

The Laurel Highlands

CONSERVATION LANDSCAPE
INITIATIVE - FEBRUARY 2008

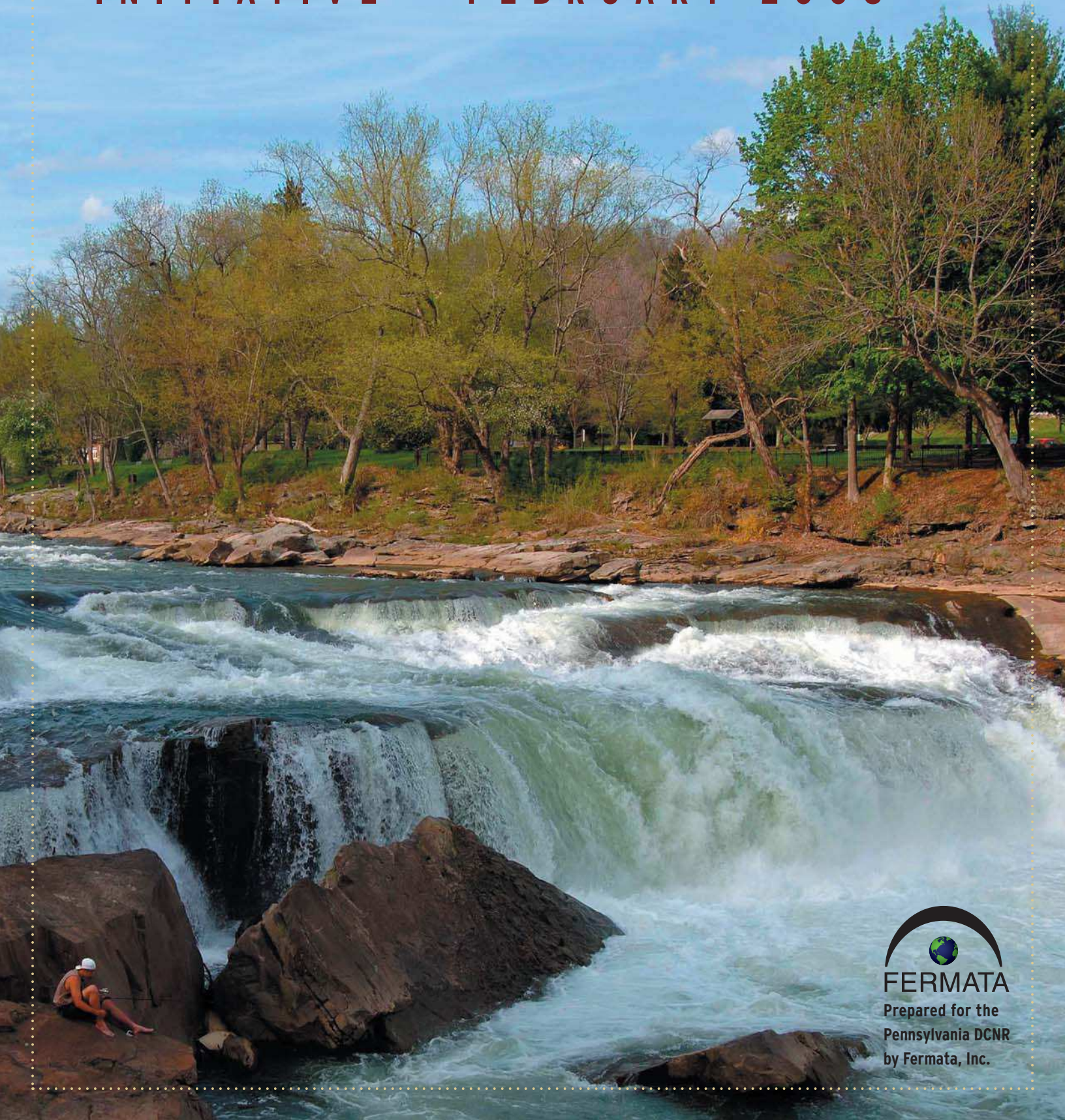


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Introduction

The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), following the example set by its successful PA Wilds initiative, has organized a series of Conservation Landscape Initiatives (CLI) across the Commonwealth. These initiatives are intended to use DCNR expertise and assets to bring together a variety of regional interests (economic, conservation, recreational, social) to focus on long-term sustainable development and conservation challenges within a specific landscape in the Commonwealth. The Laurel Highlands, situated in the southwestern corner of the state (near Pittsburgh) is one of these CLI's.

