

Business Impact of Monongalia River Trails System (West Virginia)

Rail Trail Conservancy Final Report

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Executive Summary

This report summarizes a study of the business impact of the Mon River Trails System (MRTS) - a network of 48 miles of trails in north central West Virginia that has been in operation in-whole or in-part since 1998. The findings from our work are applicable for many audiences, including trail advocates, elected officials, economic development entities, and business owners with trail usage patterns and sociodemographic profile that are like the MRTS and the surrounding area in two ways. First, ***the MRTS is a local transportation and recreation hub, not a tourism-driven trail.*** Second, the ***geographic area of study is a densely populated rural core city with a well-educated population and predominantly white-collar employment.***

A key lesson from our work is that trail development can be a double-edged sword - it has economic benefits to localities and businesses, but can cause such demand that it creates a barrier to trail-oriented development, especially for small businesses. A locality should not ask “if” a trail will bring economic activity, rather it should plan for “how much” and “what type” of economic activity a trail will bring. ***Proper trail development requires collaborative public-private planning, creative funding, and incentives for economic development from the outset.*** Some suggestions for collaboration are listed here:

- Trail advocates, elected officials, economic development entities, and business owners should proactively identify and address legal barriers, land and building needs, economic incentives, and businesses needed along a trail;
- Economic development entities should dedicate resources to developing a trail corridor as a destination by recruiting a well-planned mix of businesses;
- Business owners and trail advocates should also work to make the trail or a district on the trail a destination by collaboratively planning and implementing events;
- Elected officials and economic development entities should work with trail advocates to harness anticipated future growth to fund infrastructure improvements using value capture tax instruments such as Tax Increment Financing (TIF) for major projects or Community Enhancement Districts for projects of smaller scope;
- Local elected officials should consider taking action from the initial planning phases of a trail, such as establishing a community land trust, to keep costs artificially low for new businesses that want to locate along it;
- Trail advocates and local elected officials should frequently assess trail business owners’ perceptions of the trail’s impact and how to maximize benefit;
- Business owners on a trail should consider “self-taxing” sales like a Central Business Improvement District to support trail maintenance, events, security, or other improvements to increase business activity along a trail; and
- Businesses could adjust their offerings to cater to trail users and/or consider co-locating businesses to keep costs low (e.g., cafe at a bike shop, bike share at daycare facility).

I. Introduction

Rail-trails have a multitude of potential health, social, safety, and environmental benefits.¹⁻³ Long distance trails in rural areas, in particular, have numerous potential additional economic benefits through expanded tourism, redevelopment of abandoned industrial areas, and the creation of a sense of place. As documented by the case studies in *Active Transportation: Beyond Urban Centers*,⁴ a great number of places along the continuum of rurality from isolated rural to large rural core towns are benefitting in many ways from long distance trails. There are now more than 22,000 miles of rail-trails on over 2,000 trails, including 13 of more than 100 miles in length.⁵ More long-distance trails are in development that span rural areas, including the Industrial Heartlands Trail, a system of 1,400 miles of trails in four states - Ohio, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York - in the Appalachian region looking to revitalize local economies long in a downward trend as heavy industry has departed.

Many rural municipalities do not have the resources or developers with readily available capital to quickly redevelop land. As trails mature in rural areas, localities are working creatively to spur investment along and near these trails. Recent financing mechanisms programs including Tax Increment Financing, has the potential to spur such redevelopment and built environment change in rural America. Tax Increment Financing (TIF) is a public financing method that is used as a subsidy for redevelopment, infrastructure, and other community-improvement projects by making financing available in the immediate term based on the future anticipated property and/or sales tax increases that the financing will generate over the long-term.

A. Purpose of the Project

Much can be learned for future trail projects from more mature trails that already have experience with economic development along trails that traverse isolated rural to large rural core town areas. Thus, the purpose of this project was to assess the business impact of the Monongahela River Trails System (MRTS; Figure 1) in the rural core area of Morgantown, WV, and identify the lessons learned that may be applicable in other rural core settings.

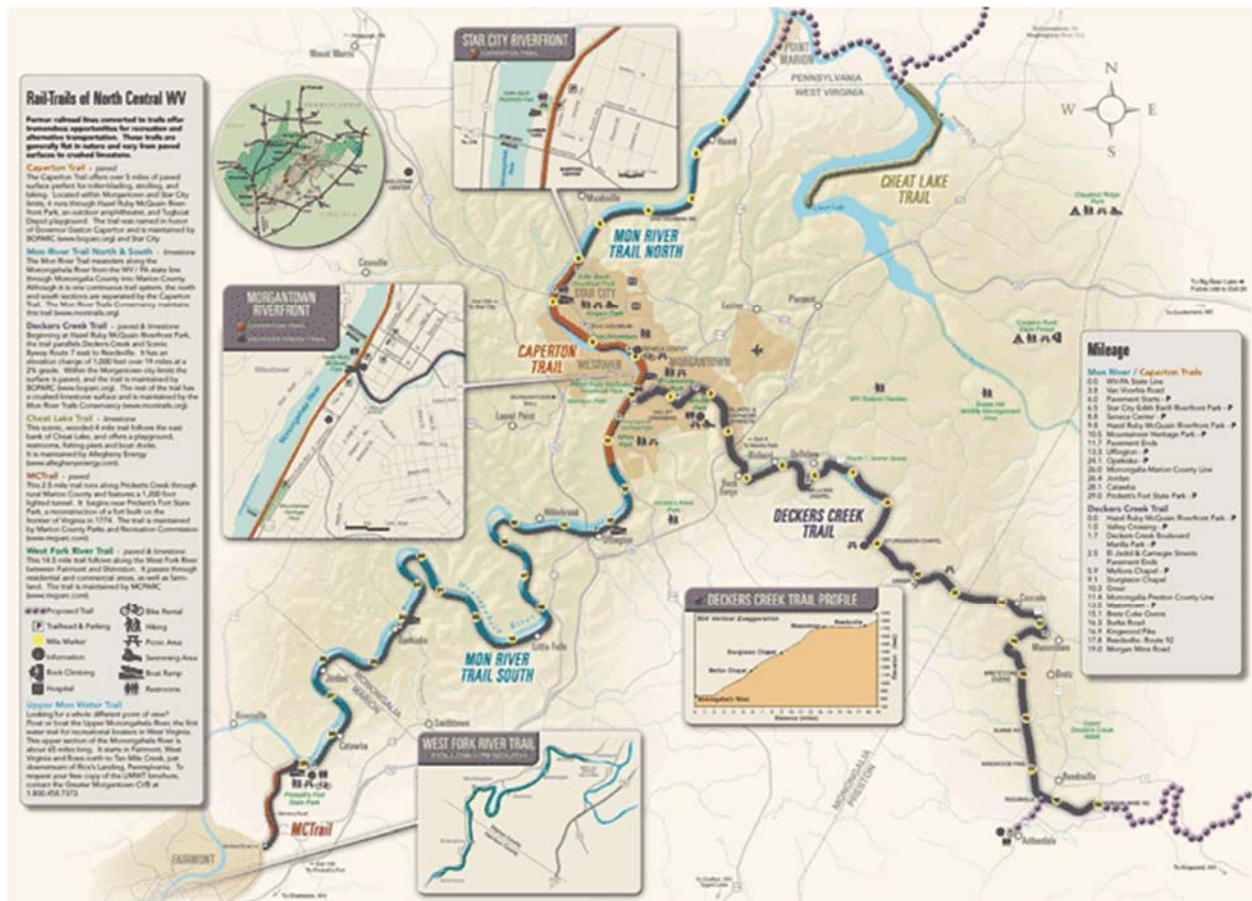


Figure 1. The Mon River Trails System

B. Audiences for this Report

This report has information for many audiences, including elected officials, trail advocates, economic development entities, and business owners in localities of similar sociodemographic profile with similar trail use characteristics. We hope that other entities will use this information to:

- plan new trails to have the strongest positive impact on economic activity,
- strengthen existing trails to enhance positive impacts, and
- assess the impact of their own trail by adapting our data collection tools

Key stakeholders were identified early in the project and engaged throughout. Main stakeholders with whom we have shared progress, data collection tools, preliminary data, and/or will share final results are:

- National Rails-to-Trails Conservancy
- Mon River Trails Conservancy
- Members of the Industrial Heartlands Trail Coalition
- Local business owners, government officials, and economic development entities
- Attendees at the International Trails Symposium in May 2017

C. Limitations of the evaluation

This evaluation is limited in scope, in that it provides information specific to the MRTS and West Virginia-specific policies. We hope to provide enough context, however, so that readers will be able to apply our findings to trails in areas that are similar geographically, economically, and demographically. We describe policy tools applicable in West Virginia that should be researched before being used in other states.

D. Overview of report contents

In this report we describe the trail system and geographic location of focus, the timeline of project activities, questions that we attempted to answer and data that were collected to answer those questions, key findings from the data that were collected, and the recommendations based on the data.

II. Focus of the Project

A. The Mon River Trails System (MRTS)

The MRTS is a system of 48 miles of trails in Preston, Marion, and Monongalia County, West Virginia operated by the Mon River Trails Conservancy (MRTC). Most of the trail is in Monongalia County, a county of roughly 96,000 residents, including 29,660 (2,917 per square mile) in the county seat of Morgantown. The first sections of the trail were built in the late 1990s and the MRTS received National Recreational Trail designation in 2006.

MRTS Construction History

1997 Caperton Trail - decking the railroad bridge over Deckers Creek
1998 Deckers Creek Trail - first 3 miles from Masontown west toward Morgantown
1998-99 Deckers Creek Trail - outside city limits (~16 miles)
1998 Caperton Trail / Deckers Creek Trail within Morgantown city limits paved
2002 38 miles fully built including 8 miles in Star City and Morgantown city limits
2002 Mon River Trail North - 2 miles from Star City north to Collins Ferry
2003 Mon River Trail South - Uffington to Pricketts Fort
2004 Mon River Trail South - Pricketts Fort connector- compacted stone
2004 Mon River Trail North - 3 miles from Collins Ferry to Van Voorhis Road
2005 MRTS - city/county/MRTC maintenance agreement
2006 Wayfinding - roadway directional signs to trailheads
2007 Mon River Trail North - Van Voorhis to PA state line
2008 Deckers Creek Trail - resurfaced mile 8 to mile 13
2008 Mon River Trail South - paved parking lot and connector to Marion County Trail
2016 Wayfinding - on-trail wayfinding and Main Street wayfinding added

In Morgantown and Star City, eight miles of the Caperton Trail running along the Monongahela River are paved. This section has an urban feel with neighboring city parks, restaurants, and shops. The Mon River Trail continues north to the Pennsylvania line and south into Marion County, WV. The Deckers Creek Trail bisects the Caperton Trail at the Monongahela River in Morgantown, running east through Sabraton at a 2% grade up 1,000 feet over 19 miles into Preston County, WV. For the purpose of this report, we discuss the trail as four distinct districts: 1) Star City; 2) Sunnyside; 3) the Wharf; 4) Sabraton. We do this for multiple reasons. First, each has its own unique identity.

