

Memo

To: John Norbeck, Deputy Secretary for Parks and Forestry, DCNR

From: Silas Chamberlin, Chair, on behalf of the Conservation & Natural Resource Advisory Council

cc: Cindy Dunn, Secretary, DCNR; Seth Cassell, State Forester, PA DCNR; Michael Hoffman, Chief, Recreation Section, Bureau of Forestry

Date: October 13, 2023

Re: ATV Regional Connector Pilot Project Field Visit, Conservation & Natural Resource Advisory Council Feedback

On Tuesday September 26, 2023, CNRAC members joined DCNR staff for a field visit to points along the ATV Regional Connector Pilot Project to solicit feedback from business owners, municipal officials, residents and DCNR staff regarding the recently-completed pilot period.

CNRAC members made the following observations during the visit. This feedback is being provided to DCNR to help inform finalization of the Draft Monitoring Report being issued by the end of 2023 and any steps regarding the continuation, improvement or assessment of the pilot project.

- **Pilot seen as a success.** On balance the pilot seems overwhelmingly positive and DCNR has done a good job of administering the program. Only one municipal official noted the cons outweighed the pros, but he admitted that the pilot had been instrumental in keeping several local businesses afloat. Regional stakeholders said the program had been a good way for them to partner with DCNR more closely and to recognize a benefit for local municipalities.
- **Major economic impact.** Every business visited has seen significant economic impact from the connector. Several businesses noted revenue had increased dramatically. Others noted they had made investments in new infrastructure to accommodate increased patronage. Several businesses noted that hunting has been on the decline and ATV tourism has been a welcome form of additional business to make up for it. A Potter County planning official noted, “The Germania Hotel and Germania Store would not exist without motorized recreation.”

Despite the clear economic benefits, several businesses expressed a need for additional support in the form of grants, financing, marketing, coordination with local and state agencies, and better networking between businesses on the route. CNRAC will make introductions between PA Wilds staff and individual businesses, but there will likely be an ongoing need for non-DCNR entities to focus on growing the capacity of economic and business support ecosystems in the region.

- **Limited local complaints.** Most residents' complaints were in response to dust and high levels of ATV traffic. A local, non-ATV trail user shared that her experience on state forest lands had not been negatively impacted by the connector. Some of the fears of environmental impact from the connector seem to have been mitigated by good planning, keeping routes on ridgelines and paralleling roads, and monitoring sensitive areas. Several stakeholders noted the need for clarity on landowner liability and some confusion about who is responsible for ATV/UTV activity on private land adjacent to the connector.
- **Significant drain on resources.** DCNR has done a very good job of managing the program, despite it requiring nearly 14,000 hours of staff time for planning, maintenance, and monitoring by rangers. Staff noted that construction and maintenance of ATV trails had detracted from their ability to regrade existing forestry roads. Rangers noted that patrolling the connector occupied significant portions of their time. In the long run, this does not appear to be sustainable for DCNR's regional staff and effectively reduces time and resources available to other public land user groups.
- **Need for legislative action.** The current ATV regulations do not reflect the rise of UTV use nor are they consistent with other motorized recreation allowed to occur on PennDOT roads. This leads to significant confusion between users, rangers, and local courts. There is also a need for increased funding for DCNR and local governments (e.g., more rangers, enhanced township road maintenance). The need for funding should be considered in the ongoing review of tag and fee structure and the potential for an increase that is tied to tangible benefits for motorized recreationists. Several of these issues will require legislative action and cannot be addressed through DCNR or other agency policy. *CNRAC requests to be engaged in this holistic discussion of tag and fee reform.*
- **Need for safety education.** Several stakeholders noted issues with children and infants riding in ATVs without proper restraints, car seats or helmets. Most ATV and UTV manufacturers advise that car seats should not be installed in their vehicles. Users typically note that ATV-style helmets are too heavy for their child's head, so they opt for no helmet or a lighter bicycle helmet, not suitable for motorized recreation. These issues are typically handled by DCNR rangers through education and a verbal warning since most users are not aware of the regulations. There is a need for additional education on proper safety regarding helmets and children in ATVs, perhaps through signage at connector trailheads and by working through ATV user groups.
- **Improved engagement by PennDOT.** Many of the complaints about the connector related to coordination with PennDOT on signage, highway occupancy permits and decisions about which sections of state highway could be designated for the connector. A number of businesses wished PennDOT would be better engaged and more communicative. This highlights the need for PennDOT's district and central office staff to be full partners in the connector pilot and potential future management entity.
- **Opportunities to enhance the connector.** The trail route could be improved to incorporate more loops and logical ins/outs near businesses and landmarks. Several stakeholders noted alternative routes would alleviate ATV congestion in some towns and over-use of some rural roads, thus reducing local complaints.

- **Additional communication needed.** There is a need for better communication between stakeholders, potentially through the formation of a stakeholder council that would meet regularly and maintain communication between key players. Several business owners, including Don of Mountaintop and Provisions, noted they are facing some challenges and confusion that could perhaps be resolved through conversations with the right players.
- **Need for a sustainable management entity.** County-level joint authority (and funding) is needed to administer the program, engage stakeholders, and lessen the burden on DCNR staff. There seems to be interest in this approach from stakeholders of all perspectives. *CNRAC requests to be engaged in this process and have the opportunity provide feedback.*
- **Evaluation of trail surface materials over time.** There was conflicting input on whether the type of material used for ATV trail surface was also appropriate for snowmobile use and how the trail surface would hold up over time. The trail surface should be monitored with the needs of snowmobile use in mind as well as ATVs, including the rates at which snow melts on the ATV trail surface and the impact of larger stone material on snowmobile skis.
- **Continue to invest in snowmobiling.** Numerous business owners noted the continued importance of snowmobile traffic and the nice synergy between snowmobile use in the winter and ATV use in the summer. Any changes meant to improve ATV access should also consider snowmobile access and vice versa, with the goal of supporting both user groups.