In a series of initial meetings the Laurel Highlands stakeholders identified the need to assess the recreational assets of the Laurel Highlands in order to understand, enhance, and promote their value in to the local economy through tourism based on natural and recreational resources. The Laurel Highlands is perceived to be more developed than PA Wilds as an outdoor recreation and tourism destination. Laurel Highlands has been the traditional vacation destination for Pittsburgh residents seeking escape from what was a polluted industrial city for nearly a century. Although Pittsburgh's pollution has dramatically abated, this trend has continued and outdoor recreation and cultural tourism are relatively popular in the region. Additionally, the region's natural and cultural assets attract tourists from around the country and internationally.

Fermata previously conducted a comprehensive recreation plan for State Parks and State Forests in the PA Wilds that included:

- A description of recreation assets in the sub-landscapes (focus areas),
- An examination of national, regional, and state recreation trends,
- An analysis of model and signature sites,
- Recommendations related to staffing and recreational programming,
- An analysis of communications and information programming,
- Development of key signature or model investments.

Fermata intends to rely on the recreation trend analysis that it conducted for the PA Wilds to identify key recreational opportunities for the various DCNR CLI's such as the Laurel Highlands. The data that comprise the analysis are applicable to the Commonwealth and the adjacent market area, and therefore there is no need to develop additional trend analyses for the CLI work.

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Initial Impressions



Fern Fossil/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

Fermata staff (Ted Eubanks, Brenda Adams-Weyant) has visited the region on several occasions in 2007. During these visits Fermata focused on a review of the recreational assets available in the region. More importantly, Fermata developed a contextual understanding of the region through which these individual assets might be better understood. During these visits Fermata worked in consultation with DCNR personnel, staff of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC), and local interests.

At present the Laurel Highlands CLI is divided into four separate sub-landscapes. These landscapes are as follows:

- Laurel Ridge
- Chestnut Ridge
- Stoneycreek -Quemahoning
- Great Allegheny Passage

According to DCNR's Bureau of Topographic and Geologic Survey, "Physiographically, the area from Dividing Ridge in eastern Somerset County to Chestnut Ridge in Fayette County and northeastward (from all points in between) up to the area just above Conemaugh Gap (close to Rt. 422 in Indiana and Cambria Counties) is now being classified as the Allegheny Mountain section of the Appalachian Plateaus province. The dominant topographic form is wide ridges separated by broad valleys, with ridge elevations decreasing to the north."

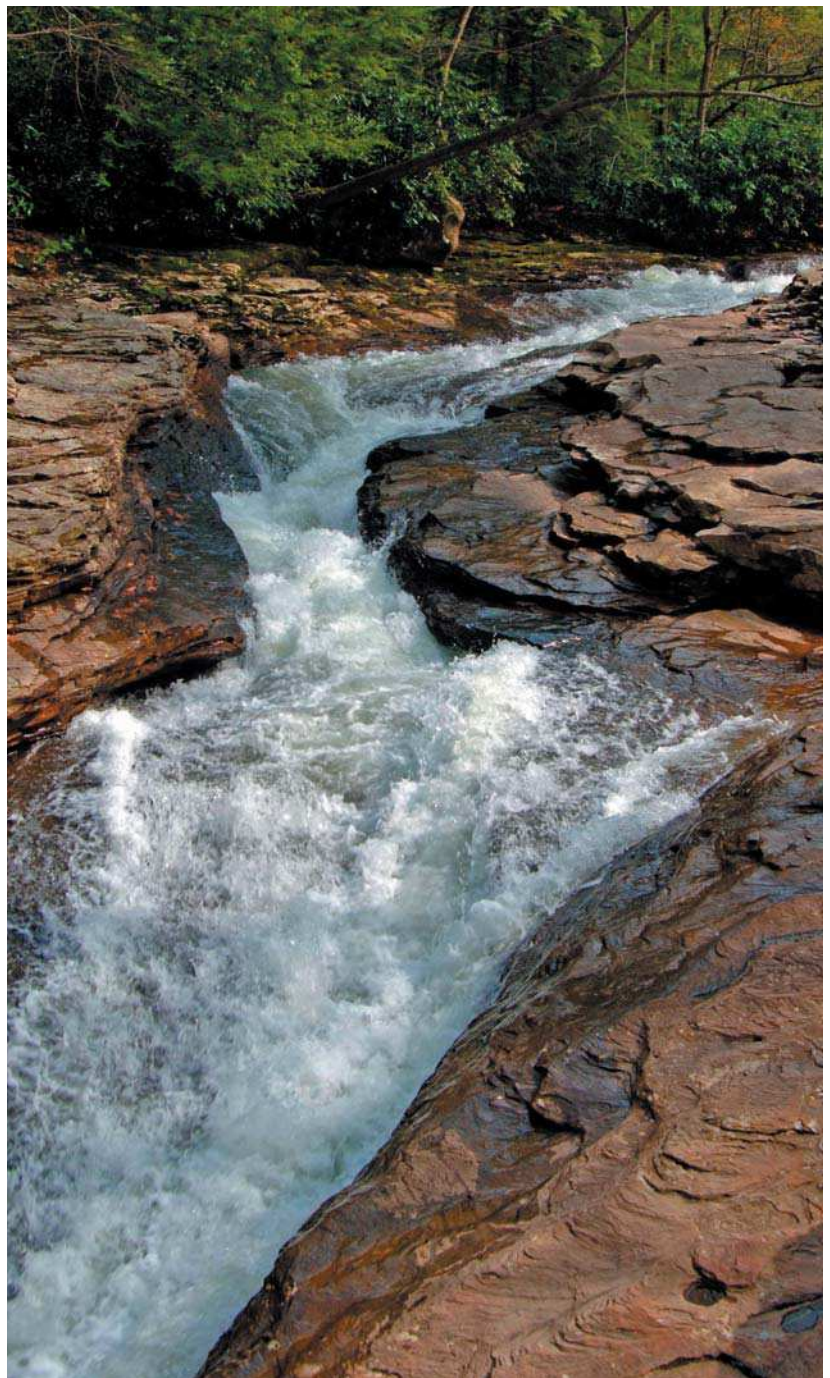
"The local relief is moderate to high. The underlying rock type is sandstone, siltstone, shale, conglomerate, and some limestone and coal. The geologic structure is large amplitude open folds. The minimum relief is 775 feet and the maximum relief 3,210 ft (Mt Davis). The Origin is fluvial erosion and some periglacial mass wasting."

