

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A VISION FOR WEST VIRGINIA'S TRAILS

A Trail Definition: A designated land corridor or body of water that provides recreational, aesthetic, alternate transportation or educational opportunities to both motorized and non-motorized users, for all ages and abilities.

PATHWAYS TO THE FUTURE: WHY A STATEWIDE TRAIL PLAN?

- **Scenic Beauty Brings Opportunity and Challenge**

West Virginia is blessed with one of the most beautiful landscapes in the United States, but it is a landscape that is often inaccessible to visitors and state residents.

As the state's tourism industry continues to grow, West Virginia finds itself challenged to increase access to this landscape, while protecting it from over-development and preserving its unique history, heritage and people.

The purpose of the Statewide Trail Plan is to provide a guide for making the wonders of West Virginia accessible to all kinds of people, for all kinds of uses, without compromising the natural, historical or cultural integrity of West Virginia.

- **The Path of Development**

Ever since the days when Native Americans hunted the rich bounty of game in West Virginia's hills, development in the state has been dependent on trails, both land and water.

Throughout the state's history, economic and demographic growth has followed the corridors of transportation. From the pioneers' exploration of the state along its rivers and trails, to the development of our communities along the railroad corridors, to the growth of America today as it follows the nation's interstate system, access has been the secret of success.

- **The Growth of the Recreation Industry**

Today in West Virginia, the importance of trails has come full circle. The abandoned wagon paths and railroad corridors of the industrial revolution are once again becoming vital assets to the state.

Tourism, including active outdoor recreation and nature tourism, has become one of West Virginia's fastest-growing industries. The escalating use of trails of all kinds is expected to continue into the future as visitors and residents enjoy the Mountain State's scenic beauty in ever-increasing numbers.

- **Toward a Better Quality of Life**

West Virginia's destiny has largely been determined by its geography and its geology, both of which have contributed to the state's rural nature. Ironically, many West Virginians find their rural location limits access to the outdoor recreational opportunities available to them.

The Statewide Trail Plan proposes to forge a unique public/private partnership that will make West Virginia the "trails destination" of the eastern United States. In

doing so, the state will create not only a significant economic development tool, but a resource that will improve the quality of life for all West Virginians.

PREPARING THE WAY: DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAN

- **The Birth of the Plan**

The development of the Statewide Trail Plan began in 1996, when the West Virginia Trails Coalition brought together the appropriate private and public entities needed to coordinate and promote the development of the state's land and water trails.

The process quickly gained the involvement of other trail groups, as well as local, state and federal agencies. This led to the Wild, Wonderful Trails Conference in Nitro, W.Va., in March 1997. Gov. Cecil Underwood provided the keynote address. Following the conference, the Statewide Trail Plan committee was formed with a membership representing a wide range of public agencies and private organizations.

- **Involving the Public**

The committee assured maximum public involvement in the plan through a series of 12 public workshops around the state and through a survey mailed to West Virginia trail users and made available on the Internet.

The workshops and survey provided the data that the committee considered in drafting the plan.

In September 1999, a draft of the Statewide Trail Plan was released to the public for further comment. Those comments were incorporated into the final version of the plan.

- **Meeting the Needs of West Virginia**

The resulting Statewide Trail Plan addresses the needs of all types of trails and all types of trail users. It plots a course that will maximize the economic and community development benefits of trails, while making the health and aesthetic benefits of a broad-based, diverse and accessible trail system available to every West Virginian.

MAKING IT HAPPEN: IMPLEMENTATION

The Statewide Trail Plan blazes the way to a successful trail program in West Virginia. Among its recommendations:

1) Create a West Virginia State Trails Program

- Expand the membership and authority of the West Virginia Recreational Trails Advisory Board.
- Appoint a state trails coordinator.
- Create a state trails program advisory group to address program development and funding needs.
- Update the statewide trail plan on a regular basis.

2) Coordinate Activities

- Have an annual trails conference.
- Conduct regular trails coordination meetings around the state.
- Develop and upgrade trail web sites and links.

