

# Special Report

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# SUSTAINABLE WILLIAMSON: 'A HEALTHY CONSPIRACY'



Photos by KATE LONG & IAN MACLELLAN | Sunday Gazette-Mail illustration by KYLE SLAGLE

Since 2010, Williamson organizations have worked through Sustainable Williamson to coordinate multiple efforts to make the area healthier and more prosperous. "We get much more done, working together," said Mingo Diabetes Coalition director Jenny Hudson. "It's a pretty amazing process, and it's a lot more fun." Conspirators pictured (center photo, from left) include Bernice Johnson, Diabetes Coalition; Darrin McCormick, mayor; Dee Kapourales, Garden Club; Tim McNamee and Ann Lambright, Redevelopment Authority; Kay Maynard, school system wellness coordinator; Randy Keathley, schools superintendent; Helen Stanley, farmers market manager; Alexis Batausa, Diabetes Coalition.

## Pieces coming together in Mingo

By Kate Long  
Staff writer

Five years ago, Williamson Mayor Darrin McCormick was trying to figure out how to pay for his town's sewer crisis. Jobs were nearly non-existent.

A few blocks away on Main Street, Dr. Dino Beckett's practice was flooded with people who couldn't afford medical care. Beckett treated patients free every other Friday, "but it didn't make a dent," he said. He started dreaming of a federally funded community health center where patients could pay on a sliding scale.

Down the street, WVU Extension agent Bill Richardson was plotting a year-round farmers market. There is not a single grocery store in all of Mingo County.

Diabetes educator Vicki Lynn Hatfield wanted to canvas the county to find people who have diabetes and don't know it. She knew that the lower the income, the greater the risk.

More than 30 percent of Mingo residents live below the poverty line, compared with 18 percent statewide, and Mingo has one of the nation's highest early death rates, according to a University of Washington study. "There are such good, strong



### THE SHAPE WE'RE IN

Want to talk with the Sustainable Williamson people?

On Saturday, March 2, from 7 to 9 p.m. at West Virginia State's Digiso facility at 1506 Kanawha Blvd. (West Side), the organization will launch a national crowdfunding campaign to build a sustainable technology center in Williamson. Videos, music and discussion. \$10 contribution.

Visit [sustainablewilliamson.org](http://sustainablewilliamson.org).

people around here," Hatfield said. "We could save a lot of them from dying early."

Hatfield, Richardson, McCormick and Beckett all grew up in Mingo County. Schools Superintendent Randy Keathley did too.

Keathley was worrying about the children. One in three Mingo fifth-graders had high blood



**“** We've got a lot of bad demographics, and we're trying to change that. A lot of us are heavy and we smoke. ... I can say that because I'm heavy and I smoke. But a lot of people don't, and they're less likely to go that direction if they see other options. So that's what we hope to do, create other possibilities and opportunities.” — DARRIN MCCORMICK, Williamson mayor

pressure that year — 32 percent — according to West Virginia University screeners and 35 percent were obese. More than 80 percent qualified for free or reduced-price meals.

Keathley wanted to increase their physical activity and improve school nutrition. "We need to go that extra mile," he said.

SEE WILLIAMSON, 4C

## The list goes on and on

"This is not happening by accident. We get more done together," says Williamson Mayor Darrin McCormick. Here's what they're doing:

- They are one step away from getting a multimillion-dollar, federally funded community health center that will treat patients on a sliding scale payment basis.
- The Mingo County Diabetes Coalition got \$50,000 a year through Marshall Medical School to stir up diabetes prevention efforts.
- Those efforts include monthly Williamson-area 5Ks, organized with the Tug Valley Road Runners and the city.
- The Redevelopment Authority broke ground on a recreation/lodging complex on the Hatfield-McCoy trail that will generate dollars through cabins, RV camping, and biking/hiking trails.
- The schools and Diabetes Coalition created running/walking programs in all middle schools. Each eighth-grader got a pedometer for a 10,000 steps-a-day competition. They held their own 5K. "We aim to spread it to all the schools," Keathley said.
- The schools have started new sports programs — soccer, track, volleyball and golf — and near-doubled after-school physical activities.
- All school cooks are making healthier meals from scratch. Last year, they got training with the help of the state Office of Child Nutrition.
- The Diabetes Coalition won a \$2.5 million grant through Duke University to canvas the county to find undiagnosed diabetes and come to their homes to teach them how to bring down their blood sugar.
- The group is constructing a "smart office" on Main Street, which is slated to be a sustainable technology training and demonstration center for the coalfields.