However, Fermata is equally impressed that these CLI sub-landscapes have meaning on a social, as well as a geological or ecological level. DCNR's lands are not equally distributed throughout the region, and therefore the agency's opportunities to serve as a catalyst are not equally divided. DCNR has a series of state parks, and one state forest (Forbes) arrayed along the Laurel Ridge. However, DCNR assets are poorly distributed elsewhere in the region. As a result, there are "early implementation" opportunities where DCNR assets are present.

Fermata found the area, from a recreation travel and tourism perspective, to be a "noisy" market. There are numerous initiatives in the region that provide nature and heritage tourism products and programs. Many of these receive substantial funding from DCNR. More importantly, many of these programs are poorly aligned with the expressed goals of the CLI. Examples of these initiatives include the Lincoln Highway Heritage Corridor, the National Road Heritage Corridor, the Great Allegheny Passage, and the various regional efforts of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy (WPC).

To help the agency with its understanding of these various initiatives, and to help bring agency funding into better alignment, Fermata recommends that a comprehensive inventory of all Laurel Highlands CLI initiatives be compiled. This would include efforts made in the past, those that are on-going, and those that are being contemplated for the future. This inventory will be critical in the near future as this CLI begins to implement the recommendations included in this report.

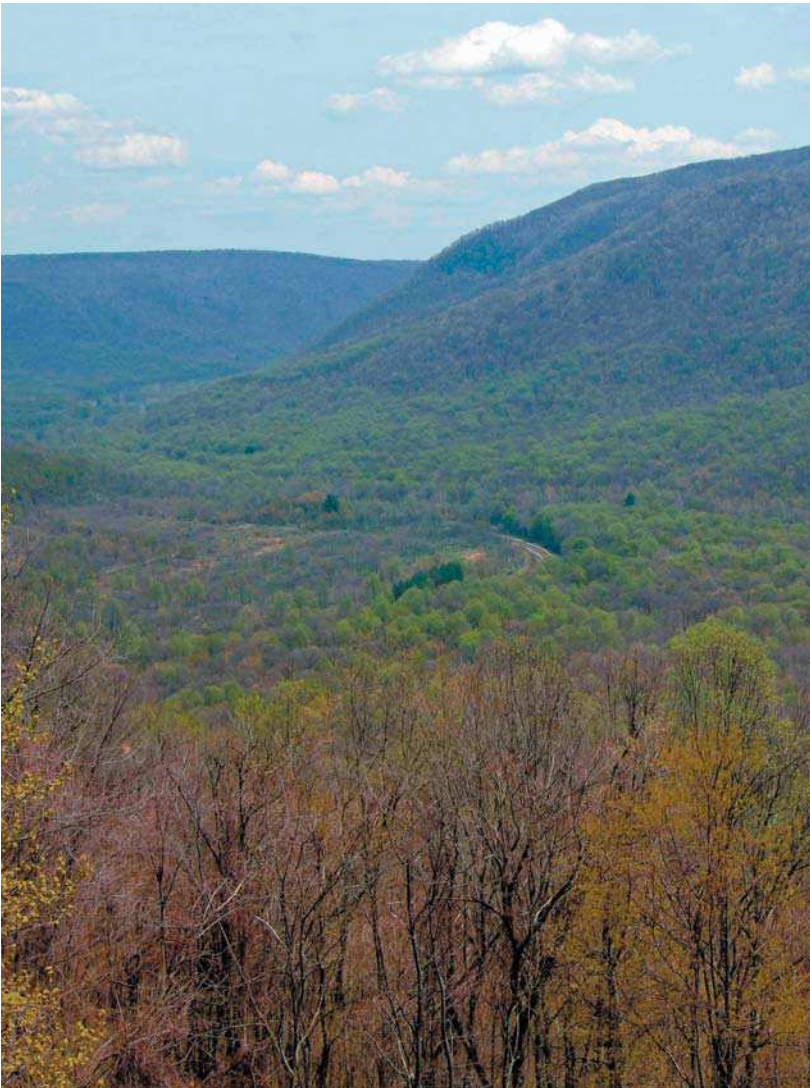
This is not to say that each of these initiatives is not doing important work in their own rights. However, the CLI approach allows DCNR to use its assets (both land and financial) to better align these varied (and at times competitive) interests. More importantly, this alignment should spur the types of synergies that will bring the agency and the Commonwealth a multiplied return on their investments.



