

UNLOCKING THE ECONOMIC & COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL OF IHTC TRAILS

POSITIONING REGIONAL MULTI-USE TRAILS AS PART OF A GROWING REGIONAL ECONOMY

AUGUST 2023



Photo Credit: Renee Rosensteel



Industrial
Heartland
Trails
COALITION



rails-to-trails
conservancy

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The project team offers its deepest gratitude to the Steering Committee, the more than three dozen individuals who took part in interviews and focus group conversations, and members of the IHTC coalition, who have been working collaboratively in pursuit of a completed regional trail network for many years.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A region brimming with great trails makes for an appealing outdoor destination. That is why the [Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition](#) (IHTC) is working to complete and connect a system of shared use trails across 51 counties in western Pennsylvania, northern West Virginia, eastern Ohio, and southwest New York. IHTC's vision is that this "Industrial Heartland" will become a premier destination offering a 1,500-mile multi-use trail network experience.

Even though the coalition has been working collaboratively for 10+ years to fulfill this vision, the [Rails-to-Trails Conservancy](#) (RTC), one of the coalition's supporting organizations, recognizes that IHTC trails can have a greater impact on the regional economy. IHTC's origins, after all, are rooted in the desire to establish a more vibrant and economically prospering region.¹ Nevertheless, over the past decade, trail advocates have focused most of their efforts on building trails rather than planning for a thriving trail economy.

RTC began this "Unlocking the Economic Potential of IHTC Trails" project in hopes of renewing the coalition's pursuit of a more prosperous region. The project team assembled a Steering Committee, interviewed subject-area experts, held focus group discussions, and hosted a workshop to determine how to work toward this goal. In total, the eight-month project engaged more than 100 stakeholders, many of them from outside of the trails community and even outside of the region. Interestingly, a project that began with the acknowledgement that the coalition has not historically involved enough people from other professions (economic developers, tourism professionals, elected officials, and others) enabled IHTC to begin fostering such relationships.

INSIGHTS GAINED

As the reader, you may have noticed that the "Unlocking" title referenced in the last paragraph is a variation on the report title (the inclusion of "community" development being the key difference). The project team experienced a paradigm shift early in the project. While aware of the importance of community development efforts and quality of life measures, the project began with a laser focus on economic development. Before long, we recognized that effective economic development initiatives are intertwined with community development and quality of life improvements. **Economic development cannot be pursued in a vacuum if the goal is to bring lasting benefit to local communities.** This recognition became one of the project's guiding principles.

Similarly, the team began to recognize that the narrative surrounding the trail economy needs to change from jargon-laden economic impact language to a message around "building local wealth and healthier, more vibrant communities," words that can be easily understood and widely embraced. Beyond semantics, the intent to build local wealth² and healthier communities represents a commitment to those already living in the region. Without planning, trail-related economic impact may not actually benefit regional residents. Nationally, there are instances of outside investors and visiting trail users reaping the benefits of trails while local people become disenfranchised. Two of the recommendations coming out of this project³ address this concern.

Yet another shift that occurred during the project has to do with trail advocates being better partners. One of the recurring questions asked of stakeholders related to getting folks from beyond the trails community "to the table" in support of trails. While a worthy goal and something that is necessary to realize the vision, members of the trails community must first become better partners. "We may first need to join them at *their* table to initiate a relationship." To build relationships with the healthcare community, tourism, elected leaders, economic developers, community groups, school systems, and others, trail advocates likely need to initiate those conversations by showing up for them and their causes.

¹ While the regional trails community has been collaborating since 2000, it was the 2010 "Power of 32" regional visioning project that spurred the formation of IHTC.

² In this context, wealth measures the value of all the assets of worth owned by a person, family, or community.

³ "Changing the narrative to one of building local wealth and healthier, more vibrant communities" and "Ensuring that local residents benefit from trail investments"

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This supports the notion that trail-related economic development should be intertwined with other community and quality-of-life measures if it is to make a meaningful impact on the region. This brings us back to IHTC's vision of establishing the region as a premier destination. We now know that **becoming a premier destination can only occur if the region has first become a premier place to live.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

This report puts forth 23 strategies for unlocking the community and economic development potential of IHTC trails. Of all the strategies, the ones that seemed to generate the most support across two separate meetings⁴ were:

- Pursuing partnerships beyond the trails community to unlock the full range of community and economic development benefits of trails,
- Creating a funding pipeline to aid trail-oriented investment and seeking renewed philanthropic support, and
- Exploring diverse governance models to create mechanisms to receive and disperse state funding across set geographies

In addition to these, the project team and Steering Committee view the following recommendations as critical to advancing this work:

- Developing an outreach program to broaden IHTC's support base,
- Changing the narrative regarding the value of trails to one of building local wealth and healthier, more vibrant communities,
- Ensuring that local residents benefit from a growing outdoor economy and working with communities to safeguard against unintended consequences, and
- Taking advantage of unprecedented federal funding opportunities and preparing one or more regional grant applications

In closing, Steering Committee member Andrew Walker observed that the only way the coalition will “unlock” the community and economic development potential of IHTC trails is if it coordinates at the local level. As Andrew said, **“This will succeed if there are hundreds – even thousands – of people who are working on this.”** Having engaged more than 100 people beyond the typical IHTC trails community over the course of this project certainly has given us a start.

What We Mean When We Say Trails

While there are all sorts of great trails throughout the region, we are working on a specific type of path. The IHTC is dedicated to completing specific multi-use trails that are located along the corridors that make up the larger network (map on the back cover). Also called “shared use paths,” multi-use trails are paths that are designed to accommodate the movement of pedestrians and cyclists. In the context of the IHTC, they are typically wide, level, accessible paths. Many of them are rail-trails, but not all IHTC trails follow former rail corridors.

⁴A May 9 coalition meeting and the May 23 Leveraging Trails for Community and Economic Development workshop

BACKGROUND

IHTC VISION

The vision of IHTC is that the Industrial Heartland becomes a premier destination offering a 1,500-mile multi-use trail network experience.

About the Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition

The Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition (IHTC) is a coalition that is working to complete and connect a system of more than 1,500 miles of shared use trails across 51 counties and four states. Communities in western Pennsylvania, northern West Virginia, eastern Ohio, and southwest New York boast a shared heritage of innovation, steel production, agriculture, and manufacturing. Through IHTC's initiative, these states will share reinvention, renewal, and innovation once more.

IHTC's overarching goal is to connect the trail network so that local and visiting trail users can seamlessly walk and bike from trail to trail, city to city, and town to town. The system is about 50 percent complete.

The coalition was born out of the **Power of 32 visioning project**, which imagined a more vibrant region powered by multi-state collaborations. Power of 32's tagline was "32 Counties: 4 States: 1 Vision." Trails emerged as a priority, prompting the Power of 32 leadership to encourage the trails community to renew multi-state planning efforts. (As early as 2000, the Tri-State Trail Initiative started a similar collaboration centered on 18 border counties. In this sense, the regional trails community has been working collaboratively since 2000.)

The first Power of 32-inspired trails meeting was held in 2011, with trail advocates gathering to consider how they could make important interstate connections across the four states. Importantly, these early conversations were not limited to trail development. They were driven by the desire to bolster the regional economy through trails. The group needed to look no further than western Pennsylvania, where The Progress Fund's [Trail Town Program](#)[®] and complementary [business loans](#) spurred trail-oriented development.



Photo Credit: Jason Cohn

While trail completion was a hot topic at those earliest conversations, the intent in convening was to plant the seeds for maximizing the economic potential of regional trails. In 2013, the group was formally organized with an expanded 51-county footprint and soon thereafter rebranded as IHTC. The coalition is supported by a Project Support Team consisting of staff members from RTC, the [Pennsylvania Environmental Council](#) (PEC), and the National Park Service's RTCA Ohio Field Office.

More can be learned about IHTC at www.ihearttrails.org and in IHTC's [10-Year Evaluation & Success Strategy](#). While that report takes a broad view of the IHTC, this one zeroes in on strategies specific to economic and community development.

BACKGROUND

Project Purpose

As one of the key organizations offering project support to the coalition, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) initiated this project to develop a shared understanding for how trails can be fully leveraged to advance the economic health and prosperity of the region.

RTC hired Cycle Forward to consult on the project. The intent of the project was to assess how to best position and accelerate IHTC trails as a growing part of what drives the regional economy in a variety of ways. In other words, the project team set out to explore ways to “unlock the economic potential of IHTC trails” and fulfill the early promise of the coalition. This resulting report provides strategies for achieving this goal.

Project Approach

Trail advocates have been working together for decades, initiating the earliest collaborations well before the formation of the IHTC. Their dedication, persistence, and hard work resulted in hundreds of miles of trails within the IHTC region and seeded the idea of an interconnected regional trail network. Especially in the last decade, advocates have focused on demonstrating the economic impact (through visitor spending/tourism) of trails to help “make the case” for continued investment and extending individual trails to link together. In the coming years, a more holistic approach will be necessary to sustain existing trails and to grow community-led advocacy efforts to create new trail connections. Doing so will make it possible to fully leverage the economic and quality of life benefits that trails and trail networks can bring to IHTC communities.

This project was designed to garner feedback from outside of the traditional trails community. Partners from outside of the trails sector (e.g., economic developers, tourism professionals, and academics) were invited to conversations about how to better position trails as economic drivers. By better understanding the economic potential of regional trails – as observed by professionals in other sectors – IHTC will be more equipped to position them as being significant to the regional economy.

Project components included:





1. Convening a project Steering Committee that met seven times
2. Hosting five focus group conversations
3. Conducting individual stakeholder interviews
4. Soliciting initial IHTC coalition member feedback
5. Leading a May 23 Leveraging Trails for Community and Economic Development Workshop to solicit reaction to initial recommendations
6. Developing this report with short- and medium-long term recommendations
7. Designing the report as a living document that will guide future IHTC convenings and decision making (in tandem with other guiding documents)

See appendices A, B, and C for summaries of the various engagement efforts.

BACKGROUND

Geographic Reach of the Project



-  BLUE PINS represent Steering Committee locations;
-  BLACK PINS represent focus group participant locations.
-  RED PINS represent stakeholder interviewee locations;
-  Not depicted: 52 workshop participants across the IHTC region.

This report and the dialogue that informed it are intended to create broad buy-in among stakeholders concerning how IHTC trails can strengthen the region’s vibrancy and economic competitiveness. The project team sought the answers to these **key questions** throughout the project:

- What does success look like for the IHTC, both in terms of the overall vision and economic competitiveness?
- How do we progress from having a collection of great trails to being a place in which trails are an integral part of a vibrant regional economy?
- What are the best ways to balance quality of life concerns and the pursuit of trail-driven economic development?
- What are the limitations to trail tourism and the outdoor economy?
- What is necessary to make the IHTC trail network and associated communities more marketable to residents, employers, and tourists?
- What data is needed to advance this effort? What infrastructure and support systems must be in place?

