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Growing Pains: A Look at the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System in Southern West Virginia

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He currently serves as West Virginia Governor Jim Justice's appointed Chairman of the West Virginia Tourism Commission.

When the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System opened on Columbus Day in 2000, very few people realized how the trails would change the economy and future of Southern West Virginia. Today, in celebration of the trail system's success, Columbus Day weekend is celebrated in the Mingo County town of Gilbert with its annual Hatfield-McCoy National TrailFest event. The event plays host to more than 2,000 ATV riders who converge in the town for a near weeklong event of trail riding, outdoor music and a lot of mudslinging fun.

In 2000, the trail system opened with just over 300 miles of trails in two counties. On that opening day, former West Virginia Governor Cecil Underwood rode an ATV through the yellow ribbon at the beginning of the trails, followed by a dozen other riders. The true question on everyone's mind that day was if it



Hatfield McCoy Trails

was possible that all the years of planning and hard work would pay off with a new tourism economy for Southern West Virginia. That small procession, led by the governor, was a signal to the world that Southern West Virginia was open for visitors – specifically, the kind of visitors who ride ATVs – but would they actually come?

Eighteen years later, the answer is a resounding and overwhelming YES! If you build it, they certainly will come! In fact, on most weekends in the spring and fall seasons, more enthusiasts want to come than there are beds, cabins, campsites and hotel rooms to accommodate them.

The challenges that the trail system experiences today are far different than the initial challenges faced by this fledgling tourism destination. The first challenge was that the trail system had opened in very rural areas. The towns of Man and Matewan and the cities of Logan and Williamson were anchors for the new trails, and these locations had almost no lodging, very few restaurants and, outside of trail riding, no other developed tourism activities. Who would build these new facilities, who would run them and how fast could they be built? It was a slow process, but the entrepreneurial spirit in Southern West Virginia and its residents rose to the occasion.



Despite the challenges, the future growth of the trails exceeded everyone's expectations. The caravans of trucks and SUVs towing trailers full of ATVs were enough to quiet even the greatest skeptic. The first full year of operations saw almost 4,000 riders visit the trail system. In 2018, that number grew to over 50,000 permitted riders with over 85 percent of these visitors coming from outside of West Virginia.

The trail system now reaches out over five Southern West Virginia counties with more than 700 miles of trails, connecting 11 incorporated cities and towns. The latest economic impact study shows more than \$20 million is being generated by the trails in the local economy, and it is supporting over 200 new jobs. The past 18 years have seen the opening of more than 50 new lodging businesses and campgrounds around the trails. These businesses, along with ancillary businesses such as restaurants, ATV rental companies, kayak rental companies and moonshine distilleries, now dot the landscape surrounding the trails and have created a true tourist destination for ATV riders.

The future looks bright for tourism development on the trails, with six more projects in design or under construction that will open new trails in Boone, McDowell, Lincoln, Kanawha, Wayne and Wyoming Counties. These projects, when complete, will connect the towns of Montgomery, Danville, Gary, Madison, Oceana, War and Welch to the trails. The recent legislative expansion of the trail system will now take it into central West Virginia, adding the counties of Braxton, Clay, Fayette, Nicholas and Webster counties to the newly formed Rimfire Trail System.

The success of the trails has not gone unnoticed at the national level. In 2016, the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) granted funding to help businesses develop along the trails. This grant, coupled with an ARC grant to the Natural Capital Investment Fund, will provide business coaching, small business training and risk capital to entrepreneurs developing businesses to support the trail system.

The growth of the trail system and the entrepreneurial opportunities it provides are enormous. It continues to exceed all expectations and is serving as an engine for tourism growth and entrepreneurship. These new capital investments will create hundreds of new construction jobs throughout Southern West Virginia, building cabins, campgrounds, hotels and restaurants in support of the ever growing number of tourists visiting the trail system. The future truly looks bright for one of West Virginia's newest tourist destinations. ▽