

**“Destination Hatchie“-A System of Parks on The Historic Hatchie River**

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*While not every town has the luck to have a tourist magnet like Mount Rushmore nearby, almost every community has something that makes it unique -- a quirky museum, perhaps, or distinctive downtown architecture, or an important but nearly forgotten historical event in its past. Find out what that is for your town. Brand it, promote it, celebrate it. People who share your community's values or interests will come to spend time -- and money -- in the place you call home. -Roger Zalneraitis*

It is the longest free-flowing tributary of the lower Mississippi, it contains the largest forested floodplain in Tennessee, it has remained undammed: It is the Scenic Hatchie River. The natural flood processes that drive the ecosystem are intact, sustaining the river and wetland habitats that support a rich ecological diversity. These habitats support more than 100 species of fish and 35 species of mussels. Some of Tennessee's largest fish species, the alligator gar and the flathead catfish are found in the Hatchie River. With 11 species of catfish, the Hatchie probably contains more species of catfish than any other river in North America. About 250 species of birds use the Hatchie's forests at some point during the seasons. It is definitely unique and sets our community as well as our region apart and most importantly provides an awesome opportunity through one the State of Tennessee major economic drivers...tourism.

With the drastic change in the economy there are a lot rural communities facing the same challenges, including poverty, high unemployment and infrastructure problems. Although some have had small successes with industrial development, most of those cities have turned to natural resources unique to them such as historic landmarks and recreational attractions such as rivers and lakes. According to Wild and Scenic Rivers, outdoor recreation is a growing industry

supporting over 7 million jobs. It saw a 37% increase in annual consumer spending from 2015 to 2016 from \$646 billion to \$887 billion. River recreation accounts for up to one-third of this spending, including activities both on and around waterways.

## **Important Initiatives of this Study**

### **Phase One- The Redesign of Hatchie River Nature Center in Hatchie River Park.**

- Educate the citizens of the economic and historic value of the Hatchie River to the development of the City of Bolivar and the Hatchie River Region.
- Design and construct the Hatchie River Park with a pavilion, outdoor classrooms, fishing pier, and green space in place of the Hatchie River Nature Center. This will result in greater cost efficiency and yet accomplish the same goals as the Hatchie River Nature Center.

### **Phase Two- The development of “Sand Beach Lake”**

- Extend and develop natural trails for daily recreational use by residents and tourists along the Hatchie River parks, and trails along the banks of Sand Beach Lake.
- Provide outdoor restrooms and facilities to attract more river-related business and recreational opportunities, such as fishing and paddle boat and canoe rentals.
- Research funding opportunities for clean-up of the two tracts of land with a total area of 154.67 acres which is bordered by the Hatchie River to the north, and “Sand Beach Lake” and Spring Creek to the east.

- Once land is deemed clear of environmental risks, acquire the land and funding for preliminary plans for the development of the Hatchie River RV Park and Campground.

### **Phase Three- Promote “Destination Hatchie” Regionally**

- Develop and foster partnerships with the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, The Nature Conservancy, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Tennessee Department of Forestry
- Develop a system of tourists attractions with other local governments (Haywood, Tipton, Hardeman, McNairy, and Lauderdale counties)

**This Capstone project** will show the City of Bolivar’s plans to develop and expand the Hatchie River Nature Center into a system of Hatchie River Parks that will complement other recreational and tourist attractions on the scenic and historic Hatchie River. This project will be completed in three different phases. Phase one will be the redesign of Hatchie River Nature Center into Hatchie River Park. Phase two will be the development of “Sand Beach Lake Park” which is connected to The Hatchie River via a natural spring “Spring Creek”. There will be the acquisition of a brownfield for the creation of Hatchie River RV Park and Campground. Finally, the last phase and most important to the economic development of this community as well as this region is the development of a sustainable system of tourist attractions with other local governments in the region.