PROJECT GUIDING PRINCIPLES

PROJECT GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Effective Economic Development Strategies are Attentive to Quality of Life Concerns

IHTC leadership recognizes that economic development cannot be pursued in a vacuum. Rather, sustainable and long-lasting economic development must be compatible with other community improvement strategies. In a January [2022 Brookings article](#), researchers argue that improving quality of life – not just business – is the best path to Midwestern rejuvenation, stating, “The long-standing Midwestern community economic development strategy of low taxes, business incentives, and loose environmental regulations usually doesn’t work, and has often proven disappointing to communities...” As stated in the article, “... there is compelling [new data](#) that these traditional economic development tools may be ineffective compared to investments in quality of life and place. Our research on smaller communities has found that community amenities such as recreation opportunities, cultural activities, and excellent services (e.g., good schools, transportation options) are likely bigger contributors to healthy local economies than traditional ‘business-friendly’ measures.”

Essentially, this ground-breaking research asserts that improving quality of life with attentiveness to leveraging outdoor assets, prioritizing education systems and other services, and offering cultural activities improves regional economic success. The research further indicates that many of the towns with higher estimated quality of life are places with natural amenities.⁵

2. Trails are Already a Significant Part of the Regional Economy

Nationally, some of the most cited trail research comes from within the IHTC footprint. The Great Allegheny Passage generated [\\$121 Million](#) in economic impact in 2019. And other regional trails make a considerable imprint as well. In 2017, RTC found that the Mon River Trails in West Virginia contributed [\\$6 Million](#) to the local economy, while [\\$6.9 Million](#) in spending was contributed to the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath.⁶ Trails are already a significant part of the regional economy as well as the larger outdoor recreation economy being that most activities considered part of the outdoor economy involve or depend upon trails.

3. Building Local Wealth is a Goal that Virtually all Stakeholders can Rally Around

In talking to at least five dozen stakeholders, not a single person has disagreed with the importance of using trails as a lever to build local wealth. It’s a goal that virtually all stakeholders can rally around, and the terminology is more pointed than typical economic development language. A part of what is so important about this is ensuring that there are policies and resources in place that make trail economy opportunities more accessible to local people rather than passively allowing outside investors to reap the lion’s share of the economic benefit. Ohio’s [Outdoor Recreation Council of Appalachia](#)⁷ offers a nearby example of an entity that works with local municipalities to ensure such local policies and regional resources are in place.

⁵ “Improving quality of life—not just business—is the best path to Midwestern rejuvenation,” Brookings, January 26, 2022. Based on the research paper, “An Aggregate Approach to Estimating Quality of Life in Micropolitan Areas,” Amanda L. Weinstein, Michael Hicks, and Emily Wornell.

⁶ Additionally, the Ghost Town Trail’s economic impact was measured at \$1.7 Million in 2009, and the Erie to Pittsburgh Trail’s at \$7.48 Million in 2013, both studies conducted by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy.

⁷ The Outdoor Recreation Council of Appalachia (ORCA) is a Council of Governments, created to holistically and sustainably utilize Appalachian Ohio’s plentiful outdoor recreation assets.

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PROJECT GUIDING PRINCIPLES

4. Collaborating with Leaders Outside of the Trails Community is Paramount

Early in the project, we heard a clear message coming out of focus group discussions: the most important things the coalition can do to achieve its goals are to communicate well, collaborate, and partner with leaders from outside of the trails community and listen at every step. Economic and community development “tools” are not what will catapult the initiative forward. Rather, it is these “ways of working” that will ultimately position ITHC trails and the region to reap the economic and other benefits of trails.

5. Trail Organizations Must be Better Partners

Trail organizations have to be better partners to effectively forge partnerships beyond the trails community and reap the desired quality of life benefits. The trails community must support and “show up for” leaders and efforts that, like trails, contribute to more livable communities (rather than seeking support that is unreciprocated). For example, partnerships with education systems should be based in the understanding that quality education is a critical component of successful communities. Finding ways to support education partners by reaching out TO help, rather than reaching out for help is a better starting point for a lasting partnership.



OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Numerous opportunities and challenges were identified in the workshop as well as in conversations throughout the project. The following opportunities and challenges represent those that seem most topical.

A comprehensive listing from the workshop appears in Appendix C.

OPPORTUNITIES

Unprecedented Federal Funding Opportunities

The increase in the availability of funding at federal and state levels for trail development is unprecedented. New and increased federal funding opportunities through the [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law](#) (BIL) and regional programs administered by the [Appalachian Regional Commission](#) (ARC) afford a significant opportunity for trail planning and development. The IHTC and its partners are in the position to pursue funds due to the multi-state nature of the coalition and how its vision aligns with federal and state priorities such as providing transportation alternatives, creating safe streets, increasing economic impact, and reconnecting communities. Relevant to the ARC, one of the commission's priorities is "building regional culture and tourism," something the IHTC prioritizes as well. It is important to seek and secure state and federal funding now, particularly while there is such goodwill for trails and outdoor spaces coming out of the pandemic.

Increased Interest in and Appreciation of the Outdoors

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted a renewed interest in trails and outdoor recreation more generally. Trails throughout the U.S. and within the IHTC region experienced peak usage in 2020. PEC's research on [how the pandemic impacted Pennsylvania's non-motorized trails](#) describes an increased use and newfound appreciation for trails. Nationally, trail use continued to rise while the most severe COVID-19 restrictions were in place. [RTC's national trail count program](#) showed an average increase in trail use of 9.5 percent between 2022 and 2021, with 2020 being the most significant year for trail use on record. While trail use has since leveled out, the mass rediscovery of the outdoors has resulted in sustained use and support for trails. Workshop participants referred to "a new level of consciousness about trails" and the pandemic "reawakening our understanding of the value of outdoor spaces." This ongoing interest presents the opportunity to seek bi-partisan and general public support for IHTC trail projects. As was shared by one elected official interviewed for this project: "The bipartisan nature of trails needs to be the starting point" of conversations with elected officials (and perhaps with others as well, being that trails are community gathering spaces that benefit the whole).

Quality of Life Preferences Lead Location Decisions

Whereas in the past employment opportunities may have been a primary driver in relocation decisions, it is now understood that quality of life preferences tend to determine personal decisions on where to locate. According to the aforementioned research cited in the January 2022 Brookings article and study co-author Emily Wornell (a member of this project's Steering Committee), "Jobs follow people," not the other way around. Communities and regions that offer valued amenities such as outdoor recreation opportunities, cultural activities, and excellent services like good schools and transportation options are

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measurably more likely to have healthy local economies. Such places attract and retain residents less so due to “business friendly” measures, but increasingly because people seek out quality of life factors when making location decisions.

A 2019 Headwaters Economics report, “[Recreation Counties Attracting New Residents and Higher Incomes](#),” suggests that recreation counties in particular fare well, as compared to those places that haven’t invested in developing their recreation amenities. From the article: “Across the U.S., the economies of rural places, small cities, and large metros that depend on outdoor recreation outperform their peers, on average. After the 2008 Great Recession most rural counties with recreation amenities gained population, while most rural counties without recreation amenities lost population. This difference is particularly significant as population loss threatens the future of many rural places.”⁸

Global Workforce Shifts May Favor Increased Trail Use and Relocation to Trail Communities

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered global shifts in how and where people go to work. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), in February 2022, 59 percent of people whose jobs can mainly be done from home telework all or most of the time (as compared to 23 percent before the Coronavirus outbreak). More people being able to work from any location, coupled with housing crises and climate change impacts in coastal areas and larger cities, presents opportunities for the IHTC region and its hundreds of miles of shared use trails. One regional community, Kane, Pennsylvania, has capitalized on these shifts by filling the few vacant storefronts in its commercial district with a poster campaign. Individual posters say things like, “Get Outside: Catch a Breath of Fresh Air,” and “Reach the World: Work Remotely. Easy Access to Many Destinations from the Bradford Regional Airport.”

Campaigns such as this – and West Virginia’s “[Ascend](#)” initiative – are needed in a region that has yet to fully capitalize on its outdoor assets. Just one of the IHTC counties (Forest County, Pennsylvania) was identified as a “[recreation county](#)” in the Headwaters report, and six throughout the region have increased their population between 2010 and 2021. These counties include Allegheny, Butler, and Washington in Pennsylvania, Monongalia and Preston in West Virginia, and Tuscarawas in Ohio.⁹

In addition to [global trends](#) presenting the opportunity to draw more people to relocate to the region, people already living within the region have re-evaluated how they prioritize their lives, many making [more time for trail use](#). The “reawakening” described previously applies not only to the outdoors, but also to how we spend our time. People making more time for their health and wellness, outdoor recreation, and active transportation amounts to an opportunity to bring on more trail supporters.

Trails are Becoming more Widely Recognized as being Critical to Connectivity

No longer viewed as simply recreational, trails are becoming more widely recognized as critical pieces of a community’s active transportation infrastructure. Trails connect to residential neighborhoods, employment centers, schools, cultural spaces, parks, and other communities. They join forces with dedicated bike lanes, sidewalks, transit, and other modes and spaces to support viable alternatives to vehicular use. Communities throughout the entire footprint have residents who do not drive, prefer to drive less, and do not have access to cars. Connected communities improve the quality of life of those

⁸ “Recreation Counties Attracting New Residents and Higher Incomes,” Headwaters Economics, January 2019.

⁹ “The Appalachian Region: A Data Overview from the 2017-2021 American Community Survey Chartbook,” Appalachian Regional Commission, June 2023.

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populations and for communities overall. In some IHTC communities, Amish populations rely upon trails as safe alternatives to area roadways. The connections are not just about the utility of getting from here to there. In Cleveland, the Metroparks system uses trails to help connect 24,000 acres of parks and greenspaces. Trails are great connectors, and more people understanding this creates an opportunity to bring on additional support for trail projects.

Raising Awareness Concerning the Value of Trails Remains an Opportunity

Perhaps more easily stated as a challenge, ample opportunity remains to raise awareness concerning the value of trails. Any number of potential supporters and supporting organizations – economic developers, tourism professionals, elected officials, the healthcare community, and others – are not fully aware of the value of trails. From an economic standpoint as well as quality of life, conservation, and public health, trails present an opportunity for healthier and more vibrant places. Convincing leaders that trails are as important as traditional economic development (or more important) remains an opportunity. As companies look to regain footing following the pandemic, having more people and organizations understand that trails contribute to a more desirable and competitive region provides a great opportunity to showcase and prioritize trails and the trail economy. The [York County Economic Alliance](#) provides a nearby example of an economic development organization that has prioritized trails.



