

**The Making and Marketing of the Hatchie River Park and Nature Center/Museum**

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### **Executive Summary**

In 2005, a group of concerned citizens came together and developed a plan to promote rural stewardship and tourism development in Bolivar/Hardeman County. This group is the City of Bolivar Downtown Development Corporation (DEVCO). This entity completed a Master Plan in 2006; this was a countywide test case for rural stewardship in Tennessee. This master plan was developed and called for several major initiatives. A comprehensive development strategy came out of this study.

### **Two Most Important Initiatives of this Study**

- The restoration and transformation of historic Downtown Bolivar, which has been mostly accomplished.
- The missions to restore, preserve, and enhance the utilization of the Hatchie River and its floodplains. This initiative will be done while protecting the natural attributes of this pristine and natural river.

Bolivar, Hardeman County, and the Hatchie River are inextricably linked and intertwined. This leads to the future accomplishment of the following:

- Accommodation of people and community events through the attraction of the downtown core of Bolivar.
- Build strong and viable links to the scenic Hatchie River from downtown Bolivar, Hardeman County, and residential areas adjacent to the River.

- Support daily recreational use by residents and tourists along the Hatchie River through improved river access, creation of nodes of ingress and egress, parks, and trails along the River.
- Extend economic development from the downtown core to the Hatchie River, targeting improvements adjacent to the river, and proposing river related business opportunities, such as fishing, boat rental, outdoor equipment, restaurants, and shopping.

The original plan was presented to then-Governor Phil Bredesen in 2007. The plan is being updated and re-written this year. These actions, identified as initiatives, in this *Presentation to the Governor*, Bill Haslam, will result in an enhanced quality of life bringing progress and attracting commerce to the area.

Bolivar has also conducted leadership, business, and citizen assessment surveys determining assets and liabilities. The results of these processes are the establishment of the need to develop and capitalize on The Hatchie River Park and Nature Center/Museum as the next step in our economic revitalization effort.

**This Capstone Project** deals with the challenges of this development and explains the benefits. By implementing a strategic plan utilizing the Hatchie River as a powerful tourism generator, the achievement of this goal will make Bolivar and Hardeman County a more attractive and desirable place to live, work, play, and enhance the quality of life.

## **Bolivar/ Hardeman County Overview**

Hardeman County is located in the southwestern corner of Tennessee bordering Mississippi and bisected by the Hatchie River with a 668 square mile area. The county is, geographically, the fifth largest in Tennessee. The 2010 census placed the population at 27,253. With fertile soil and gently rolling hills, Hardeman County is renowned throughout the southeast as the “Hardwood Capital of Tennessee.” The county seat is Bolivar, population 5,500. Other municipalities include Grand Junction, Hickory Valley, Hornsby, Middleton, Saulsbury, Silerton, Toone, and Whiteville all are inextricably linked.

A brief history of Hardeman County starts with the Indians. The treaty with the Chickasaws opened West Tennessee up for settlement in 1818. Among the first settlers was Ezekiel Polk, Grandfather of President James K. Polk. Rapid settlement followed, with the first hamlet being established on the bank of the Hatchie called Hatchie Town. Given its location on the river, the town suffered from chronic pestilence and flooding, and was moved one mile south. The Town was called Hatchie, but the name was changed to Bolivar in 1825. Bolivar counts among its historic structures, “The Little Courthouse,” America’s oldest “active” Log Courthouse. Since its founding, Bolivar has been no stranger to significant historical events.

In 1838, the trail of tears ordeal came through this county. The Hatchie was a significant commercial thoroughfare in the 1830’s and the 1840’s with an active steam boat-based trade.

Hardeman County was the scene of bitter fighting during the Civil War, most notably, the Battle of Davis Bridge which resulted in 900 casualties. Bolivar was under occupation during this time,

and the Union Generals Grant, Sherman, McPherson, and Wallace, made visits. Other key pieces of civil war history include the Battle of Middleburg and the establishment of the first Contraband Camp for liberated slaves in Grand Junction. Though most of Bolivar was burned to the ground during the Civil War, many pre-antebellum homes still stand. Notably, one such home, “The Pillars” circa 1826, accommodated such notable guests as Andrew Jackson, Davy Crockett, Sam Houston, James K. Polk, and Jefferson Davis. These antebellum homes mark Bolivar as an important destination for tourists who delight in our history.

