

River Town Review Toolkit

Connecting Rivers and Communities



NPS-RTCA

Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program





NPS-RTCA

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The **National Park Service – Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program (NPS-RTCA)** facilitates local conservation and outdoor recreation efforts around the country, helping communities develop or restore parks, trails, rivers, and conservation areas; address climate change; recover from natural disasters; and create new and sustainable outdoor recreation opportunities.

For more information, visit: [**nps.gov/RTCA**](https://nps.gov/RTCA)

River Town Review Toolkit

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Is your community seeing greater numbers of residents and visitors using its trails, parks, rivers, and lakes? Have you noticed the economic benefits being realized by neighboring communities embracing outdoor recreation? Have you thought about what it would take to reach your outdoor recreation potential and become a more vibrant and successful river town? Do you want to investigate it first, at the local level, and without the need to hire architects, engineers, or consultants?

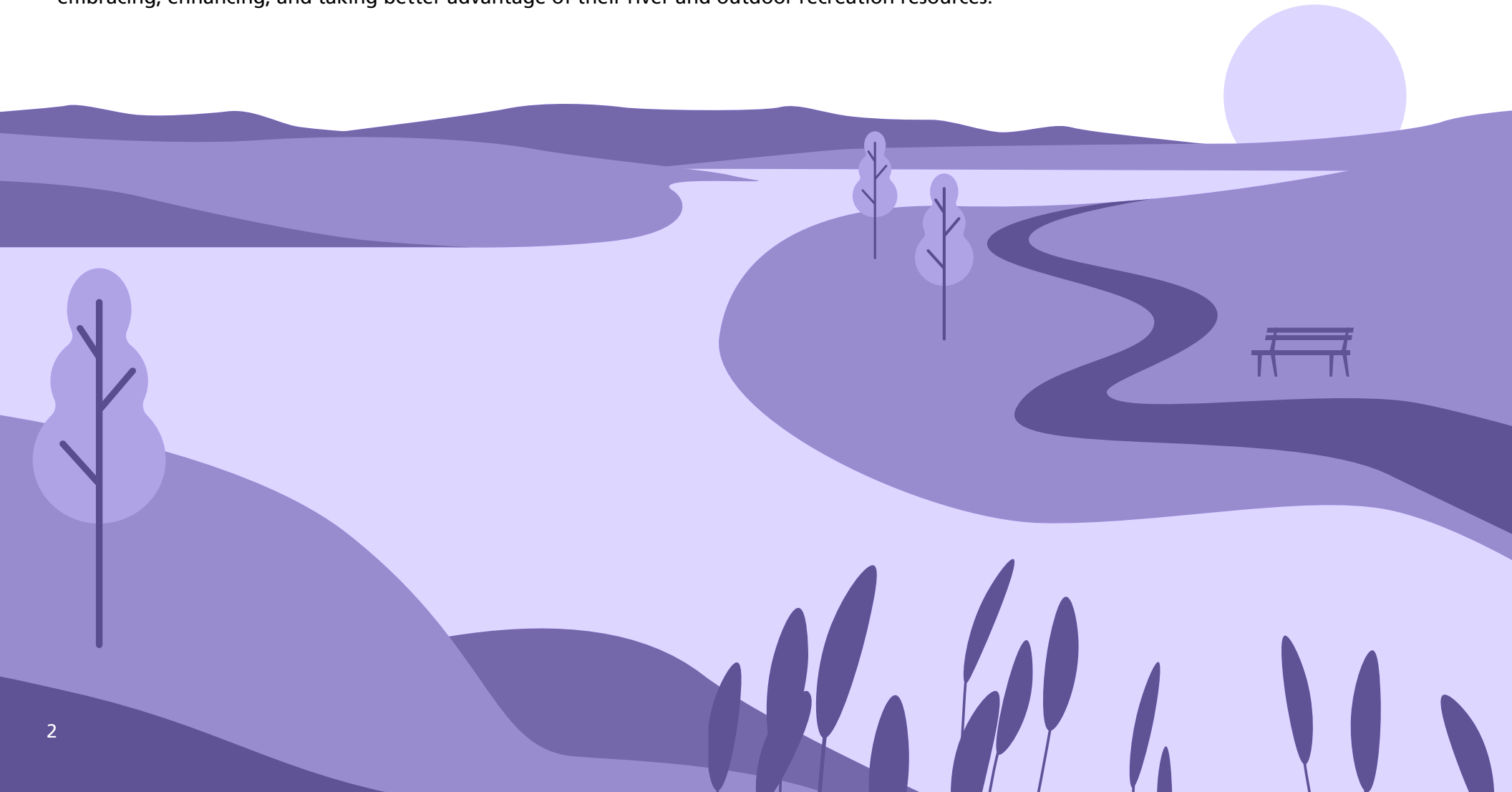
If you answered “yes,” or “we’re not sure” to the questions posed above, a River Town Review could prove to be a worthwhile exercise for your community. This River Town Review Toolkit will lead you through an assessment of your town’s outdoor recreation resources. It will then help you develop recommendations to enhance those resources, and in turn, bolster your local tourism economy. Through the process, you’ll answer basic questions such as:

- ▶ *What outdoor recreation, river access, and tourism resources do we have? What do we lack, and how do we address those shortcomings?*
- ▶ *What nearby trails and outdoor recreation opportunities can we connect to?*
- ▶ *What are our upstream and downstream neighbors doing in regards to outdoor recreation? Are there opportunities for partnerships?*
- ▶ *Are we a pedestrian- and bike-friendly community? If not, how do we become one?*
- ▶ *Is it easy to find your way around town and to local services, attractions, the river, and trails?*
- ▶ *Are recreation and visitor services accessible, welcoming, and inclusive?*
- ▶ *What outdoor recreation and nature-based tourism related businesses do we have? What needs of outdoor recreation enthusiasts are not yet being met, and how do we meet them?*

