assets in which the community could focus, such as the Ag Innovation Center and presence of Southern Virginia University. In addition, the community is surrounded by a number of outdoor recreation options including trails and waterway access. The biggest asset and one that serves as a primary building block, is the level of microventure activity in the area. Consistent with the place-based assets aforementioned, the potential to create identity that mixes remote work and entrepreneurship represents a tremendous opportunity for the community.

That is not to suggest that there aren't real barriers that need to be addressed. However, in the case of Buena Vista, at the very least they are consistent with other community barriers in technology infrastructure and housing. Both were acknowledged both from the data and in conversations with remote workers and our local stakeholder group. While these two areas will require longer-term strategic planning and investment, shorter-term areas to address revolve around the need for third spaces that provide for more accidental collisions between students and faculty at Southern Virginia University, Ag Innovation Center participants, community stakeholders, and remote workers. In addition, while the Ag Innovation Center may offer room for remote work, seeking a dedicated location that is more business services oriented may be an option to explore.

## Focus Groups Summary

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The following represents key observations from the Remote Workers Focus Group held on June 2, 2022:

- It was noted that given the HUB Zone within the area, coupled with proximity to major defense installations throughout Virginia/DC and Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, there are a number of former military now working remotely as either contractors and/or launching businesses serving the defense industry.
- Consistent with national data, the group indicated that they often feel isolated and would enjoy speaking with other remote workers, even from other fields and sectors.
- The lack of third spaces and restaurants, in fact any places to gather and eat/drink after 5 pm outside of fast food is thoroughly missing in Buena Vista. There are some new options coming online, but they are still rather limited.
- With diminishing social and civic organizations, remote workers felt it was difficult to find opportunities for community engagement. There was not a natural point of entry.
- Remote workers highlighted the difficulty in finding any rental housing within the area. Unless you have the funding to purchase and/or construct your own home, it is very difficult.
- Southern Virginia University has been growing and represents the largest institution west of the Mississippi operated by the Church of Latter-Day Saints. Given this community-centric group, having a concentration enhances the desirability and opportunities to retain students after graduation as remote workers.
- Relative to what was attractive to remote workers and thus could be highlighted and promoted as a draw to other remote workers, the following were key asset areas:
  - Cost of Living
  - Family Friendly
  - Quirky, Funky
  - Be Who You Want to Be Here
  - Casual Pace

The following represents key observations from the Remote Workers Stakeholder Organizations Focus Group held on June 2, 2022:

- In general, stakeholders felt there was currently two primary profiles for remote workers to the area. The first were young families seeking good schools, affordability and a safe environment. The second were in their 50s and 60s, seeking early retirement. Most were largely out of the Northern Virginia area and perhaps had family in the area or had visited in the past, especially given Washington & Lee and VMI in Lexington. While secondary, the area has witnessed growth as a wedding venue area, and many discover the area through those engagements as well.
- While there are 23 Airbnb units within the area, the County as a whole seriously lacks hotel rooms given the level of tourism activity within the area.