Ample Trail Economy Business Opportunities Remain

In a region that has not fully leveraged its trail economy, business opportunities exist throughout the IHTC footprint. The opportunities range from new business creation, business expansions, and product line extensions. From large corporations to mom-and-pop shops, businesses need information to make sound decisions. IHTC can play a role. IHTC and its partners can help provide needed information to economic developers, corporate site selectors, and entrepreneurs who seek to understand the business opportunity along IHTC trails. Readymade opportunities include creating a pipeline to funding opportunities, researching local manufacturers that could benefit from creating trail-oriented products, and providing trail information to economic developers and the like.

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Learning Acquisition Strategies from Land Trust and National Scenic Trail Communities

IHTC's 10-Year Evaluation & Success Strategy report revealed that the top barrier to establishing trails as a destination is the existence of trail gaps. In turn, the top obstacles to addressing trail gaps are funding and land acquisition. IHTC must continue to look for new ways of addressing land acquisition challenges if it is to increase destination appeal. Two viable opportunities for finding new ways to acquire land are:

- Learn from the land trust and community land trust professions and uncover new methods for acquiring property. The [Center for Community Progress](#), a national nonprofit dedicated to tackling vacant properties, works with “land banks” throughout the U.S. Land banks are public entities with unique governmental powers, created pursuant to state-enabling legislation, that are solely focused on converting problem properties into productive use according to local community goals. There are at least eight land bank organizations within the IHTC region. The Center for Community Progress and land banks have successfully “banked” and converted rail corridors, treating trails like other vacant properties. Learning about these efforts and how they might provide permanence may offer a new opportunity to acquire certain parcels.
- Similarly, the National Scenic Trail community (and other professionals working on land acquisition in other spheres and locations) may be able to convey approaches and ideas that have been untested by the proponents of regional shared use trails.

Strengthening Ties to Local Agritourism, Arts, Cultural, and Heritage Programs and Sites

Premier destinations boast a variety of services, experiences, and points-of-interest, inviting visitors to engage in more than a single interest or attraction. For IHTC, this means recognizing the overlapping interests of outdoor recreation and cultural heritage travelers (and like-minded residents). Shared use trail users often seek culinary/agritourism, arts, cultural, and heritage attractions and experiences. Recognizing this, IHTC and its partners can look for ways to more seamlessly promote trail experiences with other offerings through integrated marketing (in partnership with those in the arts, culinary, and so forth). This would complement the ARC's prioritization of agritourism and create an opening for partnering with extension services of land grant universities, which often include programs that focus on both agriculture/agritourism and outdoor recreation. One organization already integrating outdoor recreation with the arts, culture, and downtown areas is the Altoona Blair County Development Corporation. Their “[Lifestyle](#)” web page provides a great example to other economic development organizations that trails and outdoor recreation can be marketed as assets alongside the arts, shopping, restaurants, and breweries.

CHALLENGES

Physical and Attitudinal Barriers to Trail Investments and Trail-Related Spending

IHTC partners are accustomed to facing both physical and attitudinal barriers to trail investments and trail-related spending. Among the physical barriers is the primary challenge of land acquisition, described in the 10-Year Evaluation and Success Strategy in this way: “Right of way acquisition is the key block; you can sell a project a lot easier if you have the land.” Topographical and other physical constraints make planning for certain trail segments extremely challenging. Constraints such as trails dead-ending at scrapyards and four-lane highways, steep inclines out of a river valley, narrow bridges,

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and determining routes in urban environments call for creative approaches driven by a bold regional vision.

One barrier noted during the workshop is limited or prohibited access to active and/or underused railroad right-of-way. Large railroad companies prioritize movement of freight and are not motivated to work with communities on trail projects. Their corporate structures and complexities disincentivize cooperative agreements for trail development and create a barrier to completing trails, and thus the related economic impacts.

Yet another physical barrier is that of gaps in the trail system. Some gaps prevent long-distance touring or even some longer day trips. There are both geographic and community obstacles (related to political will and perceptions around trails) to eliminating these gaps.

Some physical barriers to trail development are the result of attitudinal barriers concerning how people think about trails, mobility, and active transportation. One workshop participant connected to the motorist mindset (people primarily getting places by car) to a needed shift in regional planning priorities. Viewing trails and active transportation differently can result in planning for new and improved infrastructure to access parks, trails, and other outdoor amenities. Communities connected by trails also make trail tourism more viable and more appealing.

Potential Allies Don't Appreciate the Value of Trails

A persistent and universal trail challenge is that some people do not appreciate the value of trails. They view trails as “nice to have” non-essential amenities (like “the icing on the cake,” as one workshop participant put it). Even worse, some people are actively opposed to trail-related investments. Included in these groups are potential allies. While some elected officials, economic developers, and tourism professionals have embraced trails, others have not. Some local leaders and decision makers don't see trails as true economic drivers and might not embrace the value of regional connectivity or thinking beyond their single community. Turnover among staff and elected and appointed leaders contribute to this issue as well. Sometimes people are not in their positions long enough to see the value of trails and trail networks. And perhaps when a person becomes oriented and adapts the mindset, they leave their position and trail advocates must begin anew with their replacement. Again, these are universal challenges, but challenges to be overcome nonetheless.

Underinvestment in Certain Locations Impedes Positive Trail Experiences

Related to both previous challenges, an underinvestment in trails in certain localities impedes positive trail experiences. The trail economy cannot reach its full potential, at least so far as tourism is concerned, if trails are not well constructed, cared for, and connected to communities and other off-trail points of interest. Eyesores such as brownfields, industrial sites in remediation, and neglected trailside properties hinder peoples' experiences. While these scenarios are often out of trail advocates' control, trail and community organizations can work with local communities to ensure that the needed amenities are in place. These concerns are not raised simply to improve tourism product. High quality trails and infrastructure also invite more local trail use, the pinnacle measure of success in trails (and one that does impact tourism, as visitors sense a local culture that uses and celebrates trails).

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Accessing and Managing Grant Funds

While unprecedented federal funds are currently available for trail projects, accessing and managing grant funds remains a challenge for local communities and small nonprofits. Rural communities (as well as some municipalities in urban and suburban areas) tend to lack the staff and other resources to complete competitive grant applications. When funds are received, managing federal (and some state) grants can be just as challenging. Besides this capacity issue, trail groups and municipalities report having trouble finding funding for pre-construction activities as well as ongoing maintenance. Add to these political constraints (such as elected officials not supporting grant requests) and the challenge of rural community preparedness to apply for and manage influx of federal becomes exacerbated. Staff and volunteer turnover, noted previously, can also contribute to the challenge of managing a state or federal grant, often a lengthy process.

A Net Positive is not Guaranteed for Area Residents

It is typical for outside investors to come upon an area and recognize unrealized opportunities. Oftentimes, their access to capital combined with affordable (to them) properties results in more outside investment than local resident investment. It is possible that many of the sought after trail economy improvements will be led by and ultimately benefit people from outside of the region. While outside investors can have a positive impact on the region, the trail economy should offer local residents the opportunity to improve their life circumstances (whether that be through business and employment opportunities, personal trail use, or otherwise). There is, of course, no guarantee of these benefits to area residents. Some of the strategies recommended would make local resident benefit more viable and mitigate potential unintended consequences of a booming trail economy – issues like displacement, substantial tax increases, and investors acquiring and sitting on vacant parcels.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

The following recommended strategies are based on feedback received from members of the project Steering Committee, focus group participants, project stakeholders, IHTC members, and workshop participants.

The recommendations represent a blend of potential community level and regional actions.

Of all the strategies, the ones that seemed to generate the most support across both the May 9 IHTC meeting and the subsequent workshop were:

- Pursuing partnerships beyond the trails community to unlock the full range of community and economic development benefits of trails,
- Creating a funding pipeline to aid trail-oriented investment and seeking renewed philanthropic support, and
- Exploring diverse governance models to create mechanisms to receive and disperse state funding across set geographies

These may be more likely to gain traction than the other strategies, but all of the strategies within have been thoroughly vetted.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

Table Key:

Asterisk (*): The strategy was noted as having the potential to be among the most impactful (when queried during the May 9 meeting).

Plus symbol (+): The strategy resonated in the workshop small group discussions.

All other recommendations are listed without any symbology.

Short-term: Next 12 months

Medium-long term: 1-3 years

STRATEGY	TYPE	TIMING
Take advantage of unprecedented federal funding opportunities and prepare one or more regional grant applications*	Funding	Short-term
Seek significant Appalachian Regional Commission support	Funding	Short-term
Create a funding pipeline to aid trail-oriented investment and seek renewed philanthropic support*+	Funding	Short-term
Develop and strengthen relationships with elected officials at all levels	Strategic Partnerships	Short-term
Pursue partnerships beyond the trails community to unlock the full range of community and economic development benefits of trails*+	Strategic Partnerships	Short-term
Engage community development, economic development, and tourism organizations in advocating for IHTC trails*	Strategic Partnerships	Medium-long term
Develop an outdoor business network to support trail-serving businesses and advance IHTC initiatives	Strategic Partnerships	Medium-long term
Renew commitment to the IHTC vision and goals	Outreach & Communications	Short-term
Develop an outreach program to broaden IHTC's support base	Outreach & Communications	Short-term
Deepen relationships with regional planning organizations and improve the coalition's understanding of various planning processes	Outreach & Communications	Short-term
Build relationships with utility companies, authorities, and similar entities to realize on-the-ground efficiencies	Outreach & Communications	Short-term
Determine what trails, segments, and experiences are ready to market to a business audience	Community & Economic Development	Short-term
Change the narrative regarding the value of trails to one of building local wealth and healthier, more vibrant communities*	Community & Economic Development	Short-term
Ensure that local residents benefit from a growing outdoor economy and work with communities to safeguard against unintended consequences+	Community & Economic Development	Medium-long term
Develop guidance that seeds trail town initiatives and other community development tools*	Community & Economic Development	Medium-long term
Explore diverse governance models to create mechanisms to receive and disperse state funding across set geographies*+	Community & Economic Development	Medium-long term
Strengthen local organizational capacity+	Community & Economic Development	Medium-long term
Engage with partners to target new businesses, products, and industries along IHTC trail corridors	Community & Economic Development	Medium-long term
Determine what trails, segments, and experiences are ready to market to a visitor audience	Tourism	Short-term
Engage IHTC's Tourism Promotion Agencies (TPAs) and Main Street organizations in promoting trails	Tourism	Medium-long term
Assume responsibility for marketing the IHTC region (while deferring to local trail groups regarding messaging for their specific trails)	Tourism	Medium-long term
Identify the region's university, economic development, and tourism assets – as well as its human assets	Data & Information	Medium-long term
Fund a target market characteristics study and a trade area analysis	Data & Information	Medium-long term

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

FUNDING

Short-term Strategy // TAKE ADVANTAGE OF UNPRECEDENTED FEDERAL FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES AND PREPARE ONE OR MORE REGIONAL GRANT APPLICATIONS

Make another big regional funding request – the first since the 2014 TIGER application – in support of trail development and other coalition initiatives. A successful application should include trail construction as well as projects that stimulate the trail economy. Many of the recommendations in this report qualify. Funding sources may range from programs within the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to the previously mentioned ARISE grant through ARC. A comprehensive list of federal transportation funding for trails, walking, and biking is available on RTC’s website: <https://www.railstotrails.org/funding/>.

