

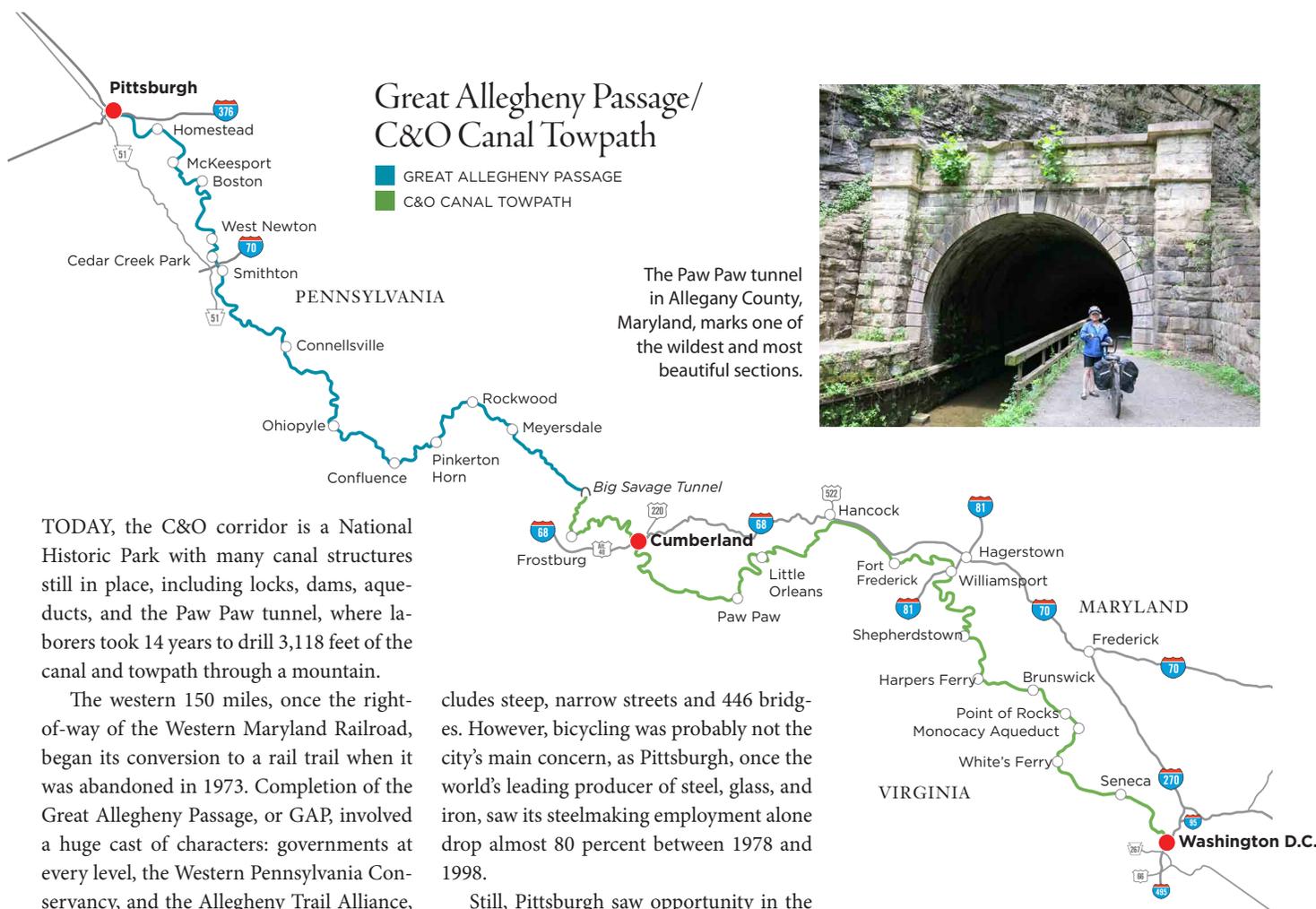
Prosperity Comes in Cycles

Bicycle trails can pump up local economies. *By Rick Pruetz, FAICP*

A cyclist rides across a repurposed bridge in Meyersdale, Pennsylvania—part of the Great Allegheny Passage.
PHOTO BY JEFF SWENSEN/THE NEW YORK TIMES