Background

The National Park Service's River Town Review Program, conducted in partnership with the Ohio River Recreation Trail (ORRT), involved 14 communities along the river, from Portsmouth, Ohio to West Point, Kentucky. Utilizing a "fresh set of eyes" approach, the process evolved along the way, with lessons learned added to each successive review. A recurring theme, outlined in the program's Summary Report, showed that the same challenges and opportunities were shared by most of the river towns, illustrating their common bond, and the value and necessity of partnerships. These river town reviews, along with the Summary Report, can be found at www.OhioRiverRecreationTrail.org.

The success of the program led to requests for river town reviews from other communities, and eventually to the development of this toolkit. It provides the tools for any river town to complete an assessment of their community, explore options, develop recommendations, and begin embracing, enhancing, and taking better advantage of their river and outdoor recreation resources.



What Is a River Town?

A River Town is a bit more than just a town on a river, so let's start with the North Country Trail Association's simple yet excellent definition of a Trail Town: "A Trail Town is a community through which a trail passes that supports trail users with services, promotes the trail to its citizens, and embraces the trail as a resource to be protected and celebrated. Trail Towns are built on a relationship between a town, the trail, and its volunteers." Just substitute "river" for "trail," add strong partnerships with neighboring upstream and downstream communities, and you have a perfectly good definition of a River Town.

In her excellent book, "Deciding on Trails" (recommended reading for any river or trail town group), Amy Camp adds that among other aspects, successful trail towns adopt a shared vision and plan, physically connect to the trail, extend an invitation to trail users, know their market and share their story, commit to quality trails, and cultivate a trail town culture. All are relevant to river towns, as well.

The Mon River Towns Program in Pennsylvania goes a step further and adds an environmental stewardship perspective as well, describing river towns as "communities that recognize rivers as assets, around which potential community and economic development can occur, and thus a resource worthy of protection."

There are many other definitions and descriptions, but all illustrate the inextricable links between the environment, the economy, outdoor recreation, and a community's quality of life.



What Is a River Town Review?

A River Town Review is an “in-house” and straightforward assessment of a community’s existing and potential outdoor recreation opportunities, connections, resources, advocates, visitor experiences, and partnership possibilities.

It engages the public to generate support and ideas and is designed to help a community better connect to the river and neighboring towns, embrace and enhance its outdoor recreation resources, and grow the local tourism economy.

Communities will find that the River Town Review Process is also one of discovery, revealing advocates and resources they never knew they had. This alone will make the effort worthwhile.

The River Town Review Toolkit is different from the many excellent trail town toolkits, in that:

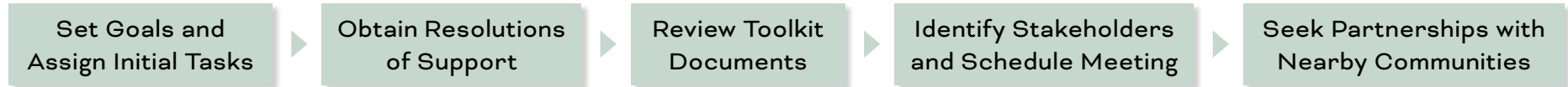
- ▶ It’s a **Five-Step Process** for assessment, public engagement, and decision-making, undertaken to help communities take better advantage of their river and outdoor recreation resources, and begin working towards becoming a more complete, and successful River Town.
- ▶ A “**Fresh Set of Eyes**” approach is used, with volunteer reviewers from outside of the community providing objective assessments.
- ▶ **Waterways-based** connections, resources, and facilities are addressed.
- ▶ Emphasis is placed on the importance of **involving and connecting to towns upstream and downstream** during the process and after, effectively developing partnerships and illustrating the fact that all are truly linked together by the river.
- ▶ And finally, a **significant requirement, the river itself, is already there** – no design, funding, or construction required!



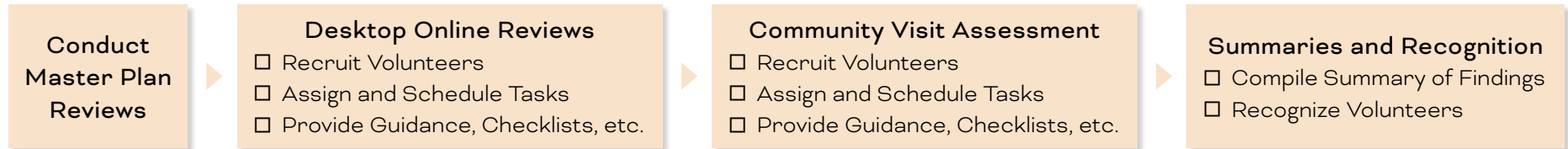
River Town Review Process

The River Town Review involves a five-step, volunteer-based process using a “Fresh Set of Eyes” approach to help enhance tourism and outdoor recreation in your community.

