

Rail trails enhance quality of life

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By Gwen Loose , York County Rail Trail Authority

In anticipation that plans may soon be announced by New York state regarding the best use of the 90-mile rail corridor between Lake Placid and Old Forge, I'd like to comment on a rail-to-trail conversion that I've been involved with since 1997.

The Heritage Rail Trail County Park is a 21.5-mile, multi-use rail trail that is one of the most popular recreational amenities in Pennsylvania's York County. It extends from the city of York's historic district to the Pennsylvania-Maryland state line (the historic Mason-Dixon Line), where it makes a seamless connection to Maryland's Torrey C. Brown Trail and continues for another 21 miles.

The southern half of the Heritage Rail Trail passes through rural farmland and small towns. The northern section winds through the picturesque valley of Codorus Creek, with long sections of uninterrupted woodland interspersed with farm fields.

Article Photos



The Heritage Rail Trail in Pennsylvania is wheelchair friendly.
(Photo provided by the York County Rail Trail Authority)

The most recent user survey was done three years ago. Analysis of the data, accumulated from the infrared counters and completed surveys, indicates an estimated 281,145 annual visits to the trail, resulting in a total economic impact in 2012 of over \$4.4 million into the local economy.

This rail trail has brought a resurgence of new business opportunities to the small towns along its route. In New Freedom, population a little over 4,000, there are three new businesses serving trail users - a bike shop, sports bar and ice cream shop - all along one street in the first block south of the trail. On a recent Saturday in May, the bike racks at the sports bar and ice cream shop were full, and the bike shop had a steady flow of customers. The next small settlement up

the line, fittingly named Railroad, has a bed and breakfast right next to the trail, and a crab shack near the trail added extensive outdoor seating once the rail trail was open. Glen Rock, another small town along the line, held an Arts and Brew Festival along the trail that attracted hundreds just this past weekend.

The majority of trail users reside in York County (68 percent), but the trail also attracted many out-of-county visitors. Not surprisingly, for many of the survey respondents, usage of our trail is a regular occurrence. More than 38 percent of respondents use the trail several times each week. Some 37 percent of all the trail users are over the age of 35, with the most represented age groups being 46-55 (25 percent) and 56-65 (32 percent). Children under the age of 15 account for 21 percent of users. (This age profile is typical of other rail trails across the country.)

As elsewhere, bicycling is the predominant form of recreation on the Heritage Rail Trail (55 percent). However, the use of the trail for walking/hiking increased to 25 percent, and running/jogging nearly doubled to 10 percent since the last survey. When asked to report on any ancillary activities while on the trail, 39 percent of trail users reported enjoying bird-and-other-wildlife watching, while 19 percent visited museums at the train stations and appreciated the interpretive signs along the trail.

It should also be noted that the Heritage Rail Trail appeals to an increasing number of users who regularly visit the trail to maintain and improve their health and fitness.

Also noteworthy from a cultural perspective: Two train stations have been repurposed to commemorate historic events, including a stop-over by President Lincoln at Hanover Junction on his way to deliver the Gettysburg Address. The Hanover Junction station has been fully restored to its original 1860s appearance, with a history museum on the first floor. The New Freedom Station was restored to its early Pennsylvania Railroad days and now contains a museum on railroad history along with a cafe. Both stations are staffed by Friends of the Heritage Rail Trail Corridor.

In all, the Heritage Rail Trail County Park features seven railroad structures that are listed on National Register of Historic Places.

If asked to identify the single greatest benefit conferred by our rail trail, I think it can be reduced to eight words: "It is the happiest place in York County."

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