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

Bolivar and Hardeman County have been severely impacted by the loss of manufacturing jobs and the general downturn of the economy throughout the community. This has been a static situation for over 12 years. In the 2016 Tennessee County Health Rankings, under the category of “Quality of Life,” Hardeman County ranks 92nd out of the State’s 95 counties. Many unsuccessful efforts have been made to attract industry to the community, all to no avail. The most recent efforts of the City have been attaining our Tennessee State Certified Site and Foreign Trade Zone status on the Bolivar Industrial Park.

The “Status Quo” has to be changed. To realize the full capitalization of the economic development assets of our community, Bolivar and Hardeman County must become a more attractive and desirable place to live, work, and play. Bolivar and Hardeman County have a strong local history, a clear connection to nature, recreation with the wonderful Hatchie River, and a countless number of assets. It is imperative that steps be taken to maximize the assets in order to make this area more attractive and livable. The focus of this plan is to capitalize on the

Hatchie River and its recreational activities, education and science, and the prioritization of all programs concerning the implementation of this project.

### **The Making and Marketing of the Hatchie River Park and Nature Center/Museum**

Successfully transforming the Hatchie River into a powerful tourism generator, combined with sound rural stewardship, is not achievable without addressing the needs of the entire county.

The process of attainment has so far, been challenging and rewarding. The City developed a Hatchie River Steering Committee that is working closely with the citizens of Hardeman County, the City of Bolivar, and leadership in the city/county. This will require a focused involvement and co-operation with State and Federal officials and agency directors. This is necessary in order for these goals to be met in crafting a study and plan for the scenic Hatchie River Park and Nature Center. This will enable the City of Bolivar to fully realize the potential of the community resource. The goal of which, is to establish Bolivar and Hardeman County as an attractive and desirable place to live, work and play, enhance the quality of life, while utilizing the Hatchie River as a powerful tourism generator.

### **Economic Development**

#### **DevCo (Bolivar Downtown Development Corporation)**

DevCo is dedicated to the restoration of historic Downtown Bolivar and the development of related attractions throughout Hardeman County...positioning the county as a destination, attracting tourists, new residents, commerce and new and expanded business opportunities, and thereby keeping both dollars and its young citizens in Hardeman County. This is done for the purpose of the enrichment of the lives of all its citizens while keeping emphasis on farmland

preservation, heritage tourism, rural stewardship, and the promotion and preservation of our natural recreational resources. The DevCo entity will dovetail nicely with the development of the river project. Their mission to attract tourists will be a building block to potential users of the river. This is one of several community groups that will ensure the success of our efforts to grow our economy.

### **HCCC- Hardeman County Chamber of Commerce**

The Hardeman County Chamber of Commerce is dedicated to the expansion and retainage of contributors to the tax base. It also provides information to help businesses of all sizes to grow. The Chamber supports modernization of county-wide infrastructure and development of tourism. Another role is to enhance the improvements of the county's quality of life to attract and retain population.

### **City of Bolivar**

The City of Bolivar Mayor and Council Persons help drive economic development, within Hardeman County, by focusing on participation in and support of the Governor's Three Star Program. They work closely with the Tennessee Economic and Community Development Department (ECD), the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the West Tennessee Industrial Development Association (WTIA), the South West Tennessee Development District (SWTDD), and other agencies to enhance economic development in Bolivar and Hardeman County. These agencies give immense help to this area identifying prospects; preparing RFIs, applying for grants, and helping the city/county market our area.

## **Development of Goals and Objectives**

By creating and marketing the Hatchie River Nature Center/Museum, this will establish a headquarters and economic driver for restoring, preserving, and capitalizing on the Hatchie River. This will have a dynamic effect on the entire Hatchie system and begin to establish it as a powerful tourism generator.