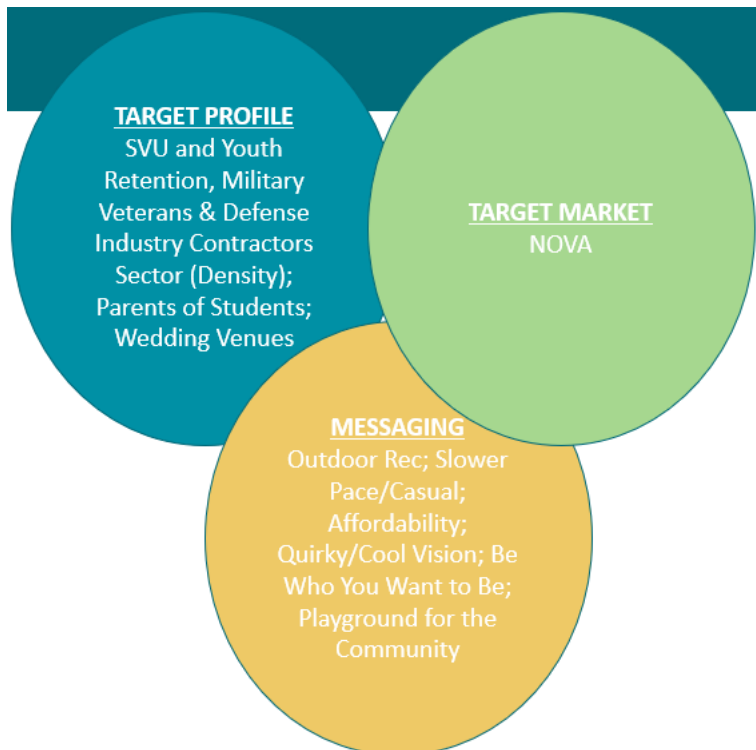
- Packaging seemed to be a recurring theme throughout the conversation. Packaging for tourists and the experience; packaging by way of entrepreneurship and small business development, and finally the packaging of moving to Rockbridge County and Buena Vista.
- While many areas around the country have been experiencing workforce challenges, it seems more prevalent here, especially given the concentration of manufacturing activity, which is distinct from the other pilot communities.
- As an observation, much of the responsibility of creating, launching and sustaining a remote work strategy lies within staffing through the City of Buena Vista.
- Downtown Buena Vista has some wonderful building fabric. It is very walkable, and there are a number of current renovation projects and new business developments happening that will provide some much-needed retail and restaurant density. In addition, the library is a wonderful asset that could be leveraged to a greater extent.

## Recommendations for Discussion

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The following represent recommendations to be considered by the Buena Vista Remote Work Group resulting from the various gathered inputs from the Work from Home Pilot. Further note that these are not in any particular prioritization but to be reviewed and discussed for relative merit.

1. One of the primary goals of the pilot initiative was to better understand the prospective target market for remote workers each of the participating communities. The following chart highlights three primary areas outlining the probable target demographic group, geographic market, and messages to reach this market.



The presence of Southern Virginia University was highlighted as a unique opportunity to retain graduates given the community-centric nature of the Church of Latter-Day Saints connection. In addition, there was a growing presence of former military and military contractors still connected to the defense industry that were working remote from the area. As such the target market is largely the state of Virginia with specific focus in Northern Virginia and capturing recent graduates from Virginia Military Institute as well.

In many ways, Buena Vista is still seeking an identity. There is an internal desire to leverage its affordability, casual nature, but in a cool and quirky way that builds a refreshed brand identity.

2. Given the current levels of remote work activity within the area, issues of internet connectivity from outside of Buena Vista, and the lack of presence of a current facility that might support both remote workers and entrepreneurs. While the Ag Innovation Center could potentially serve in that capacity, the layout and more dedicated vision of serving value-add food production, there is likely room elsewhere in downtown Buena Vista for a space conducive to hosting remote workers. It should be noted.... events and gatherings should seek to incorporate intersections of Ag Innovation Center users, local microventures out of their homes, remote workers and local stakeholders. Buena Vista should investigate

through a feasibility analysis the demand for co-work space within the downtown. While there is not a specific location observed, the feasibility could explore and identify likely locations, but just as importantly potential partnership opportunities with other users, such as the Library, SVU or even a private venture that incorporates co-work space. For example, there are emerging concepts of even places like micro-breweries operating as co-work spaces in the day time and serving coffee, and then transitioning to a third space micro-brewery in the afternoon/evening hours.

The feasibility analysis should examine levels of demand, typology of

demand, review prospective locations, organizational/ownership structure, and financials associated with the development and overall breakeven operations.



