



DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT ASSOCIATION OF APPALACHIA

2026 - 30 STRATEGIC PLAN





Executive Summary



In mid-2025, the Development Districts Association of Appalachia (DDAA) Board of Directors commenced an update of the organization's strategic plan for the 2026-2030 period. This plan update builds on the earlier 2021 DDAA plan, also developed in partnership with the Center for Regional Economic Competitiveness (CREC) and EntreWorks Consulting. DDAA represents 74 Local Development Districts (LDDs) serving the 423 counties of the Appalachian Region. DDAA is currently managed by CREC, which provides staff support to the organization and its members.

The DDAA strategic planning process proceeded through a series of facilitated discussions that assessed the organization's recent evolution, areas of competitive strength, and areas of potential program gaps. A review of these discussions is presented in Appendix 1, which summarizes the Board's SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis.

With significant market and budget uncertainties in 2025, today's planning effort assumes continued volatility. Many of DDAA's key Federal partners are facing budget cuts, and many parts of Appalachia confront challenges in recovering from recent natural disasters, including Hurricane Helene. Economic signals remain mixed, markets are shifting, and public resources continue to tighten.

Faced with this challenging and uncertain environment, DDAA has embraced a balanced strategy that combines a focus on strengthening core DDAA activities and pursuing limited new program opportunities as resources and capacity allow. This dual focus will help preserve existing partnerships, while also supporting development of a limited suite of new program offerings.

As DDAA moves forward, we remain guided by our core principles as first adopted in our 2021 Strategic Plan - with the flexibility to adjust to new developments and in partnership with the Appalachian Regional Commission.

VISION STATEMENT

DDAA will be the leading resource for local development districts in the Appalachian region.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

DDAA operates with a commitment to collaboration, innovation, and integrity.

MISSION STATEMENT

DDAA supports Local Development Districts in building healthy, prosperous, innovative, and successful communities across the Appalachian Region.

DDAA accomplishes its mission through:

- **LEADERSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** Providing high-quality training and resources to our members and their communities
 - **NETWORKING:** Connecting our members across the Appalachian region and beyond
 - **ENGAGEMENT:** Partnering with federal, state, and local efforts to advance the Appalachian region
 - **ADVOCACY:** Serving as a voice for the Appalachian region and for the work of our local development district network
 - **INNOVATION:** Developing and sharing new program and policy innovations across Appalachia
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STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND ACTION ITEMS



LEADERSHIP AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Providing high-quality training and resources to our members and their communities

Most DDAA members view training and professional development as among the most important program offerings available to LDD leaders and staff. Ensuring that timely and innovative training opportunities are readily available across Appalachia has and will remain a top DDAA priority.

ACTION ITEMS

Leadership and Professional Development

- ▶ **1.1** Offer new educational opportunities for LDD leaders on how to operate and manage an LDD more effectively.
 - Examples might include HR issues, effective use of AI tools, and grant management.
- ▶ **1.2** Develop specialized training content targeted to a broader audience of Appalachian leaders, including LDD board members and partner organizations.
- ▶ **1.3** Develop LDD staff and leadership orientation (new training program for new directors and staff) that supports on-boarding efforts.
- ▶ **1.4** Continue to deliver two conferences per year: an annual meeting (typically held in March) and an annual training conference (typically held in the summer).
- ▶ **1.5** Continue to develop and deliver additional training programs and webinars in coordination with the DDAA professional development committee.

Potential Metrics: Leadership and Professional Development

- ▶ Number of targeted training programs delivered
- ▶ Number of program participants
- ▶ Attendee satisfaction with programs

NETWORKING

Connecting our members across the Appalachian region and beyond

DDAA's success and effectiveness depend upon strong networks, both within DDAA itself and with key partners and stakeholders in Appalachia and beyond. DDAA members continue to identify DDAA's "family atmosphere" as one of the core benefits we provide to members and partners. DDAA will expand opportunities for members to collaborate, share best practices and advance our collective work.