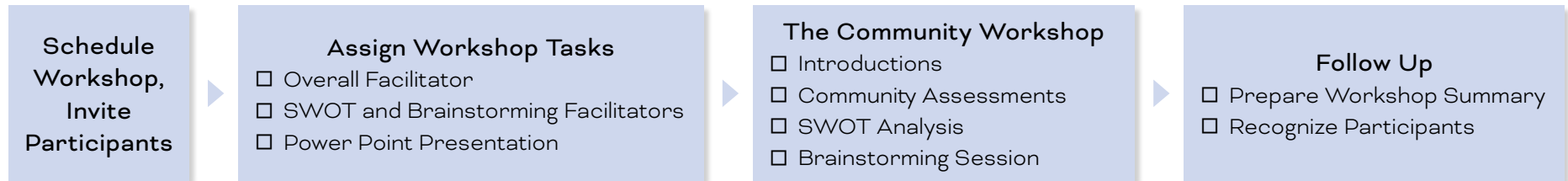
1 Form the River Town Review Team



2 The Community Assessment



3 The Community Workshop



4 Develop the River Town Review Final Report



5 Moving Forward



1 Form the River Town Review Team

Set Goals and
Assign Initial Tasks

Obtain Resolutions
of Support

Review Toolkit
Documents

Identify Stakeholders
and Schedule Meeting

Seek Partnerships with
Nearby Communities

The River Town Review Team can be formed by members of local government, tourism officials, nonprofit groups, business leaders, etc. The team should consist of a diverse group of community, government, and business leaders, as well as representatives of outdoor recreation user groups, tourism officials, and engaged residents.

The newly formed River Town Review Team will:

Set Goals and Assign Initial Tasks

- Lead the process and set goals.
- Recruit volunteers and assign tasks.
- Designate individuals to lead the Community Assessment and Community Workshop.
- Work to promote the River Town Review through social media, etc.

Obtain Resolutions of Support

- Seek a Resolution of Support for the river town review from appropriate governing bodies, associations, and boards.

Review Toolkit Documents and Resources

- Team members should review this toolkit, along with the river and trail town examples and related toolkits, found in Appendix A.