Short-term Strategy // SEEK SIGNIFICANT APPALACHIAN REGIONAL COMMISSION SUPPORT

Because nearly the entire IHTC region resides within Appalachia and because IHTC’s purpose and vision align with Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) priorities, the coalition should seek significant ARC support. IHTC should begin cultivating the ARC relationship immediately and build upon past ARC project support. IHTC partners report that being “part of something bigger” matters to them and their local decision makers. Embracing IHTC’s location within northern and central Appalachia will continue to enable local partners to connect with a larger regional identity – one that may have federal resources attached. Concerning resources, the Appalachian Regional Initiative for Stronger Economies (ARISE) is [a new ARC initiative](#) that aims to drive large-scale, regional economic transformation through multi-state collaborative projects across Appalachia. The ARISE grant is of particular interest (white papers for the current grant round are due in fall 2023), but several other opportunities are worth exploring. Having the support of elected officials and governmental partners makes for more competitive applications.

Short-term Strategy // CREATE A FUNDING PIPELINE TO AID TRAIL-ORIENTED INVESTMENT AND SEEK RENEWED PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT

Create a pipeline between lenders and economic developers and the trail and small business communities. Convene small businesses and entrepreneurs with lenders and continue to make connections on an ongoing basis. Lenders and Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFI’s) such as The Progress Fund have resources from which small businesses and trail organizations can benefit. The coalition can help make connections and referrals. The coalition should develop a funding and finance matrix so that trail organizations and entrepreneurs are made aware of the universe of funding and financing opportunities including low-interest finance programs offered by state governments.

The coalition should also seek renewed philanthropic support at a regional scope. IHTC was born out of the philanthropic community with the intent to leverage trails in the pursuit of a more vibrant regional economy. The earliest foundation support from the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation and the (ongoing support from) George Gund Foundation provided funding, partnership, and thought leadership. The coalition should request renewed foundation involvement as IHTC works to return to the early focus of positioning trails as part of an economically thriving region. This recommendation is made with the recognition that the initiative’s historic funders may have changed their investment portfolios but remain committed to the health of the region.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Short-term Strategy // DEVELOP AND STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS AT ALL LEVELS

Developing and maintaining strong relationships with elected officials at all levels is highly important to the success of IHTC. Cultivating these relationships can influence policy decisions and garner the needed political support for trails. The coalition should develop relationships with elected officials, become a trusted resource to them, invite them to trail events, and engage them in advocating for trails. With strong relationships in place, elected officials can count on IHTC partners as trusted resources for trail information. Becoming seen as a valuable resource helps advance IHTC's mission and makes it more likely that trail organizations and trail priorities have a "voice at the table" when decisions are being made. In such an environment, IHTC and local trail organizations can proactively shape public policy (versus simply reacting to it) at every level of government.

Short-term Strategy // PURSUE PARTNERSHIPS BEYOND THE TRAILS COMMUNITY TO UNLOCK THE FULL RANGE OF COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BENEFITS TO TRAILS

IHTC can only realize its vision if it is widely embraced. The coalition must pursue partnerships beyond the trail community. Re-engaging the community development, economic development, and tourism communities will enable IHTC to return to the original concept of leveraging trails to increase regional economic competitiveness. Doing so at this time will occur after a decade of capacity building and additional trail development. Economic and community development efforts should be integrated so that the needs and life-quality of area residents are given precedence over economic return and factored into planning. This was not fully appreciated when the coalition was first formed in 2013.

Also pursue partnerships with universities, the healthcare sector, heritage areas, the arts community, and outdoor organizations, and others to broaden the base of IHTC supporters. Finally, informing and involving outdoor organizations and user groups (bike commuters, cycling clubs, walking groups, etc.) will help raise awareness among regional residents.

Anticipated tactics to this strategy include:

- Providing an in-roads to involvement. Helping leaders in these fields to understand how they can elevate trails and why they would want to. Providing information and resources is needed.
- Understanding each audience's motivations and characteristics. Not all economic developers, for example, appreciate the role that trails can play in attracting talent and employers. Working to raise awareness and serve as a reliable resource can change this perspective over time.
- Showcasing examples of forward-thinking economic development entities such as the [York County Economic Alliance](#) (PA) can help counter some of the traditional lines of thinking within this sector. The same may be true of tourism. The kinds of efforts to highlight include:
 - The York County Economic Alliance actively advocating for trails and prioritizing trail investments in their work, securing federal grants in support of trails and offering its own small grant program in support of trail-serving businesses.
 - Locally, the [Oil Region Alliance](#) investing in trails, and [The Progress Fund](#) – a [Community Development Financial Institution](#) (CDFI) – making loans to trail businesses and implementing the Trail Town Program®.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

- Working with universities in a more intentional manner. One such example of this is the [Tennessee RiverLine](#) initiative, which was spearheaded by the University of Tennessee and involves several universities along the multi-state corridor. The universities contribute professional capacity and technical expertise to the effort. IHTC could gain both clout and capacity by engaging university partners (as was done early on by collaborating with the University of Minnesota and North Carolina University on a trail traffic model). Of note for IHTC: West Virginia University is spearheading a “[Hatch Integrated Multistate Research Project](#)” that is researching the roles of recreation and tourism in rural economies. This may provide an in-roads to partnership with WVU.
- Finding champions from within these professions and getting them to articulate the value of trails. They can champion trails in a peer-to-peer fashion as well as to other audiences. Having these organizations involved and acting as ambassadors carries more weight than the trails community speaking on its own behalf. To get community and economic development professionals and others involved at this level, they need to be provided with information and resources (“sell to them before they can sell for us”). The business community itself can become trail ambassadors as well. The [Menomonee Valley Partners](#) in Milwaukee reports that their longtime businesses (including manufacturers) are among their trail’s most avid supporters and actively advocate for the trail.

Medium-Longterm Strategy // DEVELOP AN OUTDOOR BUSINESS NETWORK TO SUPPORT TRAIL-SERVING BUSINESSES AND ADVANCE IHTC INITIATIVES

Business gaps and opportunities can be recognized by identifying and mapping what outdoor businesses are located in the region. The [Made by Mountains](#) initiative in Western North Carolina has been successful in doing this and using its network to propel related initiatives. (As was previously noted, the business community can be quite effective in advocating for trails.) Within the IHTC footprint, the Pennsylvania Environmental Council launched the Pennsylvania Outdoor Network in 2019, coalescing outdoor industry businesses from across the Commonwealth. While that initiative waned during the pandemic, some of the legwork is complete and might inform this iteration.



Photo Credit: Jason Cohn

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

OUTREACH & COMMUNICATIONS

Short-term Strategy // RENEW COMMITMENT TO THE IHTC VISION AND GOALS

One of the most foundational actions the coalition can take as it begins its second decade is renewing its commitment to IHTC's vision and goals. With 10 years' experience, new understanding about the world of trails, and the wisdom of the collective, IHTC partners are in the position to reset and renew their commitment to coalition building. Doing so will ultimately enable IHTC to grow and sustain its partnerships beyond the trail community. This same recommendation appears in the 10-Year Evaluation and Success Strategy document. With a renewed commitment among coalition members, IHTC can confidently engage other potential supporters and ambassadors in support of trails.

Short-term Strategy // DEVELOP AN OUTREACH PROGRAM TO BROADEN IHTC'S SUPPORT BASE

Developing an outreach program is needed to build broad-based support of IHTC trails. As one stakeholder shared, "You haven't sold (the idea of IHTC) to everyone that you need to sell." He was suggesting that the coalition has not made a convincing case regarding the value of IHTC trails.

Most of the stakeholders consulted for this project emphasized the importance of communications and collaboration as their "single most important piece of advice" - more so than any technical advice offered. Communicating IHTC's vision and high-level goals (and making these the vision and goals of many) is the place to start. One successful campaign not far from the region is Dayton, Ohio's "[Outdoor Capital of the Midwest](#)" program. As one stakeholder explained it, "they had a megaphone" and consistently pushed the message over a period of years until others bought into it as well. Amy Forsthoefel with [Five Rivers MetroParks](#) shared that the team was guided by a specific success metric: being recognized as an outdoor community by Outside magazine (which it was in 2016).

An IHTC outreach program might include:

- Beginning with local governments, elected officials, tourism organizations, and the economic development, and planning communities.
- Demonstrating the value of trails with regional best practices that demonstrate how trails have been leveraged as economic assets. It is essential to pair data with storytelling.
- Expanding the list of who is helping to share this information; put coalition members and other ambassadors to work.

Outreach to the larger community can be done in new and interesting ways, with the goal of celebrating trails, demonstrating progress, and showing how trails touch peoples' lives. RTC's "[Trail Moments](#)" campaign does a great job of this, as does its [Celebrate Trails Day](#). In Morgantown, the Mon River Trails Conservancy's [Handmade Market](#) leverages Celebrate Trails Day to showcase both the arts and local trails. This is a great example of getting different constituencies to use and care about trails.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

Short-term Strategy // DEEPEN RELATIONSHIPS WITH REGIONAL PLANNING ORGANIZATIONS AND IMPROVE THE COALITION'S UNDERSTANDING OF VARIOUS PLANNING PROCESSES

Working relationships with regional, county, and municipal planning organizations will enable the IHTC to position trails as priority projects and critical components of larger infrastructure investments. IHTC must establish or strengthen relationships with Metropolitan Planning Organizations, Regional Planning Organizations, Regional Transportation Planning Organizations, and county and municipal planning departments. As one county planner shared, planners can play a pivotal role in prioritizing trail infrastructure at every level. One recent example is the inclusion of IHTC's Parkersburg to Pittsburgh corridor in the Wood-Washington-Wirt Interstate Planning Commission's Long Range Transportation Plan, [Horizon 2045 LRTP](#), and the regional [Transportation Improvement Plan](#).