Star City is the smallest district geographically, but most equally mixed area with industrial, professional, service/retail, and restaurant businesses, residential, and a small playground and boat dock. Much of the area is trail oriented with a very obvious trailhead, a playground, bathroom, and dock.

Sunnyside is a predominantly residential area dominated by college-aged residents, with limited industrial, restaurant, and retail businesses. Very few businesses have welcoming trail access and there are numerous road crossings, including one for a dock and power plant constantly used by heavy trucks.

The Wharf district is a converted industrial area with a fairly uniform feel with numerous historical and new structures with brick exteriors and/or “warehouse” feel. There are multiple 10+ story buildings with commercial office space, a hotel with 205 guest rooms and 50,000 square feet of space for meetings and events, and multiple restaurants, but limited residential and retail. There are multiple trail access points but no single “trailhead.” Many businesses have trail frontage and landscaping; there is also a riverfront restaurant with a boat dock beneath it that is shared with the university rowing team.

Sabraton is the least trail-oriented area. It is composed of almost exclusively small strip mall-type businesses, fast food restaurants, and low-rise buildings, nearly none of which is oriented to the trail. There is no trailhead or formal trail access point, though a few businesses have made improvements for trail access and allow trail use parking.

Secondly, the districts are physically separated by specific built or natural features. From north to south on the Caperton Trail along the Monongahela River, Star City is separated from Sunnyside by the WVU Arboretum, and Sunnyside is separated from the Wharf district by the intersection with Deckers Creek, where an amphitheater, central bus depot, and two bridges are located. Sabraton, to the east along the Deckers Creek Trail, is separated from the Caperton Trail by a long stretch of undeveloped green space and multiple underpasses of a main route into Morgantown.

Lastly, three of the districts - excluding Sabraton - are Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts, which is important for this project.

B. Description of the Area

Monongalia County has roughly 100,000 residents, split fairly equally among City of Morgantown residents, West Virginia University students, and residents in incorporated and unincorporated areas outside of Morgantown. The population is predominantly white and well educated, and dominant industries are healthcare, education, professional services, and retail. Census data are heavily impacted by the WVU student population, especially in owner-occupied housing rates, poverty rates, and median income. Land use mix is high, as witnessed by relatively low commute times and a 20% prevalence of Morgantown city residents commuting by walking, bicycling, or public transportation.

Economic development is facilitated by multiple organizations, including:

- Monongalia County Economic Development Authority,
- Morgantown Area Chamber of Commerce,
- Monongalia County Development Authority (MCDA) - an arm of county government
- The Morgantown Area Economic Partnership (MAP) - a nonprofit, public-private sector partnership that includes representation from local governments, the organizations listed above, and other entities

The largest employers in Monongalia County (as of 2014) are:

1. West Virginia University
2. West Virginia University Hospitals
3. Mylan Pharmaceuticals, Inc.
4. Monongalia County Board of Education
5. Monongalia General Hospital
6. Wal*Mart Stores, Inc.
7. WVU Medical Corporation (University Health Associates)
8. The Kroger Company
9. Teletch Customer Care Management (WV), Inc.
10. Gabriel Brothers, Inc.

Table 1. US Census Data for Project Area

Population, Census, April 1, 2010	US	WV	Monongalia County, WV	Morgantown City, WV
Population	308,745,538	1,852,994	96,189	29,660
Persons under 18 years, %	24.0	20.9	15.9	8.2
Persons 65 years and over, %	13.0	16.0	10.2	8.1
Female persons, %	50.8	50.7	48.4	46.5
White alone, not Hispanic or Latino, %	63.7	93.2	89.7	87.9
Black or African American alone, %	12.6	3.4	3.6	4.1
American Indian and Alaska Native alone, %	0.9	0.2	0.2	0.1
Asian alone, %	4.8	0.7	3.1	3.4
Hispanic or Latino, %	16.3	1.2	1.8	2.6
Persons in poverty, %	13.5	17.9	22.5	37.7
Population per square mile	87.4	77.1	267.1	2,917.0
Land area in square miles	3,531,905	24,038	360.1	10.2
Economy and Transportation, 2010-2014 (American Community Survey)				
Owner-occupied housing unit rate	64.4	73.0	57.3	41.6
Median value of owner-occupied housing units	\$175,700	\$100,200	\$161,500	\$169,600
High school graduate or higher, percent of persons age 25 years+	86.3	84.4	91.2	92.9
Bachelor's degree or higher, percent of persons age 25 years+	29.3	18.7	38.8	47.8
Mean travel time to work (minutes), workers age 16 years+	25.7	25.6	21	17.1
Median household income (2014 \$)	\$53,482	\$41,576	\$46,166	\$32,400

Per capita income past 12m (2014 \$)	\$28,555	\$23,237	\$26,109	\$21,405
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Note: data retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/data.html>

C. Project Questions and Data Collection

Project data collection was driven by six questions. These questions and the data collected to answer each question are listed below in Table 2.

Table 2. Project Questions and Data Collected

Question	Data Collection
Q1. What business revenue is generated by businesses that is trail-related and is it associated with distance from the trail?	Survey businesses within four blocks of the trail by mail and online.
Q2. Why does a business choose to locate along the trail?	Interviewing business owners that opened since trail construction
Q3. Why does a business choose to leave a trailside location (to identify ways for local officials to prevent this)?	Interview business owners that located their business on the trail after it was built but did not stay.
Q4. What is the impact of the trail on property values?	Identifying changes in property values within one block of the trail, dating back to pre-construction.
Q5. What are the intangible and/or unanticipated “returns” on investment?	Focus group with local government, trail advocacy, and visitors’ bureau representatives.
Q6. What are creative ways to encourage economic development along the trail?	Focus group with directors & county officials in charge of three local Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts.

Table 3. Project Timeline

	MRTS Business Impact Study Project Timeline						
Project Activity	Sep-16	Oct-16	Nov-16	Dec-16	Jan-17	Feb-17	Mar-17
Finalize proximity stratification with help from RTC							
Prepare Study Measurements (Interview guide & Business Owner Survey)							
Pilot Test Study Measurements							
Recruit participants for surveys and interviews							
Conduct Business Survey							
Conduct Interviews and Focus Groups							
Conduct Review of Tax Revenue Data							
Analyze All Data							
Prepare Final Report							
Engage Stakeholders							

III. Results

A. Summary

1. Evaluation Question 1

Q1. What business revenue is generated by businesses that is trail-related and is it associated with distance from the trail?

A modified twenty-two item survey was created based off the 2014-2015 Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) business survey, to assess the impact of the MRTS on revenues and business decisions, assess secondary impacts on employees, and solicit feedback about the MRTS. We sent surveys to 371 businesses within four blocks of the MRTS in Star City, Morgantown, and Sabraton. See Appendix B for a copy of the mailed survey.

Included in the following list is the step-by-step approach we utilized to obtain and execute the survey mailing to all previously mentioned businesses.

Step 1: Acquired Monongalia County property tax maps from the Monongalia County’s

Assessor's office Tax map archives.⁶ These maps were downloaded to an external flash drive and printed on a large paper printer to accommodate the large-scale maps. Property tax maps were used to get a quality aerial understanding of the layout of the properties situated along and up from the trail.

Step 2: We based our primary business establishment database off the business list purchased from the West Virginia Secretary of State's business licensure department. Since businesses in WV require to have a business license to operate, this was our basis for our rationale in seeking information through this outlet. Within this list, the business's physical location could be determined. We then compared their physical location with the addresses on the tax map to determine which properties fit the location requirements of the study. To ensure the information was correct, we conducted in-person, on-ground physical scans to confirm the business locations.

Step 3: Surveys were color-coded by location and trail proximity so we could determine survey responses and conduct analyses by location and/or trail proximity strata. Three shades of four colors were used as the cover page to each survey in order for researchers to determine the location of the business once the surveys were returned. This approach also helped to keep specific business anonymity as confidential as possible. The business name was not a required field on the survey.

Step 4: Surveys were mailed to businesses with instructions to either complete a hard-copy survey or an online version of the survey using a URL provided in the survey cover letter. Responses were solicited through local newspaper stories, electronic listservs, and personal contacts, with emphasis on businesses within one block of the trail. Survey packets included a self-addressed prepaid envelope for business owners to return at their convenience.

Step 5: Once surveys were returned to the researcher's office, paper survey data were entered into the online survey platform, SurveyMonkey, and analyses were conducted in SPSS statistical software.

In reflection, the business list was not a perfect resource due to the fact that the licensing address was not always the physical address. At times, the listed address was either a Post Office box, which did not lend to locating a physical address. Additionally, the names of the registered businesses were not always synonymous with the business location, meaning the name on the registry could be an LLC or company name that wasn't the name of the business establishment.

Table 4. Survey Response Rates

Location	Surveys Sent (Completed) by Distance from the Trail				Total
	<1 block	1-2 blocks	2-3 blocks	3-4 blocks	
Star City	23 (4)	4 (0)	4 (0)	5 (2)	46 (6)
Morgantown	100 (25)	47 (6)	67 (12)	49 (6)	263 (49)
Sabraton	43 (5)	29 (1)	0	0	72 (6)
Total (Response Rate)	166 (34; 20.5%)	80 (7; 8.8%)	71 (12; 16.9%)	54 (8; 14.8%)	363* (61; 16.8%)

*371 sent, less 8 surveys returned to sender

Response rate to the business owner surveys was relatively low (n=61; 16.8%) but highest among the businesses within one block of the trail (n=34; 20.5%) where we focused most of our recruiting activity. A large minority of responses were from professional services businesses (n=27; 44.3%) that are not “trail-oriented” and not primarily focused on or impacted by the trail and tourism. A glimpse at the pre- or post-trail construction business opening data shows a shift toward professional services and restaurant businesses since the trail opened.