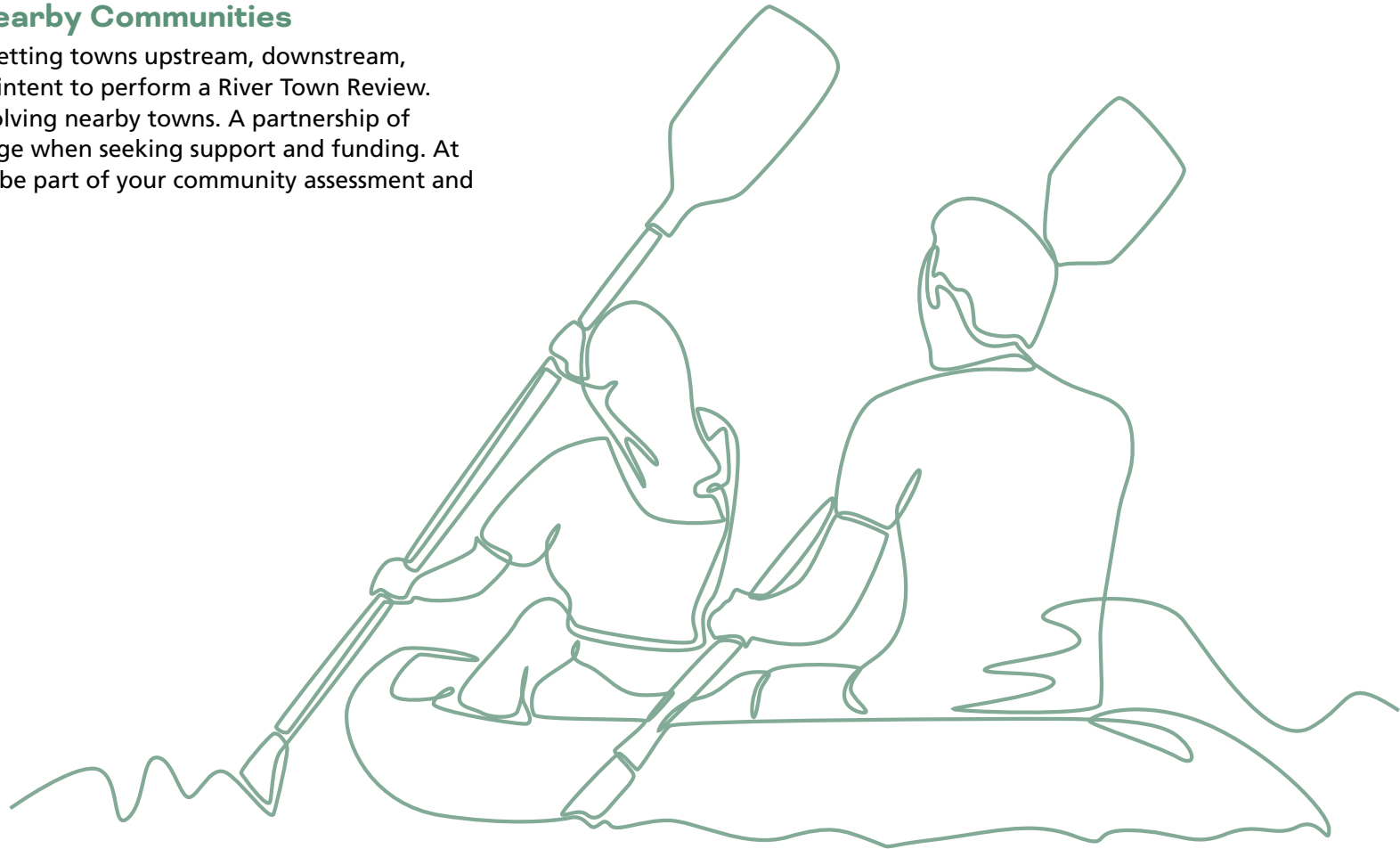


Identify Stakeholders and Schedule Meeting

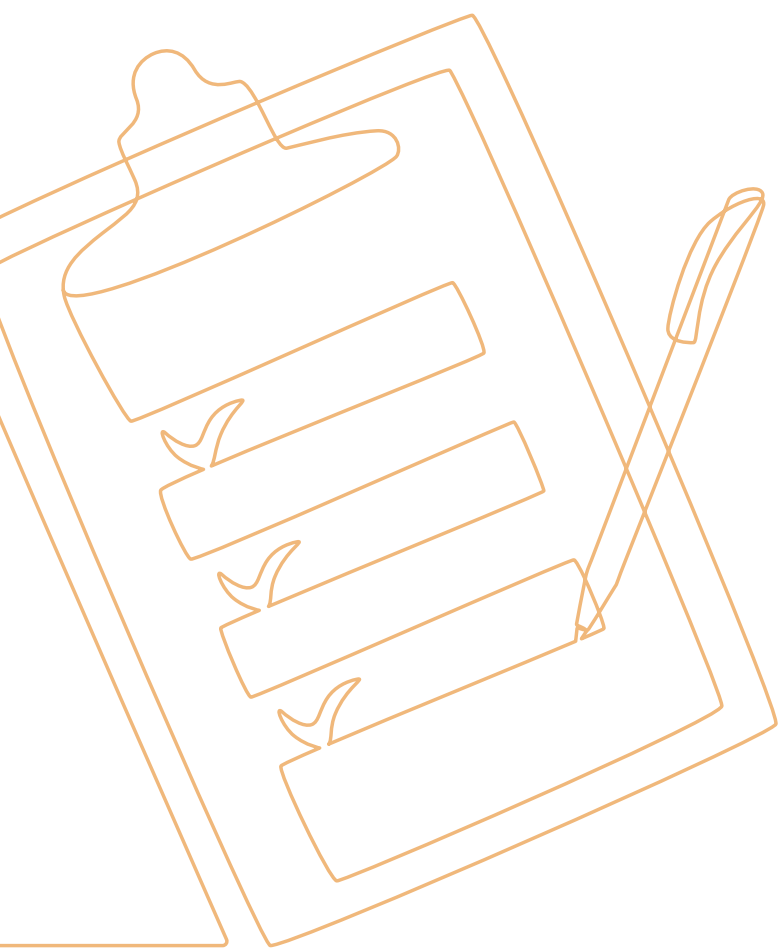
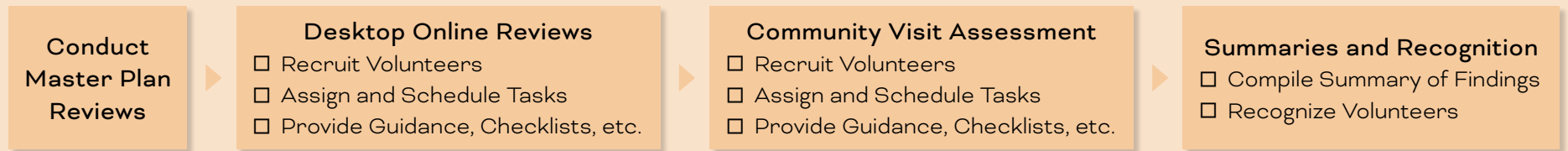
- Identify stakeholders – defined as those who may be impacted by or have an interest in the project. Host a meeting with stakeholders to:
 - Inform the group of your plans to conduct a River Town Review.
 - Provide River Town Review examples and relevant resources to the group.
- Gather stakeholder input regarding the importance of, and potential for, outdoor recreation in the community; for use in developing recommendations; and for inclusion in the Final Report.
- Invite stakeholders to participate in the workshop and assessments. During the process, consider stakeholders' potential involvement in future planning and implementation efforts.

Seek Partnerships with Nearby Communities

- Plant the seeds of partnership by letting towns upstream, downstream, and across the river know of your intent to perform a River Town Review. Consider a River Town Review involving nearby towns. A partnership of communities will have an advantage when seeking support and funding. At minimum, extend an invitation to be part of your community assessment and offer to do the same for them.



2 The Community Assessment



Conduct Master Plan Reviews

Members of the River Town Review Team will conduct a review of local master planning efforts. This will provide insight into how the community envisions its future and will help with the team’s development of recommendations.

Determine which of the following plans have been reviewed and adopted by your community and/or county:

- City and/or County Comprehensive Master Plan
- City and/or County Parks and Recreation Plan
- City and/or County Bike and Pedestrian Plan
- City and/or County Transportation Master Plan

Review each of the adopted plans and:

- **Compile a summary of plan aspects related to:**
 - Park and recreation facilities
 - Greenways and trails
 - Waterways, boat and paddling access, riverfront developments
 - Bike and pedestrian facilities and improvements as well as street design initiatives
 - Proposed park and recreation spaces, conservation areas, or land purchases
 - Publicly owned properties, flood zones and easements, and utility owned rights-of-way
- **Become familiar with the locations of the facilities and areas mentioned above.** If possible, include them on a map for use in the Final Report.
- **Check to see if any regional transportation master plans identify and promote bicycling as an alternative mode of transportation.** If so, include the potential recommendations in the River Town Review Report.
- **Include the plan summaries in the Final Report.**

Desktop Online Reviews

Desktop Online Reviews involve objective assessments from volunteers about your town and tourism organization websites, social media presence, and availability of total visitor experiences. The reviews should be completed before the Community Visit Assessments, for use by volunteers during that part of the process.

