



CASTING THE VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF LETCHER COUNTY, KY  
NOVEMBER 2022

IMAGINE

LETCHEE

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ACTION PLAN

## A Way Forward

Envisioned by  
**Fleming-Neon City Government**  
And Citizens of the  
**Headwaters Communities**

Appalachian Kentucky conjures many images: mist rising over densely wooded hills, winding streams, curving roads, strip mines, sub-standard homes, or the faces of people with a faraway look in their eyes.

Media coverage about the region tends to examine challenges and depict stereotypes. Whether the focus of the story is about declining employment in the coal industry, the opioid crises, poor health or a myriad of other concerns; the overarching message is nearly always the same – a story about a place and people struggling to survive hard-scrabble times.



### But, what story do we tell ourselves?

Despite the pervasive challenges facing this region, leaders in Fleming-Neon and surrounding communities are united by a fierce belief in their residents and their ability to play a significant role in advancing achievement, economic development and community vitality. It is true that very real challenges exist and cannot be discounted. Leaders choose to view this situation through a lens of **abundance versus scarcity** and view themselves as a vital catalyst impacting the future.



This strong **belief in** and **connection to** place and people drives a collective commitment to develop solutions that are led by the good minds and hard work of local folk and trusted partners. The work is informed by research and best practice examples and engages the broader community in creating solutions for ongoing transformation.

University of Kentucky Senior Capstone Studio  
**Fleming-Neon: RISING**



# Schedule

5:00-5:10 Welcome and Introduction

5:10-5:25 **1 Trail Town**

- Sam Pauly
- Aileena Roberts

5:25-5:35 Questions & Comments

5:35-5:50 **2 Downtown Revitalization**

- Taylor Lacy
- JaKobi McPherson

5:50-6:00 Questions & Comments

6:00-6:15 **3 Green Infrastructure**

- Anna Del Rio
- Kendall Shockley

6:15-6:25 Questions & Comments

6:25-6:40 **4 Community Wellness Hub**

- Karli Jo Childers
- Chloe Scoggins

6:40-6:50 Questions & Comments

6:50-7:05 **5 Neon Heights Housing**

- David Dronsella
- Matthew Duvall

7:05-7:15 Questions & Comments

7:15-7:30 **6 Goose Creek RV & ATV Resort**

- Emmanuella Braide
- Evan Baldrige

7:30-7:40 Questions & Comments

7:40-8:00 Final Thoughts and Farewell



In the most severely impacted communities,  
**14-16 inches of rain** fell over a period of  
four days. This amount of rainfall represented  
more than **600% of normal totals** and  
was estimated to be a **thousand-year flood**,  
a flood with a 1 in 1,000 chance  
of occurring in any given year.





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## VISION

A resilient, healthy, thriving  
community where every  
resident is valued, and ingenuity  
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# NPS RTCA

RIVERS, TRAILS & CONSERVATION  
ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

[www.nps.gov/rtca](http://www.nps.gov/rtca)

