

## **CHAPTER 2: TRAIL ISSUES**

Participants in the public workshops, the trail user survey and the Statewide Trail Plan Committee (STPC) identified the following issues relating to West Virginia's trails as requiring action during the next five years. Many agencies and groups are making great progress in addressing these issues on a local level but they must be examined on a statewide basis. The plan for resolving these issues is in *Chapter 3: Plan for Action*.

### **TRAIL AWARENESS & INFORMATION**

Participants recognized lack of awareness of trail opportunities in the state as a problem. Some felt state government should promote trails more widely to users and visitors. Written information about the state's trails is not adequate or readily available.

There is also a lack of information about the trails. Signage is underprovided on many trails, particularly in rural areas. Few trails have quality maps. Other trail information problems include outdated mapping, the need for bilingual mapping and signage and protection of informational kiosks from vandalism.

Many of these problems will continue due to limited funding for trail efforts. Although this is a nationwide problem and not unique to West Virginia's trails, the state will suffer a stagnation or loss of visitors if these problems continue or worsen. With surrounding states developing innovative trail networks and advertising campaigns, West Virginia must continue to improve its efforts to promote and develop its outstanding trail system to remain competitive.

The West Virginia Division of Tourism already has answered some of the concerns related to inadequate mapping by updating and expanding the West Virginia state trails map, contained in the West Virginia Statewide Trail Plan. This map represents the first step in a new effort to inventory the state's trail miles. The plan sets the framework for conducting this inventory and making the information available to the public through a variety of formats.

### **LANDOWNER LIABILITY & PUBLIC SAFETY ISSUES**

Securing the cooperation of private landowners is vital to expanding and connecting West Virginia's trails. Current legislation in West Virginia (WV Code 19-25-3.) protects landowners from liability if they do not charge for use of their property. Landowners are liable if a public nuisance on the property causes injury. Few state residents are aware of the current law limiting legal liability of landowners. State agencies could publicize the limits on liability and easements granted by the state for recreational use of private property.

In addition, efforts must be made to make the public aware that trails do not cause an increase in crime or vandalism. Available literature and statistics indicate no discernable rise in crime along newly designated trails. In fact, studies indicate a reduction in crime and vandalism on officially designated trails because trail users serve as eyes and ears for urban as well as rural trails. Designating a trail officially brings increased use of the trail by lawful trail enthusiasts, often reducing the amount of vandalism and crime that occurred when the trail was unofficial or under-utilized for recreational purposes. According to *The Effects of Greenways on Property Values and Public Safety*, a joint study by the Conservation Fund and Colorado State Parks published in 1995, 100 percent of respondents in single family homes adjacent to three trails in the metro Denver, Colorado, area answered no when asked if there were problems serious enough that they would want to see the trails closed. Ninety-three percent of respondents said the trail had increased quality of life in their neighborhoods.

## **PERCEIVED LACK OF COMMITMENT**

Many workshop participants identified the lack of interest and commitment to trails in West Virginia as a problem. Participants state that trails are a low priority for the elected officials and administrators despite the fact that trails are the most readily accessible recreational opportunity. Some participants suggested the lack of state support results in a trickle-down effect, discouraging support of trail initiatives by local governments. State government must be educated on the many economic and health benefits of West Virginia's trail system.

Workshop input indicated perceptions that other recreational interests received the bulk of the state's promotional and development focus on the outdoors, leaving trails seriously under-funded and under-promoted. This discourages citizens who are trying to develop trails as an outdoor recreational draw.

Some progress has been made. The West Virginia Division of Tourism designated 2000 the "Year of the Trail" and focused on trails for its primary promotional theme in the first year of the new millennium to recognize the enormous popularity of West Virginia's trails.

Other states recognize the benefits of their trail systems. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Pennsylvania announced the availability of over \$16 million in grants for trails and trail-related projects in 1999. In addition to the state funds, over \$40 million in federal Transportation Enhancement Program grants were made available for state projects. Eligible projects for state funds included planning development and acquisition of local park and recreation facilities, acquisition and development of rail-trails, river conservation planning, and improvement and development of motorized and nonmotorized trails for recreational purposes.