The River Town Review Team will:

- **Recruit volunteers** for the “Fresh Set of Eyes” Desktop Online Review. A sample recruitment letter can be found in Appendix B.
- **Assign and schedule tasks** for the Desktop Online Review.
- **Provide guidance for the volunteers** with the Desktop Online Review Guide that can be found in Appendix B.

Community Visit Assessment

The Community Visit Assessment involves volunteer reviews of your town’s outdoor recreation resources, related businesses, tourism opportunities, etc.

- **Recruit volunteers** for the “Fresh Set of Eyes” Community Visit Assessment.
 - “Fresh Set of Eyes” volunteers are those from outside of your community who will visit and provide their objective assessment of your town’s outdoor recreation and tourism resources.
 - Be as diverse as possible in recruitment – target different user groups, ages, ethnic groups, ability levels, etc.
 - A sample recruitment letter can be found in Appendix B. The Community Visit Guide can also be found in Appendix B.
- **Assign and schedule tasks** for the Community Visit Assessments.
 - Contact the volunteers.
 - Supply them with a summary of the Desktop Online Reviews.
 - Encourage volunteers to take pictures and interview residents and visitors to gather ideas and perceptions.
 - **Using the Community Visit Guide, volunteers will tour your town and provide objective assessments** regarding, but not limited to:
 - *The ease and safety of walking and biking through town.*
 - *Connections and access to the river (including launch and docking facilities).*
 - *The community’s park and outdoor recreation facilities. Existing and potential connections to nearby trails and towns.*
 - *Outdoor recreation and tourism-related businesses.*
 - *Wayfinding signage.*
 - *Accessibility of outdoor recreation facilities.*

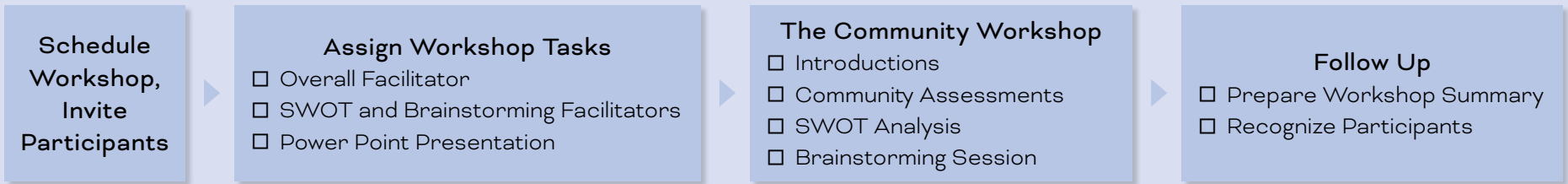
Summaries and Recognition

The River Town Review Team will:

- **Compile summaries** of the Desktop Online Reviews and Community Visit Assessments to be presented during the Community Workshop and included in the Final Report. Make sure to note if there was participation in the assessments by any neighboring towns.
- **Recognize volunteers** and send thank-you letters/emails.



3 The Community Workshop



The Community Workshop is an opportunity for the River Town Review Team to present initial findings and gather additional input related to meeting the community’s outdoor recreation and tourism goals. The workshop will include a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis and a brainstorming session to generate and prioritize ideas and goals. It serves as a platform for attendees to share and discuss challenges and opportunities, setting the stage for future partnerships and collaborative efforts.

Schedule Workshop, Invite Participants

- The workshop can be held **virtually or in-person**. A virtual session may be easier to arrange and for participants to attend, but it does require technical facilitation.
- The River Town Review Team should **review examples** of short and working workshop agendas, invitation letters, SWOT analysis, brainstorming questions, and a PowerPoint presentation. All can be found in Appendix B.
- The team should **review a previously recorded community workshop session**, found in Appendix B.
- Set the date, recruit/invite participants, and send formal invitations.
 - Ask community leaders and stakeholders to help with recruitment.
 - Include elected officials.
 - Be as diverse as possible in recruitment – target different user groups, ages, ethnic groups, ability levels, etc.

Assign Workshop Tasks

- **Designate a facilitator for the workshop** and a developer of the PowerPoint presentation.
- **Assign team members to lead discussions** during the SWOT analysis and brainstorming sessions.
- **Decide which facilitation tools to use** (pencil/paper and markers/posters, or software programs such as Mural or Miro).
- **Record the workshop** if possible and post it online.



The Community Workshop

The Workshop presentation will include:

- **Introductions** of the River Town Review Team and workshop participants.
- **An outline** of the River Town Review Process.
- **A summary** of the Master Plan and Desktop Online Reviews as well as the Community Visit Assessments.
- **A SWOT Analysis** and ranking of the results.
- **A Brainstorming Session** to generate and prioritize ideas and goals related to enhancing outdoor recreation and tourism in the community – group the ideas/ goals as immediate action, short-term, and long-term items. As part of this session:
 - Choose an immediate action item to be completed as a **“Quick Win” project** and include it in the Final Report. Even better, select more than one! This shows commitment and will help generate support.

