



CASE STUDY:

UPPER CUMBERLAND
DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT
& *WISH YOU WERE HERE!* SERIES

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Cover Image: *Cumberland Caverns*, a popular recreational amenity featured in the series

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Introduction

Economic Development Districts (EDDs) deliver value to their communities by bringing together stakeholders to tackle opportunities at a regional scale. One example of this is the economic potential of a region's natural resources. The character of a region extends far beyond any one town or county to encompass river valleys, mountain ranges, plains, ridges, lakes, shores, and more. Natural beauty is a shared resource, and one that is nurtured or degraded by the actions of dozens or hundreds of localities, public agencies, developers, farmers, businesses, and citizens. Regional organizations like EDDs are well-situated to participate in projects that address region-wide issues linked to the natural environment, including economic development efforts such as natural asset tourism.

This case study explores the Upper Cumberland Development District's *Wish You Were Here!* television program, including its genesis, partnerships formed to deliver it, content, impacts, and future outlook. Over the course of three seasons, this series has told the story of dozens of natural places, businesses, and cultural experiences that makes Tennessee's Upper Cumberland region a unique and attractive place for visitors from throughout the state and around the country.

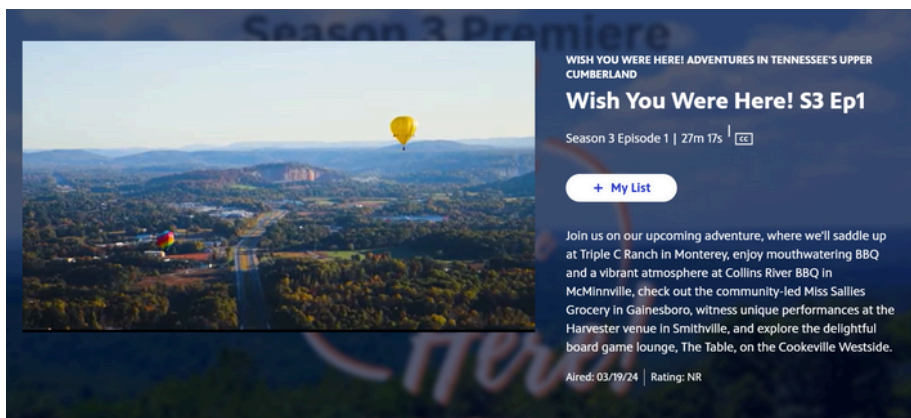


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The Upper Cumberland Region

The Upper Cumberland Development District (UCDD) serves a 14-county region of central northeast Tennessee rich in natural beauty, with an abundance of forests, lakes, waterfalls, and topographic diversity. Physiographically, it encompasses portions of the state's East Central Basin, Highland Rim, and Cumberland Plateau; geographically, it stretches from the edge of greater Nashville to that of greater Knoxville. Its fortuitous confluence of convenient access to major cities and large reserves of unspoiled natural beauty has driven growth in recent years: from 2020-2022, the three μSAs comprising the region's largest centers were among the fastest-growing 15% in the United States. Moreover, its well-developed transportation infrastructure and abundant natural resources support a robust and growing manufacturing sector; five distinct industrial clusters collectively employ more than 20,000 of the region's residents.

Despite these advantages, the Upper Cumberland region continues to struggle with stubbornly high poverty rates, modest median per-capita incomes, population decline in many of its smaller communities, and a perception among some manufacturers that it lacks the skilled workforce that is available in Tennessee's large metropolitan areas. In its most recent Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), UCDD identifies economic diversification as a crucial strategy to combat these various challenges, including through the development of a robust tourism sector. It specifically calls for *"innovatively marketing communities to capture increasing numbers of tourists, revitalizing downtowns, and capturing revenue dollars from increased tourism."*



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Tourism Potential

A diversity of experiences attracts visitors to Upper Cumberland, including its scenic towns, natural beauty, outdoor recreational opportunities, and robust cultural programming. The linchpin of the regional tourism economy is the region's outstanding scenic beauty and opportunities for outdoor recreation, but visitors help to sustain everything from a regional brewing scene to a major performing arts center and an unusually robust collection of historic general stores. Tourism is a longstanding feature of the regional economy: inclusive of induced impacts, it supports three quarters of a billion dollars of economic impact in the region annually.

The growing strength of the tourism sector was a bright spot for the region's economy in the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic. As travel to major metros fell, the rural communities in Upper Cumberland were able to attract visitors by marketing outdoor recreation activities. Driven by this activity, sales tax receipts in the region rose 12% year-over-year in 2021-2022. As planners set out to develop the region's next CEDS and develop programming, the potential for the tourism sector to continue to play a role in diversifying the economy and strengthening regional resilience to future economic shocks was apparent.

"Our vision was to increase the visibility of the fourteen-county region," says Tommy Lee, UCDD's Deputy Director. "The CEDS sets the vision for that, and we leaned into tourism promotion as a key strategy."

Wish You Were Here!

This context was the impetus for the Wish You Were Here: Adventures in Tennessee's Upper Cumberland campaign, a major regional marketing collaboration between UCDD and the local PBS affiliate WCTE. *Wish You Were Here!* is a three-season series of videos that highlights the region's various natural and cultural attractions. Over the course of eighteen polished half-hour segments, the series showcases more than 100 local businesses, museums, theaters, state parks, resorts, tours, and recreation opportunities. The series was released monthly in 2022 and 2023 and has a

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[companion website](#) and [dedicated pages on WCTE's website](#). A third season recently wrapped production and will debut this year.