3. A number of participants indicated a lack of opportunity to network with other remote workers in the area, as well as just get engaged with the community. City staff should start to build out a database and leverage the engagement from remote workers within the focus group to create opportunities for networking around for example, a feasibility analysis for co-work space. Also bring in resource partners like the Ag Innovation Center, the Library, SVU and Rockbridge County partners for programming. Remote workers further suggested opportunities to have presentations from other remote workers or local stakeholders about events, activities, or even remote work “hacks” to use in technology, work-life balance, etc.
4. One of the primary observations both in our focus groups, but also in touring downtown, a need for overall identity branding. Given the lack of hotel rooms, there simply isn’t a great



deal of tourism activity within the area. And thus, there isn’t a lot of external branding and marketing about the City of Buena Vista. Part of the remote work strategy from an economic development perspective is to create buzz around a particular location. Branding is way to message to the “consumer” what makes the

City of Buena Vista unique to this marketplace. Contracting with a brand marketing

company and leveraging local remote workers in this effort to create a community brand that also would attract and retain remote workers and build downtown investment opportunities.

5. Buena Vista’s microventure density was rated at 5.09 microventures per 100 population. This is nearly double that of the national average and suggest a highly entrepreneurial population likely doing small scale production in ag and other markets as well as artisans, artists and makers. The Ag Innovation Center will address the scaling opportunities within many of these markets. Another value-add to this segment should include reapplying to Virginia DCHD’s Community Business Launch program as well to further populate “Third Space” type of businesses in the downtown as part of your remote work strategy. While Buena Vista ran a CBL in 2021, a post-Covid relaunch and tied into the Ag Innovation Center would prove to be a catalyst for scaling microventures in third space like retail and restaurants businesses to meet the needs of remote workers.



6. Buena Vista is not unique relative to its issues with housing. As such, we are encouraging all the pilot programs to collaborate with their county and regional partners, like the Central Shenandoah Valley Planning Commission on the Housing Study. While certainly a longer-term strategy, seek creativity at a more pilot scale in the short run. There are a number of communities that are examining more non-traditional forms of housing to address both affordability and supply.



This past year, the City of Raleigh took aggressive steps by passing a new Tiny House ordinance that further outlines tiny home construction within the city, additions of Auxiliary Dwelling Units (ADUs) to primary residence homes, as well as “Cottage Courts” to allow for

multiple tiny houses on a single parcel akin to a subdivision. A full copy of the ordinance can be found at <https://cityofraleigh0drupal.blob.core.usgovcloudapi.net/drupal-prod/COR22/TC-06-21.pdf>. As consumer and developer interest grows in this area, it's a great opportunity to market dwellings as part of boomerangs returning to the area for family considerations.

7. Working with Rockbridge County officials, consider creating a "Work from Rockbridge County" web page that could be shared/incorporated into each stakeholder website so that there are multiple touch points. This would be a great opportunity to engage with VSU, VMI and Washington & Lee career centers (or the appropriate department) as part of this marketing. The website resources could include items such as:
  - Testimonials from Remote Workers
  - Short-Term Airbnb Rentals – "Try us out!"
  - Networking Opportunities
  - Features on Co-Work Spaces and the Ag Innovation Center
  - Address the "Why?" for Buena Vista
  - Listing of Housing Options

Seek to market through LinkedIn alumni groups from the respective universities. In addition, search for industry groups involving defense contractors that could be tapped as a target market for this resource website.

8. Within the downtown of Buena Vista, approximately 13 percent of the jobs are in what we would consider remote work active job sectors (I.T., Healthcare and FIRE) that may lead to remote work opportunities. However, community wide that number drops to 2 percent. Thus, rather than a business attraction strategy, it's actually a human capital retention strategy. With each new transition to remote work, there is likely a 2 to 3-fold increase in salary for local residents.



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**Rural Online Initiative Program Provides Alternatives**

Given the housing situation, this may be a more effective strategy at building a robust remote work sector. A demand and programming study could be evaluated to better understand this strategy. The state of Utah partnered with Utah State University to do this very strategy, but on a statewide basis.

9. While there is dedicated City of Buena Vista staff to provide work in this strategy, a follow-up to this initial work would be to examine the relative roles and responsibilities of other stakeholders throughout Rockbridge County that are active in the remote work space to

better understand how to apply additional capacity and resources to this community and economic development strategy.



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