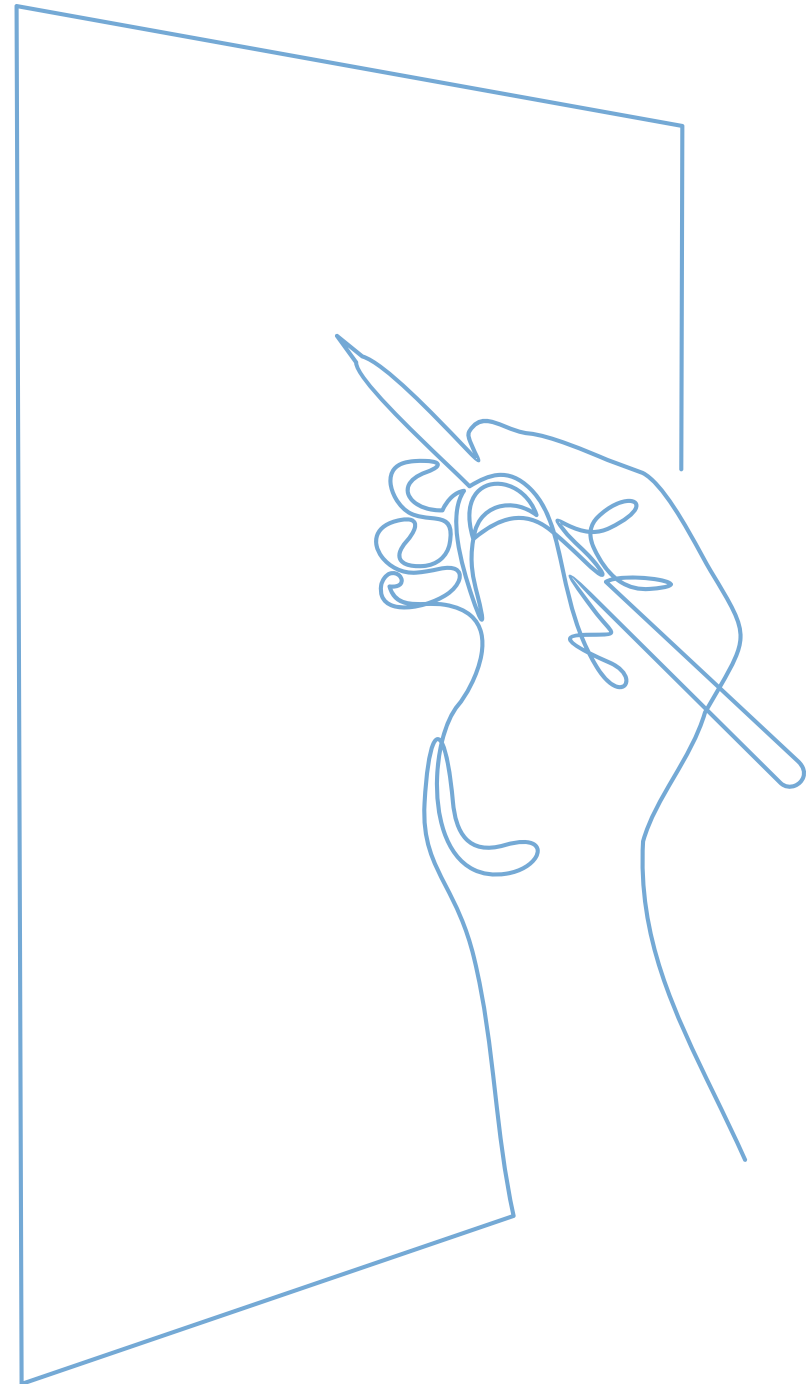
In addition, ask participants:

- “What are some unique, interesting, or quirky activities, places, or experiences that would draw people off the river and trails into your town?” These **“Total Visitor Experiences”** are what visitors are looking for and key to successful river and trail towns. Share them with local tourism officials and include them in the Final Report.
- “What potential partnership opportunities are available?”

Follow Up

Soon after the workshop, the River Town Review Team will:

- **Prepare Reviews, Summaries, and Recommendations** related to:
 - Community Assessments and Desktop Online Reviews.
 - Partnerships (existing and potential).
 - SWOT analysis and brainstorming sessions.
 - The “Quick Win” project(s) and the “Total Visitor Experience” exercise.
- **Send thank-you follow-up letters/emails to workshop participants** (be sure to include an opportunity for participants to provide additional input). A post-workshop email draft can be found in Appendix B.



4 Develop the River Town Review Final Report

Prepare Final Report

Include Recap, Recommendations, Action Plan, and All Summaries

Share Final Report

Distribute to Community Leaders, Volunteers/Participants, Residents, and Nearby Towns

River Town Review Community Meeting

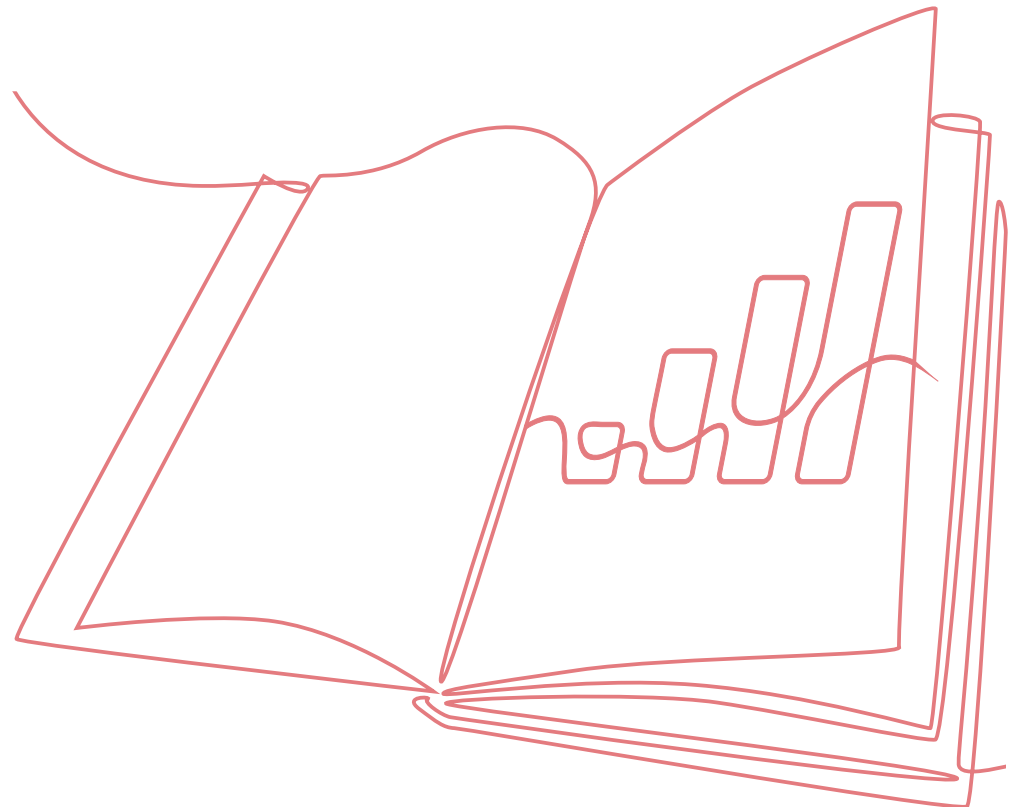
- Present Summary of River Town Review Process
- Highlight Findings and Recommendations
- Seek Additional Input and Community Champions