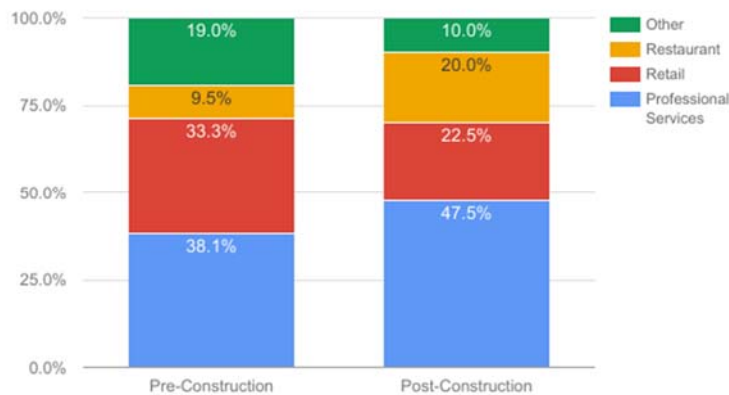


Figure 1. Business Type by Opening Date Relative to Trail Construction

More than half of the respondents were located within one block of the trail (n=34; 55.7%), including 23 businesses that have direct access to the trail. Roughly 70% of these businesses were Professional Services or Retail.

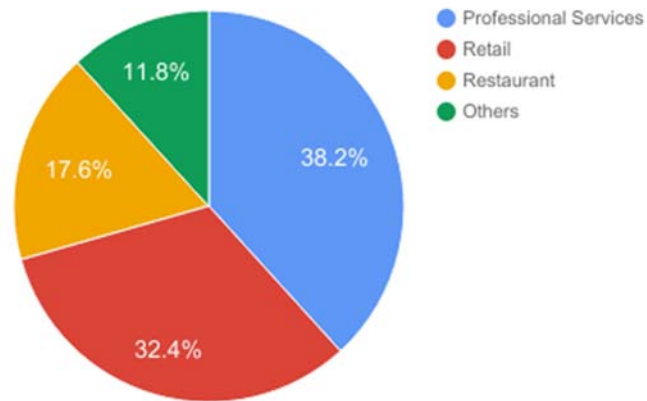


Figure 2. Business Type of Businesses within One Block of the Trail (n=34)

Of the 46 businesses that established their current location after the trail was constructed, 41.3% (n=19) indicated the trail had some impact on their choice of location including seven (15.2%) that indicated the trail had a strong or very strong impact on their choice of location. Among these 46, the 16 businesses that were located more than one block from the trail were significantly more likely to report the trail having no impact on their decision to locate where they did (81.3%) than businesses within one block of the trail (46.7%).

Business Revenues

A picture of trail-generated revenues further paints the picture of these respondents as businesses that are not dependent on trail-generated customers or revenue. The average percentage of total revenue generated by trail users was only 2.56%, which equates to a total of \$601,837.20 for the 45 businesses responding to these items.

Table 5. General and Trail-Generated Revenues of Respondents (n=61)

Measure, Per Business	Responses	Value
Average Trail User Expenditure	29 (47.5%)	\$25.97
Total Revenue, 2014, Median	26 (42.6%)	\$325,000
Total Revenue, 2015, Median	28 (45.9%)	\$350,000

Percentage of Total Revenue from Trail, Mean	45 (73.8%)	2.56%
Percentage of Total Customers from Trail, Mean	46 (75.4%)	2.47%
Estimated Revenue from Trail Users, 2015, Mean	45 (73.8%)	\$13,374.16

Business Decisions

When asked multiple questions about the impact of the trail on future business decisions, very few seemed to be impacted by the trail.

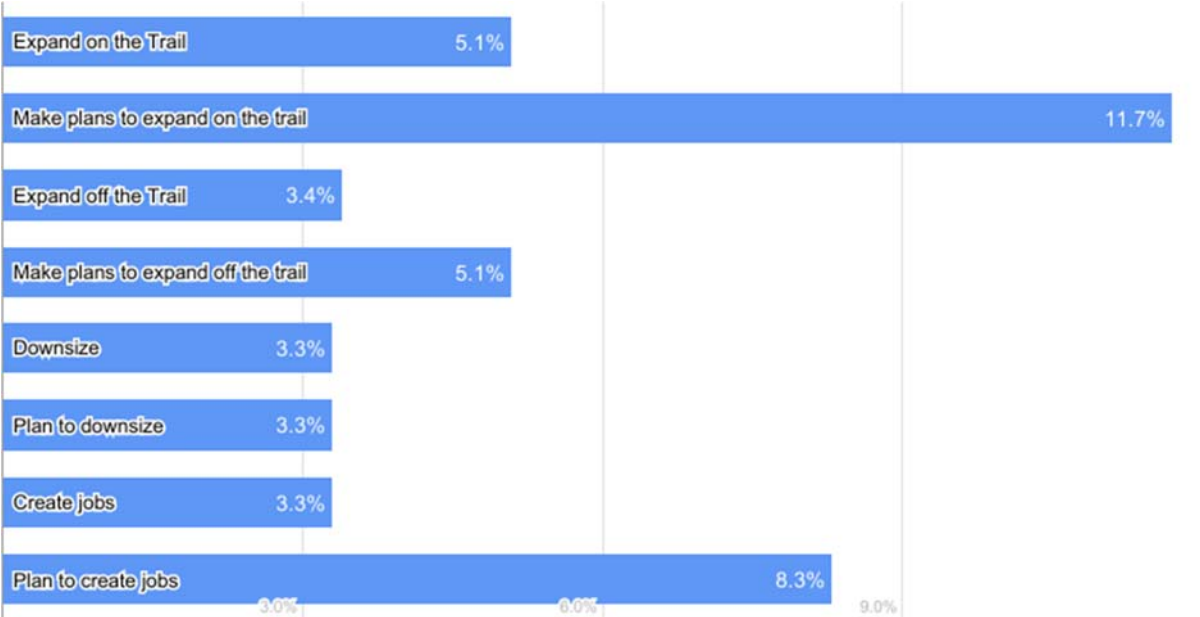


Figure 3. Impact of Trail on Future Business Decisions

Impact of Trail Events

The vast majority indicated that trail events had no impact on sales or revenues (n=38, 80.9%). Businesses positively impacted by trail events (n=8, 17.0%) were almost exclusively retail shops or restaurants.

Secondary Impacts of the MRTS

Secondary impacts of the trail were noted in other responses about the employees of the businesses represented in the surveys. Only one responded they have an “off-season” where they reduce staff, further suggesting non-tourism-dependent businesses. More details about the businesses are provided below.

Table 6. Employment Data of Respondents (n=61)

Measure	Responses	Mean (SD)
Number of full-time employees	57 (93.4%)	9.2 (17.7)
Number of part-time employees	34 (55.7%)	4.3 (8.0)
Hours per week of full-time employees	56 (91.8%)	39.5 (12.1)
Hours per week of part-time employees	33 (54.1%)	15.1 (9.3)

An important secondary impact was employee transportation behavior. Nearly one-in-three respondents indicated that employees have to pay to park when driving, and 42.6% indicated having bike parking at their business or nearby. Only 12 businesses reported having any employees commute by trail and very few employees per business commuted using the trail on average (0.4 +- 1.1), with a maximum of four trail commuters at a single business. Of the 12 businesses with trail commuters, 8 (66.7%) had bike parking at or near their business whereas only 35.7% of the businesses with no trail commuters had bike parking at or near their business.

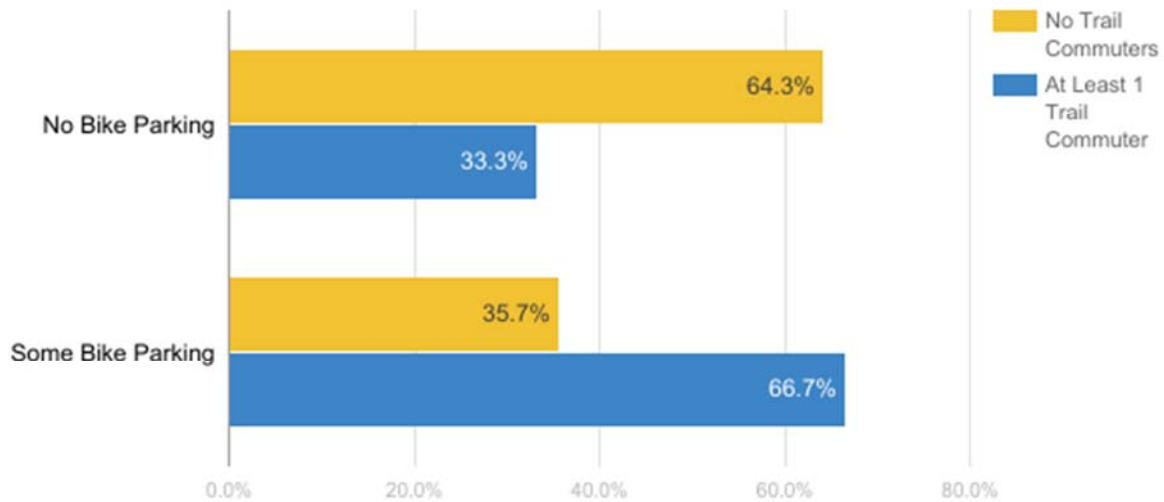


Figure 4. Bike Parking Availability and Trail Commuting

Other Benefits

Anecdotal evidence of secondary, indirect benefits of the trails were noted in an open-ended item at the end of the survey asking for feedback about the trail and its impact on business. The vast majority of responses were positive or positive with constructive feedback. Responses generally highlighted the quality of life, transportation, health, physical activity, and employee/employer recruitment benefits of the trail. Perceptions of unsafe locations, vagrancy, and lack of lighting after dark presented a barrier to optimal use.