IHTC should also develop a list of the various plans and planning processes that could incorporate trail projects. This would include everything from regional [Transportation Improvement Program](#) (TIP) listings to local municipal plans. More than knowing the relevant documents, IHTC and its members need to find a way to influence their content, which begins with developing relationships.

Short-term Strategy // BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH UTILITY COMPANIES, AUTHORITIES, AND SIMILAR ENTITIES TO REALIZE ON-THE-GROUND EFFICIENCIES

Workshop attendees took note of the York County Economic Alliance's partnership that resulted in installing 16 miles of fiber optic broadband beneath the Heritage Rail Trail. The savvy of all parties involved resulted in a "dig once" project that improved both the trail surface and internet availability. Key to a project like this or any other pairing of a trail improvement and utility project relies upon strong relationships and creative approaches. The project need not relate to broadband. In Cuyahoga County, Ohio, water and sewer improvements are being pursued in tandem with trail improvements. The key is to have the relationships in place and an openness to partnering to achieve on-the-ground efficiencies. Additionally, when a project addresses more than one issue, it expands the constituency that cares about and advocates for the project.

COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Short-term Strategy // DETERMINE WHAT SEGMENTS OF THE TRAIL NETWORK ARE READY TO MARKET TO A BUSINESS AUDIENCE

Corporate site selectors, economic developers, and tourism professionals may include ready-to-market trails and trail segments in their information packets that they send to prospective businesses if IHTC partners make that information available to them. Economic development organizations host familiarization tours and even train their staff and partners in the assets and amenities in the area. By providing information, IHTC can help them improve how they market certain trail corridors as being ripe for investment (and already offering economic and quality-of-life returns). Providing economic developers with the details they need to sell trails as assets positions them to compete for new businesses and industries. This is a value proposition that the IHTC can likely communicate better than individual trail organizations and local entities. This recommendation supports the previous recommendation to build relationships with economic development professionals as well as the one about seeking renewed ARC support.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

Short-term Strategy // CHANGE THE NARRATIVE REGARDING THE VALUE OF TRAILS TO ONE OF BUILDING LOCAL WEALTH AND HEALTHIER, MORE VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

Touting the economic impact of trails in a vacuum can be alienating and ineffective. IHTC must change the narrative regarding the value of trails and who they are meant to benefit. The coalition should position trails as “must have” amenities and shift to a wealth-building narrative. A wealth-building narrative would center the coalition’s commitment to improving the life circumstances of local people (via trails). Building local wealth and taking a “resident first” approach to trails ensures that residents are using and benefiting from trails, not just outside visitors and investors.

More than a matter of narrative, trail advocates and local leaders can collaborate to ensure trails contribute to more livable places. In Frederick, Maryland, the [Carroll Creek Linear Park](#) provides flood control, a place for recreation and transportation, and serves as a community gathering place that links different parts of the community. Together, trail advocates and community leaders needed to demonstrate the value of such an investment. The devastating impacts of past floods made it easier for local leaders to convey how the proposed park would contribute to local wealth and wellbeing. Regionally, [Corry, Pennsylvania’s “Blue Zones” initiative](#) is a great example of a local effort that focuses on improving and extending the lives of local residents and communicating this through its programs and priorities. As a Certified Blue Zones Community®, Corry emphasizes benefits of its program such as lowered healthcare costs, improved productivity, higher well-being, and greater quality of life. Trails, of course, are a part of this.

If the narrative – and commitment – shifts to one of wealth-building and healthier, more vibrant communities, the coalition and partnering organizations must offer programs that foster opportunities for regional residents, whether that be through sustainable careers, business and entrepreneurship opportunities, increased property values, or increased sales and use taxes resulting in more vibrant built communities. More generally, the coalition can collaborate with local leaders to create the kinds of places people want to live, resulting in more economically stable communities.

IHTC should not allow economic impact and improvement to be the only benefit emphasized. The most complete message is that trails can help build local wealth and contribute to healthier, more vibrant communities. In Ohio, the Jefferson County Soil & Water Conservation District speaks of trails as being a backbone for economic development and a “connective tissue” for local communities. Outside of the region, the Made by Mountains initiative places a heavy focus on storytelling and rewriting the narrative to share the stories of people and companies behind the region’s burgeoning outdoor economy. While part of the effort aims to generate outdoor industry business opportunities, the grit and maker culture storylines take center stage with each independent brewery, outfitter, and gear manufacturer that is highlighted as part of the initiative. The 24-county initiative touts both its outdoor economy and the people who make it possible.

All of this must be considered according to the desires of local residents. Understanding what people want in any given community, what it takes for them to feel safe on trails, and so forth become important considerations. Connecting with and supporting under resourced communities (and asking these questions in these places...not just pushing the narrative) is critical in building broad-based support.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

Medium-Longterm Strategy // ENSURE THAT LOCAL RESIDENTS BENEFIT FROM A GROWING OUTDOOR ECONOMY AND WORK WITH COMMUNITIES TO SAFEGUARD AGAINST UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Ensure that people already living within the region benefit from trail-related economic growth, not just outside investors who recognize the opportunity. East of IHTC's Parkersburg to Pittsburgh corridor, the [Outdoor Recreation Council of Appalachia](#) (ORCA) works with communities to ensure local policies align with the goal of building local wealth. ORCA recognizes that trail development does not automatically result in economic development, let alone residents taking advantage of the opportunity. The organization helps communities and entrepreneurs to overcome barriers, working with municipalities to set policies that create the conditions for investment. The IHTC can do the same by providing examples of policies and ordinances that align with community values and create a climate that is conducive to building wealth within the outdoor economy. Beyond pointing to examples, IHTC can engage with local community and economic development organizations to provide hands-on assistance to communities in need of outside resources.

Anticipating the unintended consequences of a growing outdoor economy is equally important. The most common challenge faced by recreation communities is housing affordability, particularly in Western gateway communities, according to the [Gateway and Natural Amenity Region Initiative](#) (GNAR). If IHTC and communities within the region need a starting point in terms of safeguarding against the downside of a growing trail economy, it can start with this known issue. Having policies in place makes it more likely that home values can increase without pricing out workers and residents. Waiting until affordability is a significant issue is likely to be "too little, too late." According to Chris Perkins of the [Outdoor Recreation Roundtable](#) (stated during an "Unlocking Outdoor Recreation for All" webinar hosted by Fourth Economy), "It's difficult to unwind things that have already been done, after the dye has been cast." RTC has developed recommended policies for addressing affordable housing challenges in its whitepaper, "[Strategies to Preserve and Build Affordable Housing Near Green Amenities and Urban Trails.](#)"

In doing this work of safeguarding against unintended consequences, IHTC should consider community development corporations (CDCs) as partners that can bring to the table experience in preventing gentrification and other issues. In Pittsburgh, for example, the Hazelwood Initiative both embraces trails and has programs in place to ensure that the neighborhood maintains affordable housing, reducing instances of displacement.

Medium-Longterm Strategy // DEVELOP GUIDANCE THAT SEEDS TRAIL TOWN INITIATIVES AND OTHER COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT TOOLS

Trail Town initiatives create opportunities to build relationships and provide needed resources in communities that don't necessarily qualify for certain economic development programs. The Trail Town approach provides an in-road to communities, as well as support and resources. Trail Town initiatives could also help bolster a trail culture among residents and signify to visitors that participating communities are accommodating. Trail Town initiatives within the IHTC footprint could potentially be regional in scale or, more likely, customized to smaller geographic areas such as a specific IHTC corridor ("Parkersburg to Pittsburgh Trail Towns," for example) or an even smaller area such as a single county or trail. The coalition's role could be developing core tenants and best practices to seed unique, individual programs that are tailored to meet local needs.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

[York County Trail Towns](#) (PA) is an excellent example of a program that is operated by an economic development organization in a defined geographic area. Their BLOOM small business grant program is one of several ways in which the program offers tangible benefits to participating communities. The [Mon Forest Towns](#) program (WV) serves gateway communities surrounding the Monongahela National Forest, focusing on community development and building local wealth.

Yet another program to watch is [Central Ohio Trail Towns](#). Yet to be launched, the program framework prioritizes quality of life enhancements and making connections to active transportation infrastructure. This program is poised to deliver assistance to communities across a 7-county region when up and running. There are discussions around how this project could be used to influence the State of Ohio to pursue a statewide trail town program which is identified as a recommendation in the Ohio Department of Natural Resources state trail plan, the [Ohio Trails Vision](#).

While Trail Towns is a proven community development tool, other tools and approaches exist in terms of helping communities leverage and connect to their trails. In Milwaukee, the Menomonee Valley Partners actively supports trail-oriented development (a Waldorf model daycare, bike-themed coffee shop, and environmental community center, for example) that results in a similar trail-friendly and trail-appreciative culture that enhances local quality of life.

Medium-Longterm Strategy // EXPLORE DIVERSE GOVERNANCE MODELS TO CREATE MECHANISMS TO RECEIVE AND DISPERSE STATE FUNDING ACROSS SET GEOGRAPHIES

Throughout the course of the project, Councils of Governments (COGs) were shared as a governance model that has enabled other regions (southeast Ohio, northeast Iowa) to build, manage, and advocate for trail networks. COGs are regional governing and/or coordinating bodies that are normally controlled by their member local governments. The program in southeast Ohio, the Outdoor Recreation Council of Appalachia (ORCA), involves the Baileys Trail System. With the establishment of ORCA, local governments are prioritizing trail investments such as the new trail system, in-town trailheads, and a 5,000 square foot facility that will house a restaurant and other businesses. The member governments contribute to the executive director's salary. ORCA also established a sister nonprofit organization that can accept funding sources that the local governments cannot. The Baileys project additionally used conservation financing (a pilot for the USDA Forest Service, although other conservation finance models exist) in pursuing the development of trail-related infrastructure.