Prepare Final Report

The team will prepare a River Town Review Final Report. A customizable example, in Word format, can be found in Appendix B.

The Final Report will include:

- **An introduction** – what, why, when, where, and who (include contact information for River Town Review Team).
- **A list of stakeholders and potential partnership opportunities.**
- **Volunteer recognition.**
- **Description of the 5-Step River Town Review Process.**
- **Summary of Community Assessment Findings:**
 - Master Plan and Desktop Online Reviews.
 - Community Visit Assessments.
- **Summary of Community Workshop Input:**
 - SWOT analysis results.
 - Brainstorming session ideas.
 - A description and status of the “Quick Win” project(s).
 - Recap of the “Total Visitor Experience” exercise.
- **Photographs** taken during the River Town Review Process.
- **A list of Recommendations and a Proposed Action Plan.** The Action Plan should include:
 - A brief introduction and recap of the process so that the Proposed Action Plan can be used as a stand-alone document.
 - The River Town Review Team’s recommendations (prioritized and organized as immediate, short-term, and long-term action items). Include relevant resources with each action item. Relevant resources can be found in Appendix A.



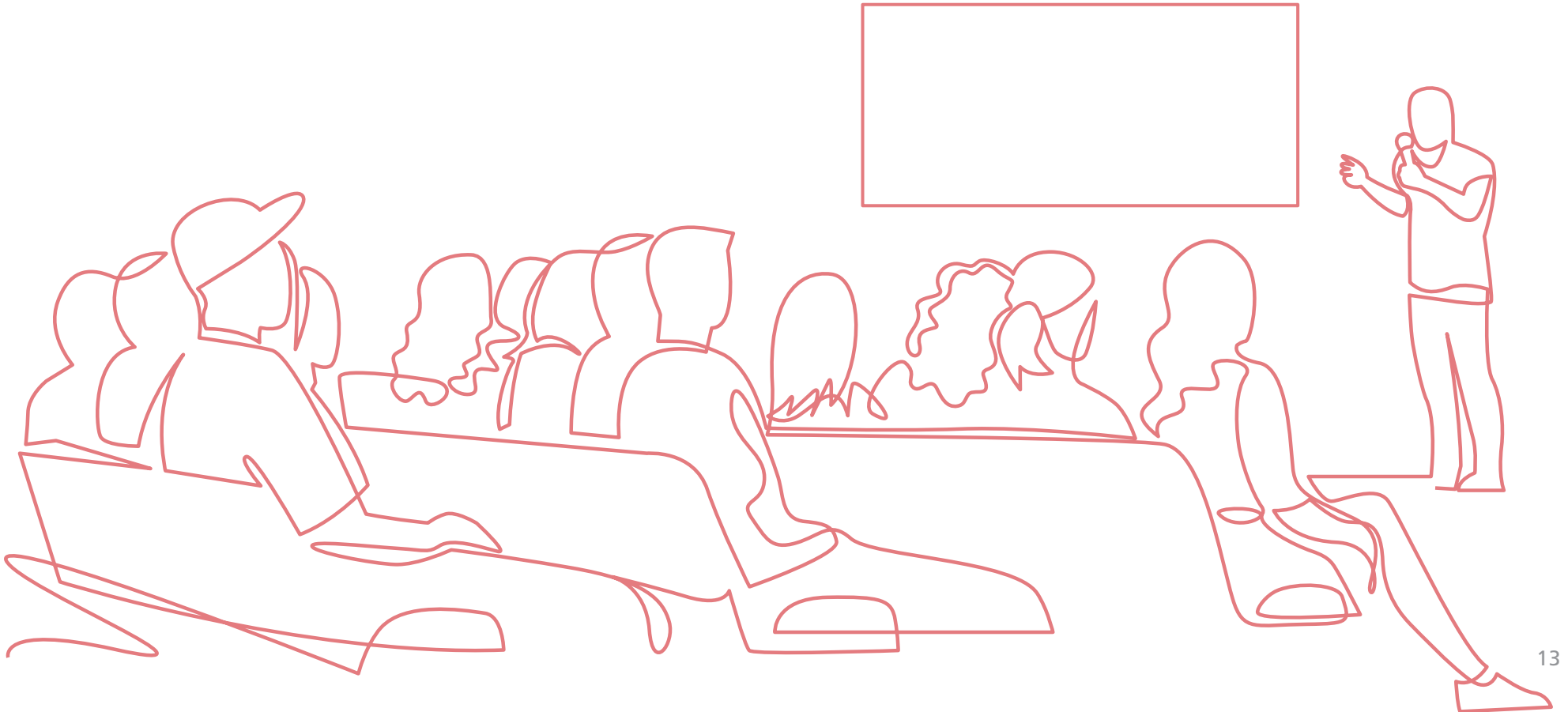
Share Final Report

- Upon completion, share the Final Report with community leaders, tourism officials, River Town Review volunteers, workshop participants, stakeholders, residents, and neighboring communities. Post the Final Report online and on social media.
- Schedule a follow up meeting to present the report to the community. Invite the public and those listed above. Hold virtually or in person.

