



HOMEGROWN TOOLS **for ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

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Homegrown Tools tells the story of small towns that have successfully stimulated private investment and job creation. The tool is meant to connect public officials, practitioners, and researchers to successful small town economic development strategies and inspire small towns to leverage their unique assets. Homegrown Tools is managed by NCGrowth, an EDA University Center at UNC Chapel Hill, in partnership with the UNC School of Government, the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, the NC Rural Center, and the UNC Department of City and Regional Planning.



Barter Theater-Abingdon, VA

Points of Interest	County Data
Population (2019)	7,867
Municipal budget (2021-2022)	\$23,947,547
Per capita income (2019)	\$33,073
Median household income (2019)	\$45,848
Poverty rate (2019)	16.2%
Minority population (2019)	6.1%
Proximity to urban center:	134 miles to Roanoke, VA
Proximity to interstate/highway	I-81

Synopsis

The Barter Theatre, a staple tourist attraction in Abingdon, VA, was forced to indefinitely close its doors when the pandemic hit. The Barter then created “Barter at the Moonlite,” repurposing a former drive-in movie theater in the community for performances. The venue serves as an innovative way to continue attracting tourists to the area.

Introduction

Before COVID-19, tourism was thriving in Abingdon, VA— thanks largely to its two central attractions: the historic Barter Theatre and the multipurpose Virginia Creeper Trail nearby. When the pandemic hit, the Barter was forced to indefinitely close its doors, directly impacting the town’s tourism numbers. Through innovation and strong community partnerships, Barter members and stakeholders created “Barter at the Moonlite,” a drive-in theatre experience for visitors to watch live stage performances from the safety of their cars. With this new venue in place, the Barter continues to draw tourists to Abingdon, serving as a valuable part of outdoor recreational experiences offered in the area.

The Community and its History

The town of Abingdon, located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Southwest, VA, was once on a well-traveled wilderness route called the Great Road that saw many traveling pioneers on the way to settle the new American frontier.¹ The town itself was established by an act of the Assembly of Virginia in 1778, becoming the “commercial, transportation, and political center of Washington County.”² Due to its location on the Great Road (and later the Virginia-Tennessee Railroad), “the community was a transportation hub, as well as a long-time trading and production center for the tobacco industry.”³

Today, Abingdon is a self-described “artsy location,” a popular tourism destination that boasts multiple historic sites and a growing food scene. The town is also close to spectacular recreational opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts such as the Virginia Creeper Trail. A 34.3-mile multi-use trail, the Virginia Creeper begins in Abingdon and runs on a rail right-of-way dating back to the 1880s. The trail “attracts over 180,000 visitors each year from across the United States and around the world who come to enjoy the natural, scenic beauty of Southwestern Virginia.”⁴

Perhaps most famously, Abingdon is home to the historic Barter Theatre, established in 1933 during the Great Depression. Founder Robert Porterfield was a former Broadway actor who offered a unique way for locals to attend theatre performances in a formerly empty opera house in Abingdon, VA. For 40 cents, or the equivalent paid in bartered goods, patrons could watch a show. During the first season, members of the Barter Company made less than five dollars, but they gained a collective total of over 300 pounds. In the present-day, Barter Theatre is the state theatre of Virginia, as well as the nation’s longest running professional theatre. In a regular year, Barter performances draw thousands of visitors to the area, accounting for up to 35 to 40 percent of Abingdon’s tourism.⁵ The Barter also continues its original legacy: twice a year, patrons can still pay for admission by bartering—and all proceeds now go to local food banks.

Through innovation and strong community partnerships, Barter members and stakeholders created “Barter at the Moonlite,” a drive-in theatre experience for visitors to watch live stage performances from the safety of their cars.

1 <https://visitabingdonvirginia.com/about>

2 <https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/vamainstreet/abingdon.htm>

3 Ibid.

4 <https://vacreepertrail.com/history/vacreeperhistory.htm#:~:text=The%20Virginia%20Creeper%20Trail%20had,Coal%20and%20Iron%20Railroad%20Company>

5 https://heraldcourier.com/news/as-it-celebrates-anniversary-barter-theatre-continues-to-drive-abingdon-s-tourism-economy/article_d1d93aee-aafe-50b2-8da5-ab76f9683464.html

The Strategy

Before COVID-19, Abingdon Tourism Director Amanda Livingston shares that tourism was booming. After tracking hotel lodging tax, meal tax, and hotel occupancy, both meal and lodging taxes were projected to exceed 2019's budget numbers as well as the projected budget for 2020. A market research study conducted in 2012 showed that the town's overall historic charm and downtown architecture were a large attraction, as well as the growing culinary scene (e.g. USA Today awarded Abingdon Best Small Town Food Scene for both 2019 and 2020).⁶ However, the top two tourism attractions found in the study were the Virginia Creeper Trail and the Barter Theatre.