3) Utilize Trails for Alternative Transportation

- Increase public awareness of the benefits of alternative transportation.
- Incorporate alternative transportation into all road planning and design.
- Create a coalition to work with WVDOT to identify and pursue funding for alternative transportation needs.

4) Promote the Economic Benefits of Trails

- Create programs that promote investment in trail infrastructure.
- Develop a media campaign to educate the public on the benefits of trails.
- Conduct economic development workshops statewide to assist trail-related small businesses.
- Encourage WVDNR to conduct surveys on the economic impact of state parks and trail users.

5) Encourage Cooperative Maintenance

- Determine and address trail maintenance needs statewide.
- Develop volunteer trail maintenance programs.

6) Minimize Trail-Use Conflicts

- Develop trail policies and safety programs for all trails.
- Develop trail management systems for all trails.
- Create standards for design, signage and safety that would minimize trail use conflicts.

7) Encourage Trail Partnerships

- Encourage the WVDNR to advise and coordinate local trail efforts.
- Create a rural development program to assist gateway communities.
- Develop legislation that provides trail and river groups access to insurance coverage through local or state government.
- Involve West Virginia's 11 Regional Planning and Development Councils in trail planning.

8) Connect Existing Trails

- Locate and map all existing and proposed trails and river access points.
- Develop a comprehensive statewide trail map that visualizes linkages.
- Collaborate regionally to connect trails.

9) Collaborate with Landowners

- Broaden and enhance legislation limiting the liability of landowners along trails.
- Encourage local approaches to increasing landowner support of trails.
- Develop an incentive program through WVDNR that encourages landowners to provide public access for recreational purposes.

10) Create More Trails

- Fund studies to determine regional trail needs.
- Consolidate all existing and proposed trails into a master plan.
- Repair and complete the state's flagship trails, the Greenbrier River Trail and the North Bend Rail Trail.
- Develop land donation incentive programs.
- Create standard state procedures for acquiring and converting abandoned rail corridors to trails.
- Include river access points in future road construction or repair.

11) Develop a State Funding Program for Trails

- Develop a state loan program for trail-related businesses
- Create a state trail fund that can be used to match federal funds.
- Create a West Virginia Trails Foundation.
- Develop new sources of funding.

12) Raise Awareness of Trails

- Develop trail marketing strategies through the West Virginia Division of Tourism.
- Utilize the West Virginia Trails Coalition to inform the public about trails.
- Identify and install signage along highways for major trailheads.

13) Improve Trail Accessibility

- Create a standardized format for relaying information about trail features, conditions and difficulty.
- Create recognizable and standardized signage for all trails.
- Provide trail signage, maps and guides in alternative formats.
- Increase awareness of, and adherence to, ADA design requirements.
- Target non-traditional trail use groups in trail planning and promotion.
- Conduct a statewide water trails assessment.
- Expand, subsidize and interpret the state's river gauging system for the recreational paddler.
- Expand on-site programs for environmental education and interpretation of trailside resources.

The West Virginia Statewide Trail Plan provides "The Pathway to the Future" for the state's trails and the development of the active outdoor recreation industry in West Virginia.

But the plan is only the first step. A plan that sits on a shelf is a waste of energy and money. Only through implementation of the plan's recommendations can we make West Virginia the "Trail Destination" of the eastern United States.

Just as the Statewide Trail Plan was created through cooperation, so too will implementation rely on the cooperation of state legislators, public agencies, private businesses and non-profit organizations.

The goal of making our state's scenic beauty and rich heritage accessible to all is ambitious, but attainable. The time is right for West Virginia to step down the Pathway to the Future.

TYPICAL TRAIL USES

Aesthetic Appreciation
Alternative Transportation
ATV (all-terrain vehicles)
Backpacking
Bicycling (roads/trails)
Camping Access
Canoeing
Caving Access
Commuting
Cross Country Skiing
Environmental Education
Exercise
Fishing Access
Four-wheeling
Hiking
History & Culture Appreciation
Horseback Riding
Hunting Access
In-line Skating
Kayaking / Rafting
Motor Boating
Nature Study
Off-road Motorcycling
Photography
Relaxation
River Tubing
Rock Climbing Access
Running / Jogging
Snowmobiling
Walking
Watching Wildlife