Exemplary quotes:

As stated -- the rail trails (both the Mon River and Decker's Creek) are critical to the quality of life, transportation functionality, and economic growth of Monongalia County. To attract new businesses and encourage high-quality employees to move here for employment and retain them and existing residents, significant enhancement, and increased connections to this system (linking neighborhoods, schools, churches, businesses, parks, public amenities) should be at the highest priority for the region. This system is the most cost effective solution to the major transportation issues in this topographic setting. Whatever the cost, find a way to fund it and do it fast!

~Business owner from a professional service in Morgantown 2 blocks from the trail

I believe that establishment of trails around Morgantown and the networks that has developed is responsible for 25% of the growth in this region.

~Business owner of a apartment rental professional service in Morgantown adjacent to the trail

Love the rail trail. Ride to work on it -- not daily. It has greatly improved the quality of life/living in Morgantown!!!

~Business owner of a physician's' office in Star City 3 blocks from the trail

The secondary impacts from access to the trail have been great: exercise options on lunch hour, walking access to downtown clients and destinations, soothing views of the river.

~Business owner of a professional service in Morgantown adjacent to the trail

Our business would not be affected by users of the trail but several employees use the trail daily for exercise. It is the main reason we have stayed in Morgantown.

~Business owner of a Morgantown law office 2 blocks from the trail

We love the trail but the concern of safety when using it alone keeps us from using it as much as we'd like.

~Business owner of a medical supply professional service in Morgantown adjacent to the trail

2. Project Question 2

Q2. Why does a business choose to locate along the trail?

Seventeen business owners were interviewed over the course of a two-month span. All but one business was located within one block of the trail and 13 were owners of service-oriented businesses, predominantly retail, lodging, or restaurants. Average length of operations at the current location was 8.5 years, and all but one opened after trail construction. The Wharf (n=7), Star City (n=1), Sunnyside (n=4), and Sabraton (n=4) trail districts were all represented. Please see Appendix A for interview questions.

Step 1: Business owners were first identified by proximity to the trail. We predominantly wanted to interview businesses closest to the trail that engage in first-hand experiences with foot and bicycle traffic coming off of the trail into their business establishment. Schedule constraints of both the business owners themselves and study timeline inhibited the gathering of more interviews.

Step 2: Business owners were initially contacted by phone and then interviewed in face-to-face interviews at their business location. Interviews ranged from 15 to 45 minutes in length. Participants were each given a formal cover letter introducing them to the project, making them aware of the university's Institutional Review Board's approval and asking for their participation in the study. The focus group was led by one member of the research team.

Step 3: The conversation was recorded using a digital recorder to later transcribe for more in-depth qualitative analysis. Once the interview was transcribed, it was reviewed separately by two readers to identify key response themes. Themes were then discussed to reach consensus.

Step 5: Data were kept as confidential as possible and all names were deleted from the text. Hard copy transcripts were kept in a locked filing cabinet in a researcher's locked office when not in use. Electronic copies of the qualitative data were kept on a secure drive accessible only to the research team.

Themes that emerged and application to four targeted audiences are presented in the table below.

Table 7. Interview Themes (n=17) and Application to Four Target Audiences

	Trail Advocates	Policy Makers	Economic Development Authorities	Business Owners
Locating businesses and increasing commerce along a trail system.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Educate potential businesses as to how their location in proximity to the trail is an economic asset rather than just a bonus. ● Work with businesses to market the trail and plan events. ● Schedule regular meetings to inform business owners how to market to trail users. ● Collect and share data about trail use, events, and business impacts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Implement creative policy initiatives to incentivize and encourage businesses to locate along the trail. ● Support innovative ways of keeping property values and costs down to encourage small businesses to locate to the trail. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Foster mixed-use development and a healthy mix of retail, lodging, restaurant, and professional services businesses. ● Dedicate resources to recruiting businesses and assisting business owners through the startup process. ● Encourage water-based events and recreation if trail runs alongside a waterway. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Business Owners want to be a part of a destination setting along a trail system and value a variety of commerce. ● Understand that the trail brings many potential customers by the business daily at a slower speed than vehicle traffic, so cater to them with a welcoming entrance off the trail and goods and services that trail users want.
Safety/ Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● First impressions are key to perceived safety and increasing trail usage, including landscaping, trash cleanup, and regular maintenance. ● If near a natural water feature, the cleanliness, activity on, and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase police presence on the trail to help diminish trail safety concerns. ● Consider relocating businesses or service agencies that encourage loitering to a location away from the trail. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increased use is good for safety and business; thus dedicate resources to fully develop the trail with a healthy mix of retail, residential, restaurant, services, and professional businesses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Partner with trail advocacy groups on innovative events to increase use and/or adapt business to “front” the trail to increase safety by increasing “eyes on the trail.”

	<p>accessibility of the water are also important to increase trail use.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Events are important to increase use and perceived safety. ● Lighting is important for feelings of safety after dark. 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Improve aesthetics, trail frontage, and/or improve lighting near their business to improve perceived safety.
<p>Access, Parking, & Signage</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ensure clear wayfinding signage depicts the links and connections between the trail, historic sites, shopping, neighborhoods, and/or business district(s). ● Have very clearly marked and welcoming “gateway” or “archway” entrances at trailheads. ● Collaborate with nearby business districts, if any, to improve physical and economic connections between the trail system and the rest of the city. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide clearly marked “trail-use parking” signs and spaces and co-locate parking for trail and business use. ● Providing free or validated parking may help reduce the perception that parking garages along the trail are unused, unsafe (loitering), and cumbersome for trail users and customers coming to trail businesses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Focus development around clearly marked and welcoming trailheads. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Allot some parking spaces in areas of surface parking lots that are convenient to the trail specifically for trail users. ● Through signage, communicate the parking for trail users. ● Make small modifications to clearly provide access from their business to the trail.

Subthemes within each of these three main interview themes are presented below

1. Locating businesses and increasing commerce along a trail system
2. Safety/Quality
3. Access, Parking, and Signage

1. Locating businesses and increasing commerce along a trail system

Some interesting themes emerged from this item based on type of business:

- 1) Small/local businesses and restaurants were predominantly focused on the aesthetics - be it the historic nature of a building, the ambiance of a multi-business building, or the natural aesthetic of a section of the trail (especially the Wharf District)
- 2) “Big Box” retailers or larger corporations were primarily focused on a market decision or suitability of a space to fit their needs
- 3) Professional services (e.g., legal firm) businesses viewed the trail as an “added bonus” that has been positive for the social wellbeing and healthy break activities of employees
“One of the things that we did look at was the location. When you start checking boxes on things you want [in a business location], because we’re a healthcare company, we saw that we had access to the trail being very close to the building. I’m not going to say that was a huge factor, but that was a plus looking at it.”

“An important thing is to have a centralized location, have a centralized plan, have a group of dedicated individuals from all different aspects of the community. I think that’s how you come up with a comprehensive plan on how to improve use of the trail and get the message out.” ~Director of real estate at a Morgantown professional service

“...There are sections of the trail that I think need to be more manicured or cut back...again, the more you improve public space, the more “good” people that you attract. Once you attract those “good” people, the “bad” people kind of fade into the background a little bit. They don’t like to be around and I know that from doing public events. You bring an activity and that’s not their life, they don’t want to be around a whole crowd of people.”

~General Manager at restaurant establishment adjacent to rail trail

“I know just currently in my particular world it helps as far as a sales tool. It helps more in line with transient guests and also group guests, because we can always advertise that right down the stairs is a trail you can go down to Fairmont and you can go past Star City, or you can go through Sabraton and on down to Reedsville.”

~Hotel sales manager of hotel located adjacent to rail trail

2. Quality and Safety:

There was near universal agreement that events on the trail would benefit perceived safety, that some sections of the trail were a safety concern, and that all sections would benefit from

lighting, especially the Wharf District where many restaurant workers commute along the trail after dark. Greater concern about safety was voiced for areas that were isolated and in areas that are not isolated but have fewer “eyes on the trail” - that is, no trail-fronting businesses, unkempt overgrowth, and/or lack of landscaping.

“I think it’s a paramount thing that the trail is in good shape to make people who are maybe new to cycling more comfortable. Cyclists are cyclists, they will deal with whatever, but new people it’s all about the good experience and the safe experience.”
~General manager at a local bicycle retail outfitter

“Just that presence (bike patrol), I think will make a difference, so that people are not afraid to use it.”
~Business owner of restaurant adjacent to the rail trail

“Oh I think it’s beautiful. The rail trail, I can remember when it opened up and it just improved the quality of life for the community unbelievably. People could run, people could walk. Families with baby strollers.”
~Business owner of profession consulting firm adjacent to the rail trail

“I think my biggest thing with the rail trail that I see is really cutting back all that over growth, and even to where it’s selective tree cutting from the rail trail to the river...see the river is more visible in a lot of areas. It’s pretty and it gets blocked by scrubby looking growth.” ~General manager at a local bicycle retail outfitter

3. Access, Parking, and Signage:

There were very few perceived barriers to accessing the trails, primarily because many businesses allow trail users to use their parking lots without any formal agreement or signage. These business owners see the benefit of allowing trail users to park in their lots but also foresee potential issues with overuse by trail users harming their primary business. More formal signage may be beneficial so that trail users and business owners formalize where and when trail users may park. It may be beneficial to provide incentives to build “mini-trailheads” at these designated areas to further guide trail users.

Most of the more recently constructed buildings provide designated trail access thanks to advocacy by the MRTC. Though most owners of the older buildings see the benefit of trail access, many do not have dedicated access from the “back” of their buildings. Thus, it may be beneficial to provide incentives to build access points from these buildings.

“I know it’s [the rail trail] got good access. From an access standpoint, I think it can be a positive for businesses if they have the parking to share.”
~Director of real estate at a Morgantown professional service

“Businesses need to have easy access on and off the trail...have the business open and

visible so that people on the trail can see what's there and what their options are.”
~Morgantown pharmacist

“I'm realizing that it [rail trail] isn't what it could be. I never think about it. It's just out there. You know? I do see a lot of people walking to work on it, down to the law firms and things like that. So, it's a path, basically. That's the way I think a lot of people look at it, it's just a road you walk on It's a mode of transportation, is the way I look at it. I don't think about it really as recreation or attraction, as much as maybe we should.”
~General Manager at restaurant establishment adjacent to the rail trail

“The trail lends itself as an alternative thoroughfare”
~Director of real estate at a Morgantown professional service

3. Project Question 3

Q3. Why does a business choose to leave a trailside location?

