Sylva’s Story on Foot

Amber C Albert

Submission Date	Aug 29, 2025 2:03 PM
Name of Initiative	From Rails to Breweries: Sylva’s Story on Foot
Contact Person	Amber C Albert
Title	Director
Address	1 University Way
City	Cullowhee
State	NC
Zip Code	28723
Primary Phone Number	(828) 227-3192
Email	aalbert@wcu.edu
Organization Type	Non-Profit
Organization Tax ID	56-6001440
Time of Year of Initiative	Off Peak (Dec - March) preferred

Describe the timing of the initiative in as much detail as possible (please list key project dates, milestones, timeframes, etc.)	Fall 2025 (August – November) MHC hires Intern A to research and draft script tour in consultation with Sylva Economic Director. The student will be supervised by MHC's Director. (September) Intern A, Sylva Economic Director, MHC Director meet and discuss merchant partners (November) Intern A will rehearse tour with local volunteers as visitors. (November – December) MHC interviews and hires Intern B to give the tours in the new year. Spring 2026 (January) MHC onboards Intern B which includes tour rehearsals. Marketing for tours begins. Start tracking registrations. MHC designs survey for visitors. (mid-February) Tours begin. Second paid marketing push. (March) Tours continue. (early April) Tours conclude. (May) MHC submits report to JCTDA and Town of Sylva
Describe your initiative	"From Rails to Breweries: Sylva's Story on Foot" is a proposed student-designed walking tour aimed at enhancing the visitor experience in Jackson County by connecting Sylva's rich railroad history with its vibrant craft beer and local business scene. By highlighting key landmarks and encouraging engagement with Main Street merchants, restaurants, and breweries, the tour is designed to attract visitors and encourage extended stays. Grant funding would support a paid student internship during the spring 2026 semester. The position's primary responsibility will be the delivery of the tour in collaboration with Sylva stakeholders, as well as marketing efforts to promote the tour as a tourism initiative. At this time, the Mountain Heritage Center does not plan to charge for the experience, but all promotional materials will encourage participants to shop at the conclusion of the tour. This approach supports local businesses directly while keeping the tour accessible to a broad audience. If successful, the initiative could serve as a model for a future Town of Sylva and the WCU Mountain Heritage Center signature series—strengthening the town's identity as a destination where history and hospitality meet.
Describe what previous experience applicant has in successful execution of similar endeavors	The WCU Mountain Heritage Center previously engaged with this grant through its role in facilitating the annual Mountain Heritage Day festival. Management of the event has since transitioned to the WCU Chancellor's Office, with the Center now serving in an advisory capacity for programming.
Website	https://www.wcu.edu/engage/mountain-heritage-center
Social Media Channels - paste URLs below	Instagram – wcu_mhc Facebook – facebook.com/MountainHeritageCenter
Amount of Funds Requested?	2,797
Date Funds Needed	Jan 9, 2026

Give a narrative description of how this project will increase tourism and visitation in Jackson County	By guiding visitors through historic landmarks and including stops at Main Street shops, restaurants, and breweries, the tour creates a unique, immersive experience that boosts local spending and encourages repeat visits. This initiative will directly support tourism by offering a new, engaging way to explore Sylva, appealing to heritage tourists, craft beer enthusiasts, and casual visitors alike.
If this initiative has occurred before, what is new that differentiates it from prior years?	While the Mountain Heritage Center has previously offered programming related to Sylva's downtown, like an architectural worksheet activity, this initiative represents a fresh and innovative approach. "From Rails to Breweries: Sylva's Story on Foot" introduces a student-led perspective, offering a youthful and engaging voice to guide the experience. It also strengthens the connection between Western Carolina University and the town of Sylva, fostering mutual visibility and partnership. The Mountain Heritage Center has experience developing and leading walking tours of the historic WCU campus and, most recently, the John C. Campbell Folk School. Unlike past efforts, the proposed tour is designed not only to educate but also to activate tourism by encouraging interaction with local businesses.
What is your advertising and marketing plan for your initiative?	(November or December, 2025) Press release about the grant and initiative partnership featuring interview with Intern A. (January & February, 2026) Paid ads in regional newspapers: Smoky Mountain Times Swain County, The Mountaineer Haywood County, The Franklin Press Macon County. Press release that may run in the above papers as well as The Sylva Herald Jackson County about the tours. May include interview with Intern B. Paid social media boosts with an emphasis on communities within a 2-hour drive perimeter. (March & April, 2026) Social media posts featuring tour participants.
Do you agree to acknowledge the 'Jackson County TDA' in materials as required? Any releases or ad placements should have a statement that "the event was made possible, in part, by the Jackson County TDA." Print ad placements, where/when possible should include the JCTDA logo.	Yes
Total anticipated cost of initiative	4,297
Total funds your organization will provide toward total cost?	1,500
Detail funds requested from other sources and note commitments or anticipated receipt of funds from other sources	The MHC has committed $1,000 to fund a part-time position for Intern A this fall and $500 in the spring for paid marketing.