Workshop participants agreed that West Virginia has made a good start in developing and promoting outdoor recreation but further efforts are required to promote the benefits of trails. This requires a strong public/private partnership with active citizen and state leadership involvement. In times of shrinking government expenditures, citizens and corporations must step in to be responsible and involved stewards of our state's trail treasures and cooperate with state agencies to make the most of available funding sources. A mandated and funded West Virginia State Trails Program, as called for in Objective #1 of Chapter 3: Plan for Action, would address these issues and could leverage public and private funding sources.

## **TRAIL DEVELOPMENT, LINKAGE AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

West Virginia possesses many miles of trails, but workshop participants agreed that greater diversity of accessible trails is needed. Many stated they would use trails more if the trails were more easily accessible and if there were a greater variety in the state's trails to provide for all types and levels of users. The workshops also illustrated that there is interest in local trail development if more information and expertise were available to assist with these efforts.

Participants mentioned a need for "connector" trails to get people from urban to rural trails without driving, as well as the need for more community trailheads. Many workshop respondents wanted to see a "big picture" approach to trails development, with more oversight and coordination on the state level. Respondents also felt that past trail efforts had not given enough attention to trail infrastructure. As a result many trails now in use suffer from lack of comfort facilities, campsites, signage and nearby lodging.

Workshop participants and the members of the Statewide Trail Plan Committee suggested the incorporation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility considerations in future trail development and, where possible, increased accessibility in existing facilities. Experts in state government or the private sector can provide information to local trail efforts.

For example, the West Virginia Department of Transportation and the Nature Conservancy, in partnership, are creating an accessible 2,100-foot trail for the physically challenged at Cranesville Swamp. The project will be constructed to standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act and will use funds from the Nature Conservancy and the Federal Highway Administration, National Recreational Trails program. Due to the unique nature of the effort, the Nature Conservancy will publicize the trail statewide and nationally.

Participants recommended that ADA requirements and accessibility issues be given higher priority by all trail developers and managers. Trail managers need to be innovative and creative in new construction and in attempting to retrofit existing facilities. Given the nature of the settings, not all of the state's trail miles can be made ADA accessible. Trails must provide sufficient information, in alternative formats, on trail characteristics so that people may decide independently whether a specific trail is

accessible to them based on their abilities. This does not preclude creating some accessible areas or segments of trails so that everyone will have the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors.

## **TRAIL MARKETING AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS**

Participants cited lack of cross-promotion of West Virginia's diverse natural, cultural and historical attractions as another problem. Participants recommended forging promotional links among trails and historical attractions, tourist sites, outfitters, retail outlets and lodging. Many suggested that the state, convention and visitors bureaus and chambers of commerce could assist with this effort.

State residents should be educated on the potential economic benefits of trails. According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the newly developed Hatfield-McCoy Recreational Area, a 2000-mile system of multi-use trails for off-highway vehicles, mountain bikes, equestrians and hikers, is projected to generate over 3,200 new jobs and over \$107 million in direct and indirect economic benefits annually. This trail network represents only a small part of the state's total current and potential trail miles.

Additionally, the public should be informed that trails actually increase, not decrease, property values. The Delaware and Raritan Multi-Use Trail, which follows an abandoned railroad and canal in central New Jersey, is cited by the Rails to Trails Conservancy in *Railroads Recycled* as an example of the economic benefit of trails. James Amon, executive director of the D&R Canal Commission says that property values adjacent to the park and trail have increased. Private businesses have been created in response to user demand. It is now common to see concessionaires and rental establishments catering to the many users of the trail and canal. An historic train station in Lambertville recently was restored into a restaurant and a hotel was built nearby that profits greatly from its trail neighbor. New proposals for trail-oriented development are currently in the works, including a combination canoe and bicycle rental outfitter.

A number of tourism-related businesses have developed around the North Bend Rail Trail in the past several years as a result of the trail's popularity. These businesses include a bike shop, several bed and breakfasts, and some retail stores. There also has been an increase in business at tourist service businesses such as gas stations and restaurants. These successes can be replicated throughout the state given the proper development and promotion of trails.