The Chute/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

To this end, Fermata narrowed its focus to a single landscape containing the majority of DCNR assets in the Laurel Highlands - the Laurel Ridge. Fermata staff believes that this area offers the most advantageous opportunities for short-term, on-the-ground, implementation. Many of the other initiatives mentioned previously have components within this sub-landscape, and therefore can be easily integrated into this focused effort. The model created along the ridge may then serve as an example for future work both within the Laurel Highlands CLI as well as for other CLI's in the state.

The Laurel Highlands



The Laurel Highlands/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

The Laurel Ridge (Laurel Highlands) extends from Ohioopyle State Park north to the city limits of Johnstown (Laurel Ridge State Park). When one considers Ft. Necessity National Battlefield, Nemaocolin Woodland Resort and Spa, and even Braddocks Grave as part of this region, the southern boundary extends to Route 40.

The Laurel Highlands contains one state forest (Forbes) as well as a series of state park properties (Ohioopyle, Laurel Mountain, Laurel Hill, Linn Run, Kooser, Laurel Summit, Laurel Ridge). The Laurel Caverns (within the Chestnut Ridge sub-landscape) is privately owned, but DCNR is presently engaged with the owner in discussions about a potential acquisition. In addition, there are over 18,000 acres of Forbes State Forest surrounding Laurel Caverns. This includes the 7500-acre Quebec Run Wild Area (with an extensive and heavily used trail system), Lick Hollow State Forest Picnic Area along Route 40 just east of Uniontown, and the 14-mile long Whitetail Trail (basically Lick Hollow SFPA to Quebec Run Wild Area).

Therefore Fermata expanded the southwestern edge of the Laurel Highlands to include the Laurel Caverns and the Bureau of Forestry lands mentioned above. The Laurel Highlands also contain significant conservation lands that are managed by other organizations. For example, the WPC manages Fallingwater and the Bear Run Nature Preserve.

As stated previously, many of the pre-existing initiatives are contained within the Laurel Highlands. The Great Allegheny Passage passes through Ohioopyle (the state park as well as the borough). The National Road Heritage Corridor (U.S. 40) transits the southern edge of the Laurel Highlands, and the Lincoln Highway (U.S. 30) cuts east-west across the center of the region and serves as a vector for travelers coming from Pittsburgh.

Conceptual Framework

From an organizational standpoint, the Laurel Highlands, as a recreational unit, is relatively simple to organize. The points of interest are generally arrayed southwest to northeast along the ridge, and travel to these destinations is aligned along the ridge as well. The Laurel Highlands hiking trail follows the ridge top, allowing travelers to experience the Laurel Highlands on foot.

The challenge is to orchestrate travel into the area in a way that optimizes the experiential value of the region. For example, where should travelers begin their Laurel Highlands adventure? Where are the portals that will usher travelers into the world of nature? Where can DCNR be assured that the conservation message will be effectively communicated?

In Fermata's professional opinion, the logical portal to usher visitors into the Laurel Highlands is Ohiopyle. We believe Ohiopyle State Park to be not only one of the finest parks in the Commonwealth, but one of the finest in the entire eastern U.S. Investments made by DCNR in this state park will be returned multifold. In other words, the recreational and tourism opportunities at Ohiopyle are obvious and immediate.

There is an important distinction to make, however, regarding a northern portal to the region. Many visitors enter the northern Laurel Highlands via Route 30 and Ligonier, continuing to Forbes State Forest and Linn Run. Others enter the Laurel Highlands via Donegal then to Seven Springs, Hidden Valley, and other destinations.

