

Recognizing the Best in County Government Programs!



2012
Achievement
Awards

Nomination Packet

PUBLIC SAFETY ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

**A PARTNERSHIP WITH APPALACHIAN TRAIL CONSERVANCY AND
ROANOKE COUNTY FIRE & RESCUE**



Roanoke County, Virginia

Roanoke County Fire & Rescue

5925 Cove Road

Roanoke, Virginia 24019



2012 VACo Achievement Awards

Deadline: June 1, 2012

Application Form

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. Deadline: June 1, 2012

Program Information

Locality **Roanoke County**

Program Title **PUBLIC SAFETY ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL**

Program Category: **Criminal Justice & Public Safety**

Population Category: **(4) 50,001 to 100,000**

Contact Information

Name: **Richard E. Burch, Jr.**

Title: **Chief of Fire & Rescue**

Department: **Roanoke County Fire & Rescue**

Complete Mailing Address: **5925 Cove Road, Roanoke, VA 24019**

Telephone #: **(540)777-8701** Fax #: **(540)777-9773**

E-mail: **RBurch@RoanokeCountyVA.gov**

Signature of county administrator or chief administrative officer

Name: **Clay Goodman**

Title: **County Administrator**

Signature* *B Clayton Goodman III*

*Entries without this signature will not be accepted.

2012 Virginia Association of Counties Achievement Awards

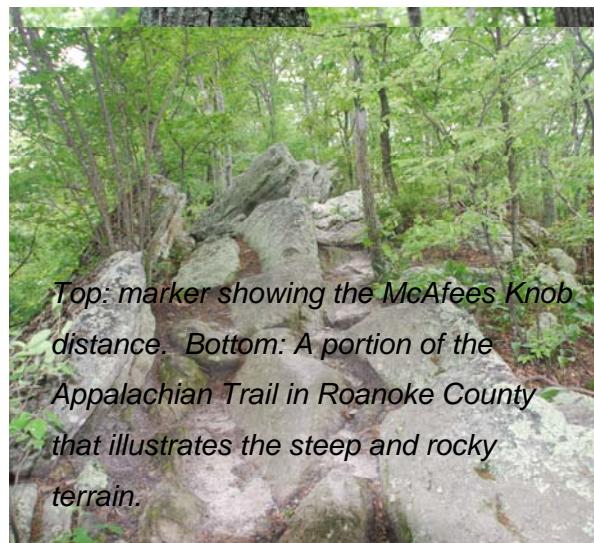
PUBLIC SAFETY ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

A PARTNERSHIP WITH APPALACHIAN TRAIL CONSERVANCY AND ROANOKE COUNTY FIRE & RESCUE

Over the last five years, Roanoke County Fire & Rescue witnessed a dramatic increase in rescue calls for lost or injured hikers on or near the Roanoake County portion of the Appalachian Trail (AT). The rise in emergency calls can be traced to the enhanced cell phone coverage throughout the mountainous area of Roanoake County. Prior to the increase of cell phone coverage, most hikers who became lost or had minor injuries walked down through the woods until they found a road or house where they could call for help. These calls were very easy to handle since they required limited services from the County. Furthermore, the recent economic recession has made local attractions more popular to the citizens of the Roanoake Valley.

Unfortunately, the ease of accessibility to call 911 has made the possibility of a hiker who becomes exhausted, lost, or has had a minor injury to call for help very simple. These calls are extremely labor intensive and require additional staffing that impacts the Fire & Rescue Department's ability to manage everyday responses. Beginning in spring and running until late fall, the Fire & Rescue Department would average one rescue per weekend, if not more. Most of these rescues were for minor injuries and lost hikers that were day-hikers and ill prepared. It was not uncommon for day- hikers to have little or no water, inappropriate clothes, no flashlight, and not physically fit to do a strenuous hike. It should be noted that no thru-hikers, who are people hiking the entire trail and are experienced, called 911 or required Fire & Rescue services.