We interviewed the owners of two businesses that left their trail location in 2005 (please see Appendix A for interview questions). One of which was a landscaping business that began prior to trail construction in Sabraton in the mid-1980s and the other an outdoor retailer which opened in the Wharf District in 2000. Both businesses continue today, but in different locations away from the trail. Both businesses chose their location and timing in an attempt to reach an untapped market within the growing competitive Morgantown community.

The businesses were very different, in timing, industry, and location, but key themes regarding departure from the trail location from these interviews:

- Rising rental costs due to demand for commercial space proximal to the trail
- Fluctuating, seasonal revenues were insufficient
- Trail-oriented revenue was not as strong as anticipated
- Retail mix in their district was insufficient

Suggestions to retain businesses along the trail included:

- Provide dedicated parking shared by the businesses and the trail users
- Provide tax incentives for businesses locating along the trail
- Keep land and rent costs affordable for small businesses
- Encourage retail mix in districts to increase foot traffic and make it a destination
- Encourage co-siting businesses to maximize use of existing sites (e.g., cafe at a nursery)

Following are details of each interview.

The Outdoor Retailer

For the outdoor retail shop, there was a direct link between choosing to put their business along the trail in the newly developing Wharf district area and seeing a need for an outdoor retailer in that area. The original developers saw the potential for an outdoor store to move into the Wharf and moved their own newly acquired outdoor store into the space. The vested interest was dual-fold, the developer needed to fill a vacant building while filling the need of a bike sales/rental and kayak store along trail and river. At the time, the excitement and momentum of the newly developed trail and Wharf District helped to harness early sales while rent for the space was relatively low at the time.

Several early onset barriers blocked the outdoor retailer's sustained success. Sales capacity was just not present in the newly developing Wharf area at the time, which lacked retail mix and foot traffic. Seasonal business inconsistency and weather made it difficult to sustain the business throughout the year. The store mostly attracted shoppers buying small retail items (e.g., drinks, snacks, patch kits) or renting bikes, not shoppers buying big ticket items needed to grow a newly opened business. Parking was also a major issue for the outdoor retailer, as they were dependent on metered parking spaces to share with other professional businesses in the district. These barriers, coupled with an 18-month road streetscaping project that blocked the front entrance to the business, crushed any early momentum in the district. The ultimate shuttering of the business occurred after the ownership of the building changed hands and the new owners wanted to triple the outdoor retailer's rent.

"It was really sales. The sales were not there. We were the only retail location down there and probably the biggest thing there....ultimately it just came down to sales. They just weren't there. There's no other retail businesses there and just not continuous sales throughout the year. It was very seasonal and very weather dependent."

"Parking. Make sure your business has parking for you. Don't try to depend on someone else for your parking. By far that would be the biggest."

"Free B&O [city tax on businesses] I think that would incentivize some people [business owners] to say, "Hey." If it was for 10 years or five years or whatever it would be. That, as a business owner, those are the things that...the overhead that you can't control. You only pay it if you sell stuff, but it still comes out of your pocket. It doesn't come from anywhere else."

For other outdoor retailers and general retailers alike, this specific bicycle/kayak retailer suggested the following: (1) secure parking spaces specifically for the use of the retailer's

patronage and trail users in a nearby surface lot or parking garage; (2) for businesses connected to aquatic retail (kayak/ canoe/ boating shop), make it very easy to access the water, and (3) municipalities should research creative ways within the existing tax structure to incentivize businesses to locate along the trail.

The Landscapers

A similar story was relayed by the landscaping company that moved into the Sabraton area from a more rural area east of our study area in the mid-1980s. The landscape owners were trying to capitalize on the beginning, flourishing commercial market in Sabraton, which was far more busy and accessible by vehicle than the area they were locating from where their greenhouses and central landscape business was - and still is - located. The landscape business opened during the same year that the McDonald's and the BB&T community bank were built in Sabraton. The space they chose was next to the 'then' active rail line and had the crucial outdoor square footage they needed.

The space was suitable for them for the next two decades. Interest rates were higher to own property when they opened in the 1980s, making renting a more attractive option than owning property. However, year after year the rent increased as the Morgantown economy grew. Like the outdoor retail shop, seasonality became an issue due to the variability in the weather, short peak season for gardening and landscaping jobs (two months), and a short growing season. Through the 20-year span, the rent skyrocketed, and the property owner continued to increase the rent and changed the rental agreement to a month-to-month agreement for the last 3 years of their lease.

"Which that [month-to-month lease] adds a whole other level of stress because you're getting in the garden business and you're going to vacate the property, say in 60 days, but you received that [notice] in March, and you're going into your [busy] season that could be catastrophic."

Ultimately, it was the unpredictable nature of the fluctuating lease that made them relocate. In any business, especially a seasonal dependent business, a month-to-month lease situation does not allow for a planning element and adds stress on the business owner. If the market had been more affordable or stable over time, the landscape business would have definitively purchased the land in Morgantown along the trail. Admittedly, the business owner haphazardly closed the landscape business too quickly and should have planned his closure over a multi-year phase, which may have given him the chance to purchase the property.

"If you don't have affordable real estate, it kills the deal."

In hindsight, the landscape business owner regrets not seeing the added value of being on a property right near the rail trail. If the purchasing opportunity arose, the business owner would have capitalized on incorporating the business into a great outdoor space and opened a small cafe along the trail as part of the nursery. He could have used the trail market as an advertising tool for his landscape business by equipping the cafe attached to the nursery with a beautifully landscaped patio area which would have showcased the work the nursery performs.

“It [the landscape business] would be a gold mine to have the rail trail walk up the back of our business.”

The landscape business owner currently operates 4/10 of a mile off the rail trail 16 miles to the east up the Deckers Creek Trail. The business owner had several recommendations and suggestions for businesses contemplating locating close or on the trail: (1) have a clear, targeted marketing plan that details how the business will incorporate and interact with the trail and the trail user market; (2) educate the business owner on how to interact with trail users and have an economic development group discuss with them that the trail is an economic benefit to their business; and (3) solicit land donations so that land can change ownership at an affordable rate for growth.

4. Project Question 4

Q4. What is the quantitative Return on Investment of the trail for a local government?

A. Historic Property Value Data

The MRTS was fully built in 2002. To understand the impact of the trail on property values, we collected values of all properties within one block of the rail trail from 1994 (pre-construction) through 2016 (current) at six time points - two prior to trail construction and four subsequent to trail construction. Values prior to 2006 were entered from hard copy records stored in the Monongalia County Tax Assessor's office, whereas more recent records were entered from an online database.⁷⁻⁹ Mean and median property values can be examined across time. Mean values tell us the average cost across all properties but may be heavily influenced by outliers such as very high assessed new construction. Figures 5 and 6 both show the change in mean value for property over time, presented in two ways for visual appeal:

