



# VIEWS & VISIONS

A publication of Bowles Rice LLP

Summer 2019



## Connecting Parkersburg to Pittsburgh by Rail-Trail: Bringing a World-Class Trail Network to West Virginia

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Kelly Pack is the Senior Director of Trail Development for Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), a national nonprofit based in Washington, D.C. She still remembers her first-ever rail-trail experience; as a young child, she completed the long bicycle ride along the Cranberry Tri-Rivers Rail-Trail in her home state of West Virginia. It was an experience that would inspire her as an adult. Since joining RTC in 2006, Pack has helped bring to fruition the trail aspirations of community groups across the country. She holds a master's degree in recreation, parks and tourism resources from West Virginia University.

For more than 30 years, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) has worked closely with communities across the country to promote, encourage and advance our vision of creating a nationwide network of trails from former rail lines and connecting corridors to build healthier places for healthier people. Today, there are more than 22,000 miles of rail-trails across the United States. Hundreds of communities – large and small, in all 50 states – are experiencing the many benefits that these trails bring.

We know that as trail systems grow, they spark new investment in trailside businesses and commercial opportunities along the route. In mid-sized cities and rural communities, such investments spur tourism, bringing new dollars into the community. Trails increasingly demonstrate their significance in community transformation through economic activity by trail users, including visitors and locals.

West Virginia has a robust collection of rail-trails, with 67 open rail-trails totaling 566 miles, and incredible opportunities to expand and connect those existing rail-trails. Creating these connections and developing trail networks within the state



will help spark new local business opportunities, revitalize communities and attract and retain residents. One of the most attainable and exciting opportunities is the 238-mile Parkersburg to Pittsburgh (P2P) corridor, a segment of a larger 1,500-miles-plus planned trail network that the Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition envisions spanning 51 counties through West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio and New York.

Since 1988, local residents and trail advocates in West Virginia have helped develop an almost contiguous rail-trail from Parkersburg to the West Virginia-Pennsylvania state line, including the North Bend Rail Trail, the West Fork River Trail and the Mon River Trail. Closing nearly 22



*Tunnel on North Bend Rail trail near Salem (Photo Credit: Jessica McDonald)*



miles of gaps in Wood, Harrison and Marion counties would create a 150-mile rail-trail in West Virginia – one of the longest in the country. Connecting these existing rail-trails with the world-renowned Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) in southwest Pennsylvania would complete the P2P corridor and open the door to a recreation and tourism economy worth tens of millions of dollars annually, with the potential of attracting some of the 800,000 hikers and bikers who visit the GAP each year, along with a share of the more than \$40 million they spend annually in communities along the trail.

The GAP almost single-handedly revived and reinvented the small rural communities it passes through, many of which were skeptical years ago that a biking and hiking trail could have any impact on their economy. West Virginia is now just a few small steps away from its own world-class rail-trail that would have a similarly transformative impact on local communities here.

Completing these few short gaps would see this part of West Virginia become an immediate draw for trail tourists across America and around the world. It takes bravery and vision to work toward something you can't already see. We know that our trail-building partners in West Virginia have plenty of both. What they need now is the commitment and support of their state legislators and business leaders, and a continuation of the determined local grassroots trail-building movement that has brought them so far – and now so close – to a premier tourist destination in West Virginia. ▽

Learn more at [www.railstotrails.org](http://www.railstotrails.org).

**Image 1:** North Bend Rail Trail leading into Cairo, West Virginia (Photo Credit: Mike Tewkesbury). **Image 2:** Bicyclists touring the Mon River Trail in Morgantown, West Virginia (Photo Credit: Jake Lynch). **Image 3:** Enjoying a bike ride on the Mon River Trail (Photo Credit: Steve Shaluta).