## **QUALITY OF LIFE**

Trails are the state's most abundant, and in some areas, only recreational opportunities. Almost every home in West Virginia is near an official or unofficial trail, but many state residents take little advantage of these recreational possibilities due to lack of knowledge and trail access.

With the abundance and diversity of trails in the state, there is an opportunity and a need to increase visitor trail use to improve our economy and our health. With obesity and heart disease rates continuously near the top of the national average, West Virginia needs to increase its exercise rate. In 1998, the West Virginia Bureau for Public Health, Office of Epidemiology and Health Promotion, reported that West Virginia's age-adjusted rate of heart disease was 21% higher than the national average. West Virginia ranked #1 out of 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico in prevalence of obesity.

Workshop participants ranked promotion of healthy lifestyles to increase state resident trail use as an important issue. Currently, some efforts are being made to promote the health benefits of trails but not on a statewide basis. For example, the West Virginia Coalition for Physical Activity, sponsor of Walk Across West Virginia, incorporates the statewide trail plan map, health information and tidbits of West Virginia history into its free, flexible walking project used by schools, work sites, churches, individuals and community groups. Private and public health groups should work in conjunction with the West Virginia Bureau for Public Health to develop a promotional and educational campaign to increase state residents' trail use. Trails and greenways are also an alternative transportation resource that is currently underutilized.

## **TRAIL MAINTENANCE**

Participants indicated that mechanisms must be created to provide for future trail maintenance. Trail developers know from past experience that if no maintenance plan exists, a trail is destined for problems. This maintenance issue is important to consider when funding is secured for trail development. It is much easier for a local government or the state to support a trail project if the issue of current and future maintenance has been addressed. A maintenance plan removes government concern that it may have to take over up-keep of the trail. Even small projects that do not make provisions for maintenance find that what was initially an attractive asset can, over time, become a financially draining eyesore.

Another issue related to maintenance is trail overuse. State-level coordination of trails could help to plan for alternatives if overcrowding becomes an issue.

While oversight from the state will help alleviate some of the maintenance issues raised above, it is important for local trail managers to make maintenance a priority in their planning efforts. One source of assistance that trail managers can depend on for maintenance assistance is volunteers. Trail users are generally willing to put in some volunteer time to provide assistance with trail development and maintenance. For example, Morgantown's first city park, Whitmoore Park, has fallen into disrepair over the years. Using volunteers, the city of Morgantown and the Mon Valley Greenspace Coalition have rehabilitated the park and built an impressive connector trail involving excavation and the construction of several bridges.

A statewide volunteer clearinghouse could assign volunteers to participating projects. This clearinghouse could be run through either a state or private-sector entity.

Another source of maintenance assistance is low-income, high unemployment population segments. Application could be made to the federal Welfare-to-Work program for grant monies to fund wages of these employees. Such programs have proven successful in other states. The California Conservation Corps (CCC) employs approximately 2,000 young adults, 18 to 23 years old, every year to work on conservation projects sponsored by local, state, federal government and nonprofit organizations. This mutually beneficial program provides employment and develops work skills for young adults. It further provides conservation-related entities with an affordable labor force to complete projects they might not otherwise be able to accomplish. CCC accomplishments include construction or rebuilding of over 2,500 miles of trails, four million hours spent on park improvements, and over 900 miles of stream clearing for salmon and trout migrations.

A multitude of potential labor sources exists for low or no-cost trail maintenance assistance. From prison populations to secondary schools, universities to retirees, a trail manager should be able to locate willing and enthusiastic volunteers for almost any trail maintenance effort.

## **TRAIL USE CONFLICTS**

Many workshop participants predicted that increased trail use could result in an increase in conflict among different types of trail users. User conflict is generally one-sided and occurs when a user objects to another user on the same trail. Conflict is generally the result of opposing expectations, attitudes and beliefs. Efforts should be made to ensure that all trail users have a safe and enjoyable experience on West Virginia's trails. Respondents at the workshops felt there was a problem of communication and understanding among, and sometimes within, trail user groups.