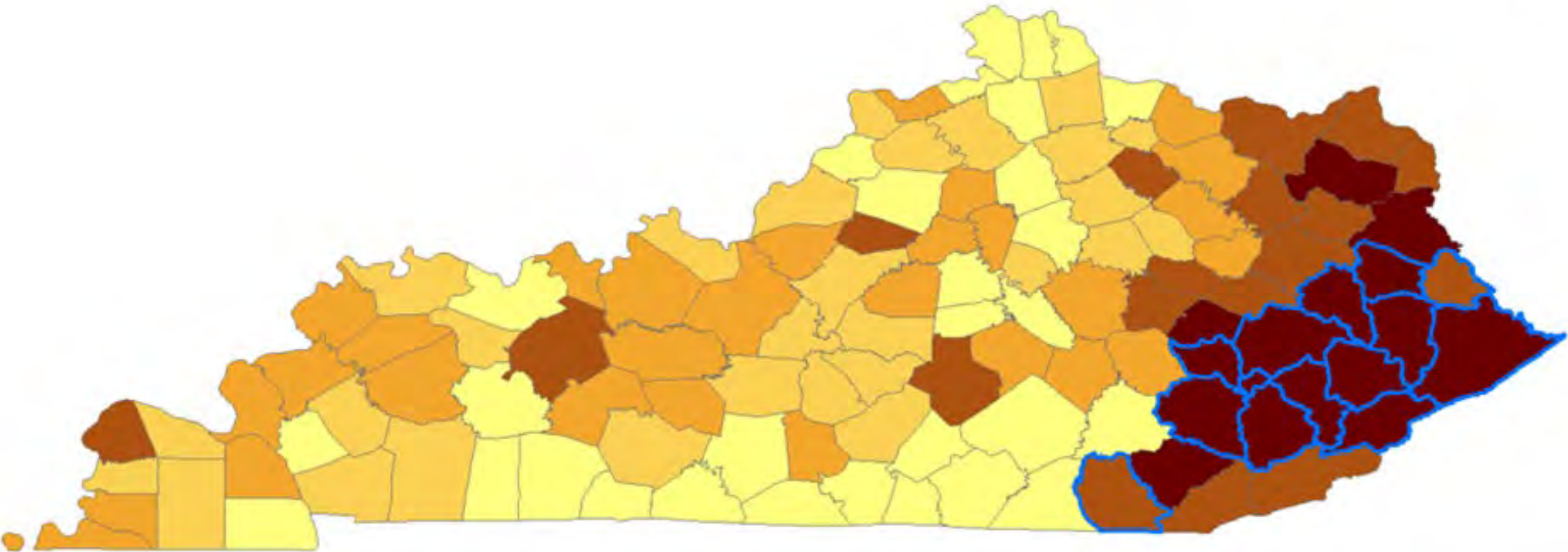






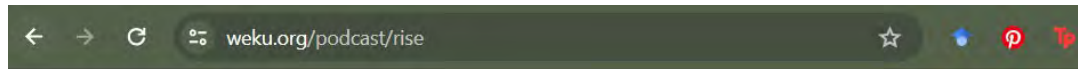


# Historic Kentucky Flood Events by County (1967-2022)

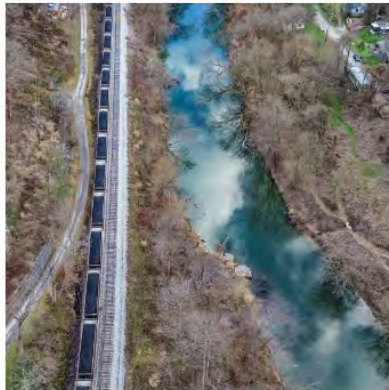




# Shared Learning



## Latest Episodes



Feb 27, 2024

### RISE Episode 10

Do surface mines and mountaintop removal sites worsen flooding in Eastern Kentucky coalfield communities?

