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Southwestern Region Charts Vision for New Century

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ROANOKE — A map with no names can sum up the shared vision of 14 cities and counties in southwestern Virginia that was partially unveiled Monday.

"We wanted to show the cohesiveness and down play the artificial barriers," said Ken Anderson, one of 1,000 volunteers from the region who spent 18 months coming up with goals for the year 2010.

The big geographic map of the area drawn for the news conference contained only the three words: *New Century Region*. Missing were the names within the borders: Alleghany, Botetourt, Craig, Floyd, Franklin, Giles, Montgomery, Pulaski and Roanoke counties, along with the cities of Clifton Forge, Covington, Radford, Salem and Roanoke.

And even the regional title may change to something catchy, Bev

Fitzpatrick, president of the New Century Council, said. They'll talk about replacing the neutral name next week, when the second part of the report is released.

"We can probably save a lot of taxpayer money by working together," Fitzpatrick, said, adding that they are not talking about consolidating governments — just services.

The strategies range from establishing toll-free communication within the region to establishing a council to oversee a regional approach to all aspects of economic development.

If the visionaries have their way, there will be 10,000 acres of regional commerce parks located throughout the area that will be jointly owned. The county and city governments would share in the cost of creating the parks and share in the tax revenues from businesses locating there.

"They are going to require a new way of thinking," Anderson

said of the commerce parks, "but that's what it takes to be competitive in a global economy."

There are models of the concept on a smaller scale, Anderson said. Montgomery County and the city of Radford took a year to work out an agreement to share the costs of preparing land along the Interstate 77 corridor for business development. They built water and sewer lines and signed a contract to share tax revenues from business that locate there.

The plan also envisions a regional utility system that will coordinate infrastructure needs so that water and sewer systems, for example, follow drainage basins rather than artificial government borders.

Last year's ice storm, which left much of Blacksburg and Virginia Tech without water and without the power systems that rely on water, illustrates the benefit of a regional system, Fitzpatrick said. The storm left much of Blacksburg and Virginia Tech without

water. Montgomery County's water system runs to the border, within two miles of the reservoir used by Roanoke County. If the systems were joined, he said, the problem would have been averted.

Other recommendations include:

- The presidents of the region's colleges and universities will form a council and work together to develop ties between education and job creation.

- The Roanoke Regional Airport will be the passenger center while the New River Valley Airport will specialize in heavy cargo transportation for the region.

- The region will be a world leader in fiber optics and wireless communication, and the concept of the Blacksburg Electronic Village will connect schools, businesses, governments and residents in one computer system.

- There will be a communications innovation zone to remove regulatory, policy or organizational barriers that inhibit telecommunications use.