## Project Overview

In 2008, the Allegheny Trail Alliance and the Trail Town Program® together developed a comprehensive design manual for Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) signage to guide the introduction of any new signs and the progressive replacement of old signs. It was produced to help strategically develop the potential of the GAP as an economic asset to the region by improving the visitor experience, provide a sense of safety, and guide visitors to businesses and amenities just like or better than a National Park trail or other tourist attraction would.

Since then, the Trail Town Program® had installed signs piecemeal at a few trailheads along the Great Allegheny Passage and kiosks in the Trail Towns.

The Allegheny Trail Alliance similarly constructed GAP-style signage at select spots. However, as late as 2013, only three locations had the baseline set of these design-informed signs: the trailheads at Confluence, Ohiopyle, and West Newton. Most of the balance of hoped-for progress to be undertaken by trail groups had been put aside for the necessary priorities of maintaining the trails and existing structures, not to mention because of the difficulty of coordination and participation.

With the completion of the GAP to Pittsburgh in 2013, The Trail Town Program® in 2014 set out to effectively complete baseline visitor signage on the trail and update kiosks at all marked trailheads from Homestead, PA to Deal, PA—around two dozen locations in all. With the cooperation of the landowners and trail maintenance groups, the result was a project proposal to direct the design, production, and installation over a hundred new identifier, mileage, and way-finding signs. All kiosks at the Trail Towns were to receive updated business maps, and three brand new kiosks were to be made with interpretive features and maps of town and trail.

Here are examples of pages from the 2008 *Great Allegheny Passage Graphic Identity & Sign Guidelines Manual*.
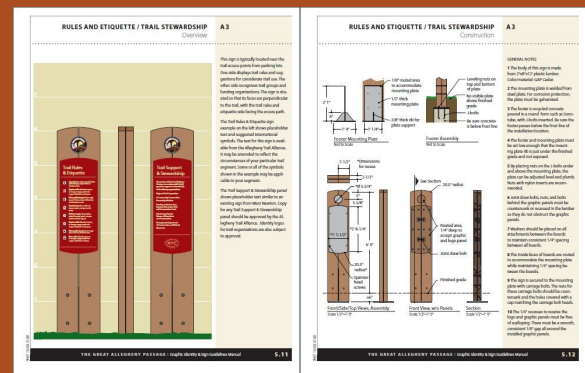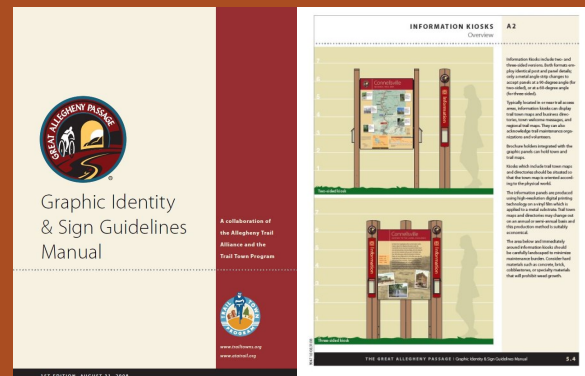
"Trail users need and expect signage: to lead them to trail access areas; for rules and regulations to describe the history and heritage of the region; to direct them to town services; and to orient and educate visitors."

- from the *GAP Graphic Identity & Sign Guidelines Manual*

Visitor Information: Great Allegheny Passage Signage (2014)

In 2013, over 1,000 of the signs on the Great Allegheny Passage were inventoried, photographed, and evaluated.

Process: How Was This Project Accomplished?

The Trail Town Program® ventured to lead the project, which required substantial funding and additional staffing for a project coordinator. Additionally, the full scope of the project required the participation of all individual trail groups, landowners, and in some locations, permits and variances from municipalities.

A lot of planning was therefore required. Fortunately, in 2013 an inventory of most of the trail's signs formed a basis for plans that were shaped over the course of the project with the input of the trail groups, who were all very helpful.

Finding a contractor to take on a task for these custom-designed signs led us to Bunting Graphics Inc., of Verona, PA. During the project, the contract scope of work needed to be revised after the input of the sign groups and revisions to the plans. Also, since the project was to include new maps and kiosks, the map designs from past projects were revived. However, they needed much revision and for new kiosks needed to be designed from the beginning. This presented challenges itself. Town maps also required help from community members to uncover what businesses should now be included and other changes to make.