The reason to make this distinction is because the northern part (basically Seven Springs and north) is where the winter recreation is generally located. Forbes State Forest grooms over 115 miles of snowmobile trail from Route

30 to south of Rt. 653 - the most popular snowmobile destination in southwest PA. Winter recreation includes the Laurel Mountain State Park ski slopes (when operational), Hidden Valley, and Seven Springs. Forbes State Forest has over 100 miles of popular cross-country ski trails (some are groomed, some left natural), as well as the cross-country ski concession at Laurel Ridge State Park on Rt. 653. Therefore it is important to note that how and where recreationists access the Laurel Highlands often depends on the recreational experiences they seek as well as the time of year that they seek them.

Returning to Ohiopyle, we believe it to be an attractive case beyond what it offers DCNR in the way of recreational benefits. Ohiopyle State Park entirely encompasses Ohiopyle Borough. The residents of Ohiopyle are almost exclusively dependent on the state park for their livelihoods. Many own or work for the various outfitters located in the borough, or are engaged in providing support services for other recreational activities in the region. The state park and the borough are closely entwined in a symbiotic relationship, one that can never be teased apart without severe damage being done to each entity.

Rather than denying this relationship, Fermata believes that DCNR is best served by embracing it. The borough is in desperate need of support from DCNR and the Commonwealth, and DCNR is best served by a borough that is willing to embrace the notion of sustainability, protecting the investments of the agency in the state park and the overarching interests of the state.

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Therefore Fermata recommends that the state park and the borough initiate a joint state park/community planning process. In as much as it is impossible for the borough to expand or develop without the participation and support of the park, their vested interest should be in cooperation. The location of a new visitor center, the installation of street lights, or the funding of a new sewage treatment facility are examples of improvements that should only be considered in the context of a joint state park / borough perspective. We are not aware of any previous attempts within the Commonwealth to develop a joint state park / community plan. But given Ohiopyle's unique situation (totally surrounded by a state park) the rationale (and need) should be obvious.

More importantly, such a joint planning effort will offer the agency a chance to influence a community to develop the most progressive land use and development regulations in the Commonwealth. DCNR Secretary Michael DiBerardinis has spoken passionately about the need to incorporate the notion

of sustainability into every aspect of the agency's work. Ohiopyle offers the immediate opportunity to put substance behind that sentiment.

Meetings with Ohiopyle park manager John Hallas have identified a number of immediate investments that could be made to enhance the park as the portal to the Laurel Highlands. At the top of the priority list is the development of a new park visitor center. Discussions about this new center have been on-going for years, and within recent months a new location

along the river (which Fermata supports) has been chosen. However, this project has been recently stymied, and we urge reconsideration of this project as a top priority. If the impact of the Initiative's objectives is to be realized through the "Early Implementation Projects" proposed for Ohiopyle State Park, the Borough of Ohiopyle, and Stewart Township, any delays or prioritization for the Department's contracted consultant needs to be dealt with in an expeditious manner. This can only happen in Harrisburg at the Bureau Level.

In addition, the park staff is eager to move the existing concessions along the river into the borough itself. The scenic values of Ohiopyle's river front are inestimable, and the planning process mentioned above should help in deciding how to best manage this property for these values.

PEC has been engaged in discussions with borough residents about their needs and priorities, and those will be detailed later in the PEC report. However, the need for additional sewage capacity impacts the state park as well as the borough, and therefore Fermata considered the options for developing additional treatment. The agency's interest is obvious; a new visitor center will generate additional demand on the existing plant. The borough's interest is obvious as well; no new building permits will be allowed pending the development of additional capacity. Therefore Fermata recommends that DCNR explore the possibility of work with the borough, DEP, and perhaps DCED in the development of a zero discharge (or at least a tertiary treatment) sewage treatment facility. Such a facility would embody the notion of sustainability, would provide the capacity needed by the agency for its new park facilities, and would allow the borough to expand. In return, the borough should be asked to transfer the river front property that contains the existing sewage treatment facility to DCNR and the state park.

DCNR is best served by a borough that is willing to embrace the notion of sustainability, protecting the investments of the agency in the state park and the overarching interests of the state. Therefore Fermata recommends that the state park and the borough initiate a joint state park/community planning process. In as much as it is impossible for the borough to expand or develop without the participation and support of the park, their vested interest should be in cooperation.

When considering new facilities such as a visitor center, it is important to consider the interpretive messages and elements that will be contained within. Therefore Fermata recommends the development of a comprehensive interpretive strategy for the entire Laurel Highlands' recreation unit. The interpretive planning process can proceed in tandem with the park / borough planning effort. The goal is to allow the interpretive plan to inform the infrastructural investments such as a new visitor center, rather than to wait until after build-out to determine what interpretive elements should occupy the space.