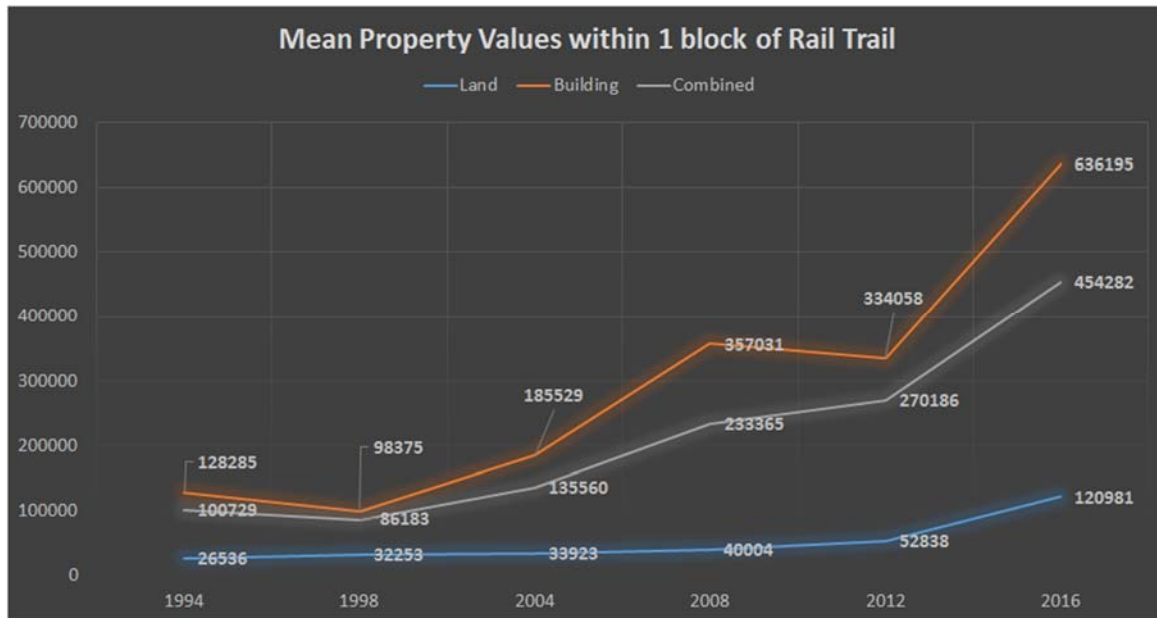


Figure 5 - Line Graph Mean Property Values 1994-2016

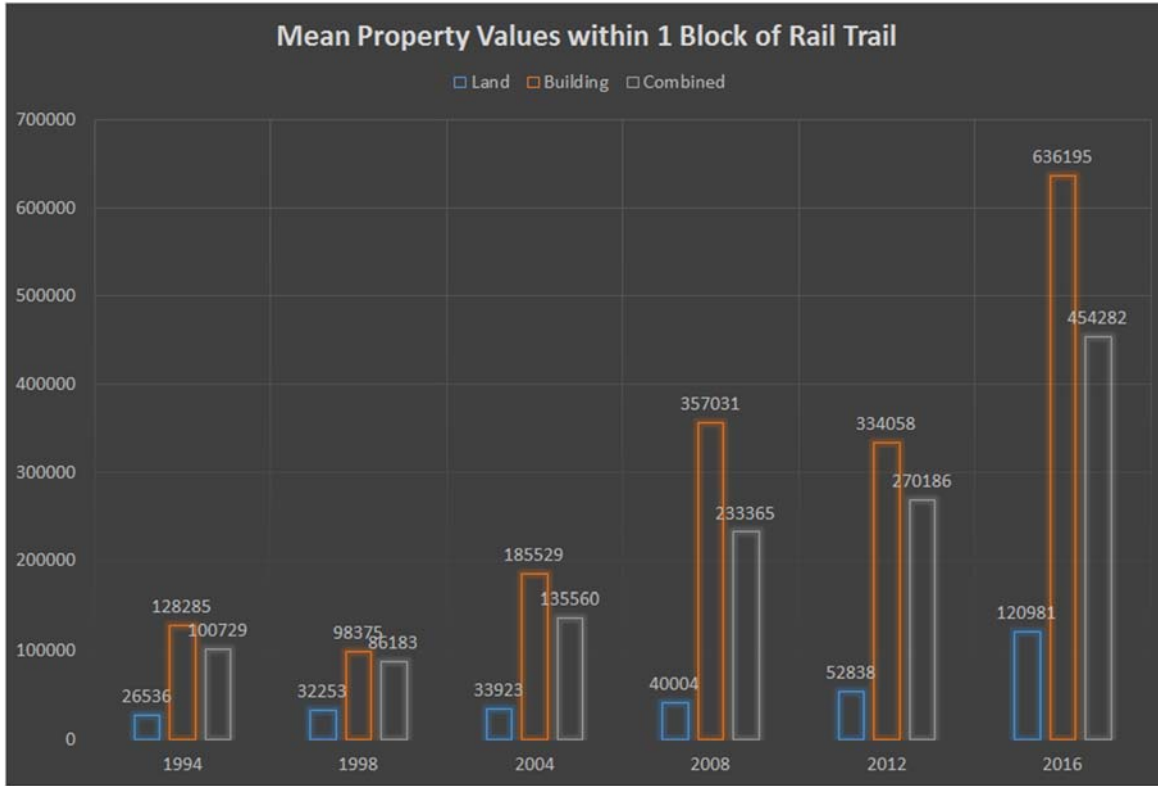


Figure 6 - Bar Graph Mean Property Values 1994-2016

Median property values show the middle value of all properties along the rail trail. This calculation of average values is less susceptible to high and low outliers within the data. Figures 7 and 8 show the Median values in two different visual styles.

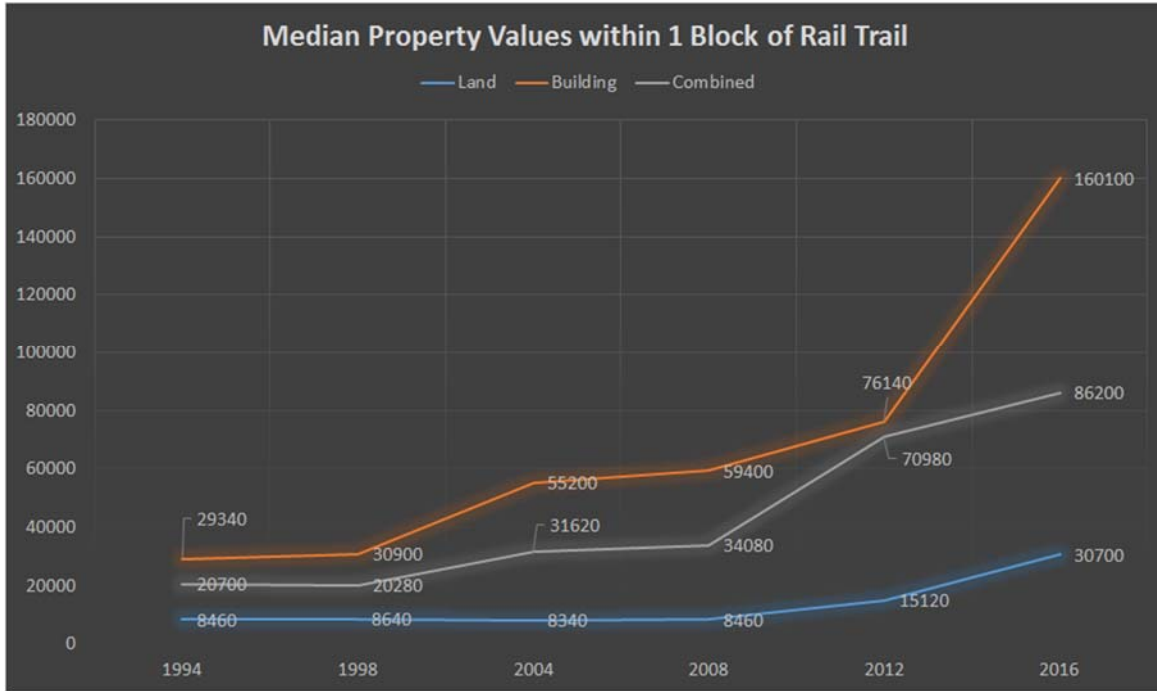


Figure 7. Line Graph Median Property Values 1994-2016

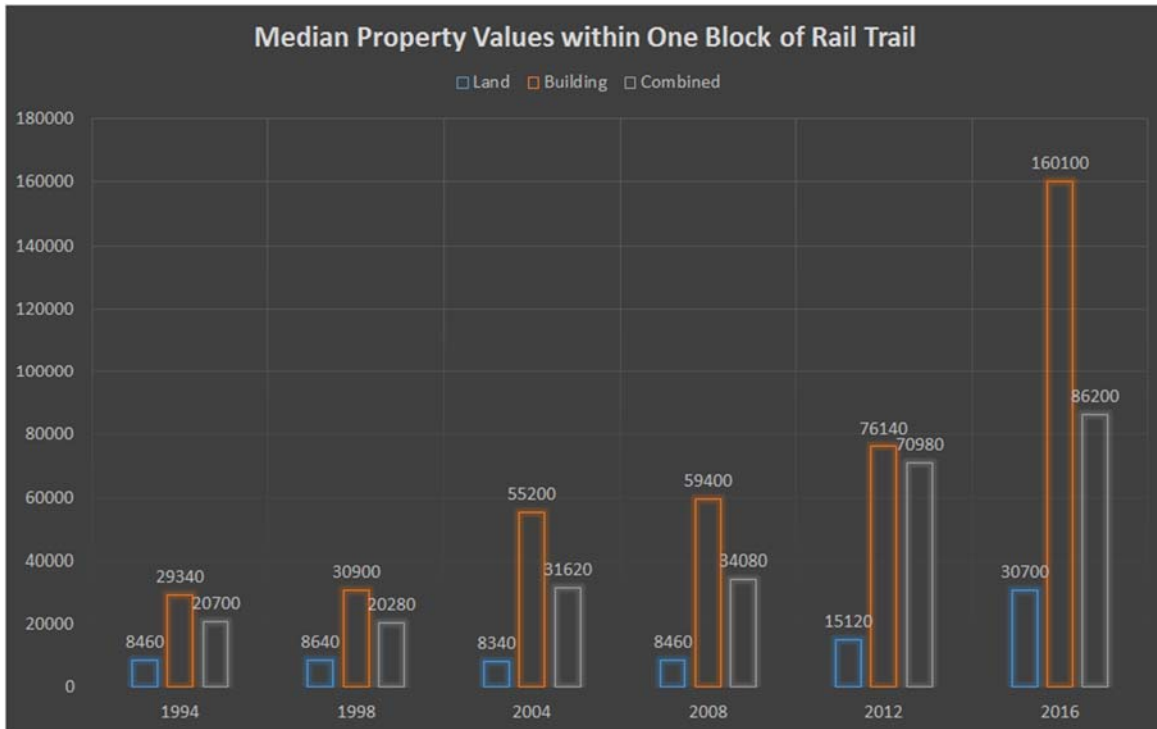


Figure 8. Bar Graph Median Property Values 1994-2016

Overall, these data indicate that rail trail properties increased average values substantially over time. The vast majority of these are commercial properties. To date, we have been unable to locate good comparison data for commercial properties in Monongalia County. For some context, however, median home values in Monongalia County have increased 68.3% (from \$112,200 to \$188,800) from 2005-2015 according to American Community Survey estimates, whereas median property values with one block of the trail have increased 172.6% during a similar time period (from \$31,620 in 2004 to \$86,200 in 2016). In summary, these data show that rail trail property values grew at a strong pace over time, but it is difficult to characterize within the context of the economic growth of the greater area.

B. Tax Data 2014-2016

In order to do a more comparative look at the variables associated with property values, we have requested and received electronic assessment data for all properties in Monongalia County from the state tax office. The data are stored in a text file and need some cleaning and reformatting to be prepared for analysis. They include all properties from 2014-2016. Using best practices identified for determining the impact of rail trails on assessment values, we will develop a model to, at a minimum, understand how rail trail property values may differ from the rest of the county during this three year period. This analysis will be forthcoming in the next few weeks but was not ready at the time of this report due to administrative delays in receiving the data.

5. Project Question 5

Q5. What are the intangible and/or unanticipated “returns” on investment?

In order to identify and understand the tangible and intangible benefits of the MRTS, researchers conducted a focus group with seven individuals representing various city and county officials, non-profit environmental and trail organizations, and city and county commerce advocates (please see Appendix A for interview questions).

Included in the following list is a step-by-step approach that we utilized to conduct the focus groups with this population.

Step 1: We built our community leader list based off of the positions these individuals held in the community. Representatives from the following local organizations were contacted and agreed to attend the focus group discussion: Friends of Deckers Creek, Mon River Trails Conservancy, Morgantown City Council, Greater Morgantown Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the Monongalia County Commission.

Step 2: To gauge interest, schedule availability, and inquire about their willingness to participate, the business owners were initially contacted by phone. Once a mutually agreeable time was solidified, we chose to conduct the focus group at the public library since it is a

centrally located, neutral, and free community space. Most community public libraries have meeting rooms, are free, and are a pillar of community neutrality in a town.

Step 3: Our focus group was conducted in a face-to-face manner around a large conference room table and consisted of a 75-minute focus group discussion. Participants were each given a formal cover letter introducing them to the project, making them aware of the university's Institutional Review Board's approval and asking for their participation in the study. The focus group was led by one member of the research team and another team member took notes.

Step 4: The conversation was recorded to later transcribe for more in-depth qualitative analysis. Once the focus group audio was transcribed, it was reviewed separately by two readers to identify key response themes. Themes were then discussed to reach consensus.