SPANNING RIVERS, RAILROADS, HIGHWAYS, AND, occasionally, entire valleys, the Great Allegheny Passage/C&O Canal Towpath was finally completed this May, creating a continuous off-road bike path from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C. Bicyclists who previously used individual segments can now spend days, or weeks, roaming the Pennsylvania and Maryland countryside on a 335-mile “super-bikeway.” ¶ In addition to building the nation’s longest multipurpose trail, public-private partnerships have also been harnessing bicycle tourism as an economic development tool here. This July, my wife Adrian and I pedaled the entire trail to enjoy some spectacular scenery and see for ourselves how a trail can inspire the rebuilding of towns in a region shaken by dramatic changes in manufacturing and transportation. ¶ The eastern 185-mile segment of the trail follows the towpath used by mules to pull barges loaded with coal, lumber, and farm produce between Cumberland, Maryland, and Washington during the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal’s working lifetime, from 1831 to 1924. In 1938, the federal government acquired the canal corridor and considered converting it to a highway. Then, in 1954, U.S. Supreme Court Justice William Douglas drew national support for preservation of the towpath by leading a highly publicized hike there.



TODAY, the C&O corridor is a National Historic Park with many canal structures still in place, including locks, dams, aqueducts, and the Paw Paw tunnel, where laborers took 14 years to drill 3,118 feet of the canal and towpath through a mountain.

The western 150 miles, once the right-of-way of the Western Maryland Railroad, began its conversion to a rail trail when it was abandoned in 1973. Completion of the Great Allegheny Passage, or GAP, involved a huge cast of characters: governments at every level, the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, and the Allegheny Trail Alliance, a coalition of seven trail organizations.

Western anchor

In the 1970s, the city of Pittsburgh began considering a quixotic idea: how to encourage bicycling despite a topography that in-

cludes steep, narrow streets and 446 bridges. However, bicycling was probably not the city’s main concern, as Pittsburgh, once the world’s leading producer of steel, glass, and iron, saw its steelmaking employment alone drop almost 80 percent between 1978 and 1998.

Still, Pittsburgh saw opportunity in the miles of riverfront land abandoned by the region’s once-dominant industries. In 1998, Pittsburgh adopted its Riverfront Development Plan, aimed at creating an interconnected linear waterfront and greenway that could attract private investment as well as

pedestrians and bicyclists to the city. The plan also envisioned that this greenway, Three Rivers Heritage Trail, would one day be part of a larger trail network extending to Washington, D.C., establishing Pittsburgh as a hub for bicycle tourism.

Today, the GAP Trail approaches downtown Pittsburgh by crossing the Monongahela River over the Hot Metal Bridge at the SouthSide Works, originally the location of LTV Steel. Following site remediation and \$265 million of public-private investment, SouthSide Works is now a thriving mixed use center.

The Three Rivers Heritage Trail also connects SouthSideWorks with parks and private developments along 24 miles of Pittsburgh's riverfront as well as the now-completed GAP/C&O trail to Washington. Judging by the full bike racks we saw outside the Hofbrauhaus, one of the center's 13 restaurants, Pittsburgh's bike-oriented development strategy is paying off.

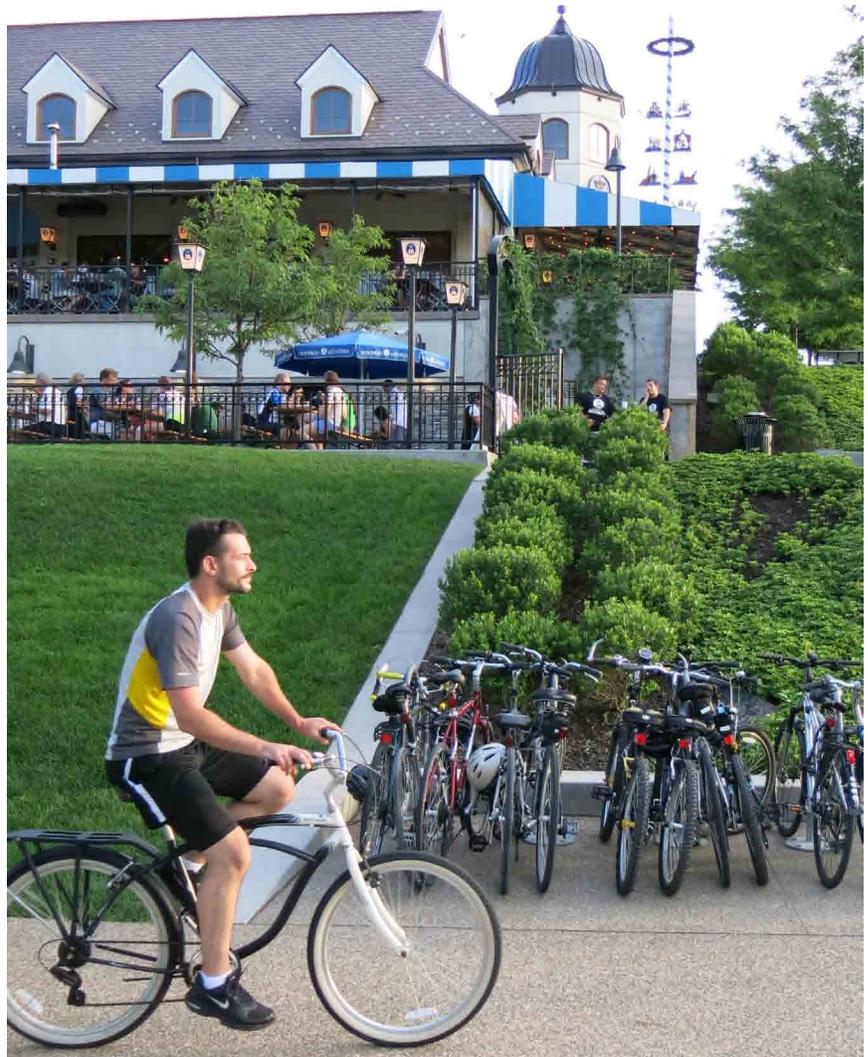
As envisioned by Pittsburgh's 1998 riverfront plan, the greenway network connects locals and tourists with this region's industrial history. To the east, along the banks of the Monongahela River, the trail crosses the former home of the massive Homestead Works of U.S. Steel, at one time the source of almost one-third of all steel used in the U.S. Much of the former plant site is now a successful retail and entertainment center. But the Homestead Works Pump House still stands as a reminder of the clash between striking steelworkers and Pinkerton guards that left 10 dead in 1892.