A COG is one of many possible governance models that can aid communities in building local wealth. Other models may include:

- In Pocahontas County, West Virginia, communities collaborated to become designated as an [IMBA Ride Center](#): the [Snowshoe Highlands Ride Center](#) (SHRC). The CVB, national forest, and local communities are involved in managing the designation. SHRC overlaps with the Mon Forest Towns geography, another multi-community effort explained in the previous recommendation.
- In northern West Virginia, the [Mountaineer Trail Network Recreation Authority](#) works with 15 counties and more than 20 supporting organizations to develop, enhance, and market regional trails using ARC POWER funds (Partnerships for Opportunity and Workforce and Economic Revitalization).
- Public-private partnerships such as Ernie's Bike Shop partnering with Summit Metroparks in Massillon, Ohio to build trail-side restroom facilities that benefit both the business and the community by meeting a basic visitor need.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

- [U.S. Economic Development Administration](#) (EDA) funding programs have been utilized to support trail projects within the region and beyond. EDA funds should be considered as a potential federal funding stream to help advance the work of the coalition.

IHTC should explore various models that may help to meet the unique needs of the region and the coalition.

Medium-Longterm Strategy // STRENGTHEN LOCAL ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

For any community development initiative to be successful, local knowledge and capacity is essential. Engaging with local communities and organizations to identify gaps in expertise, capacity, and more will highlight the need and allow for a strategy to meet that need to be developed. To some extent, The Progress Fund's early Trail Town outreach on the Great Allegheny Passage is an example of this. It built local knowledge and ability to both know about and take advantage of the trail and its impact on communities.

In Venango County, Pennsylvania, the Oil Region Alliance (ORA) reaches out to local groups to offer its support. Having technical and other support from a National Heritage Area such as the ORA helps communities without a professional staff to address challenges and take advantage of funding and other opportunities.

Strengthening local capacity applies to nonprofit organizations as well. Trail groups often face issues such as burnout and volunteer retainment. The Greenbelt in Harrisburg is one such example. The volunteer-run group is often overburdened. The Pennsylvania Environmental Council has provided some support to the group as it works to build its capacity.

Medium-Longterm Strategy // ENGAGE WITH PARTNERS TO TARGET NEW BUSINESSES, PRODUCTS, AND INDUSTRIES ALONG IHTC TRAIL CORRIDORS

The workshop made clear that IHTC partners are thinking about how the coalition can help spur business development along the region's shared use trails. IHTC and its partners can specifically encourage siting businesses along the IHTC trails, providing needed market information to economic developers and corporate site selectors (per an earlier recommendation). IHTC partners should think broadly concerning what types of businesses to target. A suite of approaches may include:

- Targeting outdoor industry businesses: everything from manufacturers to service providers and retail operations.
- Appealing to businesses beyond the outdoor industry, targeting those that value quality of life factors such as trails and outdoor recreation in their site selection. According to Wisconsin's Director of Outdoor Recreation in a recent stakeholder interview, the companies need not have an outdoor recreation focus to bring net benefit to the region (and for trails to help make the case for locating here).
- Working with traditional manufacturers to retool or add to their product lines. For example, a local company that fabricates steel tubing could make and sell bike racks within the region. Generate a list of companies to approach as part of a larger asset mapping effort.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

TOURISM

Short-term Strategy // DETERMINE WHAT TRAILS, SEGMENTS & EXPERIENCES ARE READY TO MARKET TO A VISITOR AUDIENCE

To increase use and interest in IHTC trails, the coalition must first determine what trails, segments, and experiences are currently “market ready” and positioned to receive visitors. With this understanding, IHTC can play a more active role in marketing these trails and experiences.

For context, the Great Allegheny Passage was not marketed in earnest until there were 100 contiguous miles (two-thirds of the total trail) completed. Whether that decision centered on the century mileage or reaching two-thirds completion, it supports a commonly held belief that significant mileage is needed for a multi-use trail to attract a critical mass of visiting trail users. However, the tourism community might disagree, as would many trail users/advocates. Shorter trails possessing destination appeal (or even just located near established destinations) can successfully attract casual trail users who prefer covering shorter distances. This leaves more time for exploring off-trail points of interest. IHTC should not discount shorter segments with destination appeal when evaluating the marketability of its trails. For example, the Allegheny National Forest Visitors Bureau markets a 7.5-mile segment of the Knox & Kane Rail Trail, and the segment was recently named Pennsylvania’s 2023 Trail of the Year. The trail’s terminus at Kinzua Bridge State Park adds to the lure of the trail. Shorter distance trails with destination appeal are indeed marketable. In addition to considering the trail’s length, quality, features, and overall appeal, the existence of business services comes into play. Trailside communities should have open eateries, lodging facilities, bike repair, and related services.

Specific steps in determining market readiness include:

- Engaging IHTC partners and community leaders in this discussion and decision-making.
- Developing a list of IHTC trail segments by length, character, and community readiness (consult the 2014 Connectivity Analysis and existing Trail Trips for this).
- Acknowledging that some locations may be more suitable than others for targeting increased tourism and economic development.
- Including a checklist of desired business services and amenities.

This exercise in determining market-readiness should extend beyond identifying which trails and segments are “ready.” IHTC should offer a checklist and guidance concerning desired characteristics and essential amenities to those locations that may not be well positioned for tourism. Encouragement and specific information can help spur community- and trail-level improvements. The previous recommendation on seeding “trail town” and related programs helps to address these needs as well.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

Medium-Longterm Strategy // ENGAGE IHTC'S TOURISM PROMOTION AGENCIES AND MAIN STREET ORGANIZATIONS IN PROMOTING TRAILS

The eight IHTC corridors pass through areas promoted by 38 tourism promotion agencies (TPAs), nearly all of them convention and visitor bureaus (CVBs). They range in sophistication, reach, budget, and how they market trails. Nevertheless, TPAs do the important work of attracting people to the region and can integrate trail experiences into their marketing. In some cases, local chambers of commerce play a similar role, or they support trail groups and communities in better engaging with tourism agencies.

IHTC should engage the TPAs and get them the resources they need to better promote trails and support trail communities. IHTC can direct TPAs to “visitor ready” trails, trail segments, and experiences, as well as to the photo database. The photo database is a great starting point in terms of providing helpful information to TPAs, making it easier for them to promote trails. IHTC can consult its 2016 Tourism Strategy for a complete list of TPAs. IHTC can also engage area Main Street organizations, which are charged with marketing their downtown areas, as well as certain community development corporations that also engage in place-based marketing. Trails are marketable assets, and trail audiences bring additional sales opportunities to downtown businesses.

Another possibility in engaging and supporting TPAs would be to establish a small grant program that awards funds to TPAs for trail-related outdoor recreation development projects. Virginia Tourism operates such a program – [DRIVE Outdoor](#) – awarding up to \$20,000 for qualifying projects. This approach would provide support beyond information for marketing purposes. Rather, the grant program would encourage investment in trail tourism and product development. The Virginia program funds non-permanent structures, event staging, equipment purchases, research and studies, and business expansions (sub granting funds to trail-serving businesses). Another program to potentially model is York County Economic Alliance's [BLOOM](#) small business grant, albeit that program is designed to support small businesses in making trail-related investments.

IHTC Communities that Have (or Have Had) Main Street Programs:

OHIO

Kent
Painesville
Ravenna

WEST VIRGINIA

Fairmont
Mannington
Morgantown
Parkersburg

PENNSYLVANIA

Blairsville
Ebensburg
Indiana
Millvale
Oil City
Pittsburgh
Ridgway
West Newton
Vandergrift



RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

Medium-Longterm Strategy // ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR MARKETING THE IHTC REGION (WHILE DEFERRING TO LOCAL TRAIL GROUPS REGARDING MESSAGING FOR THEIR SPECIFIC TRAILS)

While TPAs (as well as chambers, downtown organizations, and others) are great resources in marketing IHTC trails, the coalition cannot rely on them to market the larger network. At best, these organizations can embrace the regional vision and position their local trails as being part of a larger brand and experience (the IHTC).

IHTC must create its own materials, much like the Tennessee RiverLine is currently doing in developing an interactive web application to assist with trip planning. Rather than leaving this to the tourism community, they have leveraged their strong university partnerships to make this a viable project. Similarly, the [Ohio River Way](#) developed a digital guide to highlight amenities, services, access, and safety information for recreation use of a large segment of the Ohio River. River Towns are profiled on their website, encouraging visitors to “explore beyond the shore” by identifying unique attractions in each town. The River Towns also host events that help connect residents and visitors to the river throughout much of the year.

IHTC has engaged in some marketing and tourism promotion, most notably the “Trail Trip” itineraries, which PEC recently updated. PEC also recently sponsored Next Pittsburgh’s “Outdoor Guide” series to promote the outdoor recreation economy in Pennsylvania and neighboring areas. Creative media partnerships such as this can help to elevate IHTC trails. As the coalition delves into marketing, it should build upon its existing brand foundation and materials and pursue integrated marketing opportunities, promoting trails as part of a larger offering that includes the arts, heritage sites, downtown areas, and more.

Additionally, IHTC can play a role in assisting communities with weak tourism organizations by providing resources such as a web toolkit that can be used for promoting both existing and planned trails.

In planning to move forward with marketing, IHTC should re-evaluate its 2016 IHTC Tourism Strategy to determine how the landscape has changed in recent years and which recommendations remain relevant from a tourism perspective.

DATA & INFORMATION

Medium-Longterm Strategy // IDENTIFY THE REGION’S UNIVERSITY, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, AND TOURISM ASSETS – AS WELL AS ITS HUMAN ASSETS

IHTC needs to collect information to better understand the lay of the land in the region (regional planning districts, outdoor industry businesses, economic and community development organizations, universities, DMO/CVBs, etc.), interpret the data with maps, infographics, reports, and visuals, and supplement it with effective and purposeful storytelling. The previously referenced Made by Mountains initiative offers an example of a regional initiative that prioritized data collection and the resulting storytelling. The group led a massive effort to gather, interpret, and use data in making the case for outdoor economy investments. Data was pivotal to setting up the larger campaign. Collecting this information regionally would most likely occur upon establishing university partnerships and/or receiving grant support. Specifically, early data collection should focus on:

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES



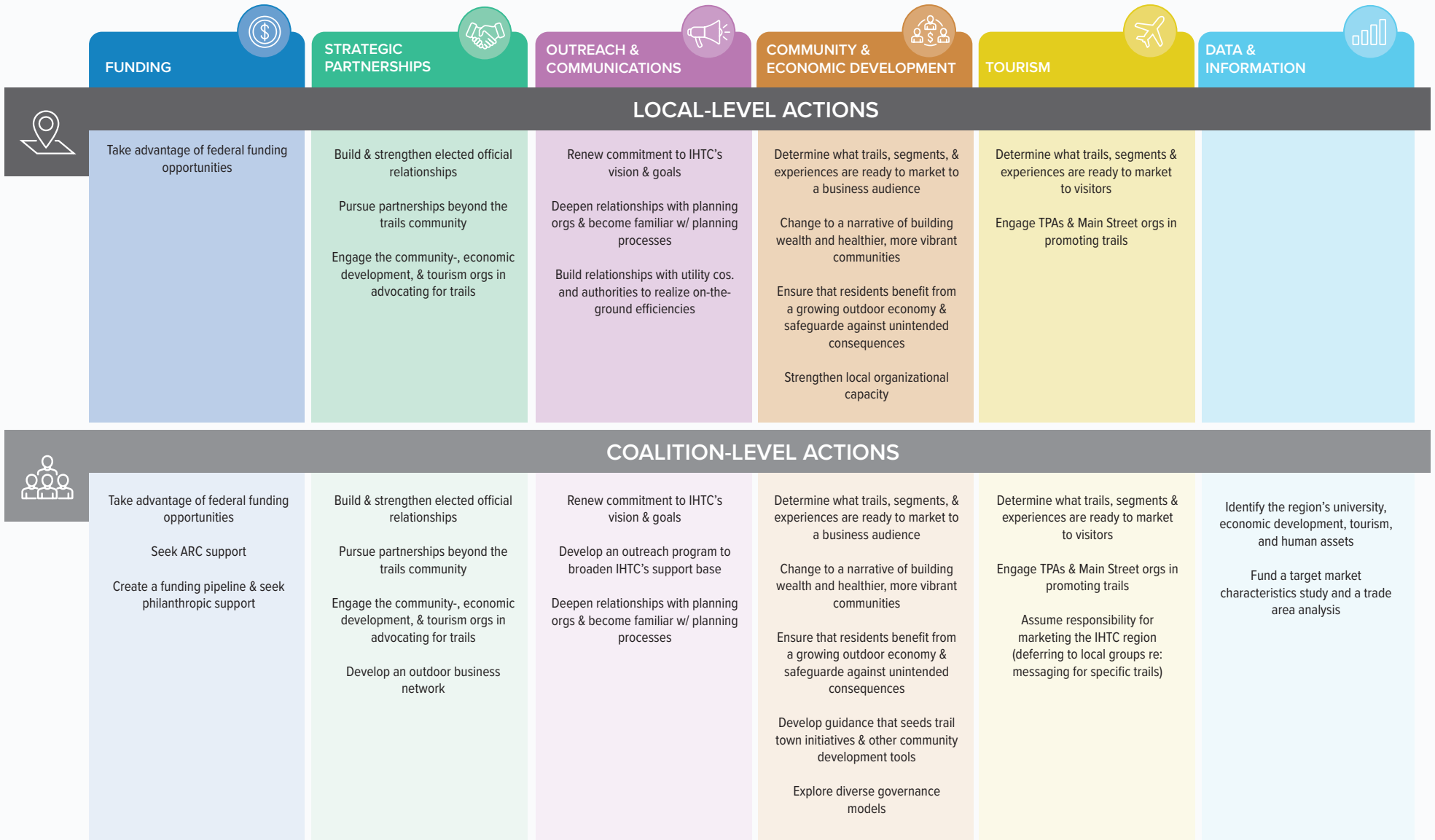
- Tourism and park and recreation academic departments
- University extension offices that offer reduced-fee economic development and tourism-related services that serve the region
- Information related to potential healthcare and health philanthropy partners
- Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs)
- Information concerning user amenities that can support marketing of IHTC trails.

While collecting and utilizing this information is important, the IHTC must also recognize that the region's greatest assets are the people who advance this work. Conducting asset mapping of the people involved (in trails and other endeavors) is an important part of this recommendation.

Medium-Longterm Strategy // FUND A TARGET MARKET CHARACTERISTICS STUDY AND A TRADE AREA ANALYSIS

Identify whether a target market characteristics study has been completed for the IHTC region. If nothing comparable already exists, hire a qualified company to conduct a target market characteristic study for the IHTC and/or for sub-regions within the IHTC. Target markets are typically defined by characteristics such as demographic information, geographic information, and psychographic information such as interests, values, and lifestyles. While the IHTC has done some cursory work related to target markets, having a more informed understanding will aid the coalition in making decisions and establishing the region as a premier destination offering a 1,500-mile trail network experience. Similarly, in conducting a trade area analysis, communities and regions can make data-driven decisions before spending on marketing and civic improvement projects. An example of a company that offers trade market analysis is *Placer.ai*. The company offered a demonstration for the Great Guernsey Trail in Ohio, giving trail advocates an impressive amount of insights and data they previously had not had access to. Understanding the trade area as well as target markets will position the IHTC as a trusted resource to the economic development and tourism communities (and others), ultimately supporting trail investments.

Unlocking the Economic & Community Development Potential of IHTC Trails
IHTC STRATEGIES

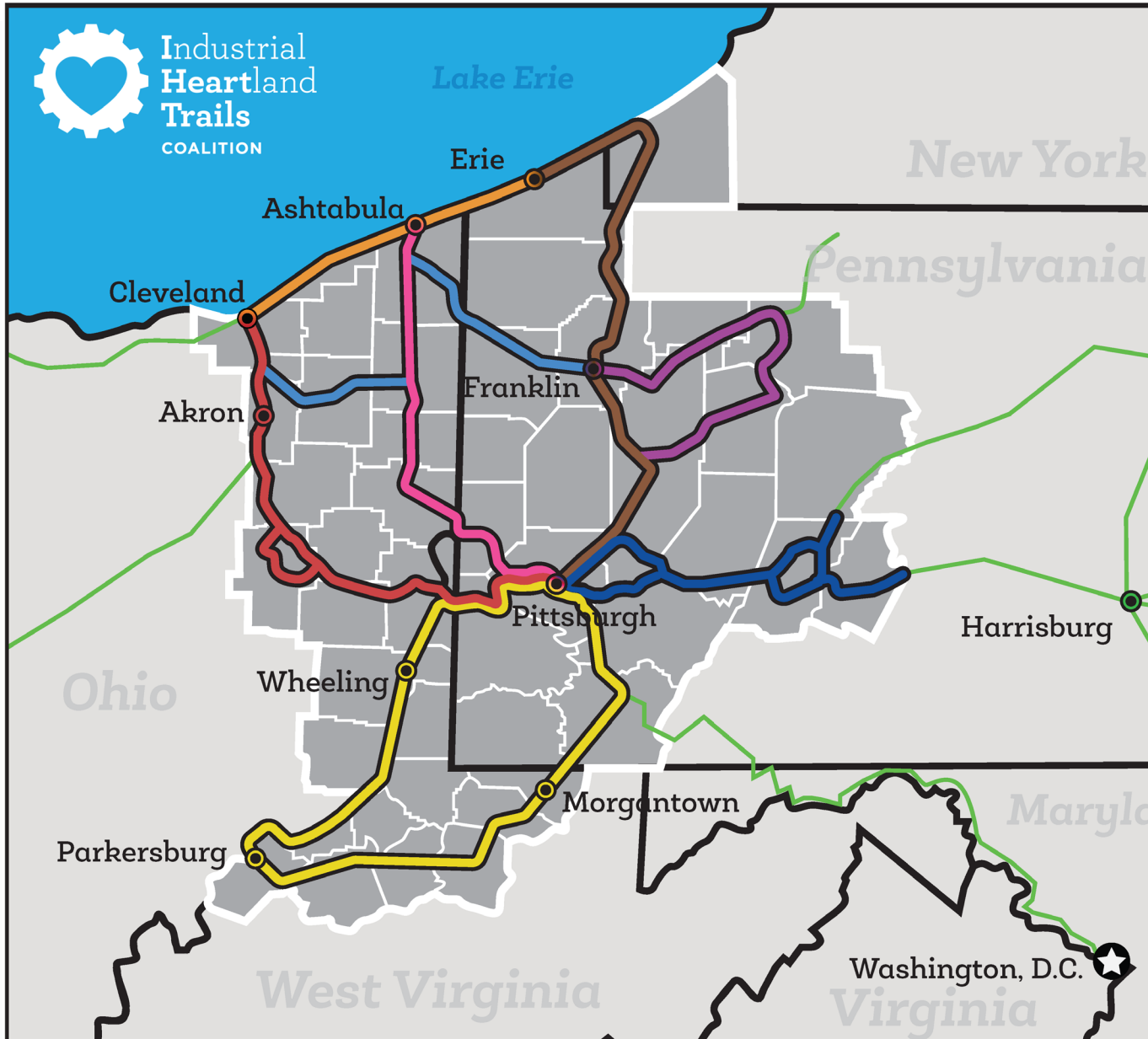


RESOURCES

- [Brookings article: “Improving quality of life—not just business—is the best path to Midwestern rejuvenation”](#)
- [Blue Zones](#) (for community level wellbeing)
- [The Center for Community Progress](#) (for vacant property issues and creating “land banks”)
- [Community Development Institute](#) (for community capacity building)
- [Community Heart & Soul](#)
- Economic research:
 - [Erie to Pittsburgh Trail Economic Impact Analysis](#) (2013)
 - [Ghost Town Trail Economic Impact Analysis](#) (2009)
 - [Great Allegheny Passage Economic Impact Study](#) (2019)
 - [Mon River Trail System Economic Impact Study](#) (2017)
 - [Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail User Spending Impact Study](#) (2017)
 - [Economic Potential of the Great American Rail-Trail](#) (2022)
- Headwaters Economics report: [“Recreation Counties Attracting New Residents and Higher Incomes”](#)
- IHTC resources:
 - [Website](#)
 - [10-Year Evaluation & Success Strategy](#)
- [Main Street America®](#)
- [National Park Service Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance \(RTCA\) Program](#)
- [Our Town](#) (creative placemaking grant program)
- [Outdoor Recreation Roundtable](#)
- [Pennsylvania Environmental Council](#)
- The Progress Fund ([business loans](#) and [trail town resources](#))
- [Project for Public Spaces](#) (for community placemaking)
- [Rails-to-Trails Conservancy](#) resources:
 - [“Trail Moments”](#) campaign
 - [Celebrate Trails Day](#)
 - [TrailNation™ Collaborative](#) and [small grants program](#)
 - [Listing of federal transportation funding programs for trails, walking, and biking](#)
 - [“Strategies to Preserve and Build Affordable Housing Near Green Amenities and Urban Trails Whitepaper”](#)
- Trail Use Trends
 - [RTC’s National Trail Count Research](#)
 - [Covid-19’s Impact on Pennsylvania’s Non-Motorized Trails](#)



Industrial Heartland Trails
COALITION



Mega Corridors and Major Trails of the Industrial Heartland

PARKERSBURG TO PITTSBURGH CORRIDOR

- North Bend Rail Trail - WV
- Harrison North Rail Trail - WV
- West Fork River Trail - WV
- McTrail - WV
- Mon River Rail Trail - WV
- Sheepskin Rail Trail - PA
- Three Rivers Heritage Trail - PA