SEE AND ON, 4C





"Each one of these projects is a piece of a puzzle that's eventually going to fit together. When we work on a new project as community, we think how it fits with the others."

**VICKI HATFIELD**  
Mingo Diabetes Coalition founder

"We realized that the only way we can deal with our situation effectively is to work together. We saw that health issues, quality of life issues, and economic development issues are inseparable. Once we started doing that, we started getting things done."

**DR. DINO BECKETT**  
Williamson Redevelopment Authority president

"Sustainable Williamson is one of the most effective community projects I've seen. We look at them as a model for other areas of West Virginia that might like to do this."

**TRACEY ROWAN**  
Area director, U.S. Department of Agriculture

"Sustainable development often happens in places where most people can afford to buy a Prius. When you try it in a place where people don't have money and there are serious health problems, then you learn how to include everyone in its benefits."

**ERIC MATHIS**  
Williamson Redevelopment Authority commissioner

## WILLIAMSON

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"Children who are hungry and sluggish can't concentrate."

They were all working on their dreams separately, in their own agencies, not getting very far. Then something interesting happened. They started working together.

First, Mayor McCormick got a lot of community development training. "If you've got a problem, you find out how to solve it," he said.

He revived the Williamson Redevelopment Authority as a vehicle to apply for grants and get things done. Dr. Beckett agreed to be president.

About the same time, Vicki Hatfield and other interested people started the Mingo County Diabetes Coalition "so we could have more clout." They issued a walking challenge: Get a team of 10 people and see if you can walk enough steps to get to Los Angeles.

"We hoped 70 people would sign up, and we got 180," she said. The next year, they got more than 300. "So we knew people are hungry for this sort of thing."

Meanwhile, North Carolinian Eric Mathis had moved to Williamson to start a solar energy business and a "smart office" that could provide sustainable technology training to the region.

All those people — and others with their own dreams — started comparing notes. Sometimes they sat around the town's little coffeehouse and talked. Sometimes they talked at meetings or on the street. They began to see they were working on pieces of the same picture.

That was three years ago. "We saw we were all working on improving our quality of life and the local people's health, and we shouldn't just be looking at one little piece of the puzzle, like a campground or a 5K or a farmers market," McCormick said. "Our project became more about the way all these smaller projects are related."

They saw that a health center would bring the city millions of dollars and lots of jobs. The city could help start the regular 5K run/walks Hatfield wanted. A farmers' market, community gardens and recreation park would make the city more attractive for economic development. The Diabetes Coalition could help get the kids moving. A solar energy company could train people for new professions.

All those things could help lower the awful health statistics.

"We realized that the only way we can deal with our situation effectively is to work together," Beckett said. "And we recognized that health, quality of life, and economic development issues are inseparable. Once we started looking at it like that, we



KATE LONG | Sunday Gazette-Mail photos

The major community group boards overlap, so they can coordinate. As the Diabetes Coalition discusses its school program, the school wellness coordinator is on the board. Redevelopment Authority members can offer city help.

started getting things done."

They named their collective effort Sustainable Williamson. The Williamson Redevelopment Authority is its main vehicle. They've got a Web site: [www.sustainablewilliamson.org](http://www.sustainablewilliamson.org).

"They" includes the Garden Club, the running club, fire department, some businesses, Southern Community College, a range of others. "Our mission statement isn't individual projects anymore," McCormick said. "Our project is creating a more sustainable way of life."

"It's one of the best grassroots efforts I have ever seen," said Tracey Rowan, area director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "At their meetings, the excitement is contagious. I've never seen anything like it. It's likely to succeed and likely to last, in great part because these people are committed to living and working there."

They have a lot to overcome. Mingo tops the Robert Wood Johnson County Rankings for West Virginia in poor physical health days, poor mental health days, low birth weight and preventable hospital stays. Moreover, WVU research has linked coal operations with certain forms of cancer, birth defects, heart disease and other health problems. In 2011, Massey Energy settled a lawsuit by 500



From board planning sessions come jointly planned projects, such as a running/walking program in all the middle schools. Here, Adam Warren and Alexis Batausa of the Diabetes Coalition and Tug Valley Road Runners teach middle-school kids to run safely.

Mingo residents who said coal company contamination of their water gave them cancer and other problems.

"But Sustainable Williamson is not taking an anti-coal posture at all," Rowan said. "That's not what this is about. All these people know that Williamson exists because of the coal companies. So now it's, 'How can we add to it? What do we have because of the coal industry that we can use to make our

community better?'"