Please upload your detailed budget, including event or initiative expenses and revenue. You can attach a spreadsheet (Excel), PDF, or Word Document.	Final_JCTDA Budget WCU MHC 2025.docx 34.79 KB
Anticipated Attendees from Jackson County:	30 (20% of capacity)
Anticipated Attendees from outside Jackson County:	120
Anticipated overnight stays generated:	While the walking tour may not directly generate overnight stays, it has strong potential to enhance the visitor experience for both daytrippers and overnight guests—encouraging longer visits, increased spending, and deeper engagement with local businesses.
How did you determine audience/attendance numbers and where do they come from?	150 total (6 weeks of 2 tours per week = 12 tours) (preferred capacity 12 guests per tour with some room for larger parties, max. 15) (12 tours x 12 guests = 144)
How will you measure success of your initiative?	The Mountain Heritage Center will evaluate the success of the “From Rails to Breweries: Sylva’s Story on Foot” initiative using a combination of the following data. Participation Rates: Tracking the number of individuals who take part in the walking tour, with attention to monthly trends and weather. Visitor Surveys: Collecting feedback from participants to assess satisfaction, perceived value, and suggestions for improvement. Merchant Feedback: Gathering input from local businesses to understand the tour’s impact on foot traffic, sales, and overall engagement. Social Media and Marketing Analytics: Monitoring online engagement, reach, and promotional effectiveness. Intern Reflection Essays: Written observations and reflections from Interns A & B about visitor engagement and suggestions for future improvement of the tour series.
Upload any supporting documentation for your application here:	Letter of Support - Town of Sylva.docx 42.85 KB
Is there anything else you'd like to add?	Thank you for considering the application!
Signature:	

83 Allen Street
Sylva, NC 28779
828-586-2719 Fax 828-586-8134

June 4, 2025

Jackson County Tourism and Development Authority
Nick Breedlove, Director
98 Cope Creek Roadd Suite D
Sylva, NC 28779

Dear Nick,

Thank you for considering the WCU Mountain Heritage Center's request for funding a student intern to develop a tour of Downtown Sylva. Amber Albert is a key member of the Main Street Sylva Association's Design Committee and the Mountain Heritage Center is a key town collaboration partner within the University. When I first met Amber, she shared that her background, including historic tours she had organized with a local town. With her extensive knowledge of history and historic buildings, I knew that she would be a key asset to the Main Street Sylva Association and the Town of Sylva in so many ways, especially since we have lost a key historic preservation resource from the County Planning Department.

The Town is asked frequently to provide historic tours of downtown to state officials and WCU departments. They have been very successful, however, we have limited capacity to host them and I believe a program like this could not only provide additional capacity, but also drive a more diverse interest in our historic downtown. Offerring tours more widely will solidify a sense of connectivity between visitors and the Town of Sylva. I would imagine that the results will be return visits or even new planned visits to Jackson County by those who were spending their overnight stays in adjacent counties, but instead came to Sylva for the day to experience these tours. It is a perfect complement to the Heritage Walk, but with a more modern approach and the goal to drive visitor interactions with merchants.

Please let me know if you have any questions. Thank you for your support of the Town of Sylva in so many ways.

Sincerely,

Bernadette Peters
Economic Development Director
Town of Sylva

CC: Paige Dowling, Town Manager