► LISTEN • 52:48



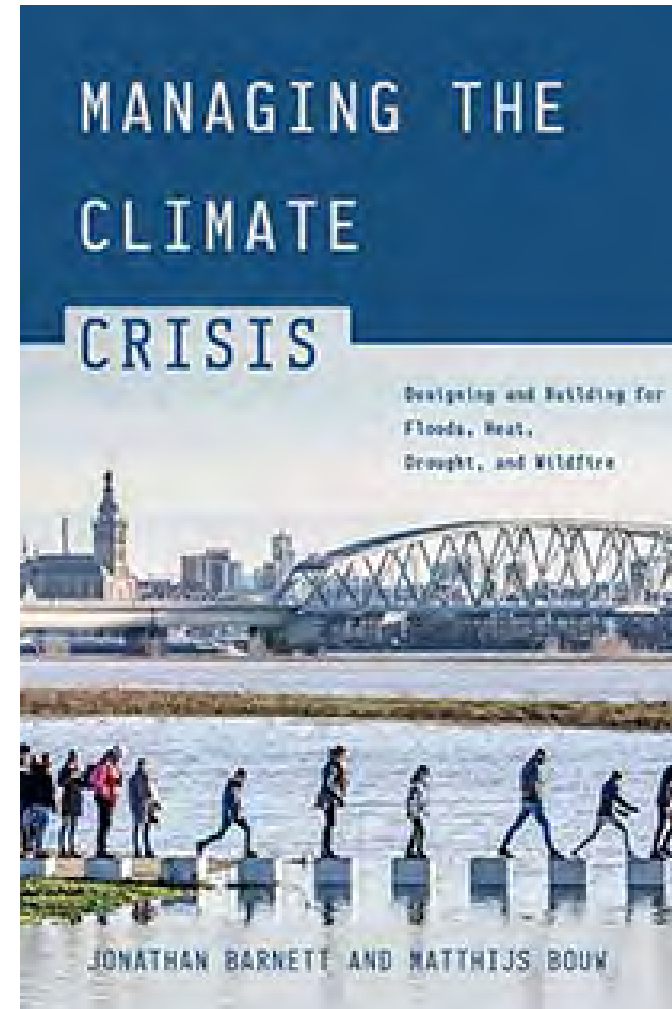
Aug 8, 2023

### Rise Episode 9 - The Flood One Year Later

We take a look back at the 2022 Eastern Kentucky Flood

► LISTEN • 52:59

<https://weku-rise.org/>



<https://islandpress.org/books/managing-climate-crisis#desc>



# Sustainability: Environmental Stewardship



Goose Creek: reforestation opportunities



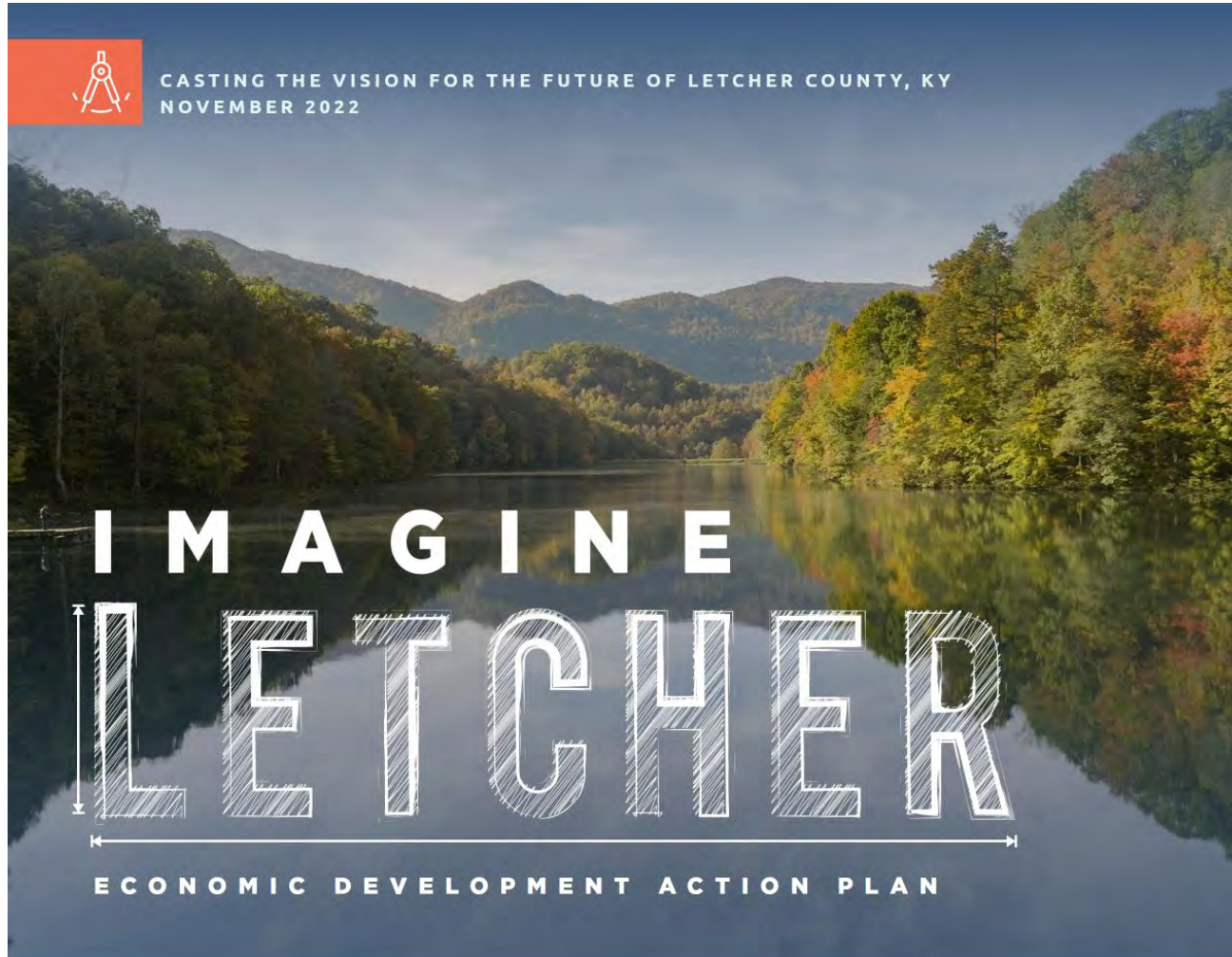
Downtown: reduce impervious pavement



<https://www.njfuture.org/issues/environment-and-agriculture/water-sewer/green-infrastructure/>



# Sustainability: Economic Equity



Tourism and nature-based recreation can help create economic development opportunities that build upon the cultural, historical and natural assets of the region



Downtown Pikeville, Ky., is photographed on Saturday, April 6, 2024.  
RYAN C. HERMENS [RHERMENS@HERALD-LEADER.COM](mailto:RHERMENS@HERALD-LEADER.COM)

BY BILL ESTEP  
UPDATED APRIL 22, 2024 11:08 AM

On the 60th anniversary of the War on Poverty, the economy of the region is in transition. Healthcare and remote work have added jobs.