Installation was then coordinated through two crews, including an installation subcontractor. The schedule needed to be arranged to keep open holes and other debris around as short as possible, and to work around any scheduled events on the trails.

Installing the signs required many site visits to mark and remark locations and orientations for utility companies and installation crews. Slow digging at sometimes difficult locations was also an issue. When the project timing is off, then signs are left to take up valuable storage space at the factory too.

Visitor Information: Great Allegheny Passage Signage (2014)

Resources: What was needed for this project?

FUNDING

This project required substantial capital funding to cover estimated costs in excess of $262,000 based on previous sign projects from 2012, excluding staff hours. Funding for this project was provided by:

- The Richard King Mellon Foundation
- The Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau County Tourism Grants
- The Allegheny Trail Alliance.

LEADERSHIP

The Trail Town Program®, seeing a need go unfulfilled and knowing the obstacles of so many trail organizations to initiate coordination among themselves, stepped in to propose and lead the project.

PARTNERSHIP

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

- Allegheny Trail Alliance member trail groups: Somerset County Parks and Recreation, Ohiopyle State Park, Regional Trail Corporation, and Steel Valley Trail Council
- Elizabeth Township, City of Connellsville, City of McKeesport, and Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area
- Bunting Graphics, Inc. (Lead sign fabricator, designer, and installer)
- Ruff Signs, Inc. (Installation subcontractor)
- Apollo Design Group (Trail map design)

Issues Encountered

This ambitious project was conceived with support of the Allegheny Trail Alliance, but without the individual trail groups prior involvement in planning. A policy was put in place just the year before concerning approvals for new signs projects, which required a time-consuming system of approvals that this project tested to its limits. It also meant a lot of sign content and placement revisions needed to happen throughout the project, almost to its end.

Also, a goal was to unveil the signs for the 2014 trail season. However, the initial timeline was shown to be very ambitious once installation was tested and the number of edits needed accumulated. Combined with the extended amount of time needed to receive permits from municipalities and feedback on revisions, and a delayed install schedule, the timeline was pushed back towards the end of trail season. Fortunately, the revised timeline stuck and all contracted work was accomplished by then.

Installation was especially difficult to coordinate across the trail, since the project spanned approximately 120 miles and at sometimes remote locations. Coordinating two installation crews, each with changing personnel and differing levels of understanding of the project required that everybody was continuously reminded of what-goes-where and when the work would be done.

Visitor Information: Great Allegheny Passage Signage (2014)

Impact

The GAP Visitor Information Signage project finally produced over a hundred new signs and displays, including:

- 6 business directory updates for existing kiosks
- 4 new kiosks featuring business and area information
- 24 new amenity information signs
- 15 new way-finding/mileage signs
- Dozens of trailblazers and identifiers

In all, 23 locations were upgraded to baseline GAP design and branding standards. An additional 5 repaired parts to previous signs were added, and older signage was removed or replaced at these locations

The GAP Signage project represents a major effort that completed basic necessary sign improvements that enhance GAP branding and better connect the trail to its communities at its target locations. It also provides much of the missing information along the GAP for users to navigate it safely and comfortably, significantly enhancing the trial's usability.

Since then, solicited and unsolicited feedback from trail users have shown that the signs were welcome and have already contributed to an improvement in the GAP visitor experience.

Examples of new signs (from the top): Rules and mileage at Deal; amenity information on the Connellsville bikepath, and amenities and mileage at Garrett.

This project also demonstrates that with some planning and a lot of hard work, and more than a helping of initiative, a massive partner-based project such as this is possible.

Opportunities

Duplication in other communities

Several others trails in the region are expressing interest in looking closer and their own sign systems. Calls have come in to discuss rail-trail way-finding and sign systems with the Trail Town Program®. One trail system has even taken direct design inspiration from the GAP signs. While there is no "one-size-fits-all" sign system, being able to have a continuity of experience and reliable information is an obvious benefit and the appeal of creating better trails through information is spreading.