Today, the site of the Battle of Homestead is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the Pump House is one of the destinations managed by the Rivers of Steel Heritage Corporation, which conserves and develops historic, cultural, and recreational resources in the eight-county Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area, a magnet for more than 400,000 visitors annually.

An economic impact study of the Rivers of Steel NHA notes that smaller towns in the region are still struggling to recover from industrial decline. Confirming this point, the trail passes empty factories and abandoned machinery in Duquesne and in McKeesport, once home to the world's largest pipe manufacturer and now occupied by roughly one-third of its peak population 55,300.

Trail towns

In the 150 miles between Pittsburgh and Cumberland, the GAP segment passes 10 Trail Towns, communities working to create a welcoming environment for trail users and, in turn, improve their local economy and the quality of life for residents. In the



Many patrons of the Hofbrauhaus in Pittsburgh arrive by bike. The GAP/C&O trail runs right by it.

185-mile stretch between Cumberland and Washington, eight more communities along the C&O segment similarly coordinate eco- and historic tourism and economic development under the name Canal Towns.

Trail Towns: Capturing Trail-Based Tourism, a guidebook from the Allegheny Trail Alliance, urges business and civic leaders to create a sense of place based on the towns' history and character. To encourage extended side trips, Trail Towns maintain consistent systems of marketing, mapping, and wayfinding, making it easy for bicyclists to stop and explore these communities.

Trail Towns are also encouraged to cater to customer needs by revitalizing town centers, retooling existing stores, and, when warranted, growing new businesses. The Progress Fund, operator of the Trail Town Program, offers loans and technical assistance to small businesses to help integrate economic revitalization with overall community planning in trailside communities.

As the guidebook notes, in addition to attracting tourists, the process of creating a Trail Town can renew a community's sense of pride and identity.

Cumberland, Maryland (pop. 23,700), followed this advice by restoring its historic pedestrian street, redeveloping the former terminus of the C&O Canal as Canal Place Heritage Area, and hosting regular music festivals and other events. "The revival of the city is driven, in part, by the trail," then-Mayor Lee Fiedler told the *Baltimore Sun* in 2006.

Bill Atkinson, Trail Towns program coordinator in the Maryland Department of Planning, estimates that the trail brings \$2 million in business annually to Cumberland and surrounding Allegany County alone. Responding to our informal survey, Gail Hall, the owner of the Inn on Decatur in Cumberland, reported that four-fifths of her guests are bicyclists.

Linda Boxx, president of the Allegheny



This bed and breakfast in West Newtown, Pennsylvania, recently expanded by acquiring the historic house next door, thanks to funding from the Progress Fund.



With help from a \$50,000 loan from the Progress Fund's Trail Town Program, an old department store was transformed into a cycle shop and lodging.

Trail Alliance, cites several more examples of trail-inspired “reinvention,” including Confluence, Pennsylvania, a village at the convergence of three waterways with a town square, Victorian bandstand, and a population of just 777. Here the Progress Fund arranged a \$175,000 loan for the Confluence House B&B, where over 60 percent of the guests come off the trail, according to co-owner Sandy Younkin.