<https://www.kentucky.com/news/politics-government/article287488580.html>





# Sustainability: Social Inclusivity



Health & Wellness.  
<https://dirtworks.us/portfolio/camphill-ghent-elder-care-initiative/>



Housing. <https://www.pilotcove.com/>



# Process

Trip 1: Look, Listen & Learn

Trip 2: Share, Collect & Reflect

Trip 3: Final Presentations

## Thank you for sharing your time, voices and ideas.

In response to Fleming-Neon's ongoing recovery from the flooding of 2022 and process of envisioning a new future, students from the Landscape Architecture Department at the University of Kentucky's Martin-Gatton College of Agriculture, Food and Environment have developed hypothetical design concepts for outdoor spaces in and around Fleming-Neon that have grown out of the community-driven efforts behind the Neon Rising Initiative and the Imagine Letcher Economic Development Action Plan.

### Opportunities to Participate

To ensure that the students' work reflects and responds to community needs and aspirations, UK's Landscape Architecture Studio traveled to Fleming-Neon twice to share ideas and gather feedback from the community. On our final trip, students will present their conceptual projects and we hope you can join us!

**Trip 1. February 9 - 10:** Students listened to and learned from local high school and middle school students and community members, saw the town and documented their project sites.

**Trip 2. Friday, March 29 - Saturday, March 30:** Students shared preliminary design concepts and collected feedback.

**Trip 3. Tuesday, April 30, 5:00-8:00pm at the Neon Lights Building:** Students have incorporated community feedback from previous trips, refined their designs, and will give final presentations to the community.

5:10-5:35: Trails	6:25-6:50: Wellness Hub
5:35-6:00: Downtown	6:50-7:15: Housing
6:00-6:25: Green Infrastructure	7:15-7:40: Goose Creek

Our sincere thanks to the Neon Rising Initiative and the Neon Lights Building for graciously hosting us and supporting our engagement efforts.

## Please join us!

### VISION:

"A resilient, healthy, thriving community where every resident is valued, and ingenuity drives ongoing improvement and is recognized nationally as a model for innovation in small town rural America."



A Way Forward essay and Imagine Letcher Economic Development Action Plan



Special thanks to our project partner, the National Park Service - Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program, and the American Society of Landscape Architects - Kentucky Chapter for their financial support of this studio.



# Community Research

## Economy Before 2022

Fleming-Neon also known as Neon, is a home rule-class city in Letcher County, Kentucky, in the United States. It is bordered to the east by the unincorporated community of McRoberts. Fleming-Neon, KY is home to a population of 429 people as of 2021 census. 770 at the 2010 census, down from 840 at the 2000 census. It is projected today in 2024 that the population sits at 525. That means since 2000 the population of Fleming-Neon has decreased 37.5%. The unemployment rate is 7.3% in Fleming-Neon, compared to the national average 4.0%.



Figure 1: Employment by Industry

**Occupations.**  
From 2020 to 2021, employment in Fleming-Neon, KY grew at a rate of 16.6%, from 193 employees to 225 employees.

The most common job groups, by number of people living in Fleming-Neon, KY, are Sales & Related Occupations (32 people), Healthcare Support Occupations (30 people), and Office & Administrative Support Occupations (30 people). This chart illustrates the share breakdown of the primary jobs held by residents of Fleming-Neon, KY.

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## Culture of Appalachia Kentucky

Appalachia Kentucky has geographically been problematic and responsible for determining a way of life. The mountains and valleys have isolated eastern Kentuckians for centuries enforced by rugged topography. The residents of this area have pride and developed a rugged individualism based on bonds of friendship and the love for the land.

According to the Appalachian Regional Commission, Appalachia sits across 13 states and 423 counties ranging from southern New York and northern Mississippi. Settlers are largely from Ireland and Scotland which has led to a distinct dialect. Having words with multiple meanings and changing words completely. Appalachia is embedded with superstitions, beliefs, and customs.

