



## **SOAR Announcements Bring Partners, Funds to Eastern Kentucky**

Since December 2013, state and federal leaders have announced the launch of several programs that will bring millions of dollars in investments to eastern Kentucky and lay a strong foundation for the multiyear SOAR initiative. In addition, leaders have put forth SOAR-specific initiatives that are expected to see action within the next six months. Among the announcements:

### **Gov. Beshear, Congressman Rogers announce plan for high-speed broadband**

In January, Governor Steve Beshear and Congressman Hal Rogers jointly announced an ambitious plan to extend access to high-speed broadband throughout Kentucky. Underserved eastern Kentucky is to be the first area for the statewide project, which will be supported by \$60 million in state bonds and \$40 million in federal and private sources.

The “Next Generation Kentucky Information Highway” will offer affordable and accessible broadband to reduce the barriers of mountain terrain and accelerate business development, distance learning, advanced health technologies, and first-responder communications. The project is expected to take up to three years to build nearly 3,000 miles of fiber infrastructure, including 600 miles in eastern Kentucky.

Broadband service for eastern Kentucky was a primary recommendation of the December SOAR conference, and this project will be a centerpiece of the SOAR initiative. The Center for Rural Development, which recently completed a feasibility study outlining the costs for laying dark fiber, is set to lead the first phase of broadband expansion. Kentucky currently ranks 46<sup>th</sup> in high-speed broadband availability, and 23 percent of the population have no access to broadband.

Congressman Rogers’ [press release](#)

### **Governor calls for extending a four-lane Mountain Parkway by 2020**

Governor Beshear released a proposal in January to widen, modernize, and extend the Mountain Parkway, which has long served as the main connector between eastern Kentucky and the Bluegrass region.

As part of his Kentucky Highway Plan, the Governor is recommending a series of projects, totaling \$753.6 million, to create a four-lane corridor from Interstate 64 near Winchester to Pikeville. The westernmost part of the Mountain Parkway has long been four lanes, but the remaining 29.8 miles is two lanes, with an occasional passing lane. The Governor’s plan would

four-lane the section from Campton to Salyersville and extend the parkway from Salyersville to Prestonsburg by four-laning 16.2 additional miles.

To finance the \$753.6 million project, the Governor proposes to use \$595.6 million of state and federal highway funds over six years and \$158 million from the sale of toll revenue bonds. The Governor says the road projects will strengthen the region's ability to attract jobs, visitors, and investment.

Governor's [press release](#)

### **Eight southeastern counties designated as federal 'Promise Zone'**

An eight-county region in southeastern Kentucky, hard hit by poverty and loss of coal jobs, is among the first five sites in the country to be designated as a federal "Promise Zone." The White House made the announcement in December.

The designation means the federal government will partner with these zones to accelerate public-private partnerships, promote job creation and education opportunities, and improve access to federal grant programs. The southeastern Kentucky initiative will focus on a range of activities, including small business lending, expanded job and entrepreneurship training, college- and career-readiness programs and technical-education programs.

The Kentucky Highlands Investment Corporation led the application process and will work in partnership with the University of Kentucky, Eastern Kentucky University, Berea College, the East Kentucky Concentrated Employment Program and other partners on the initiative. The Appalachian Regional Commission provided \$250,000 in support of this partnership. Promise Zone counties: Bell, Harlan, Letcher, Perry, Leslie, Clay, Knox and Whitley.

White House Promise Zone [overview](#)

### **\$30 million 'Race to the Top' award to boost K-12 education**

The U.S. Department of Education announced a \$30 million grant in December to provide quality education for K-12 children in 17 eastern Kentucky school districts.

Race to the Top district grants are awarded to regions with innovative plans to drive education reform and improve student achievement. Emphasis is on personalizing student learning, increasing student achievement and effectiveness of educators, closing achievement gaps, and preparing students for success in college and careers. The Kentucky Valley Educational Cooperative is leading the effort, affecting some 43,000 students and 2,500 educators in 14 counties.

U.S. Department of Education [press release](#)

### **Vilsack: 'StrikeForce' initiative will increase region's access to USDA resources**

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack joined Governor Steve Beshear and Congressman Hal Rogers on Jan. 17 in Pineville to announce the expansion of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's StrikeForce Initiative into Kentucky and three other states.

In Kentucky, “StrikeForce for Rural Growth and Opportunity” will serve 73 counties, including those in eastern and southeastern Kentucky. USDA will seek to increase its investments to the targeted counties through intensive outreach and partnership. The purpose of the initiative is to strengthen partnerships in poverty-stricken rural areas to ensure that every community has equal access to USDA programs.

Since it was launched in 2010, StrikeForce has resulted in more than 80,000 projects and brought more than \$9.7 billion investments to rural America.

USDA [press release](#), USDA video on StrikeForce Initiative

### **\$2.6 million loan pool to spur small business start-ups and expansions**

Businesses in southeastern Kentucky recently gained access to a new source of business capital to encourage economic growth in the region through the SOAR initiative. The loan program was made possible by a \$400,000 grant announced by Gov. Beshear; \$900,000 in private funds raised by Kentucky Highlands Investment Corporation; and a \$1.3 million matching grant from the Community Development Financial Institutions Fund of the U.S. Department of the Treasury.

The \$2.6 million loan program will be available within 22 counties (Bell, Clay, Clinton, Cumberland, Estill, Harlan, Jackson, Knox, Laurel, Lee, Leslie, Letcher, Lincoln, Madison, McCreary, Owsley, Perry, Pulaski, Rockcastle, Russell, Wayne and Whitley). The program will be administered by the Kentucky Highlands Investment Corporation, which provides loans, equity investments, and other assistance to southeastern Kentucky businesses.

Governor’s [press release](#)

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