The two popular areas that the majority of all incidents occurred are at Dragon's Tooth and McAfee Knob. These scenic hikes are extremely popular and are less than 30 minutes from downtown Roanoke making them a favorite day hike. The



Top: marker showing the McAfees Knob distance. Bottom: A portion of the Appalachian Trail in Roanoke County that illustrates the steep and rocky terrain.

Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) is the primary care-taker of both trails with the Roanoke Appalachian Trail Club (RATC) maintaining the trail system with volunteers. Each section of the trail is further regulated by different Federal Agencies. Dragon's Tooth is the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forestry Service (USFS) and McAfee Knob is controlled by the U.S. Park Service. Thus, when dealing with issues that happen on the AT, it is typically the local government that provides emergency response. For example, if there is an injury on McAfee Knob the closest response for a U.S. Park Ranger that is designated for this section of the AT is from the Harpers Ferry Ranger Station located approximately four hours away. Thus, it is not realistic for the Federal Agency to actually manage these types of responses.

To effectively manage these types of rescues the Fire & Rescue Department realized that additional training needed to be completed to help mitigate these types of incidents, but moreover to ensure the safety of Fire & Rescue Department personnel responding. During this training, it was realized that a vast majority of hikers becoming lost stated that there were very few signs or trail markings to keep them on the correct path. Granted, the AT is marked but if you are not an experienced hiker it is very easy to get off the trail especially once it becomes dark. The Fire & Rescue Department purchased specialized equipment to help remove the patient or lost hiker from the trail to minimize staff for each rescue. Though the additional equipment makes the job easier, it still requires at least ten to fourteen fire & rescue personnel for each incident. In some cases, depending on the location of the lost hiker, the number of responders could double.

The Fire & Rescue Department set out to establish a working relationship with the ATC in 2008 and the concerns we were having fell on deaf ears. In the spring of 2011 Virginia Secretary of Public Safety, Mrs. Marla Decker became involved by delegating the state forester of the Virginia Department of Forestry to identify the stakeholders that Roanoke County would need to work with to help resolve the increase in emergency calls on the AT. In June of 2011, a

meeting was held at the Roanoke County Fire & Rescue administrative offices with all of the stakeholders involved in managing the AT through Roanoke County. Additional local government officials from the counties of Botetourt and Craig also attended along with the U.S. Park Service, U.S. Park Police, U.S. Forest Service (USFS), ATC, RATC, and the Roanoke Regional Greenway Commission.

Initially, the trail stakeholders (AT, US Park Police, USFS, and RATC) were reluctant to discuss any of the requests for additional signs and markings on the trail. There concern was that additional signage would go against the natural surroundings and experience of the hiker. However there was a very compelling argument made by Roanoke County with the support of Botetourt County Emergency Services and Craig County Emergency Services that there was a major need to address the issues that were caused from the increase of 911 calls on the AT. Three years prior, Roanoke County Fire & Rescue changed the method of tracking the responses to these mountainous areas through our computer aided dispatch (CAD) system. This information was able to illustrate very clear picture for all the stakeholders to understand that there was a real problem and action had to be taken to address it.

A public-private partnership was developed with all the stakeholders to identify solutions to the problem of people becoming lost or injured. The group consisted of Roanoke County Fire & Rescue representing local government, the ATC representing the U.S. Park Police and U.S Park Service, USFS, and RATC. This group moved the meetings from the office to the trail with two stakeholder hikes to actually identify where lost hikers and injuries occurred through detailed GIS mapping. During the hikes the representatives of each group developed strategies on what type of signage would work best, wear additional information kiosks should be placed and improvement of public documents of the trail such as brochures and maps.

Another component that was extremely beneficial was having the ATC ridge runner, an employee that actually walks the trail in specific sections, assist hikers and do light trail

maintenance. This individual was trained on the use of a Roanoke County Fire & Rescue radio and assigned in the County's CAD system. The ridge runner's work assignment was dedicated to the Roanoke County section of the AT and during the hours of the day that would have the greatest impact to reducing emergency calls based on detailed statistical information from the prior three years. The ridge runner talks with hikers that appear ill prepared and advises them of the risks along with responding to emergency calls while on the trail to give additional information to fire and rescue personnel.