In one *Wish You Were Here* video, series host Katelyn Steakley and several correspondents showcase the natural setting of a yoga and retreat center, interview the owner of an espresso shop, and visit a historic inn. Another takes viewers to a small-town general store and on a state park pontoon ride. The videos mix first-person commentary, one-on-one interviews, and B-roll shot on site that captures moments like live stage performances, lunch rushes, ghost tours, and kayak trips. Each concludes with the series catchphrase “Wish you were here!” followed by a title card with links to the featured destinations, series website, and other resources.

Funding and Collaboration

This collaborative project emerged as a way to support local communities as they adjusted to pandemic-era challenges. In 2021, UCDD established and hired for the position of Tourism Recovery Coordinator using funding from the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) authorized under the CARES Act. It also purchased a drone and software for videography and convened partners to discuss a tourism recovery strategy. The opportunity was clear: travelers leery of denser urban areas were driving an uptick in regional tourism, and the cities, towns, and businesses in the region were eager to build a strategy to capitalize on it. The collaborators, including UCDD, WCTE, and other regional tourism stakeholders, ultimately discussed more than twenty possible formats before settling on the *Wish You Were Here!* format, which focuses on “Local businesses, natural assets, and hidden gems.”

PBS affiliate [WCTE](#) was a key partner on the project and has produced each of the three seasons, and support from the [Upper Cumberland Tourism Association](#) and [Tennessee Tech University](#) were crucial as well. UCDD leaned into its existing relationship with WCTE, a major regional stakeholder that had worked with UCDD in the past and had a shared vision for regional dynamism. The first season was funded

through a grant from EDA, the second through a [USDA Rural Business Development Grant](#), and the third through grants from [Tennessee Tech](#) and the [Tennessee Department of Tourism Development](#). Through each stage, support from partners and the business community was crucial to the program's success. Success and partnership went hand in hand—each year's award was designated to create a single season, and each success gave reason for a successive partnership.

"The success of the partnership came down to the willingness of the partners to participate in the project and their ability to work together for a common purpose," comments Lee. "I know it sounds cliché, but in my opinion it's that spirit that makes all the difference."

Early Outcomes

The series aired on WCTE and the stations of five other Tennessee PBS affiliates in 2022 and 2023 and is available through UPDD and WCTE's websites, as well as on YouTube. Though it is not yet possible to numerically link its success to the growth of tourism in the region since then, local businesses have reported that visitors have shared with them how the series inspired trips to the area. "It exceeded our expectations for the response we thought we would get," notes Lee, who highlights the story of one Ohio couple who found the series on YouTube and arranged a trip to the region that took them to various destinations they had seen on the show. Tourism figures have remained strong even as the impact of the pandemic on travel has waned, suggesting that Upper Cumberland has successfully raised its profile to visitors from in the state and around the country. The success of *Wish You Were Here!* demonstrates the value of regional collaboration and the robustness of asset-driven regional development work led by UCDD and implemented through its CEDS.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Engage Partners on Their Core Competencies

Asked about the key to bringing such a collaboration together, Lee commented, “You have to get the broadcast partner on board early, because without them there’s nothing in terms of distribution. Having that existing relationship with a partner like that, you can potentially make great things happen.” Getting the initial support and maintaining it through three seasons was a key challenge, but also a core reason that an EDD was best positioned to take the project on. As natural convenors, EDDs have broad and deep relationships with entities across their regions and have the perspective and capacity to engage the right partners to make a project into a strengths-based collaboration.

2. Lead with the CEDS

A common criticism of large-scale planning processes like the CEDS has long been that plans are made and then shelved, while the day-to-day work of the agency continues unchanged. Upper Cumberland took the opposite approach, using the CEDS planning process as a springboard to build momentum around the *Wish You Were Here!* series. Tourism development was the second major section of that plan, which then listed “*Increase number of visitors by marketing communities in innovative ways*” as its first objective. The action-oriented language and clarity of purpose in that document bolstered UPDD’s grant application to EDA to fund the Tourism Recovery Coordinator position, which oversaw the series’ creation.

Leading with the CEDS also helps partners know what the District’s vision is and how they can fit with it. “It’s a chance to be transparent about what you are wanting to accomplish,” adds Lee. “It helped to make it clear what we were trying to do to help the local tourism entities, and that we weren’t looking to steal their thunder or take resources away from them. Like anywhere else, taking a strong approach to communication was key.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS

3. Invest In Successes

Key to *Wish You Were Here's* impact has been its longevity over three seasons. Though there have been potential roadblocks—the Tourism Recovery Coordinator position no longer exists, and each season has needed a new funding partner—UPDD has stayed committed to building on its successes. The project has reached dozens of businesses and localities, giving each of them a positive and impactful point of contact with UPDD, and has now covered enough ground that visitors are able to plan whole trips around destinations it spotlights. Moreover, its continued presence in the community has helped to keep a broad focus on one of the region's key assets -- tourism, while ensuring that the industry's growth over the last few years is cemented and expanded, bringing visitors, revenues, and positive attention to the region for years to come.