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Figure 2: Downtown Fleming-Neon

**Median Earnings by Industry.**  
The industries with the best median earnings for men in 2021 are Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing & Hunting, and Mining (\$48,250), Construction (\$44,333), and Educational Services, and Health Care & Social Assistance (\$27,407).

The industries with the best median earnings for women in 2021 are Educational Services, and Health Care & Social Assistance (\$34,800) and Retail Trade (\$26,563).

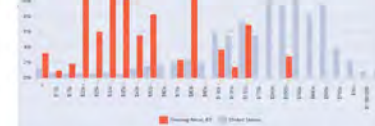


Figure 3: The following chart display the households distributed between a series of property value buckets compared to the national average for each bucket in Fleming-Neon, KY. The largest share of households have a property value in the \$100K - \$150K range.

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## The Culture of Coal

Through the centuries Coal has been one of the largest industries in eastern Kentucky. It has created a culture of its own in the vast mountains of Appalachia. Mining of coal began in the mid to late 1800s to supply the commercial users. During the mid-1800s coal mining became such a commodity it stimulated the expansion of railroads in the mountains. During the twentieth century coal was essential for electrification in America. Coal mining has been an economic driver for small Appalachian communities especially when early mining depended upon human labor. Coal production in Appalachia is declining, but the legacy of coal mining remains. Due to the decline of coal the regional population has also been on the decline in the twenty first century.



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## County Scale



Letcher County lies in the Appalachian Mountains of Southeastern Kentucky and has survived through three eras and Kentucky split in the face of multiple floods and various disasters. The county houses the major towns with numerous other small settlements. These include Whitesburg, Fleming-Neon, Shackles, Mayfield, Hixson, Barlow, Cummins, Little Springs, Gordonsville, and others. The county is rich in natural resources, including coal, timber, and wildlife. The county is also known for its scenic views and outdoor recreation opportunities.

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created in the wake of the coal industry and the county housed over 75 coal camps, which helped contribute to the development and infrastructure that is seen today in Letcher County. Unfortunately, due to the decline of the coal industry, Letcher County has been on the economic downturn.

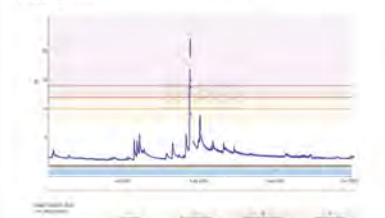
However, in spite of the economic downturn, the combined efforts of these county towns have continued in multiple forms of recreation and

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## Natural Systems and Climate Risks Flooding Risks



Gage Heights at Whitesburg on North Fork Kentucky River: June 22 - September 22

The summer of 2022 saw conditions of severe drought through the end of July, which compacted the soil. Compounding the drought and compaction issues were the deforestation of the county and broader ecoregion over the previous decades, which limits the water that can infiltrate into the soil and creates more pathways for runoff and erosion. The topography of Eastern Kentucky, namely steep slopes and narrow valley floors, lends itself to floods of high intensity and short duration in usual circumstances. These factors combined with the intensity of the rainfall and synthesized into a perfect storm for flooding of high intensity and, in this case, long duration.

