



## Blount County: The Only Preserve America County in Tennessee

### History of Sustainable Tourism in Blount County:

Although no one officially used the term until just a few years ago, the idea of sustainable tourism originated in Blount County in the 1850s, when a resort was built at Chilhowee Mountain at Montvale to allow visitors to experience the Smoky Mountains. Then, with the creation of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in June 1934 visitors were given a unique tourism destination and the culture that has been in the Appalachian Mountains for hundreds of years, was made accessible to those traveling through the area. The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) also significantly helped Blount County's sustainable tourism industry by creating an infrastructure that includes trails, campgrounds, beautiful bridges and buildings, and scenic landscapes, making for a very visitor-friendly experience. During its first full year, the park attracted approximately one million visitors, and today, tourism is the second largest industry in the county, with a total economic impact of \$229 million, bringing in \$13 million in local taxes and providing \$66 million in payroll to the 2,700 tourism related jobs.

Over the years, events and attractions evolved that celebrated this Appalachian heritage in Blount County's gateway community—Townsend. These events and attractions drew visitors from across the country and as they grew and new ones developed, it was clear that tourism based on Blount County's heritage, history and natural assets was a natural draw for visitors.

A few years ago, the Smoky Mountain Convention and Visitors Bureau was fortunate enough to hear Ed McMahon, nationally renowned authority on sustainable development, land conservation, and urban design, speak about development and tourism and how those can go hand-in-hand. McMahon put into words the vision Blount County had already been working toward, and the visitors bureau realized that if it didn't start to take control of its tourism growth, it could easily get out of control with possible negative results. Thus, the visitors bureau moved beyond its original "heads in beds" mission, and it became the county's advocate for sustainable tourism by adopting a new mission: *The Smoky Mountain Convention and Visitors Bureau will sustain the heritage and natural resources of Blount County as a unique destination for leisure and business travel.*

It became absolutely critical to understand the dual roles of preserving and promoting community's heritage and history, while at the same time continuing to grow its tourism base. To do this, the visitors bureau has traveled to benchmark communities across the country to learn best practices; brought in experts, such as McMahon to educate the community about tourism, growth and preservation; assisted the community with heritage-related projects; and it hosts numerous events annually that educate locals and visitors about Blount County's history, as well as sharing and preserving its arts, crafts and musical heritage.

In addition to establishing quality events, the visitors bureau knew that it needed funding as well as regulations in place to help preserve Blount County's unique atmosphere. As it looked into the various possibilities, it was clear that the Preserve America designation was an ideal fit for the community. This designation would allow the visitors bureau to encompass its efforts under one designation, bring the community together with one vision and provide a source of funding to continue its mission.

## **Establishing Partnerships:**

With the visitors bureau taking the lead, it became apparent that partners in the community were needed to join its efforts in order to successfully obtain the Preserve America designation. This began by studying all of the county's cultural assets, and then educating the community on their value to tourism. After a thorough study, it was clear that the designation must encompass all of Blount County, not just one city, town or community.

Next, educating the county about sustainable tourism was key. The visitors bureau shared its vision of what tourism in Blount County could be and just as importantly, what uncontrolled, unfocused growth could do. Through community forums, media relations efforts and small and one-on-one meetings with business leaders, elected officials, hotel/motel owners, attractions and other community organizations, the word began to spread, and excitement grew about the possibilities for tourism and growth in Blount County.

Once this education process was completed, the visitors bureau found that organizations throughout the community were on-board and supportive of its goals, mission and were interested in obtaining the Preserve America designation. A vital part of this plan was that it was inclusive of all types of individuals and organizations—from local, state and federal elected officials to environmental preservation groups, civic and community leadership programs and the community's businesses and attractions. Without everyone's strong support and commitment, the designation and more importantly, the resulting plans and actions to create sustainable tourism, would not have been possible.

Once the Preserve America designation was obtained, it was the community that took the lead, and is now working to support the visitors bureau's sustainable tourism mission. The county mayor is establishing a committee to oversee and submit grant requests on behalf of Blount County, and the various organizations that are eligible for this grant money are forming their own committee to evaluate the needs county-wide, prioritize those needs and then submit grant requests based on their findings. The motivation and actions of these community organizations are what will make the Preserve America designation beneficial to Blount County.

## **Blount County Benefits from Preserve America:**

The Preserve America program has several distinct benefits for Blount County.

**Attracting visitors by raising visibility:** Being associated with the Preserve America program is an instant attention-grabber for those trying to decide where to visit. The visitors bureau has already worked with the county highway department to place signs alerting visitors and locals that it is a Preserve America community, which will help to further establish Blount County's focus on its heritage and sustainable tourism. Additionally, the local and national media coverage identifying Blount county a Preserve America community, the listing and link on the Preserve America website and the Preserve America logo that the county and other organizations can display on signs, banners, and promotional materials, further this recognition.

**Provides a common resource for increased funding:** The 2008 federal budget allocated approximately \$7.5 million for Preserve America grants that Blount County is eligible to apply for. With money from these grants, Blount County can continue to grow its sustainable tourism efforts, improve its current events and activities and establish new ones.

**Unites the community by focusing tourism and growth goals:** With the Preserve America designation, all of Blount County's attractions, events and planned activities have a common goal to strive toward—preserving and promoting its heritage and culture. It gives the entire community specific goals that everyone can work together to achieve.

**Preserves the character of Blount County while providing economic impact:** The ultimate goal of Blount County's tourism efforts, special events and attractions are to continue to make tourism a viable industry with tremendous economic impact in Blount County. This designation signals to the community that we have something special in Blount County, and it is important to cherish it, preserve it, promote it and share it in order to keep the heritage and culture alive and keep visitors coming to Blount County.