## **City of Bolivar Overview**

Bolivar, population 5,002 is the seat of Hardeman County, which is located in Southwest, TN. The city was established in 1823 on the Hatchie River and was originally named Hatchie Town. On October 18, 1825, Hatchie Town was renamed to Bolivar after Simon Bolivar, South American revolutionary leader. It is a town rich in history, with three historic districts and one individual listing within the city limits of Bolivar: North Main Historic District, Court Square Historic District, Bills/McNeal Historic District and Western Mental Health Institute, districts, and a completely restored downtown business area. The City's growing Recreation Department will be charged with most of the responsibility of this project.

The development of this project will have a great impact on not only the city's and county's economic status but the Hatchie River Region. The Hatchie River has historic value, being the longest free-flowing tributary of the lower Mississippi, and contains the largest forested floodplain in Tennessee. Because it has remained undammed and largely unchannelized, the natural flood processes that drive the ecosystem are intact, sustaining the river and wetland habitats that support a rich ecological diversity, the Hatchie will be a tourism draw for people from all over the world to the area. As part of the long term initiative and Master plan for Bolivar, The Hatchie River Park, old Tannery/Armira site, and Sand Beach Lake will connect and link outdoor recreational activity areas for hiking trails, biking, fishing, boating, and canoes. These are areas of undeveloped natural resources for tourism in Bolivar and have been identified and referred to as the communities low hanging fruit.

## **Description of the Opportunity or Need that the project addresses**

Like many other rural communities, Bolivar and Hardeman County has been faced with multiple economic development challenges. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) prepares an index of county economic status for every county in the United States. Economic status designations are identified through a composite measure of each county's three-year average unemployment rate, per capita market income, and poverty rate. Based on these indicators, Hardeman County is categorized as distressed. Bolivar alone has lost over 2,500 manufacturing jobs in the last fifteen years.

Social and economic factors as well as limited access to opportunities has had an impact on the communities ability to live healthy and active lifestyles and has also created disparities in health, which has prevented the citizens of those neighborhoods to receive the support necessary to thrive. The location of the second phase of this project is located in the heart of the most economically distressed parts of the city and will provide recreational activities that will be easily assessable by walking trails and bike routes that will be inviting for all ages and encourage a more active lifestyle.

In 2015 Governor Haslam set a vision for Tennessee to be the number one state in the Southeast for high quality jobs. Haslam tasked The Department of Economic and Community Development (TNECD) with helping to reach that vision and set five long-term objectives:

- 55% of job commitments above the county median wage,
- be in the top two in per capita personal income in the Southeast,
- be number one in capital investment per capita in the Southeast,
- have the lowest unemployment rate in the Southeast and
- have no distressed counties by 2025.

Since that announcement, Tennessee Economic and Community Development has unveiled multiple programs to assist counties in achieving economic attainment.

With hopes to take advantage of those community programs and resources provided by Tennessee Economic and Community Development and other various resources the political and community leaders of Bolivar began to join together to research and create strategic plans that would create the “blueprint” for success. Over a period of time there were many discussions with various entities of the city including but not limited to political leaders on the local, state, and federal levels, Southwest TN Development District, USDA, TWRA, The Downtown Development District, TN Department of Health, and various other community and civic organizations.

The outcome of that initiative encouraged the community to focus and create a strategic plan to develop Bolivar and Hardeman County into a recreation destination. With a major decline in the city’s population, the challenges with workforce development and the extensive process of industrial recruitment has made economic development a challenge. But with the towns rich history and prestige natural resources provided by the Hatchie River, which has been designated by The Nature Conservancy as one of the 75 last great places on earth, developments around tourism will yield the best success. Depending on what the investment is, where it is, how well it is developed and promoted, Return On Investment (ROI) calculations by the State of Tennessee Department of Tourism, states each dollar spent may yield \$19.00 in taxes. Research from the USDA ERS shows that recreation counties have higher net immigration rates since 2010. These counties have geographically appropriate development strategies can capitalize on existing assets with strategies that take advantage of the historic, cultural, and natural resources that already exist in that region and have higher net immigration rates since 2010.