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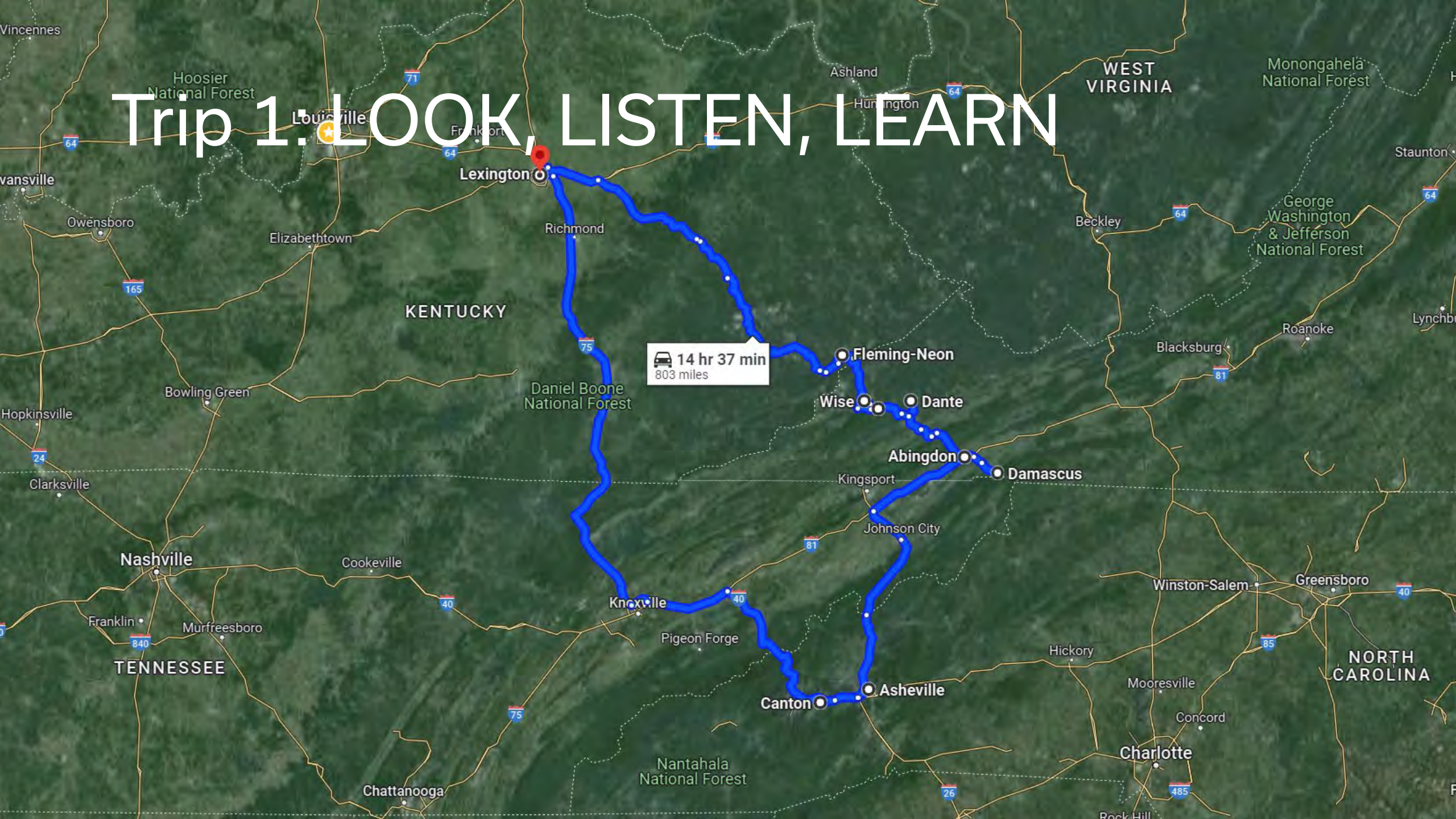
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The First Street Foundation (FSF) is a nonprofit group that does predictive weather modeling and disaster preventative data crunching for individual properties all around the United States. The flood modeling that has been done up until FSF is usually based on existing data, so they are limited in scope to geographically and temporally due to various factors. The FSF model is built on a complex of hydraulic and hydrologic models and climate projection data to account for the cause and effect of inland and coastal flooding, causing it to be continuously adjusting itself to our rapidly changing climate.

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# Trip 1: LOOK, LISTEN, LEARN