Interpretation should extend well away from the visitor center, as well. According to John Hallas and regional interpretive staff, "on DCNR property along the Great Allegheny Passage, specifically the 27 miles from Confluence to Connellsville with Ohiopyle in the middle, trail head installations in the three trail towns needs to be designed and constructed. These installations would provide for DCNR messaging, trail orientation, and trail town information on State Park Property. Once accomplished for DCNR's holdings in these key locations within the CLI, this design installation could be exported through the Progress Funds Trail Towns Program to the remainder of the towns along the GAP. A contracted design consultant is needed for this work. Design can be tied to Ohiopyle's site planning with the trail connection to Laurel Ridge/Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail."

Returning to the need for infrastructural investments at the state park, the most immediate need (after a new visitor center) is for parking. The present system is haphazard and unsustainable. Fermata recommends the development of a single parking facility that can handle as many as 200 vehicles. The most opportune location for such a lot would be on the Ohiopyle Borough side, on park property, across SR 381 from the visitor center location and lower Youghiogheny launch.



Great Allegheny Passage/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

Fermata recommends the development of a pedestrian bridge/span at this location to move people safely and effectively from this newly constructed lot to the visitor center, main falls area, and launch area. At the same time, parking should be either eliminated or discouraged elsewhere, except where paid parking might be provided on Ohiopyle Borough property or along SR 381.

Fermata recommends the initiation of shuttle service to transport visitors to the various destinations in the Laurel Highlands. The shuttle should be low-impact (CNG, propane, or electric). Shuttle drivers would also serve as interpreters, insuring that the DCNR message is widely communicated.

In addition to parking, there are specific infrastructural needs within the park. A list of these needs has been submitted by park manager John Hallas. These needs include better trail head connections in the borough for the Laurel Highland trail, development of new kayak/canoe access points (perhaps a joint PA Fish and Boat/DCNR project), new restroom facilities in high density park locations (sources of significant non-point pollution at present), and a broader set of interpretive tools (signage, downloadable maps, website). A more detailed list of park needs (as expressed by staff) is provided below.

Ohiopyle Recommended Improvements



Stoney Creek/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

Visitor Center

To be situated in the Falls Area at existing concession complex. FY09 funding.

Water System

Work with borough and existing suppliers to consolidate public water system for all park, borough, and (where feasible) township facilities.

Sewerage System

Design and develop state of the art "green" zero discharge system to service park, borough, and (where feasible) township needs, including future planned growth.

Falls Area

Rehabilitation of lots, decks, curbs, landscaping, in connection with visitor center site plan and Ohiopyle's borough master plan.

Lower Yough Launch

Complete redesign with one portal and segregation on the river for commercial and private boaters, upgrade addition to check-in booth with single interior rest-room, service employee road re-alignment with commercial staging area rehabilitation, in connection with visitor center site plan design and Ohiopyle's borough master plan.

Private Boater Change House and Additional Parking

New change house/showers/restroom and new parking lots on private boaters' side of street across from visitor center/lower Yough launch. Enhancements to existing private boater parking in connection to the visitor center site plan and Ohiopyle's borough master plan.

Rental lodge on Meadow Run renovation

Conversion of manager's residence to overnight accommodations, rented on a weekly basis from Reserve PA. Consider (alternatively) the use of this facility as a retreat, conference, or small-scale education center.

Ferncliff Parking/loop takeout

Existing lot and loop take-out rehabilitation. Add parking on old youth hostel site and provide visual and physical barrier from railroad.

Fermata discussed with DCNR's Dan Devlin potential acquisitions that are being considered for Ohiopyle State Park. Fermata's only recommendation regarding these acquisitions (other than we support such an investment) is that they be integrated into the recreation and interpretive plans.

In discussions with regional DCNR staff, as well as Ohiopyle SP staff, Fermata identified a need for additional staff at this park for it to be able to shoulder the responsibility as the primary portal for the Laurel Highlands. The staff additions are being recommended with the understanding that they will represent a net gain, and therefore the anticipated improvements are contingent upon retaining the current two seasonal staff. Park manager John Hallas has provided specific details about the staff needed. However, Fermata strongly supports the addition of interpretive staff early in this process, allowing the new staff to participate in the interpretive planning effort.

Proposed Full Time Salary Positions at Ohiopyle State Park to Facilitate the Laurel Highlands Conservation Landscape Initiative

One (1) Environmental Education Specialist Supervisor (EESS)

Lead Laurel Highlands Landscape Interpreter and Educator with supervisory functions for Environmental Education Specialist staff assigned to Ohiopyle State Park. This position would have advisory functions with Bureau of Forestry, Bureau of Topographic and Geologic Survey, and State Parks Environmental Education and Interpretive staff within the CLI and act as an onsite point person for non-profit partners. This position could additionally serve the supervisory interpretive needs of Laurel Caverns Geological Park should the Commonwealth acquire that property.