## **Problems/Opportunities**

The Hatchie River has been designated by The Nature Conservancy as one of the 75 last great places on earth most deserving of protection for future generations. The Nature Conservancy also considers it to be one of the five most valuable river systems in the world. It is protected as a Scenic River in the State of Tennessee, and it is the last major un-channelized tributary of the lower Mississippi River Basin (Cairo, Illinois to the Gulf of Mexico).

The Hatchie River and its ecosystem are disappearing due to sedimentation created by channelized tributaries. **Implications:** If these sedimentations issues are left unchecked, the Hatchie River will ultimately be destroyed. **Opportunity:** Align the various stakeholder groups and conservation organizations to leverage and capitalize on their common objectives in restoring and preserving the Hatchie River. **Solution:** Accomplish the mission, goals, and strategies, including working in a strategic partnership with the Nature Conservancy, Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency (TWRA), and other conservation organizations, to save **the** Hatchie River. The Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency (TWRA) is a partner and potential funding

source in this project. The University of Tennessee is also lending expertise, resources, grants, graduate students, studies, and other programs to this effort.

Only a few public access areas and no recreation areas exist in Hardeman County to encourage enjoyment and use of the Hatchie River. **Implications:** The pristine Hatchie River will continue to be underutilized and a missed opportunity for all but a hand full of locals. **Solutions:** Identify key sites for public access for boat ramps, picnic areas, campsites, trails, outfitter stores, and waterfowl refuge areas for acquisition by the State of Tennessee and the Hatchie River Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, along with conservation easements with private landowners.

**Public Awareness:** While the public is generally aware of the existence of the Hatchie River, its attributes and history are not broadly known or understood, resulting in very little usage of the River for recreational activities, education, and science.

**Solution:** Develop and execute an all-encompassing marketing and promotional plan including scheduling of river events.

**Solution:** Develop “outdoor classroom” sites to provide hands-on education for schools and students at all levels.

**Solution:** Establish The Hatchie River Nature Park/Museum of Ecology & Conservation dedicated to education for schools and the general public. The central theme of the Museum will be: **“Why The Nature Conservancy has designated the Hatchie River as “One of 75 Great Places on Earth Most Deserving of Preservation’ and considers it to be one of the five most valuable river systems in the world. The Museum will**

**showcase the Hatchie River as a living classroom, demonstrating its path to successful restoration to its natural state.”**

Bolivar/Hardeman County, Tennessee, is turning into a very special community, unlike any other. Bolivar is blending a unique sportsman’s paradise and an unmatched outdoorsman’s Mecca with family recreation and a distinctive town with deep historical roots into a perfect tourist destination and wonderful place for people to live. It has been proven that people are also looking for ways to reconnect with nature while, at the same time, seeking an exceptionally high quality of life as a complete alternative to urban lifestyle.

The mission is to restore, preserve, and enhance the utilization of the Hatchie River and the Hatchie flood plains. To do this, will require Hatchie River Park/Nature Center improvements that will be a major draw based on need, activity, interest, and accessibility to the scenic river in Bolivar.

### **Timeframe**

In 2015, the City of Bolivar took the opportunity to align with various stakeholder groups such as Boy and Girl Scouts, and conservation organizations to leverage and capitalize on this project. The first goal was to build a Hatchie River Park/Nature Center. The City of Bolivar has taken significant steps toward making this vision a reality.

A three acre parcel of land on Highway 18N at the Hatchie River was acquired through a \$60,000 Local Parks and Recreation Fund Grant (LPRF) from the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation.

In 2015, after acquiring the land, the city made some minor improvements to the exterior of the building, cleaned up the property, erected the park signage, and constructed a water wheel powered by an ever flowing artesian fountain. With these few changes and improvements, the visitor's interest has greatly improved.

In 2016, the city received a Tourism Enhancement Grant from Tennessee Department of Economic & Community Development. This was a \$50,000 grant that will be used to replace a deteriorating, existing, 12 foot boat ramp with a 24 x 30 foot concrete boat ramp and construction of a floating boat dock structure that will provide a safe, public ramp system to access the river. Asphalt paving will complete the project for the building, providing parking in front and rear of the Hatchie River Park. This project will enable an easy public access point to navigate the river and enjoy the outdoors. The Hatchie River Park/Nature Center will also include a scenic pullover space. Highway 18 is the most traversed highway in Hardeman County and makes this area very well-known with direct sight from road traffic. Construction utilizing these funds will begin in the fall of 2016.