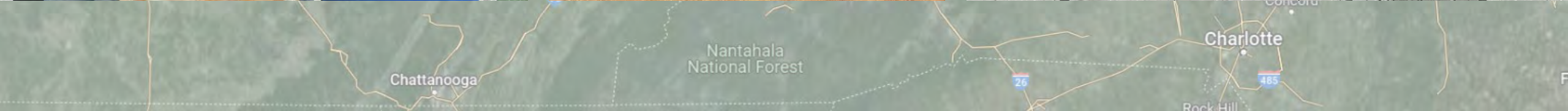




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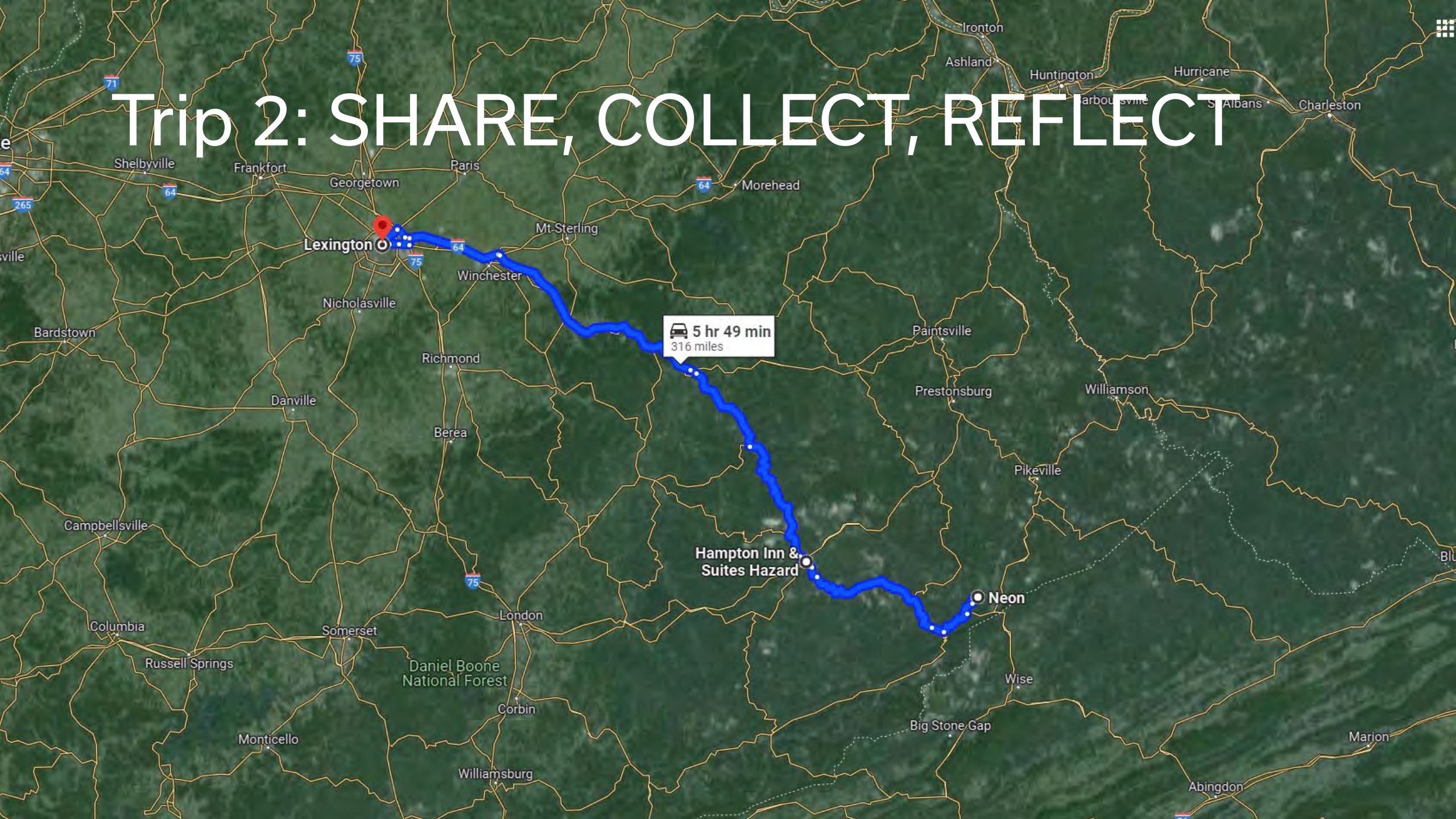








# Trip 2: SHARE, COLLECT, REFLECT





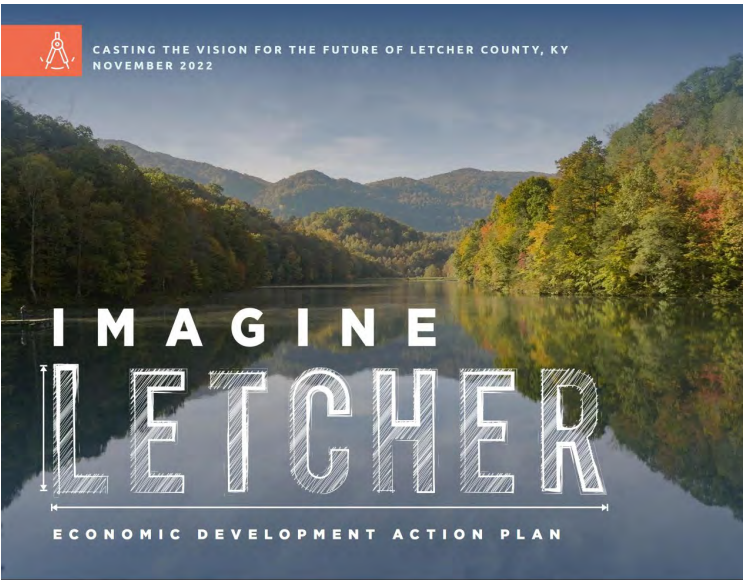
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We were fortunate to draw from the great work already done by the community: December, 2022 Neon Rising Initiative Meeting (above), A Way Forward document (above right), and Imagine Letcher: Economic Development Action Plan (below right). These interactions and documents guided project identification and development.