The Mingo Countians don't have the tens of millions that state-level organizations are pouring into neighboring McDowell County, for the Reconnecting McDowell project. They are grass roots, like Cinderella's mice, putting together "a lot of little pieces that are going to add up to something significant," Beckett said.

"It's fair to say this is a healthy conspiracy," McCormick

said. "This is not happening by accident."

Their conspiracy results are fairly dizzying in number and variety:

After jumping through many federal hoops, they are teetering on the edge of opening a new multi-million dollar community health center. They collaborated on grants for the Diabetes Coalition, and they got \$50,000 a year for prevention efforts and \$2.5 million to beat the bushes and

find those undiagnosed diabetics.

They created monthly 5Ks for local people and started running/walking programs in the schools. The schools doubled their after-school physical activity and upgraded school food. The Redevelopment Authority broke ground on a lodging and camping complex outside town. The new mountain bike club will map trails for it.

"Whether we're rehabbing buildings or putting solar on buildings or organizing 5Ks, it's all part of one project now," McCormick said. "We talk about it that way now, we plan it together, and that makes a big difference."

Mathis' solar panel company is equipping local people with sustainable technology skills. Residents can now enjoy a new farmers market, community garden and pick-your-own community orchard. Hoop greenhouses supply the farmers market. Students from places like Yale and Connecticut Wesleyan are coming to help with all of the above.

The list goes on.

"Each project is a piece of a puzzle that will fit together eventually," Hatfield said. When she and another diabetes educator travel to the homes of newly diagnosed diabetics this summer, "we can refer them to the 5Ks and daily runs. We can tell them about the farmers market and community gardens. Before, we didn't have anything to tell them about."

They plan to form local diabetes support groups in outlying areas of the county. Those local groups may help us spread their projects county-wide, Hatfield said. At the same time, they are helping Mathis find funding for the "smart office" they hope will become a sustainable technologies regional training center.

"Five or six years ago, we weren't looking at the big picture like this," Beckett said. "We were looking at this little piece, then that little piece. Now we've created this whole connected process, and we think about all these things together, as one big picture."

USDA is holding Williamson up as a model for other small struggling communities. "Down the road, we expect they will help other communities replicate what they've done," Rowan said.

"Maybe, when people read about what we've done as a small community over a short period of time, without, really, a whole lot of money," Beckett said, "it will encourage them to say, 'If Williamson can get going, why can't we?'"

Monday in the Charleston Gazette: Mingo schools boost test scores, attendance, discipline with fitness program.

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## AND ON

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■ The farmers market has grown from one day a month to one day a week and is operating in the black. The city donates space, and the Garden Club and Southern Community College students help. They plan to add days as they grow.

■ Two new large hoop greenhouses will soon stock the market year-round. This summer, Extension staff will teach anyone who wants to learn how to build one.

■ Elderly residents are growing corn on city land in community gardens, with the help of Extension, Southern Community College students and the Garden Club.

■ As the city tears down abandoned buildings, they secured training in salvaging elements that can be sold or incorporated in projects such as

the recreation park.

■ A mountain biking club has started, the Tug Valley Trailblazers. "This is a new activity, so we're mapping trails and getting bikes," said Bruce Curry, Southern West Virginia Community and Technical College staffer.

■ Southern students are creating a plan to make Williamson a bicycle-friendly city.

■ A community orchard is producing pick-your-own grapes and apples on two acres of an abandoned strip mine outside town.

■ Six senior centers and churches ran the "Walk with Ease" exercise program, with the help of the Diabetes Coalition. "We'll do another round this spring," said Jenny Hudson, new Diabetes Coalition director.

■ Mingo, Wayne and McDowell counties and Pike County, Ky., have formed CASE (Central Appalachia Sustainable Economies), a help-each-other technical assistance cooperative.

■ As a CASE project, public health graduate students from Appalachian State, WVU, Connecticut Wesleyan and Yale University will come to all four counties this summer to lend expertise and get experience.

■ A private gym has been rehabbed to Public Employee Insurance Agency specifications so public employees can enroll in PEIA's Weight Management Program.

■ The USDA designated Williamson a STAR (Small Town Appalachian Revitalization) city, making them eligible for technical assistance from USDA and Appalachian Regional Commission. "It also means they will be a model town for other towns," area director Tracey Rowan said.

■ The STAR program funded a conference that brought foundation representatives to Williamson to hear about these efforts.

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