One (1) full-time Environmental Education Specialist (EES) and one (1) full-time Outdoor Recreation Program Specialist (GOPA)

Through direct public contact and partnerships, these positions serve the environmental education, interpretation, and recreational programming needs of the Conservation Landscape Initiative at the portal location and provide programming assistance and EE&I special event facilitation throughout the Laurel Highlands. These positions are recommended in addition to the 2 current wage EEI positions.

One (1) full-time Maintenance Repairman II and One (1) nine-month DCNR Ranger

These positions mitigate the ongoing and growing maintenance and operational needs of Ohiopyle State Park with special consideration to a unique and demanding whitewater boating operation, the full development and attraction of the Great Allegheny Passage, and the additional growth and complexity the CLI will set into motion for Ohiopyle State Park.

One (1) full time equipment operator and One (1) full time Maintenance Repairman II,

For specialized training in trail maintenance and trail related projects for a mobile Trail Care Crew for work on trail systems throughout forestry and park land within the CLI and specifically on the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail and Great Allegheny Passage.

As stated above, Ohiopyle is the primary portal to the Laurel Highlands. Fermata believes it critical that this region be viewed by DCNR as a single recreation unit (similar to those proposed in the PA Wilds). Therefore we recommend the creation of a Laurel Highlands recreation unit, charged with considering the recreational needs and opportunities for the region as a whole. DCNR staff identified a



Planning team meeting at Powdermill Nature Reserve/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

number of DCNR personnel that might be included in such a team, such as Terri Kromel, Jim Shaulis, and Gary Fleager.

Before leaving Ohiopyle, and considering the remaining DCNR properties along the ridge, it is important to revisit this notion of Ohiopyle as a model for sustainability in the Commonwealth. Fermata (particularly Ted Eubanks) believes that the Laurel Highlands project presents an opportunity to take advantage of the lessons learned in the PA Wilds and to elevate this CLI to a level of effectiveness and engagement not yet reached in this area. The Laurel Highlands can serve as a model for how a state resource agency, partnered with local communities and interests, can promote sustainable recreation and tourism as pathways to the future. The Laurel Highlands should not be about theory; the Laurel Highlands should be about application. Therefore the recommendations offered by Fermata are made in hopes that such a model is achievable in the near future.

The PA Wilds represents, in our minds, a landscape-scaled conservation and recreation project that celebrates the restoration successes of the past. This is the gist of the "Cradle of Conservation" story. The Laurel Highlands, however, is about the restoration challenges of the present and how this generation of DCNR leaders will meet that challenge. In other words, the Laurel Highlands

is an opportunity for today's leaders to address these contemporary challenges and to leave an example that future generations emulate much as Rothrock, Pinchot, Dock, and Goddard serve as models for conservationists today.

Joseph Rothrock and Myra Lloyd Dock could not have conceived of "carbon footprints" and "restorative economics." These are contemporary issues, and are only understood in the context of contemporary time. Goddard certainly had insight into the need for parklands, and the responsibility of the Commonwealth to provide outdoor recreational opportunities, but many of his ideas about park development would be controversial, if not shocking, in our age of environmental sensitivity. What is necessary is a leadership that is reassured by the past successes, but that is also energized to confront those issues that have only surfaced in our time and that can only be addressed with a new approach, a new set of tools.

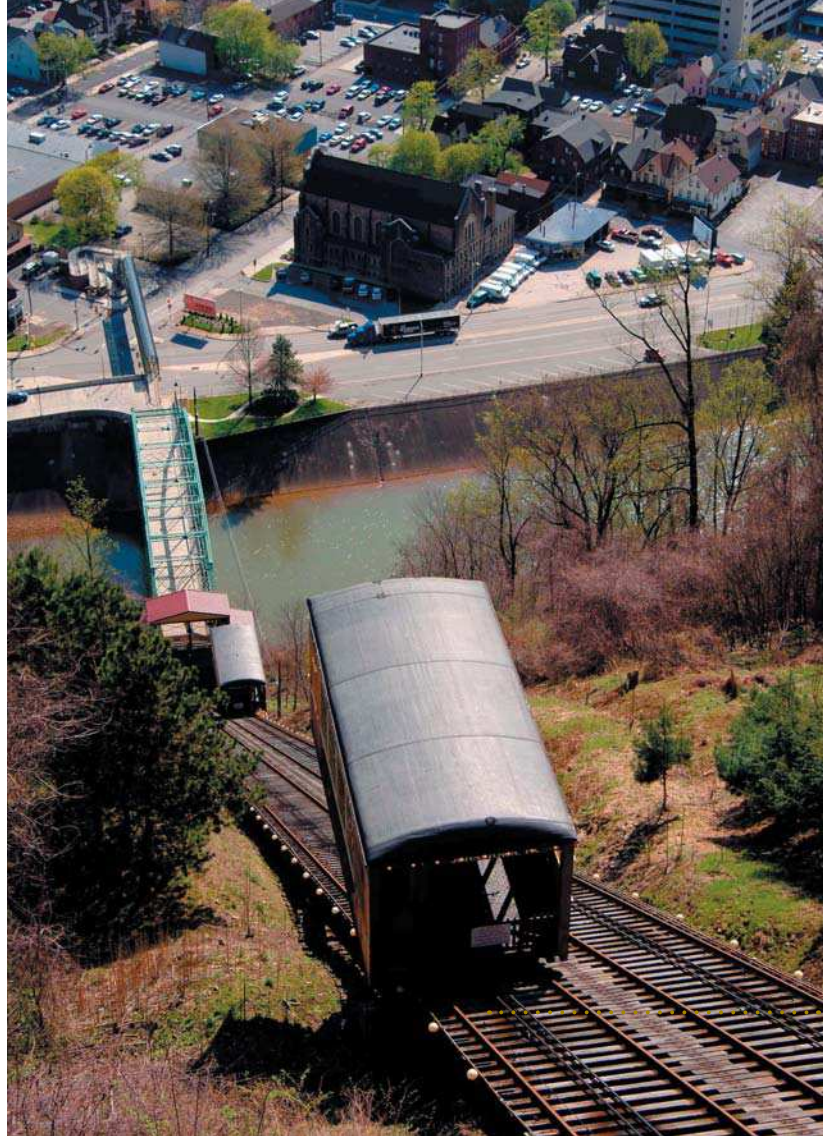
Therefore, while the PA Wilds is about the storied past, the Laurel Highlands is about the challenging future. The following are but a few examples of how the concepts of sustainability and restorative development might be applied to Ohiopyle and the Laurel Highlands.