# Natural Assets

**Thunder Mountain**

**Goose Creek**

**ATV Trail System**

Easy  
Moderate  
Difficult  
ATV Roads

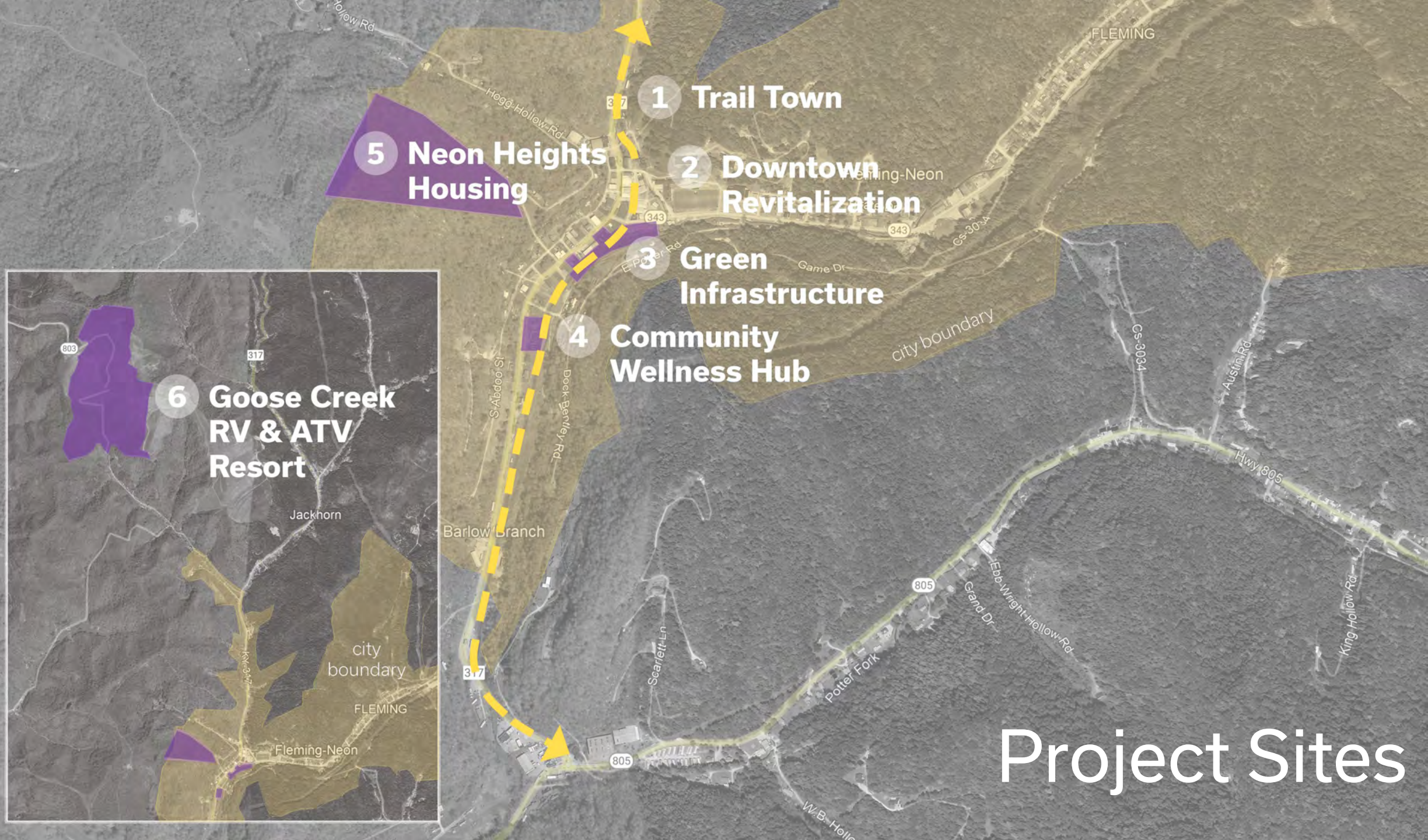
**Raven Rock Resort**

**Pine Mountain Scenic Trail**

**Tanglewood Trail**

**Jefferson National Forest**





Project Sites



# Thank you

Community & Partners

Neon Rising Initiative

City of Fleming-Neon & Letcher County

UKLA Class of 2024!