The City was a recipient of the Local Parks and Recreation Fund Grant, through the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, a \$286,000 grant to build a Nature Center, Museum, outdoor center, and an outfitters building that will provide the needed supplies for

fishermen, canoers and tourists. This is the critical element in transforming the Hatchie River into a tourist destination.

DATE	FROM	AMOUNT
August, 2014	Tennessee Local Parks and Recreation Grant	\$ 60,000.00
July, 2016	Tennessee Tourism Enhancement Grant	\$ 50,000.00
August, 2016	Tennessee Local Parks and Recreation Grant	\$ 286,000.00

## **Results**

The outdoors and access to recreation areas are defining features of Bolivar, Hardeman County, and western Tennessee. The scenic Hatchie River, valleys and rolling mountains make the area an ideal destination for hiking, biking, walking, watersports, and other outdoor activities. Key stakeholders have undertaken a study. A development plan has been prepared identifying opportunities, not only, for the Hatchie River Park but also for transforming landscapes adjacent to the scenic Hatchie River. These will become amenities for area residents and serve to attract out-of-town visitors to the community. The study and plan has focused on, and will further eco-tourism, land development, environmental stewardship, and expansion of parkland adjacent to the river. This will connect key landscapes of the community. The study and plan includes estimated costs for such a transformation. A strategy will be implemented for phasing development, and an economic impact analysis will be developed. It is estimated that the city's revenue projections will increase within the first year of completion of the project. Calculations by sportsmen and tourists utilizing our facility and natural resources lead the city to expect approximately twenty additional users per day. Return On Investment (ROI) calculations by the State of Tennessee Department of Tourism, states each dollar spent will yield \$18.00 in taxes.

The Hatchie River once served as a valuable source of life for those in Hardeman County. It served as a means of transportation, and therefore, a means of power. This river park is critical not only to Bolivar and Hardeman County but to the State of Tennessee. This vision is to blend a unique sportsman's paradise and an unmatched outdoorsman's mecca, with family recreation, while preserving and enhancing the Hatchie River and its floodplains. This project is an investment in livability, and sustainability. Greenways, blueways, parks and recreation facilities are critical in making this project successful. Completion and implementation of this project will bring a new sense of life, and power, to not only the river, but to all who take advantage of it.

## **Resources**

**Hardeman County's Presentation to the Governor**, A Countywide Test case for Rural Stewardship in Tennessee, September 2007

**Devco, Bolivar & Hardeman County 10 Year Plan**, March 15, 2013

[\\_ \(https://www.facebook.com/wolfriver\)](https://www.facebook.com/wolfriver)  [\(https://twitter.com/wolfconserv\)](https://twitter.com/wolfconserv)<sup>i</sup>

**The Nature Conservancy**, Letter dated August 15, 2007, Monica Pope, West Tennessee Program Manager, to The Hatchie River Conservancy

**Hardeman County, Tennessee Five Year Asset Based Strategic Economic Development Plan**, 2010-2014

**The Association for the Preservation of Tennessee Antiquities**, (APTA)

<http://www.thepillars.org>

**Sain, Jimmy**, Mayor of Hardeman County, Interview of Hardeman County Adventure Tourism Act Designated Areas, March 12, 2015

**West TN River Basin Authority**, July 2015 Board of Directors Monthly Meeting Minutes and Agenda

**Hardeman County Chamber of Commerce**, Strategic Business Development Plan, February 2016

**TLM Associates**, Preliminary Architectural Report, Hatchie River Boat Docks Nature Center Renovations, February 2016

**Hardeman County Tourism Guide May 2016**

**Parish, Gerald**, CPRP/CPSI Director, Letter of official notice from Department of Environment and Conservation, of approval of the Local parks and Recreation Fund (LPRF) grant

**Hardeman County Health Rankings**

<http://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/tennessee/2016/county/snapshots>

**Tennessee Department of Tourism**

<https://tn.gov>toursim>

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