

Appendix F

Regional Trail Networks

In the last decade, an effort to formalize connectivity of trails throughout Pennsylvania has led to the development of regional trail networks that look to build upon the collective momentum of each project's success and supporting infrastructure. In many ways, these efforts mimic the expansion of the original regional railroad network on which many trails are built, connecting local communities to the larger whole.

The forerunner of the regional trails effort is the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) in southwestern Pennsylvania. The idea for the GAP began with seven different trail groups coming together to complete the project of converting the Western Maryland Railroad and the Pittsburgh and Lake Erie Railroad into a single trail. They created an umbrella organization called the Allegheny Trail Alliance to coordinate the effort and set priorities for funding. They also decided to brand the project as a whole, superseding the local names as a way to market the scale of the project. As the project grew in stature, the GAP added other efforts to make sure the local communities benefited from the effort, creating the Trail Town Program and becoming the model for success nationally.

That model—scaling up the construction efforts and focusing on the other components of a successful trail—is what drives the regional trail networks. Branding helps create public support and allows the trail vision to bypass obstacles and maintain progress. It also encourages collaboration and coalition-building with a variety of partners.

Currently in Pennsylvania there are four regional trail networks working towards connectivity. Unsurprisingly, the three projects in the eastern part of the state all include a single long- distance trail as a key component, while the one in western Pennsylvania relies on the GAP as a critical corridor.

Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition (IHTC or I Heart Trails): This project is made up of seven destination corridors connecting 52 counties in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, and New York. At over 1,500 miles, it is one of the most ambitious projects nationally, but has been making great progress in the past few years and is approximately 50% complete. In Pennsylvania, the key corridors include the Erie to Pittsburgh Trail, the Pennsylvania Wilds Loop, and the Sheepskin Trail portion of the Pittsburgh to Parkersburg Corridor.

The Circuit Trails: This project follows a hub and spoke model to improve the transportation options throughout greater Philadelphia. The Circuit Trails began with a successful federal TIGER grant application, which demonstrated the value of working collaboratively to complete difficult projects. Since that grant, the Circuit Trails has set a high bar for success and continues to achieve its goals. Ultimately, the Circuit Trails will be an 800-mile network comprised of trunk lines and connectors in five southeast Pennsylvania counties and three counties in New Jersey.

NEPA Trails Forum: This group in the Poconos has long met as a network, but has only recently begun to plan for connectivity, spurred on by the soon-to-be completed connection of the D&L Heritage Trail into Wilkes-Barre. At potentially over 300 miles, this emerging network will create new recreation and transportation options for the region.

THE LINK: THE LINK is an interconnected network of safe, beautiful multi-use trails offering Lehigh Valley residents and visitors the opportunity for year-round outdoor recreation, alternative transportation, and healthy living. It offers over 125 miles of trails available for biking, running, walking, and other outdoor activities. More than 100 additional miles are planned for future completion. THE LINK provides access to other long-distance trails outside of the Lehigh Valley. It provides trail users with a direct connection to Philadelphia, the Pocono Mountains, New York, New Jersey, and beyond. This effort is essential for the future of the Lehigh Valley. Growth of the trail network will increase quality of life, generate economic growth, protect the environment, and improve population health in coming years.