Step 5: Data were kept as confidential as possible and all names were deleted from the text. Hard copy transcripts were kept in a locked filing cabinet in a researcher's locked office when not in use. Electronic copies of the qualitative data were kept on a secure drive accessible only to the research team.

The key themes that emerged are presented below. Interestingly, the discussion focused on the need to do more to keep entry costs low for small businesses and coordinate the economic activity along the trail by dedicating a staff member at the local economic development authority to actively recruit and retain businesses. Mechanisms that may support this include creating a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) like the Progress Fund on the GAP trail to provide loans to support tourism-oriented businesses along the trail and/or developing a community land trust to purchase valuable land or buildings for trail-oriented businesses.

Key Themes Regarding Intangible Benefits of the Trails and Needs

- MRTS primarily benefits "locals" or non-residents visiting for other reasons than the trail, but has great potential as a tourism destination trail during summer when the university is not in session
- Strong intangible benefits were social interaction, educational activities, non-profit (fundraising) events, and healthy activity
- Strong secondary benefit of trail as a recruiting/retention tool for employers/employees/ residents - which all add to the tax base
- Key for officials is to plan ahead for growth and keep trailside property affordable for small/local businesses
- Key need is an economic development person in charge of the rail-trail to recruit businesses, coordinate events, promote inter-business collaboration, and coordinate all interested parties

- Big need is for safety and aesthetic improvements (new trails should plan for this) to improve perception of trail. Specific to Morgantown is social services and bus depot located on or very near the trail that serve primarily low income and/or indigent individuals, creating a perception of vagrancy and loitering.

6. Project Question 6

Q6. What are creative ways to encourage economic development along the trail?

There are three distinct Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts along the MRTS. This funding mechanism may be a boon to trail development, so we conducted a focus group with representatives from three TIF projects adjacent to the MRTS in Morgantown: Star City TIF, Sunnyside Up TIF, and the Wharf District TIF. There was a total of four participants involved in the discussion which took roughly 65 minutes (please see Appendix A for interview questions). All participants were integral to the establishment and/or operation of the three TIF districts. Focus groups were led by one member of the research team and another team member took notes. The focus group was recorded, transcribed, and reviewed separately by two readers to identify key response themes. Themes were then discussed to reach consensus. Data were kept as confidential as possible and all names were deleted from the text. Hard copy transcripts were kept in a locked filing cabinet in a researcher's locked office when not in use. Electronic copies of the qualitative data were kept on a secure drive accessible only to the research team. Results of the focus groups are presented in this section based on key questions we asked.

What is a TIF?

It is first important to understand what a TIF is and how it can be used to spur the development of trails and/or economic development along a trail. There are multiple detailed descriptions of the TIF mechanism,¹⁰⁻¹² how and where TIFs (or “value capture” mechanisms) have been used in the US and elsewhere, and their benefits and potential drawbacks. Thus, we will focus on what we learned specific to TIFs in WV. Essentially, a TIF provides the opportunity to raise capital for present infrastructure improvements to support economic development and eliminate blight based on anticipated future growth in property and/or sales tax revenues that will result. Funds are often used to provide public infrastructure that a private developer wouldn't be asked to pay for because it supports much more than just that single developer's project. For example, in the Sunnyside TIF, funds were used to support construction of three mixed-use buildings by using money for a major reconfiguration of an intersection to create safe ingress/egress to a parking garage for use by all three buildings. Without this funding, the buildings would not have been viable. In essence, there's a multiplier effect of the TIF funds, in this case a \$1.7 million investment led to nearly \$140 million of development.

How Can TIFs Be Used to Support Trails?

Potential uses of TIF funding include land and building purchases; construction of sewer, water, or other utilities; road construction (including the local 20% match for federal transportation funding); lighting; parking; green space; parks; trailheads; comfort facilities; bus stops; streetscape redesign; and more. The key factor is that these items are necessary for sustained, economically viable development. *Our focus group participants stressed that a TIF is not a viable option for a trail-only project that merely is used as a tourism generator in a small town; TIFs are generally much more substantial projects.* A rail-trail can be a small part of a larger TIF district, however. For example, in the Wharf District the trail was constructed using private foundation and federal transportation funding (20/80 split) prior to the establishment of the TIF district, which then spurred construction of a hotel using the TIF for land purchases and infrastructure improvements. However, if planned appropriately, the TIF could have been used rather than the private foundation funding for trail construction because of all the economic development along the trail that the TIF investment would also support.

Another creative example of how a TIF may be instrumental on a rail trail was discussed. If a developer needs 40 parking spaces for a mixed-use structure, for example, the TIF could be used to pay for an additional 40 spots for trail parking, and lighting, bike parking, a comfort station, and utilities to also support a trailhead to increase the economic viability and attraction for users.

How to Make the Most out of a TIF?

Our focus group participants discussed numerous potential barriers to effective use of a TIF and lessons learned from their separate experiences. The key point is that an effective TIF requires a lot of up front planning and full cooperation by public and private entities. One or two uncooperative private landowners can limit the effectiveness of using a TIF to fully develop a district.

Recurrent themes from the focus group:

- It is important to have people in a decision making capacity that bring the knowledge and vision to a city concerning rail trails and the economic benefit, development, and funding process associated with rail trail development
- Successful TIF projects necessitate good development plans that make sense with competent development teams of planners, engineers, politicians, property owners, and private developers.
- To incorporate a trail into a TIF district, *rail-trail representatives should be an active participant* to explain their vision for the rail trails and how the trail can be incorporated

into planning.

- Mixed financial sources for projects opens doors to other funding opportunities, both private and public. Investors come when there is a combination of partnerships and influx of investments.
- Properly publicized, accurate information is absolutely needed to educate about TIF projects. There needs to be good, open information concerning development and plans when TIF projects are proposed in neighborhood areas.
- TIFs can be used “across” taxing entities (i.e., across county lines) to increase the size and potential benefit so that a TIF is warranted whereas it might not be sufficient in a single county

Potential issues:

- Tax receipts go to pay off the TIF, not into county receipts, freezing the taxable amount and taxes which pay for many things including schools - a major issue depending on school funding formulae state policy
- Public-private partnerships further reduce tax receipts by *removing the property entirely* from taxable status
- There must be some development to make it work; need to use the TIF financing for some economic development/revenue generator. Thus, a trail alone or a trail with only small development would not be sufficient, which limits applicability in rural areas.

Solutions to the issues:

- State policy can make up for the lost revenue to schools, as has been done in WV (see “TIFs and School Funding in West Virginia” below)
 - Interested parties in other states should use the Council of Development Finance Agencies’ online TIF resource center and state-by-state resources at <https://www.cdfa.net/cdfa/tifmap.nsf/index.html>
- The taxing entity should engage in negotiations with the public entity involved in the public-private partnership (in Monongalia County’s case, with the public university) to make up some or all of the lost tax revenue
- If a project is too small for a TIF, consider other value capture mechanisms (e.g., Social Enhancement District, Community Improvement District) or designated self-taxing district to fund trail development, infrastructure, and maintenance projects. A prominent example is the self-taxing district being considered for the major Atlanta Beltline project.¹³

TIFs and School Funding in West Virginia

Of special note, TIFs in West Virginia seem unique from how they operate in other states.

Specifically, when TIFs are established there is a potential negative impact on school funding because it can freeze the tax base in the district from which revenue is generated to operate the school district. Under West Virginia law, schools are funded under a minimum dollar amount per pupil system, which means that even when a TIF reduces the at-large tax base the school district draws upon, *the state will make up the difference in the budget amount to match the minimum per pupil dollar amount*. This special situation in West Virginia was set up by a 1982 court decision by Judge Recht in Ohio County who found that schools were performing so abysmally in the state that financing must be redone to ensure students in low property value counties were able to receive a comparable education to those in high property value counties.

B. Interpretation

The data collected in this project highlight a few key findings that other similar trails may benefit from:

1. the MRTS has been part of the stimulus for strong economic growth in Monongalia County, particularly along the trail;
2. the MRTS is unique from other trails that have been studied (e.g., Great Allegheny Passage, Creeper Trail) in that the MRTS is not a tourism generating destination;
3. many of the businesses along the trail are professional services (e.g., law firms) not primarily impacted by trail traffic, but when you combine these businesses with lodging, retail, and foodservice businesses in close proximity, numerous mutual benefits are realized;
4. the primary business benefit for the MRTS, because of the type of businesses along it, may be in recruiting and retaining talent who benefit from trail access and aesthetic appeal for active transportation and active work breaks;
5. safety after dark is a universal concern which may be addressed by improving lighting, police presence, and increasing residential areas and events along the trail;
6. three TIF districts that encompass busy sections of the MRTS have been underutilized for trail benefit but should be tapped for future improvements;
7. trail advocates and local government officials could help business owners understand the direct impact and benefits of the trails by frequently soliciting feedback from businesses and collecting/disseminating data about trail use and impact; and
8. ongoing maintenance, events, policing, and other improvements could be funded with unique self-taxing districts or community improvement/enhancement value capture instruments.

C. Limitations

Our findings should be viewed in light of a few limitations. First, the survey from which we collected trail-generated revenue and business impacts were plagued by low response rate,

especially in areas less proximal to the trail. This prevented an analysis of block-by-block trail-generated revenue as was originally intended. This limitation may have also skewed the data based on who responded. We attempted to overcome this by recruiting in as many information outlets as possible, especially those that we knew would reach businesses nearest to the trail. Second, our findings are most applicable to trail systems and places that are similar to our project - rural core towns with an expansive trail system used primarily for recreation and transportation by local residents or guests visiting the area for other reasons than the trail. Third, we have been unable to identify an equivalent comparison group against which we could compare the properties along the trail to understand the comparative impact of the trail on property values. We will continue to work on this subsequent to this final report.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions for RTC Economic Business Impact Study

Business Owner (of businesses that opened after the trail was built) Interview Questions:

How many years have you operated at your location? What type of business do you operate?
Why did you choose to locate your business where you did? (what were the key factors)?
In your opinion, what are your perceptions of the safety of the trail? For you as a business owner as well as trail-users?
What are your thoughts on the access to the trail? How easy or difficult would you say it is for users or customers to utilize?
In your words, what is the physical “quality” of the trail where your business establishment is located?
Overall, what kind of financial impact has the Mon River Trail System had on your business? a. Why do you think that the trail had this financial impact on your business?
What efforts, if any, have you undertaken to bring trail users into your business?
What suggestions do you have about how to attract more users to the Mon River Trail System and to attract trail users into businesses in communities on or near the trail?
How much economic activity seems to be taking place at your section of the trail?
One suggestion on how to better promote and market the Mon River Trail System is to have close coordination between state government agencies, local and county governments, Chambers of Commerce and local business owners like yourself. How interested would you be in participating in such a partnership to better promote the Trail?