The partnership has flourished and Roanoke County Fire & Rescue could not be more pleased with the outcome. There has been a reduction in emergency calls to both Dragon's Tooth and McAfee Knob and we believe it is directly related to the increase in signage and trail markings that have been installed on the trail. Furthermore, when there is an emergency call for an injured hiker our fire and rescue personnel are able to access them much quicker because the hiker is able to give a better location based on the signage that was added. For example, all the bridges on the McAfee Knob section were labeled with a reflective numbered sign made by Roanoke County's Street Sign Department. The 911 caller is asked specific questions about where the injured hiker is based on the numbering system and/or trail head markers. Knowing where the injured hiker is saves critical time and man-power on rescuing the individual.

On the weekend of April 14, 2012 the ATC hosted their annual Stakeholders Trail Summit at Mountain Lake Hotel and chose to have their Stakeholders Meeting Hike in Roanoke County to actually see the progress made. Over 40 participants from eight states, representing various hiking groups and federal government agencies hiked the McAfee Knob trail. Roanoke County Fire & Rescue participated in the hike providing valuable information to the groups on how the partnership was created to improve overall safety for the day-hiker along with providing a historical setting of the hike, as McAfee Knob and Dragon's Tooth are two of the most treasured sections of the entire AT. Groups in North Carolina and Georgia who participated in the

Stakeholders Hike, have expressed an interest to use the model that Roanoke County developed as a template for improving their scenic trail areas that also have similar problems with day-hikers becoming lost or injured.

This Appalachian Trail Partnership took over three years and required multiple organizations that had very different missions to work together for a common goal. The outcome has been a tremendous success in reducing the responses to lost or injured hikers but more importantly has made hiking in Roanoke County a more enjoyable and safer destination for all citizens that want to experience some of Virginia's most breath taking natural venues.

Special thanks to the ATC, RATC, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Park Police, U.S. Park Service, Botetourt County Emergency Services, Craig County Emergency Services, Roanoke County Community Development Department, Virginia Department of Forestry, the Honorable Secretary of Public Safety, Mrs. Marla Decker. Without the support of the staff of the agencies listed, this project could not have happened.

Short Overview of Program

Over the last five years, Roanoke County Fire & Rescue witnessed a dramatic increase in rescue calls for lost or injured hikers on or near the Roanoke County portion of the Appalachian Trail (AT). Most of these rescues were for minor injuries and lost hikers that were day-hikers and ill prepared. It was not uncommon for day- hikers to have little or no water, inappropriate clothes, no flashlight, and not physically fit to do a strenuous hike.

To effectively manage these types of rescues the Fire & Rescue Department realized that additional training needed to be completed to help mitigate these types of incidents, and moreover to ensure the safety of Fire & Rescue Department personnel responding. During this training, it was realized that a vast majority of hikers becoming lost stated that there were very few signs or trail markings to keep them on the correct path.

A public-private partnership was developed with all the stakeholders to identify solutions to the problem of people becoming lost or injured. The group consisted of Roanoke County Fire & Rescue representing local government, the ATC representing the U.S. Park Police and U.S Park Service, USFS, and RATC. This group moved the meetings from the office to the trail with two stakeholder hikes to actually identify where lost hikers and injuries occurred through detailed GIS mapping. During the hikes the representatives of each group developed strategies on what type of signage would work best, wear additional information kiosks should be placed and improvement of public documents of the trail such as brochures and maps.

This Appalachian Trail Partnership took over three years and required multiple organizations that had very different missions to work together for a common goal. The outcome has been a tremendous success in reducing the responses to lost or injured hikers but more importantly has made hiking in Roanoke County a more enjoyable and safer destination for all citizens that want to experience some of Virginia's most breath taking natural venues.