CLEVELAND TO ERIE CORRIDOR

- Cleveland Lakefront Trail - OH
- Great Lakes Seaway Trail - PA

CLEVELAND TO PITTSBURGH CORRIDOR

- Cleveland Foundation Centennial Lake Link Trail - OH
- Ohio and Erie Canal Towpath Trail - OH
- Conotton Creek Trail - OH
- Fanhandle Trail - PA/WV
- Montour Trail - PA
- Three Rivers Heritage Trail - PA

PITTSBURGH TO HARRISBURG CORRIDOR

- Apollo's Kiski Riverfront Trail - PA
- Roaring Run Trail - PA
- West Penn Trail - PA
- Ghost Town Trail - PA
- Path of the Flood Trail - PA
- Lower Trail - PA

PA WILD, WILD WEST CONNECTOR

- Redbank Valley Trail - PA

PA WILDS CONNECTOR

- Sandy Creek Trail - PA
- Clarion Highlands Trail - PA
- Summit County Hike & Bike Trail - OH
- Portage County Hike & Bike Trail - OH

ERIE TO PITTSBURGH CORRIDOR

- Great Lakes Seaway Trail - PA
- Chautauqua Rail-Trail - NY
- Corry Junction Trail - PA
- East Branch Trail - PA
- Queen City Trail - PA
- Oil Creek State Park Recreational Trail - PA
- McClintock Trail - PA
- Oil City Trail - PA
- Samuel Justus Trail - PA
- Allegheny River Trail - PA
- Armstrong Trail - PA
- Three Rivers Heritage Trail - PA

ASHTABULA TO PITTSBURGH CORRIDOR

- Western Reserve Greenway - OH
- Mill Creek MetroParks Bikeway - OH
- Little Beaver Creek Trail - OH
- Three Rivers Heritage Trail - PA

The IHTC envisions a network of trails

that stretch from the shores of Lake Erie to the confluence of Three Rivers in Pittsburgh and on to the Ohio River and the Appalachian foothills of West Virginia. This connected off-road trail system will allow locals and visitors to explore the small towns, major cities, historical sites, rivers and mountains that characterize America's first frontier. In this region, one discovers the birthplace of America's industrial revolution.

IHeartTrails.org



The Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition is a TrailNation™ Project. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's national trail-network building initiative designed to prove what's possible when we connect people and places by trail.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Focus Group and Stakeholder Interview Summary

Focus Groups

A series of five focus groups was held in February and March 2023 to garner insights concerning increasing the economic and community development potential of IHTC trails. The groups consisted primarily of people from outside of the typical trail community (although there was a session held for trail managers). The intent of hearing from professionals working in other sectors was to invite fresh perspectives and insights. Certainly, hearing from the 29 people working mostly in different sectors contributed greatly to the formation of the recommended strategies.

The groups and participants included:

1. Trail developers and managers, Feb. 24
 - Aaron Dodds, Jefferson County Soil & Water Conservation District (OH)
 - Joy Fronzoli, Erie County Planning (PA)
 - Tom Kase, Knox-Kane Rail Trail (PA)
 - Marty Radock, Corry Junction Greenway Trail & the East Branch Trail (PA)
 - Dan Rice, Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition (OH)
 - Corey Zetts, Menomonee Valley Partners (WI, Hank Aaron State Trail)

2. Elected officials and staff, Mar. 16
 - Mayor Greg Bricker, East Liverpool, OH
 - State Delegate Evan Hansen, WV
 - Councilor Jennifer Selin, Morgantown, WV
 - Senator Kent Smith, Ohio
 - Kathryn Kerber, Mayor's Office of Bay Village, OH
 - Mayor Matthew Starr, Mount Vernon, OH

3. Community development/Main Street, philanthropy, and business associations, Mar. 17
 - Debbie Berry, Greater Cleveland Partnership (OH)
 - Jim Denova, formerly of Benedum Foundation (PA)
 - Jeff Siegler, Revitalize or Die (PA)
 - Treye Johnson, George Gund Foundation (OH)

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4. Economic development and tourism professionals, Mar. 23
 - Kacey Brankamp, Capital Crossroads Special Improvement District (OH)
 - Pete Eshelman, Roanoke Regional Partnership (VA)
 - Deb Lewis, City of Cedar Falls Tourism and Visitors Bureau (IA)
 - Ann Nemanic, GO Laurel Highlands (PA)
 - John Phillips, Oil Region Alliance (PA)

5. Small business and academic community, Mar.24
 - Chrisian Abildso, West Virginia University (WV)
 - Andrea Irland, NPS Recreation Trails and Conservation Assistance (RCTA in OH)
 - Jason Jolley, Ohio University (OH)
 - Ernie and Debbie Lehman, Ernie's Bike Shop (OH)
 - Clay Lezon, University of Tennessee (Tennessee RiverLine)
 - Patrick Osborne, University of Tennessee (Tennessee RiverLine)

Stakeholder Interviews

In addition to the focus groups, the project team conducted one-on-one interviews with six stakeholders, who may better be characterized as subject area experts. We assured each person that their responses would be held in confidence. Their responses and advice vastly contributed to the report.

Those interviewed included:

- Silas Chamberlin, York County Economic Alliance (PA)
- Amy Forsthoefel, Five Rivers MetroParks (OH)
- Melinda Huntley, Ohio Tourism Association (OH)
- David Kahley, The Progress Fund (PA)
- Mary Monroe Brown, Wisconsin Office of Outdoor Recreation (WI)
- Jessie Powers, Outdoor Recreation Council of Appalachia (OH), and Seth Brown, Quantified Ventures (Washington, DC)

The project team would like to express its sincere appreciation to those individuals who took part in the focus group and stakeholder conversations, which had a great influence on the project and this report.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX B

May 9 Pre-Workshop Coalition Meeting Summary

The project team wanted to engage the IHTC Coalition in advance of holding a public workshop. It hosted a virtual meeting on May 9, 2023 with the purpose of providing a project overview, soliciting initial feedback, and encouraging workshop attendance. A total of 25 coalition members attended this meeting.

After hearing about the draft strategies, participants responded to polls to share which strategies they thought would be the most impactful. Responses helped to guide workshop planning and report development.

Poll: “Which three short-term strategies do you think would be the most impactful?”

- Take advantage of unprecedented federal funding opportunities and prepare one or more regional grant applications
- Create a funding pipeline to aid trail-oriented investment and seek renewed philanthropic support (also resonated with workshop participants)
- Pursue partnerships beyond the trails community to unlock the full range of community and economic development benefits of trails (also resonated with workshop participants)
- Change the narrative regarding the value of trails to one of building local wealth and healthier, more vibrant communities

Poll: “Which three medium-long term strategies do you think would be the most impactful?”

- Engage community development, economic development, and tourism organizations in advocating for IHTC trails
- Develop guidance that seeds trail town initiatives and other community development tools
- Explore diverse governance models to create mechanisms to receive and disperse state funding across set geographies (also resonated with workshop participants)

Additional Input

In addition to the poll responses, participants were active in the meeting chat, contributing questions and ideas about:

- The importance of working with your local and regional planning organizations to prioritize trails (this became a short-term strategy as a result)
- MPO/RPO/RTPO allocations and raising local matching funds
- Pennsylvania’s Circuit Rider program and communications between riders
- The need for shuttling services
- Sharing of resources, such as Pennsylvania’s new Office of Outdoor Recreation, the Circuit Rider Program, Cincinnati’s Outdoors for All guide, and an example with partnering with a local land bank (Ashtabula) to receive an Appalachian Community grant for planning and technical assistance

APPENDICES

APPENDIX C

Leveraging Trails for Community and Economic Development Workshop Summary

Hosting an interactive workshop was an important project milestone. The workshop, held on May 23, 2023, provided an opportunity to share a project overview, discuss opportunities and challenges relative to leveraging trails for economic and community development, and share the drafted strategies and get the group's feedback. A total of 52 people attended.

A value-added component was having guest speakers from outside of the region. The speakers included:

- Emily Wornell, Ph.D. of Ball State University's Indiana Communities Institute. Emily was a member of the project Steering Committee and co-authored an informative 2022 Brookings article (based on her team's research), "Improving quality of life—not just business—is the best path to Midwestern rejuvenation." Emily spoke about her research during the workshop.
- Silas Chamberlin, Ph.D. of the York County Economic Alliance, spoke about the York County Trail Towns initiatives and other ways in which the economic development community can invest in trails – as well as why trails are a sound investment.

Opportunities and Challenges Breakout

The first breakout of the workshop focused on discussing opportunities and challenges, which participants forming five small groups. These discussions helped to inform the corresponding section of the report. Key themes identified include:

Opportunities

- Unprecedented Federal Funding Opportunities
- Quality of Life Concerns Lead Location Decisions ("Jobs follow people" not the other way around)
- Increased Interest and Appreciation of the Outdoors
- Macro Workforce Shifts May Favor Increased Trail Use and Relocation to Trail Communities
- Trails are Critical to Connectivity and Transportation Alternatives
- Raising Awareness Concerning the Value of Trails Remains an Opportunity

Challenges

- Potential Allies Don't Appreciate the Value of Trails
- Physical and Attitudinal Barriers to Trail Investments and Trail-Related Spending
- Underinvestment in Certain Location Impedes Positive Trail Experiences
- Accessing and Managing Grant Funds
- A Net Positive is not Guaranteed for Area Residents

APPENDICES

Strategies Breakout

The second workshop breakout gave participants the opportunity to respond to the drafted strategies, which were presented just prior to going into small groups. In each group, participants were asked which strategies they thought would be most effective and were also asked what might be missing. The strategies that resonated the most across the five groups included:

- Create a funding pipeline to aid trail-oriented investment and seek renewed philanthropic support (also resonated with those who attended the May 9 coalition meeting)
- Pursue partnerships beyond the trails community to unlock the full range of community and economic development benefits of trails (also resonated with May 9 meeting participants)
- Ensure that local residents benefit from a growing outdoor economy and work with communities to safeguard against unintended consequences
- Explore diverse governance models to create mechanisms to receive and disperse state funding across set geographies (also resonated with May 9 meeting participants)
- Strengthen local organizational capacity

Additionally, the “What’s Missing?” prompt yielded great feedback that resulted in a few new strategies and strengthening some of the draft strategies.

Following the workshop, participants received the presenters’ slides as well as the list of drafted strategies and the opportunity to provide additional feedback.