



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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I ♥ Trails

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Peggy Pings is an Outdoor Recreation Planner with National Park Service - Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, helping communities and nonprofits create close-to-home rail-trails, river access and land protection, since 1995. She is based in Morgantown, West Virginia, and covers West Virginia and western Pennsylvania. The Industrial Heartland Trails is one of many projects nationally that has been receiving NPS-RTCA assistance.

Peggy received her undergraduate degree in landscape architecture from West Virginia University and earned a master's degree in recreation and parks management in 1997, also from WVU.

As a volunteer in rails-to-trails conversion projects, a state park foundation, a watershed project, a community center, a food cooperative and a skate park project, she has found that voluntarism is often the catalyst to action, as well as great experience for career development.

I do. You do. We all “heart” trails.

That’s why the Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition (I Heart Trails, for short) is collaborating across state lines to connect a system of nearly 1,500 miles of shared use trails, with more than 48 percent of the total mileage already completed. Filling the gaps is the motivating push to complete our regional trail system.

“Everyone wants to link to the Great Allegheny Passage!” This has been the rallying call for trail planners, managers and users in the four-state, 48-county region that includes Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio and New York. In 2013, the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) celebrated its connection of 150 miles of rail-trails and shared-use paths between Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Cumberland, Maryland, and further linking to the 184.5-mile C&O Canal Towpath into Washington, D.C. The GAP generates \$50 million per year in economic benefits to communities along its length, with visitors typically spending \$114 a night, according to studies. This is a success that people want to use as their model.

Today, the I Heart Trails Coalition is heeding the rallying call. The goal is to connect the trail network so that local and visiting trail users can walk and bike from trail to trail, city to city, and town to town. Major cities include Pittsburgh,

Pennsylvania; Cleveland, Ohio; Akron, Ohio; Ashtabula, Ohio; Erie, Pennsylvania; Morgantown, West Virginia; and Parkersburg, West Virginia.

The completed network would make up the largest shared-use trail system in North America. Trail users would choose their own adventure for a day, a week, or even a month. The possibilities are endless. The benefits range from health and wellness to environmental conservation to economic prosperity.

How Do We Do Our Work?

The coalition (www.iHeartTrails.org) is currently made up of 23 trail groups. The Project Support Team includes staff from Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC), Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), and the National Park Service – Rivers, Trails & Conservation Assistance Program (NPS-RTCA).

Since 2014, major funding has been received from the Benedum Foundation and the Gund Foundation. A multi-year work plan has been developed, and funders are continually being sought to support the coalition’s coordination and promotional efforts and to complete the gaps.

Mapping of the vision and each trail’s status has been developed by Environmental Planning & Design, LLC. The GIS mapping and gap analysis has guided planning, management and trip planning. Explore the interactive maps at <http://GoToTrails.com/>

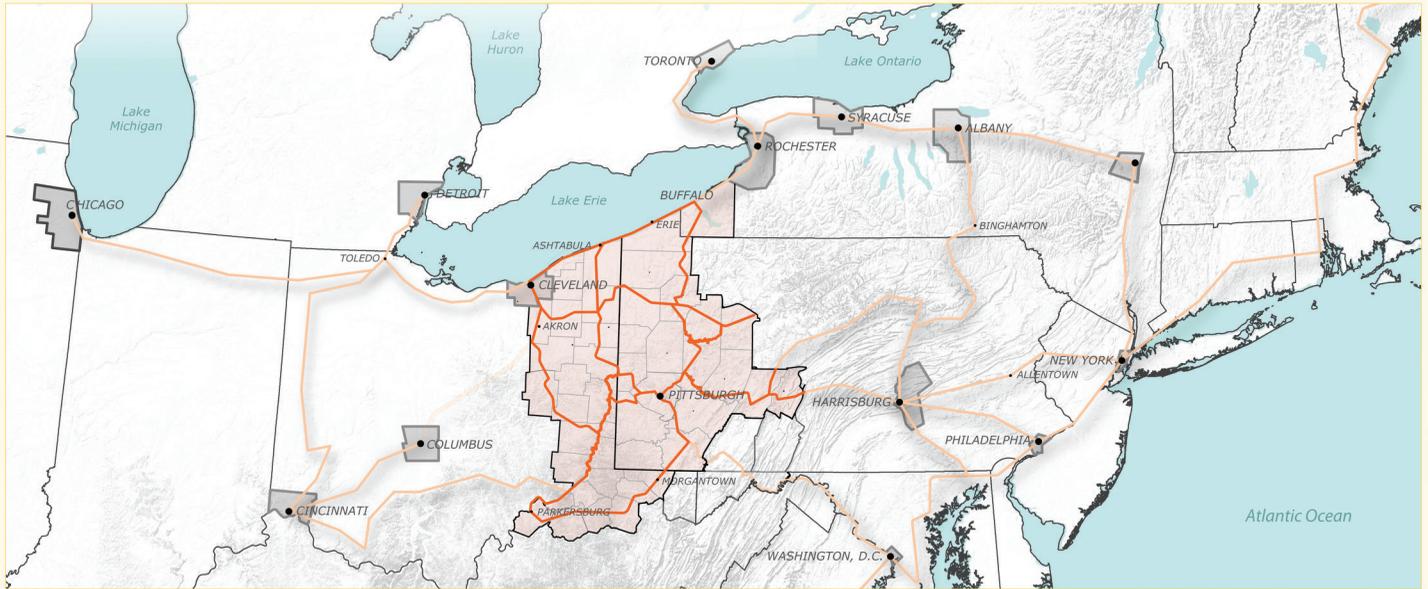
Eight major trail corridors have been identified through coalition meetings and conferences. Corridor Working Groups are in place to focus on completing their segments.