ACTION ITEMS Networking

- ▶ **2.1** Continue to support existing peer learning networks, such as our ongoing networks for RLF practitioners and recovery-to-work advocates. Develop 1-2 new peer-to-peer learning networks (i.e., communities of practice) each year focused on emerging topics, such as child care, workforce development, and disaster recovery.
- ▶ **2.2** Continue to deliver the monthly DDAA e-newsletter to all DDAA members.
- ▶ **2.3** Expand opportunities for emerging leaders to engage with the DDAA network through in-house efforts and greater DDAA emphasis encouraging LDD participation in ARC's Appalachian Leadership Development Institute. Assess the feasibility of a new DDAA-backed mentoring effort that connects more experienced members with new staff and leaders who have recently entered the profession.
- ▶ **2.4** Conduct annual member survey to identify priority items to inform DDAA's annual work program.
- ▶ **2.5** Create internal tools that assist in connecting DDAA members to expertise across the DDAA network. This effort could later support DDAA-related mentor networks.
- ▶ **2.6** Assess how best to re-engage non-member LDDs and less-engaged member LDDs to identify and respond to their needs.

Potential Metrics: Networking

- ▶ Increase in Membership
- ▶ Increased participation in DDAA activities, especially in peer exchanges and learning networks
- ▶ Increased open and click rate in newsletter

ENGAGEMENT

Partnering with federal, state, and local efforts to advance the Appalachian region

The success of DDAA members depends on our ability to effectively engage with funding and program partners at the federal, state, and local levels. DDAA enjoys strong links with long-standing partners such as ARC. Going forward, we will further solidify these existing partnerships and expand engagement efforts to new partners. These links will improve DDAA's ability to share our message about the good work underway across Appalachia.

ACTION ITEMS Engagement

- ▶ **3.1** Maintain DDAA's strong relationship with the Appalachian Regional Commission and expand through related projects and additional points of contact.
- ▶ **3.2** Expand outreach efforts to EDA, USDA, and other current and potential Federal partners.
- ▶ **3.3** Develop and engage in broader networks to support priority advocacy issues, such as broadband or substance use recovery work. These efforts should also assess how to build new partnerships with philanthropic organizations, other trade associations, and business networks as well.
- ▶ **3.4** Designate DDAA staff and/or members to actively participate with peer network groups (e.g., ARC State Representatives, NADO, SERDI, and others) to represent the Appalachian LDD voice.

Potential Metrics: Engagement

- ▶ Increase in collaborative projects
- ▶ Increase in formal partnership agreements
- ▶ Participation in network discussions

ADVOCACY

Serving as a voice for the Appalachian region and for the work of our local development district network

DDAA can and will serve as an essential voice for Appalachia, advocating for LDDs and rural communities in our region and across the US. DDAA will tell the good story of how LDDs support community building across Appalachia, and share insights on LDD impacts and more generally, on how communities in Appalachia and rural America are faring.

ACTION ITEMS Advocacy

- **4.1** Identify (up to three) high priority issues annually (through newly created DDAA Advocacy Committee) that would serve as the centerpiece for DDAA's advocacy work.
- **4.2** Implement outreach strategies to support DDAA's advocacy work, including developing marketing materials and reports that highlight the return on investment from LDDs as well as innovative programs and policies being supported by DDAA members.
- **4.3** Develop strategies for more regular interactions with legislative staff members.
- **4.4** Support collaborations and activities designed to engage key partners at the federal, state, and local levels.

Potential Metrics: Advocacy

- Demonstrated effects on policy
- Participation in advocacy efforts (events, meetings, webinars, etc.) focused on telling the sharing insights on how LDDs support development in Appalachia and across rural America.
- Engagement with key partners (number of interactions or participants in events)

INNOVATION

Developing and sharing new program and policy innovations across Appalachia

Over the past five years, DDAA has expanded its role in sharing and developing new program and policy innovations. Our work in areas such as recovery-to-work is widely respected across the country, and we can develop additional areas of expertise moving forward. As this work continues, DDAA will develop new means to engage DDAA members and to amplify our voices in policy discussions in Washington and across the US.

