



Community Connections: Connellsville Caboose Welcome Center

Project Overview



Before and After Views of the Caboose in Connellsville.

The rails to trails movement has turned former railroad corridors into popular recreational paths, but along the way many remnants of the railroad's glory days were left to the side. These remnants includes railcars and cabooses. This was the situation in Connellsville, PA along the Great Allegheny Passage.

For many years, trail users and local community members noticed a rusty, yellow caboose right on the edge of the town. Questions loomed of what to do with this historic structure. From several community meetings and the Trail Town Assessment, one key service that was missing in Connellsville was a welcome center. Over the years, improvements were made to the trail-head including a camping area and water fountain but there still remained a rusty, yellow caboose. With leadership and inspiration from the Trail Town Program® (TTP) and Student Conservation Association (SCA), efforts were soon underway to transform this eyesore into a much needed point of interest. TTP and SCA researched and worked with several community organizations and volunteers to restore this historic caboose. By fundraising and taking it step by step, the former rusty, yellow caboose became a shiny, red welcome center for cycling tourists on the Great Allegheny Passage.

The Caboose was stripped and sanded of rust, painted in a historic style, raised onto tracks, fitted with steps, stocked with maps, and created a new first impression to the City of Connellsville. Since completion of the Caboose Welcome Center renovation, additional improvements to the site have included updated parking, landscaping, and signage.





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Process: How Was This Project Accomplished?

Upon determining the best use of this site, efforts continued to determine what all elements were required to create a functioning welcome center. This included all construction and safety procedures as well as obtaining the required permits and approvals from the City of Connellsville. An in-depth plan was set in place alongside best case timelines to keep the project moving forward including a maintenance plan after completion of the renovation.

Some of the first steps included identifying and applying for grants or donations to cover key project expenses. At the same time a network of volunteers and a project support team was coordinated by the Student Conservation Association. Volunteers were recruited for particular elements of the project. To help encourage participation, pizza was provided and donated by local restaurants. Certain elements required additional outreach and donations. This was especially important to getting the caboose on level tracks and adding access stairs.

Community members looking to get involved, but not construction savvy were able to contribute by researching and documenting historic information or photos for the interior and creative artistic renderings for the exterior. Upon completing all construction and final details, a celebratory dedication was held to thank all those that contributed to the project as well as officially welcome visitors to the new Connellsville Caboose Welcome Center.



The renovation of the caboose was a transformative process with many hands on deck. These renovations built interest in the project and community as whole.





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Resources: What was needed for this project?

FUNDING

This Funding for this project came from a variety of sources, including:

- Seed Award from The Sprout Fund
- Richard King Mellon Foundation via The Progress Fund's Trail Town Program®
- Local participants and supporters

COOPERATION & LEADERSHIP

In addition to funding, leadership, and cooperation were critical to the success of this project:

- Leadership provided by interns and staff at the Trail Town Outreach Corps
- Cooperation from the City of Connellsville, who owns the caboose and is leasing it to the Yough River Trail Council (YRTC) for use as a Welcome Center
- Commitment from the YRTC to maintain the caboose after the project is complete

PARTNERSHIP

The following participated in shaping, permitting, and completing the successful project:

- City of Connellsville
- Connellsville Area Career and Technical Center
- Connellsville Garden Club
- Connellsville Redevelopment Authority
- Connellsville School Board Members
- CSX Corporation
- Hobo Model Railroad Club
- Local artists and volunteers
- Trail Town Outreach Corps
- Yough River Trail Council

Issues Encountered

The primary challenges associated with this project were:

- Finding direction on how to complete a project like this, which involves a rehabilitation of a unique historic resource
- Maintaining contact with volunteers and sharing a sense of urgency about the project.

Both of these issues were overcome with persistence from the project leaders.





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Impact

This project is an important example of community partnerships and preservation by taking an underutilized historic resource near the trail and putting it back into use. It utilized and strengthened the growing network of resources and volunteers (traditional and non-traditional) to accomplish a much needed improvement to the town as well as providing hands-on opportunities to get involved with their community.

The Connellsville Caboose Welcome Center ultimately provided a missing amenity to not only the community but also the visitors to the trail. It is now a place to stop and rest. Visitors are more comfortable as they enter the City and are encouraged to explore the nearby amenities of the trail and town for an extended stay.

In addition to providing maps and brochures, volunteers have been able to add a guest book inside the Caboose.

This helps community leaders and businesses track where visitors are coming from year round. The Caboose is a self serve center but can transition to a staffed informational center in the future.



The Connellsville Caboose Welcome Center was dedicated and officially opened in June 2012. Since opening visitors from around the world have stopped in to learn about the railroad and trail history of the Connellsville area.

Opportunities



This is a relatively unique project, but an example of how someone can have an idea and work with the community to do something with a big impact. Underutilized sites such as cabooses, train stations, or small commercial buildings can be fitted to serve as informational centers. Additional opportunities exist for displaying historic artifacts or public art in and around the welcome centers.

The project could be replicated in other towns. Other uses include ice-cream stands or a collection of cabooses that have been transformed into overnight accommodations as the Caboose Hotel in Titusville.

Many other communities may already have their own caboose on display. This was the case in Trail Town Foxburg. Here community members took a similar approach with tasks that including a fresh coat of paint inside and out, updating a seating area with benches and picnic tables, planting decorative grasses and flowers, adding bike racks, and reorganizing brochure holders. All of these efforts created a more welcoming atmosphere for visitors to the trail and Foxburg's business district.