## **Project Description**

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In today’s era of social media, branding, and marketing *“Destination Hatchie”* will also serve as a platform for the community to build as a brand. The City of Bolivar has built a strong and growing positive presence on various social media platforms. Not only does *“Destination Hatchie”* serve as the title of this project but it will be used in all marketing materials and will serve as the brand for the community and all the recreational activities on the Hatchie River. Although it will be very difficult to accomplish, with regional support and buy in from the communities *“Destination Hatchie”* will be designed to attract visitors from every part of the country and across the world. With a strategic plan that would be best ran through a non-political entity such as the local chambers will see the best outcomes. The Hatchie River has been designated by The Nature Conservancy as one of the 75 last great places on earth and considers it to be one of the five most valuable river systems in the world. The Hatchie River is the last major un-channelized tributary of the lower Mississippi River Basin and is protected by the State of Tennessee as a Scenic River. The Tennessee Scenic Rivers Program is intended to preserve and protect the free flowing, unpolluted, and outstanding scenic, recreational, geologic, botanical, fish, wildlife, historic or cultural values of selected rivers or river segments in the state.

## **Who is Involved**

The City of Bolivar Administration will be responsible for the oversight of this project, which consists of Mayor, City Council members, City Administrator, an effective grant writer,

and other capable staff. The city's Department Heads and City employees will serve as the boots on the ground and be responsible for most of the preliminary land clearing, construction of the walking trails, and site preparation for further developments. Assistance will be provided from local civic groups, Bolivar's Downtown Development District as well as state agencies such as The Southwest TN Development District, USDA, LPRF, Tennessee State officials, TWRA, and The Department of Health.

Most importantly the success of this project will be for the wellbeing of the citizens of Bolivar, so it is vital that it includes a grass roots approach for its development. It will require community support from start to finish and that local buy-in will lead to more support from partners at the state and federal levels. A mind set of negative thinking will ruin the project before its inception. Positive branding and marketing of the community as a destination will help create a sense of pride and ownership of something that is unique to the region. As partnerships form regionally, there will be a greater opportunity to see more economic developments and growth along the scenic river.

### **Goals and Objectives**

These major initiatives are underway and will, provide a comprehensive development strategy, linking together key community assets while embracing rural lands and the preservation of Bolivar's unique community assets to promote a destination for visitors, tourist, businesses and residents. This project will create a system of blue ways, greenways, camping sites, and recreational areas along the Hatchie and its tributaries. This will be designed to be the beginning of a public park system that will benefit the local economy, promote usage of the lake and river for outdoor recreation activities, and encourage and educate the community on the importance of our valuable natural resources.

## **Project Timeframe**

The timeframe of “*Destination Hatchie*” will be determined by the availability of funding, mainly through grants awarded, local funding, and private donors. With the economically distressed status of The City of Bolivar, Hardeman County, and Southwest Tennessee, local funding is limited. Overcoming these barriers will require a comprehensive approach to branding “*Destination Hatchie*” as a recreational project of regional importance. This approach will bring the resources of other communities and agencies together to take advantage of the one natural resource that no other area has: the pristine Hatchie River.

- **Phase One- The Redesign of Hatchie River Nature Center in Hatchie River Park**

This phase has already begun and is the first part of development. The City of Bolivar was awarded a LPRF grant to construct a Nature Center on the banks of the Hatchie River but due to budgeting issues the plans were redesigned as pavilion with outdoor restrooms, trails, and a green space. Those plans were resubmitted and have been approved, and await a start date for construction, target date is to have it by summer of 2020. The demolition of the “Boatdock” has been completed and the land has been cleared to start construction of the new park. The building was in despair and had a negative connotation in the community for years. Now that the building has been removed the community has a better understanding of the vision for development on the river.