River Town Review Community Meeting

During the River Town Review Community Meeting:

- Share the River Town Review Final Report.
- Present a summary of the process and highlight findings.
- Discuss recommendations and the Action Plan.
- Provide opportunities for additional input and future involvement.
- Identify additional community champions.



5 Moving Forward

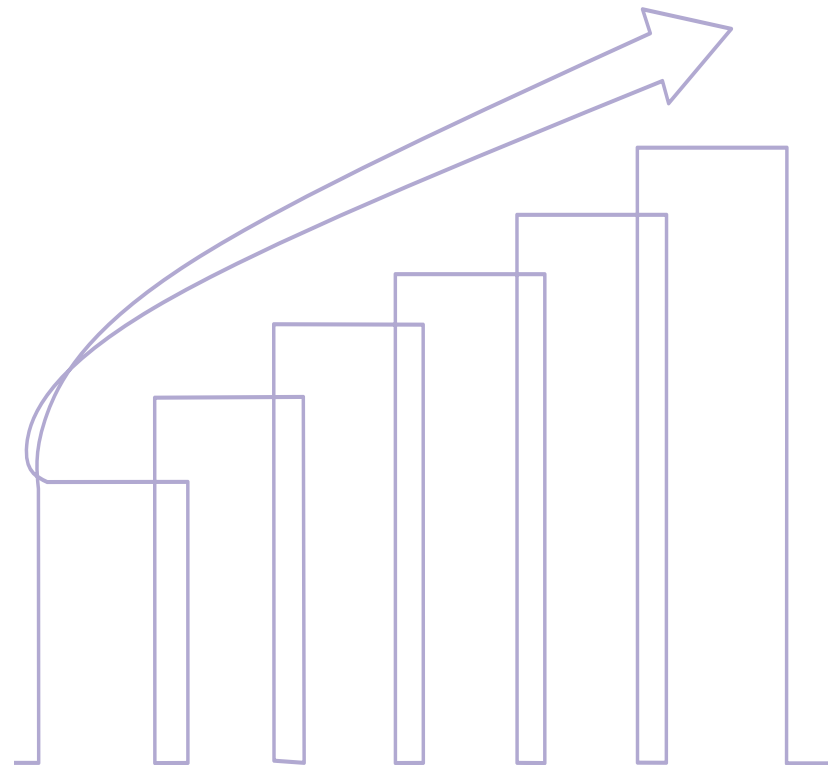


You've now conducted a River Town Review, completing an assessment of your community's outdoor recreation resources and potential. You've also:

- Discovered local champions and opportunities you never knew you had.
- Taken a big step towards enhancing your outdoor recreation resources, connecting to neighboring towns, and improving the quality of life for your community.
- Shown commitment, generated support and ideas, and have an action plan in place.
- Developed and promoted an appreciation for what a river town is, what your river town could be, and the benefits that could flow to your community.

Take the next steps now and:

- Consider forming a Steering Committee to develop a Strategic Plan for Implementation of the Action Plan.
- Keep the public informed and involved through regular updates. Tout successes.
- Utilize your River Town Review when seeking support and funding.
- Begin strengthening and formalizing partnerships, especially those upstream, downstream, and across the river, as well!
- Utilize the resources found in Appendix A.
- Apply for technical planning assistance from the National Park Service – Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program for specific projects related to your River Town Review.



Relevant Resources

Appendix A

Includes Trail/River Town examples, organizations, relevant toolkits, guides for engaging the public and gathering input, funding resources, economic impact information, etc.

- I. Outdoor Recreation and Adventure Tourism
- II. Sustainable Tourism
- III. Maintaining Small Town Character
- IV. Grants and Funding Opportunities
- V. Organizations
- VI. Community Assistance Programs



Download these appendixes at:
go.nps.gov/RTR

Appendix B

Includes the River Town Review (RTR) templates, forms, checklists, and documents referred to in this toolkit. They are intended as examples that can be customized for your community. (This Appendix will download as a .zip folder.)

- B1. Desktop Reviewer Recruitment Letter Sample
- B2. Desktop Online Review Guide and Sample Google Form
- B3. Community Visit Recruitment Letter Sample
- B4. Community Visit Guide
- B5. Workshop Invitation Letter Sample
- B6. Short Agenda Sample
- B7. Working Agenda Sample
- B8. Workshop PowerPoint Presentation Sample
- B9. SWOT Analysis Questions
- B10. Brainstorming Questions
- B11. Post-Workshop Email to RTR Workshop Participants
- B12. RTR Final Report Sample (Maysville, KY)
- B13. RTR Workshop Video Sample (Madison, IN)
- B14. River Town Review Process Flow Chart

The National Park Service team appreciates your use of this toolkit. Please let us know how the process benefitted your community and any suggestions that you might have. We are confident that by embracing and enhancing your outdoor recreation opportunities, your river town will become an even more vibrant and attractive place to live and visit.

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Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program
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U.S. Department of the Interior