- Cleveland to Erie (95 miles)
- Erie to Pittsburgh (261 miles)
- Pittsburgh to Cleveland (242 miles)
- Pittsburgh to Ashtabula (148 miles)
- Parkersburg to Pittsburgh (335 miles)
- Pittsburgh to Harrisburg (137 miles)



Aetnaville Bridge • Photo Credit: Karen Corona Merritt

The Industrial Heartland Trail Network



A 48-county, four-state, regional trail planning effort has leveraged the power of GIS and cloud access to facilitate the development of a 1,400 trail network. Convenient access to the GIS data has enabled this region to forge a common vision and set a goal to complete its network by 2035.

- Pennsylvania Wilds Connector (170 miles)
- Pennsylvania Wild, Wild West Connector (62 miles)

Filling The Gaps

There are three major challenges that trail groups face:

- 1) Acquisition of easements or properties along former rail-lines, or from private landowners, if feasible.
- 2) Development of parallel off-road paths adjacent to roadways, where needed.
- 3) Crossing major rivers and repurposing historic bridges. First, proposed bike/pedestrian routes must be assessed. The question we ask is: “Where would you be willing to ride with a 10-year-old?”

A big hurdle is to identify, protect and create safe crossings of large rivers, such as the Ohio River at Wheeling, West Virginia. This crossing is important to both the Pittsburgh to Cleveland Corridor and the Parkersburg to Pittsburgh Corridor. The historic 1891 Aetnaville Bridge is currently being assessed for maintaining the crossing between Wheeling Island and Ohio. Trail groups on each side are working closely with their local and state authorities to support bi-state trail linkages, and to build the political will to preserve the bike/pedestrian crossing.

The Challenge

Fifty gaps short of 1,450 miles. Fifty connectivity gaps – roughly 700 miles in all – have been identified. In many cases, these are the hardest parts, those sections of trail that haven’t been tackled for a reason. The most common challenges are land acquisition, funding and engineering/physical impediments.

The good news is, we have a baseline. With a 2014 connectivity analysis, we’ve mapped the 50 gaps, and working groups are busy assessing them. More than 700 miles of incomplete trail may sound daunting, but many of the gaps are short in distance. Nearly 75 percent of the gaps are 15 miles or less, and eight of the 50 are two miles or less. Completing some of these short gaps will result in big gains in connectivity.

How You Can Help

This is a long-term vision with a lot of years and trail miles to go. Although we do look forward to that day, and some of the trails are complete, we’re simply not ready to share the system as a whole with the world. We encourage you to keep using those trails that are open for business. And if you want to proactively support our vision, here are a few things you can do:

- 1) Financially support your local trail organization or any of the organizations within our system that are working to put more trail on the ground.
- 2) Volunteer with any of these same trail organizations. We can’t stress enough that the trails are built and maintained thanks to the sweat equity of local volunteers. They can use your help, whether it’s for single-day, “plug-in” projects or long-term assistance or leadership roles. As the saying goes, many hands make light work.
- 3) Keep riding. Keep walking. Keep running. And continue to spread the word about the trails you’re using. ▽

For more information, see www.nps.gov/rta.