- **Phase Two- The development of “Sand Beach Lake”**

The City recently purchased a 122 acre tract of land that includes a clear lake located on East Market/Hwy 64 East and Margin Street within the city limits of Bolivar and adjacent to the old Tannery/Armira Corporation property which will be developed in phase three of this project. The first steps of this phase will began in spring of 2020 and will continue to advance within the next two years will walking trails that will connect with the Hatchie River RV Park and Campsite. The acquisition of a Brownfield for the creation of Hatchie River RV Park and Campsite. This property is formerly known as the old Tannery/ Armira Corporation which is an abandoned manufacturing company that consists of two tracts of land with a total area of 154.67 acres. Because of the environmental risks this phase will by far be the greatest challenge faced in this project. The clean-up will be very extensive but will have the greatest economic effect to the entire city. Providing a campsite and RV park for hundreds of tourists and also special event venues for citizens as well as visitors right on the natural ecosystem of the Hatchie River. The financing of this phase will be driven totally by availability of grant funding on the state and federal levels. Although funding will have a role in the development of recreational such as pavilions, restrooms, and campgrounds this property is already usable for a day trip that might include fishing, kayaking and canoeing.

- **Phase Three- Promote “Destination Hatchie” Regionally**

The Hatchie River originates in northern Mississippi and is the longest free-flowing tributary of the lower Mississippi River totaling 238 miles. The scenic river section flows from the Mississippi State line to the confluence with the Mississippi River. It is the only river in Tennessee designated a state scenic river in its entirety. The river has considerable geographic, cultural, and historic significance. River frontage along this slow meandering swamp river with many ox bows is primarily privately owned wilderness (hardwood forests, canebrakes, swamps),

and farm land. Two National Wildlife Refuge Areas preserve and protect over 21,000 acres of forested flood plain in Hardeman, Haywood, Lauderdale and Tipton counties. The rivers' historic significance includes national landmarks dating back to the Civil War era including quaint historic courthouse squares, The Battle of Fort Pillow and the Shiloh National Park. The Hatchie River is a meandering unchanneled river similar to the upper Wolf River. The section is entirely covered by the Hatchie Wildlife Refuge and contains many species of flora and fauna. There are 10 TWRA Public boat launch areas along the river. Regionalism starts here! With collaboration amongst communities in Hardeman, Haywood, Lauderdale, and Tipton counties kayak and canoe floats can be arranged to promote tourism. These floats can launch from predetermined locations and last a couple of hours or can take a full day at low water. The best time is October through May. There can be various drop off and pick up locations where local goods can be purchased through retail development as well as overnight accommodations for people traveling. Having a regional approach will allow for more attractions and opportunities for tourists to spend more time and money.

### **Results and Lessons Learned**

- Expect to see an overall system of recreational activities that will attract visitors to the city as well as the region which will drive the local economy. Expect to see the citizens take advantage of the outdoor activities which will have positive effects on their current health risks.

- To date, lessons that have been learned is to keep the citizens involved and educated in the economic development process and be prepared to deal with over budgeting issues that will occur.
- Taking a regional approach to the economic developments on the Hatchie River will attract more visitors and will have a greater impact to the communities. Without regionalism “Destination Hatchie” becomes local parks and recreation projects with little to no value.

#### **State or National Trends identified in Research/ Resources**

- **Southwest TN Development District**
- **USDA**
- **USDA ERR**
- **Tennessee State officials,**
- **TWRA**
- **TN Department of Health**
- **Hardeman County’s Presentation to the Governor**
- **Devco, Bolivar & Hardeman County 10 Year Plan**
- **Stevens, Barrett** Former Mayor of Bolivar, Tn, TnCED
- **Hardeman County Health Rankings**

- **Tennessee Department of Tourism**
- **Dellinger, Shelia** City of Bolivar Administrator, TnCED
- **Daily Yonder**
- **TDEC**