In a regular year, the Barter is home to 25-35 shows with 130 employees, selling around 145,000 tickets per year. When the pandemic hit, however, the Barter was no longer able to safely continue traditional shows, indefinitely closing its doors. The impact of this shut down was felt almost immediately. Tonya Triplett, Abingdon's economic development coordinator, said, "The Barter being closed, it's affected everything. It's affected our hotels, our restaurants, our retailers. Everyone has been in a decline because we have not had the tourism numbers that we have had in the past."⁷ Barter's Producing Artistic Director, Katy Brown, shares, "I was on the governor's task force for reopening the state; I couldn't tell how we would do this safely. It wasn't going to be economically feasible to open the theater. I started driving around looking at outdoor venues, but didn't feel great about seating people together." Brown noticed some churches during drive-ins for their services as she continued to scope out the community. Shortly after, with

funding from the town and other community businesses and organizations, the Barter Theatre reclaimed the historic Moonlite Theater, a nearby abandoned drive-in in the area.⁸

Brown noted that, in the process of creating "Barter at the Moonlite," individuals from the county, town, and local businesses came together, emphasizing the importance of community partnerships focused on the shared goal of growing tourism. One company helped clean the grounds, another helped repaint the buildings. The Barter and area restaurants also worked together to create a "Play with Your Food" initiative: businesses developed menu specials that were attached to the show, including cocktails and picnic basket dinners, that visitors could enjoy before the show or take to the drive-in.⁹ Nearby outdoor recreation such as the Virginia Creeper continued to be promoted on the town's website alongside the Barter—offering itineraries, for example, for visitors wanting to enjoy a full weekend experience that was safe and physically distanced.

The first show premiered mid-July 2020. For each Barter performance at the Moonlite, visitors drive in, tune into the provided radio station and watch a live performance that is also simulcast on the big screen. According to Brown, the Moonlite Theater attracted over 6,000 audience members in the first four weeks of operation, with visitors coming from 26 different states. In addition, many were new to the Barter Theater experience: 46% of the people who visited weren't even in the ticketing system. Brown notes that, in addition to being a safe, outdoor experience for families, Barter at the Moonlite opened the doors for people who hadn't been to

⁶ <https://visitabingdonvirginia.com/itineraries/a-taste-of-abingdon-friday-sunday#:~:text=Abingdon%20is%20the%20Best%20Small,just%20north%20of%208%2C000%20people>

⁷ https://swatoday.com/news/article_e409670a-c086-5041-8d2c-222c0ebcb34c.html

⁸ <https://www.elizabethon.com/2020/06/12/barter-theatre-to-produce-at-historic-moonlite-drive-in/>

⁹ <https://visitabingdonvirginia.com/highlights/play-with-your-food-dinner-drive-in>

theater before. The new venue proved an approachable way to build relationships with new people who may now return in the future.

The Barter Theatre reopened for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic in September, 2021. The theatre plans to continue holding shows at the Moonlite throughout the Fall season, but plans to hold all shows at the Barter Theatre for the 2022 season starting in the Spring.¹⁰

The Outcomes

- Barter at the Moonlite offers a safe, outdoor experience during a global pandemic that still draws tourists to the area
- 6,000 audience members attracted to the Moonlite Theatre within the first four weeks of operation with visitors coming from 26 different states
- 46% of the audience members were new to the ticketing system, providing an approachable way to build relationships with new people who may now return in the future
- Local businesses supported by the Barter with a joint “Play with Your Food” initiative created by area restaurants with menu specials attached to the show
- The Barter continues to serve as part of a “full weekend experience” for visitors in the area who also visit the Virginia Creeper Trail for other outdoor experiences

How and Why the Strategy is Working

Willingness and Ability to Adapt. From its beginning during the Great Depression, Barter has been grounded in being innovative during difficult conditions. When the ability to host traditional performances abruptly ended in the wake of COVID-19, Barter members and community partners found a way to continue through creating a new platform for the theatre at the drive-in. Given the Barter’s impact on the town’s economy, this move demonstrates the importance of community versatility and adaptability even under challenging circumstances.

Strong Community Partnerships. As Brown shared, the partnerships between the Barter and local businesses proved invaluable during the transition to Barter at the Moonlite. Business members offered services such as cleaning the grounds and repainting buildings, showcasing the value of developing strong relationships with local businesses and organizations to sustain tourism growth. Additionally, the Barter’s partnership with area restaurants (i.e. the “Play with Your Food” initiative) brought further business to the community, adding additional tourism dollars through the meal tax.

Proximity to Other Local Attractions. Abingdon has become especially attractive during the pandemic since tourists are looking for small, safe, wide-open spaces that are within driving distance. In addition to the Barter, the nearby multi-purpose trail, the Virginia Creeper, offers additional outdoor recreation options for tourists looking for a full weekend experience. In fact, in 2020, the Virginia Creeper saw an enormous increase in visitors—up 25-30%. The proximity of the Barter to the trail—another physically distanced attraction for visitors—helps both to continue serving as a solid tourism base in the area.

¹⁰ <https://bartertheatre.com/schedule/>

Lessons Learned from the Story

Leverage Other Local Attractions. The Visit Abingdon website positions the Barter Theatre and nearby Virginia Creeper as the top two area experiences on the home page, also offering weekend itineraries that promote both family-friendly tourism destinations.¹¹ During COVID-19 and beyond, it can be valuable to co-promote local outdoor or other physically distanced attractions in a community. This can help to make diverse offerings more visible, and draw tourists (and tourism dollars) to the area for longer visits.

Remember That Crisis Can Bring Opportunity. Amanda Livingston notes that the Barter could have just closed its doors when the pandemic struck and done nothing. However, she believes that would have been the death of the theatre. Through continuing performances at an innovative venue, the Barter has demonstrated that it is still relevant and vital. For its efforts, it has received national attention, including a profile in American Theatre magazine, as well as inquiries from The New York Times and Martha Stewart Living. Livingston points out that this approach gives the Barter momentum for the future.

¹¹ <https://visitabingdonvirginia.com/itineraries/family-adventures-abingdon>

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