ACTION ITEMS

Innovation

- **5.1** Share innovative programs, leading practice cases, and on-line tools from the DDAA network on the DDAA website, in relevant reports, and through member recognition.
- **5.2** Support existing DDAA awards programs that showcase LDD innovations. Newer awards initiatives could highlight innovations related to LDD business operations in addition to our current focus on policy-related innovations.
- **5.3** Identify and document emerging challenges/issues and solutions through research, policy analysis, and technical assistance.

Potential Metrics: Innovation

- Awards for DDAA members
- Reports/guidance on emerging topics
- Number of relevant best practices and innovative efforts featured on the DDAA website

APPENDIX SWOT ANALYSIS (2025)

STRENGTHS

- Great Networking/Peer Learning Venue
 - Great venue for networking opportunities and peer learning
 - Learn and share about leading edge ideas
 - Bank of institutional knowledge
- Training opportunities and events
- Organization Size and Culture
 - Tradition of cooperation among LDDs—the family atmosphere
 - Size of organization is an asset—small enough to allow direct connection/interaction across LDDs
 - Goldilocks—big enough and small enough to do our work
- Good Capacity to Undertake New and Innovative Projects
 - DDAA is able to innovate and swiftly adopt new programs and focus areas.
 - Diversity of membership and of activities by member LDDs
 - The Power of Local Capacity
- Solid Organizational Base
 - CREC is providing good support/capacity. Organization is more professionally managed.
 - Engaged Board of Directors
- Strong Partnerships
 - Non-governmental arm to represent us/advocacy
 - Close links/ties with ARC—they are good partner
 - Good ties to NADO and other partners

WEAKNESSES

- Peer Learning Capacities Could Be Improved
 - Peer learning opportunities are underutilized—big issue is timing and capacity (Create new opportunities/ approaches at new sites)
 - Limited resources for members limit ability to travel and engage in professional development opportunities.
 - Better sharing of institutional knowledge? Time, capacity restraints
- Not all LDDs are Fully Engaged
 - How to build a greater sense of connection between members and DDAA, such as experiences with SERDI?
- Outreach/Advocacy role is limited
 - Could do more to support ARC and individual LDDs
 - Lack capacity/experience in effectively telling the “story” of Appalachia, DDAA, and our specific LDDs.
- Need more engagement with existing members
- Need better support for new leaders
 - Limited pathways to identify and groom emerging leaders in the industry.
 - More support for new LDD executive directors and future leaders
 - Encourage executive directors to engage with ARC, other resources

Internal

APPENDIX SWOT ANALYSIS (2025)

OPPORTUNITIES

- DDAA mission potentially well-aligned with new policy directions
 - Interdependence between urban and rural areas—focus more on this?
- Focused public advocacy mission
 - Advocacy within the region: needed more direct interaction and input to elected officials. Need to share local impacts of federal investments.
 - Sharing the DDAA story, especially by using data/analysis on the Appalachian regional economy and rural America more generally.
- Enhanced learning resources for DDAA network
 - Create a portal for LDDs/regional commissions (e.g., sample documents like RFPs, MOUs, by-laws, policies)
 - Rethink peer exchanges
 - Learning academy model with RFP and more regions sharing resources?
- Engage New Partners
- Connect to local government networks and partners (e.g., NACo, ICMA, etc.)
- FEMA Reforms: New Roles for Local Partners?

THREATS

- Political Conflict/Challenges to democracy.
 - Extremism on both sides—less willingness to compromise
 - Changes in leadership that include fewer with direct ties to Appalachia)
- Funding/Over-reliance on ARC Support
 - Changes in ARC priorities---e.g., Related to infrastructure, health care access
 - Too much focus on ARC and EDA—limited knowledge or connection to other agencies and partners.
 - Funding cuts to key Federal and state partners
 - Limited ties to non-governmental funding sources
- Limited Expertise in dealing with community recovery/resilience challenges
- Effective Story Telling in a Crowded Policy Marketplace
 - Urban vs. rural---urban provides more “bang for the buck.” How to maintain focus on rural needs.
 - FEMA Reforms: Reduced funding for disaster relief and resilience