Local Government, Trail Advocacy, and CVB & Visitors Bureau Reps Interview Questions:

What is your position with the agency or group you represent? How long have you been in this role?
What are the tangible benefits of the Mon River Trail System to businesses, local government, and residents in the immediate area?
What are the intangible or unexpected benefits of the Mon River Trail System to businesses, local government, and residents in the immediate area?

What types of actions has your agency taken to attract or cater to trail users in regards to businesses close to the MRTS?
How has your agency/ organization reached out to businesses to educate them about how to draw the attention of trail users' business?
How has your agency/ organization reached out to the business community to discuss the possibilities of locating their business on the rail trail?
Do you have any suggestions about how to attract more users to the Mon River Trail System and to attract trail users into businesses in communities on or near the trail?
What suggestions would you have for agencies/entities similar to your own but in other localities in WV or US to get the greatest economic impact from a rail-trail?
To your knowledge, are trail users using local hotel accommodations?
Within your agency/organization, is there any entity responsible for the maintenance of the rail trail? If so, which part or section?

Directors and County Officials in Charge of TIF Districts Interview Questions:

Which TIF District do you work in or represent?
Please explain the type of approach you were/ are involved in to secure TIF funding for projects in your district?
How are you using the TIF funding in the District you represent?
How has the location along the trail impacted your TIF projects/priorities?
How are you using the TIF funding to connect to and/or improve and enhance the trail? Are you in support of TIF funding for the purpose of enhancing trails?
What are the benefits of using the TIF funding for the type of project with which you were involved?
What are the challenges/ barriers to using TIF funding for the type of project with which you were involved?
What advice do you have for other localities considering using the TIF mechanism to make improvements on or near their local rail-trail?

Will they use, or have they used, their TIF \$ to leverage other investments in their trail? If so, how much, from whom and for what.

If bike/ped facilities were included, was it at the impetus of the local government or the developer? Were there any political ramifications (pro or con)?

Business Owner Interview Questions for businesses that left a trailside business:

What type of business did you operate in this location? How long did you operate this business?

Did you locate there before or after the trail was built?

Why did you initially locate your business where it was?

Why did you relocate or close? Did the trail location impact your decision to leave?

What could have taken place in order for you to have stayed?

What suggestions would you have for other businesses located near – or attempting to locate near - the MRTS?

Appendix B: Mon River Trails System Business Impact Survey



Rail-Trail Impact Survey



Please complete this survey if you are 18 years of age or older. Answer the following questions by checking the correct box or writing your answer in the space provided. You may skip questions. Please return the survey using the prepaid envelope provided.





November 1, 2016

Dear Monongalia County Business Owner,

The West Virginia University School of Public Health's Health Research Center (HRC) is currently conducting an evaluation of the economic impact of the portion of the Mon River Trails System (MRTS) that is within city limits of Morgantown and Star City, West Virginia. This research is funded through the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), a national non-profit agency. RTC is the nation's largest trails organization dedicated to connecting people and communities by creating a nationwide network of public trails, many from former rail lines and connecting corridors.

This letter is a request for you to take part in a research project to evaluate the economic impact of the Mon River Trail System in portions of Star City and areas surrounding the trail system within Morgantown city limits. This project is being conducted by Christiaan Abildso, Ph.D., MPH, Jessica Coffman, MA, and Tom Bias, Ph.D. in WVU's School of Public Health. Your participation in this project is greatly appreciated and will take approximately 10 minutes to fill out the attached questionnaire. **PLEASE COMPLETE THIS SURVEY KEEPING THE BUSINESS ESTABLISHMENT THE SURVEY WAS MAILED TO IN MIND.**

Your involvement in this project will be kept as confidential as legally possible. All data will be reported in the aggregate without mention of any of your specific responses. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate. Your participation is completely voluntary. You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer and you may discontinue at any time. West Virginia University's Institutional Review Board acknowledgement of this project is on file.

I hope that you will participate in this research project and complete the attached survey either through the mail or via the following online link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/railtrailstudy>, as it could be beneficial in understanding the economic impact of the Mon River Trails System on the businesses of Star City and Morgantown. Thank you very much for your time. Should you have any questions about this letter or the research project, please feel free to contact me: Christiaan at (304) 293-5374 or by e-mail at cgabildso@hsc.wvu.edu.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Christiaan G. Abildso'.

Christiaan G. Abildso, Ph.D., MPH

Assistant Professor, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences Department
WVU School of Public Health
PO Box 9190
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HEALTH RESEARCH CENTER

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Morgantown, WV 26506-9138
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Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action Institution

Q1: What is the <u>primary</u> classification of this business? Check one box.	Q2: How long have you been at this location?
<input type="checkbox"/> Bike rental/Sales/Supplies <input type="checkbox"/> Hotel/motel/B&B <input type="checkbox"/> Retail/Gift/Specialty store <input type="checkbox"/> Campgrounds <input type="checkbox"/> Convenience/Grocery store <input type="checkbox"/> Pharmacy/Drug Store <input type="checkbox"/> Outdoor recreation/outfitter <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation/Shuttling <input type="checkbox"/> Restaurant/Bar/Café/Ice Cream store <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial/ Manufacturing/ Construction <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	Years _____ Months _____

Q3: What month(s) of the year do you consider to be your peak season months?

(Circle the Month(s))

January	February	March	April	May	June
July	August	September	October	November	December

Q4: Is your business closed more than two weeks in any given month of the year? <input type="checkbox"/> Yes (please list months): _____ <input type="checkbox"/> No	Q5: How many persons, including yourself if appropriate, do you employ during: <table border="1" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="background-color: #e6e6e6;">Peak Season</td> <td style="background-color: #e6e6e6;">Full Time: _____ Part Time: _____</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="background-color: #d9e1f2;">Off Season</td> <td style="background-color: #d9e1f2;">Full Time: _____ Part Time: _____</td> </tr> </table>	Peak Season	Full Time: _____ Part Time: _____	Off Season	Full Time: _____ Part Time: _____
Peak Season	Full Time: _____ Part Time: _____				
Off Season	Full Time: _____ Part Time: _____				

Q6: When driving, do your employees have to pay to park their cars?

Yes

No

Q7: Roughly how many of your employees commute to/from work using the trail?

Q7a: Do you offer bike racks or bike parking at your business?

Yes

No

There is nearby public bike parking

Q8: On average, how many hours per week does the *typical* employee work during:

Peak Season	Full Time: _____ Part Time: _____
Off-Season	Full Time: _____ Part Time: _____

Q9: In relationship to the rail trail, how is your business establishment situated on the trail:

My business is on the trail and has direct access to the trail

My business is on the trail but DOES NOT have direct access to the trail

My business is not on the trail

Q9a: What impact did the trail have on where you decided to locate your business?

Very strong impact

Strong impact

Some impact

No impact

My business was located here before the trail

9b: How many locations does your business currently have? If you have multiple locations, please list them on the line(s) below:

One

More than one:

Q10: What impact would you estimate the trail had on this business location in the past year?

- Increase sales/revenues significantly
- Increase sales/revenues somewhat
- Has had no impact
- Decrease sales/revenues somewhat
- Decrease sales/revenues significantly
- Don't Know/Not Applicable

Q11: Has the trail had any impact on your decisions to do the following in the past year?

	Yes	No
Expand your operation along the trail	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Make plans to expand along the trail	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Expand your operation away from the trail	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Make plans to expand away from the trail	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Downsize your operation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Make plans to downsize your operation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q12: Has the trail had any impact on your decisions to do the following with respect to your workforce during the past year?

	Yes	No
Create new positions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Make plans to create new positions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Eliminate positions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Make plans to eliminate positions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q13: On average, how much money does a typical "trail user" spend during a visit to your business establishment?

A "trail user" is defined as any person using the trail to get to your establishment, whether they are from another area out-of-town or if they are a local.

\$: _____

Q14: Approximately what were the gross revenue figures for this location?

These figures will only be used by adding all the responses together, NOT focusing on your business alone.

2014:

2015:

Q15: Approximately what percentage of 2015 annual revenues would you estimate could be largely attributable to the existence of the rail trail?

_____ %

Q16: Approximately what percentage of 2015 total customers would you estimate could be largely attributable to the existence of the rail trail?

_____ %

Q17: When answering the previous 2 questions, did you base your answers on “your gut” instinct or do you have a system for tracking trail-users that visit your business establishment? If you have a system for tracking trail-users visiting your business establishment, please describe it below:

Q18: What impact would you estimate events on the trail had on this business location in the past year (such as marathons, bicycle races, festivals, and other events featuring the trail)?

- Increase sales/revenues significantly
- Increase sales/revenues somewhat
- Has had no impact
- Decrease sales/revenues somewhat
- Decrease sales/revenues significantly
- Don't Know/Not Applicable

Q19: Please check if you offer the following services:

- Merchandise Shipping
- Merchandise hold/pick-up later
- Not applicable to this type of business

Q20: Do you offer any of the following amenities for trail users at this location?	Yes	No
Restroom Usage (free, without a purchase of anything)	0	0
Water (free, without purchase of anything)	0	0
Reduced cost/ discounts at your business	0	0

Q21: Please explain any actions that you have taken to attract business on the trail and/ or cater to trail users . These actions mentioned here also pertain to any additional advertising or enhancement to the appearance of a trail-side entrance you may have done to attract trail users.

Q22: Feel free to make any positive or negative comments related to the economic impact of the trail, and/or the trail itself. Thank you for your feedback.



Thank you for completing the survey!
Please return it to us using the envelope provided.
Postage has been prepaid.

**Health Research Center
West Virginia University
School of Public Health
PO Box 9136
Morgantown, WV 26506-9946**

**If you are interested in the results from this survey,
please feel free to email a request to:**

cgabildso@hsc.wvu.edu