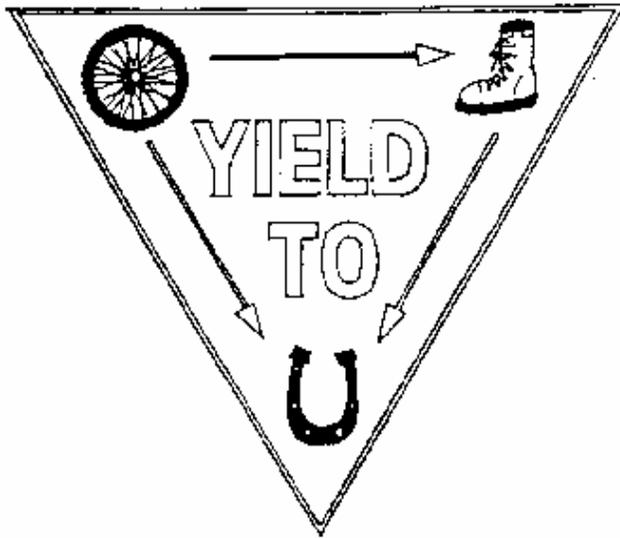
A variety of solutions is appropriate in dealing with the issue of trail use conflicts. The first responsibility lies with trail users. Often, an individual trail user's quest to use a trail in solitude can contribute to user conflict. This happens when the user encounters other people on the trail and the user's expectation of solitude is disrupted.

One solution to this problem is encouraging trail users to research trails before use to find the appropriate setting for their desired experience. However, this research is not always available as trail management entities do not always provide timely and accessible information about their trails.

Educating users on the trail's uses also improves user compatibility and decreases conflict. This can be achieved through better distribution and posting of maps and signage at trailheads. Separating users at trailheads may also reduce conflicts. In many cases, up to 80% of trail traffic is concentrated in the first half-mile from the trailhead.

Separate trailhead facilities or separate trail entrances from the trailhead may reduce user conflicts and overuse near the busy first half-mile of trails.

Proper trail etiquette would also improve user compatibility. To minimize conflict on multi-user trails, managers should educate users that bikes yield to walkers and everyone yields to horses.



Compatibility is also influenced by the trail manager's cooperation and consultation with various trail use groups. Trail managers need to know the user's needs and expectations as well as the design and trail environment to make sound decisions and react quickly to emerging use conflicts.

Finally, user groups must come to know and understand other trail users so that effective communication can ensue when conflicts arise. All trail-use groups should make a concerted effort to educate and motivate their members to understand and practice trail etiquette. Such efforts can reduce the chance that conflicts will arise and encourage constructive solutions when they do.

## **BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS**

Participants indicated that a partnership between public/private trail entities could improve the condition of the state's trails. Insufficient funding could be addressed by this partnership. A concerted effort to recruit, train and support volunteer programs to develop, promote and maintain West Virginia's trails could be undertaken. For example, private trail groups could lead in the creation and maintenance of volunteer efforts. Community efforts such as this would reduce the time and money the state must spend to maintain trails and to coordinate trail development projects.

The state's private trail groups are best equipped to develop partnerships and establish a common vision among trail entities. One benefit is that volunteer efforts save funds. Additionally, government or private-sector funding is more easily won with groups working together rather than independently. While these efforts can be accomplished to a large extent by private organizations, coordination with the state is necessary to determine trail priorities and to ensure that standards are established and maintained in cooperative volunteer projects.

The West Virginia Statewide Trail Plan contains an extensive listing of trail organizations in its appendices. This listing will facilitate networking among trail groups in locating state and national resources for trail projects.

## **ADDITIONAL ISSUES**

The workshops were the primary source of input for the issues and actions contained in the plan but the plan development process also included a public comment period on the working draft. The Statewide Trail Plan Committee also provided input during the creation of the draft plan. Listed below in no order of importance are the issues that this review indicated needed to be addressed.

### **Alternative Transportation**

While alternate transportation is discussed in several of the previous sections and information related to the benefits of alternative transportation in the appendices, public comments and Statewide Trail Plan Committee review indicated the need to address this as a separate issue. Many workshop respondents indicated a concern with the sprawl that is starting to affect West Virginia. The limitations on travelling anywhere other than by car, an issue addressed in the trail plan as well as in other areas of development planning, is evident.