The fund also arranged a \$50,000 loan for Brad and Maureen Smith to convert a 100-year-old building that once housed a department store into two vacation rental units and the Confluence Cyclery. “The trail is an economic engine for these towns,” says

Brad Smith. “Without the trail, our business wouldn’t be here.”

These firsthand accounts are statistically supported by a 2008 economic impact study in which GAP-area businesses owners reported that the trail generated over one-quarter of their revenue on average, with significantly higher percentages for lodging and businesses related to outdoor recreation. Over one-third of the respondents from lodging, restaurant, and outdoor or trail-related establishments reported that the trail strongly influenced their business location.

The study attributed \$40 million of direct spending and \$7.5 million in wages to the trail in 2008 alone. Before the completion of the last link in May, the trail was already attracting more than 800,000 people annually. According to Boxx and Atkinson, the trail counts and the economic benefits will be much higher now that the off-road path connects Pittsburgh and D.C.

Other trail tales

Other U.S. communities are reaping economic benefits from shorter trails. To mention one of many examples, the Elroy-Sparta Trail in western Wisconsin is recognized as one of the earliest rail-to-trail success stories. When the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad abandoned this corridor in the late 1960s, the small towns along this route braced for economic decline. The initial 32-mile bike path opened in 1971 and has since been linked with other segments to create a

100-mile trail that attracts roughly half of its riders from out of state.

The city of Sparta now calls itself the “Bicycling Capital of America” as the trail draws more than 60,000 cyclists annually. My recent update of a 1989 economic study suggests that the trail generates over \$3 million annually in trip-related purchases alone.

In the province of Quebec, various levels of government invested \$240 million between 1995 and 2010 in the Route Verte, which includes a uniformly signed, 3,100-mile bicycle network connecting nearly 400 municipalities and incorporating more than 1,000 miles of off-road bike paths. Route Verte users spend \$100 million annually on food, lodging, and transportation.

The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy reports additional economic development successes from trails in such diverse places as Leadville, Colorado; Dallas, Texas; and Milford, Delaware. In addition to the benefits of improved business and increased sales tax receipts, the conservancy notes the positive effect of trails on adjacent property, such as \$140 million of increased property value in Indianapolis and \$13 million of additional property tax revenue in Austin, Texas.

Intra-city trails also generate economic benefits. Applauding Minneapolis’s 167 miles of bikeways, *Bicycling* magazine named that city America’s most bike-friendly city in 2010—a remarkable feat considering the climate. According to Fred Mayer, writing in *Minnesota Business Magazine*, the public investment in bicycling infrastructure and the growth of bicycling culture there are largely responsible for the development of a local bicycle industry estimated to generate \$315 million annually from more than 100 bike retailers and some of the nation’s largest manufacturers of bike tools and parts.

Portland, Oregon, recently recaptured the lead from Minneapolis in the race to be the nation’s most bikeable city. Its 180 miles of bike lanes and 79 miles of off-street bike paths have earned it platinum status from the League of American Bicyclists.

But perhaps less well known is the bicycle’s role in economic development. Linda Baker, writing in the *New York Times*, focuses on the neighborhood surrounding the bike lane of North Williams Avenue in Portland. Housing developers there cater specifically to bicyclists. One multiuse building on North Williams is home to a ground-



Riders on Portland, Oregon's busy North Williams bike corridor can stop for a beer at the HopWorks Bike Bar and move on—or they can move in. The multiuse building includes 18 green apartments aimed at cycling enthusiasts (there is no dedicated car parking).

floor brewpub called the HopWorks Bike Bar and upper floors are occupied by Eco-Flats, an 18-unit apartment complex with no dedicated vehicle parking other than bike racks in the lobby.

According to Baker, bicycle-supported developments are drawn to bikeways not just by the sheer volume of bicycle traffic but also because potential customers are traveling at bike speeds, making it easy for them to stop and spend some money, particularly when the on-street parking space

outside a business has been converted to a bike corral.

Bicycle trails of any length promote economic development as well as healthy lifestyles, inexpensive transportation, and pollution-free recreation. According to the Trail Town manual, the longer the trail, the farther people will travel to ride it, the longer they will visit, and the more they will spend. Someone who travels to a trail for a day's ride will spend four times as much as a local user, and users who stay overnight will

spend twice as much as the one-day visitors.

Clearly, it is not easy to build a trail like the 335-mile-long trail from Pittsburgh to Washington. In fact, the GAP segment alone took \$80 million and 40 years to complete. But the results are worth the time and effort. So just keep pedaling. ■

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