Alternate transportation is transportation that is less-polluting than motorized vehicles. Bike lanes, parallel off-road paths, sidewalks, paved shoulders and existing roadway corridors for bike and pedestrian traffic can be used as alternate transportation routes.

With its rugged landscape and innumerable peaks and valleys, much of West Virginia is a transportation planner's nightmare. This has meant that the focus of transportation efforts has been on creating roads to link rural and urban areas. Recently, sprawl has started to become a problem in the state's urban areas, leaving many unable to walk for their necessities and increasing the amount of vehicular traffic.

With the passage of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (TEA 21), the federal government has provided an economic incentive to states to encourage them to include alternative transportation facilities in new transportation planning and

development. Coupled with the statistics on West Virginia's negative health habits, TEA 21 provides the financial basis for West Virginia to make a concerted effort in the future to develop and utilize its alternative transportation infrastructure.

For example, a 1999 analysis by the Surface Transportation Policy Project using new data from the Texas Transportation Institute showed that 69% of the increase in driving from 1983 to 1990 was due to sprawl-related factors such as longer car trips and a switch to driving from walking or public transit. The study found that every 10% increase in the highway network resulted in a 5.3% increase in driving, over and above increases related to population growth or other factors. This confirmed previous studies on induced travel, the phenomenon in which increased road capacity generates additional traffic.

The West Virginia Statewide Trail Plan provides several actions specifically targeted to addressing the state's lack of alternative transportation facilities. However, this effort must assume a more broad-based approach than simply looking at the problem from the perspective of trails. All facets of the state's transportation planning and development must look at including alternative transportation in future development efforts.

## **Education**

Trails serve as outdoor classrooms. With much of the state's history tied to its rugged landscape and natural resources, trails provide an excellent gateway to our past and to the natural world around us.

Students throughout the state learn the importance of maintaining water quality by conducting streamside water analysis. The many paths of the Kanawha State Forest are often crowded on weekends with amateur naturalists being instructed in the flora and fauna of the forest. Students learn about the industrial revolution by riding the rails and walking the trails of the Cass Scenic Railroad. The streets and pathways of Harpers Ferry National Historical Park take visitors back to the time of John Brown and his raid.

In some parts of West Virginia, the trails themselves are historic relics. The Greenbrier River Trail, designated a National Legacy Trail in 1999, was the pathway of the C&O railroad when it was used as the transportation backbone of the state's lumber boom in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Another rail trail relic of the industrial revolution is the North Bend Rail Trail, which served the same function as the C&O for the state's oil industry.

This juxtaposition of natural and industrial elements provides abundant opportunities for students, visitors and native West Virginians to learn more about their past and the natural world around them. Initiatives in the Statewide Trail Plan will increase these opportunities.

## **Increasing Non-Traditional Trail User Participation**

The goals of the Statewide Trail Plan include increasing trail availability for the general public as well as inspiring nonusers to discover the positive benefits of trails. Recommendations in the trail plan calling for educational and motivational efforts will focus these efforts not only on those already using the trails but also on those who traditionally have not used trails.

Several state agencies involved in the development of the Statewide Trail Plan are currently pursuing efforts that focus on increasing trail use among under-represented populations. This includes the West Virginia Bureau for Public Health, which is pursuing efforts to increase physical activity among those with unhealthy lifestyles.

The West Virginia Division of Tourism announced an effort during the summer of 1999 to bring more minority travelers to the state. With a rich African-American history, southern West Virginia provides fertile ground for trail development that focuses on this legacy. Sites of particular importance include the Booker T. Washington childhood home in Malden, which could serve as the anchor of an African-American heritage trail; and the black veterans' memorial in Kimball, which was the first monument erected to black veterans in the nation and memorialized their service in the armed forces in World War I.

The Statewide Trail Plan also calls for the increased development of accessible trail sites and production of trail information in alternate formats.

With a belief that the benefits and responsibilities of trail use should be available to all, the Statewide Trail Plan can serve as a catalyst for increasing the number and diversity of trail users.