1. Explore the development of a fee (voluntary or mandatory) that will be used to fund carbon

offsets for the Laurel Highlands. The following is an example of how such a fee might work. First, we recommend that a comprehensive visitor use study be conducted at Ohiopyle. From this study DCNR should be able to estimate the average miles driven by a party to and from the area, and to calculate the average fuel consumption for each party. Combined with other data (such as the energy consumption by the park itself) DCNR should be able to estimate the carbon footprint of the park, and the offsets that will be needed to bring the park to carbon neutrality. The fee could then be used to fund reforestation efforts by the Bureau of Forestry. There are precedents for such efforts. Two of the airlines (Delta and Continental) are partnering with conservation groups on carbon sequestration projects to offset their own emissions. In the case of DCNR, Fermata recommends that DCNR consider using part of the snowmobile and ATV (high level polluters) licensing fees for similar sequestration efforts.

2. The use of hydro/wind to take the park and community off the grid should be a top priority. Fermata recommends, however, taking this a step further. What are the restorative industries that could be enabled by the power generated by these alternate sources? For example, what about a manufacturer that makes kayaks and canoes from recycled plastic, and uses Ohiopyle electricity (from wind and hydro) to heat the injected plastic molds? DCNR could then work in concert with DCED to brand these “restorative” products, and to introduce the public to them through recreation in the Laurel Highlands.

3. The connection of the Laurel Ridge trail to Johnstown through the funicular is an excellent example of a restoration effort that could be accomplished fairly quickly. Johnstown has been decimated by the collapse of the American steel industry, and has been viewed as an icon for the failure of American manufacturing. The physical connection of Johnstown to this CLI through the Laurel Ridge should be framed as an embrace of the possibilities of the future rather than the failures of the past.



Funicular in Johnstown/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

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The Laurel Ridge

Traveling south to north, the next natural site of interest is Laurel Caverns. As stated above, DCNR is engaged in negotiations with the owner about a possible acquisition. Fermata fervently hopes that such an acquisition is achieved in the near term. These caverns offer the agency a unique opportunity to interpret a singular geological formation, and to conserve, for all time, a site that has been used by man since prehistoric times.

Fermata believes that the acquisition of the Laurel Caverns property is critical, and offers the agency the chance to develop a park unique within the system. We believe that it may be necessary to streamline the process, if possible, and to elevate the acquisition to the highest level because of the phenomenal outdoor recreation and natural history interpretation potential of the site. We also recommend that the Bureau of State Parks fully run the operation in order to provide the highest level of site interpretation, maintenance, and customer service.

Fermata staff (Brenda Adams-Weyant) spent significant time with Forbes State Forest personnel (in particular, Ed Callahan). As a result of their discussions she developed a list of needs for the Laurel Highlands hiking trail that extends 70 miles north along the ridge from Ohioptyle to Johnstown. Discussions with Forbes State Forest personnel included not only the 14 miles of the Laurel Highlands Hiking trail that extends through the Forbes, but also considered the 200 miles of additional trails within the Forbes State Forest outside of the LHHT. Finally, this list has been augmented by additional discussions with Mary Lorah and Bob Huffman.

The Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail, in the simplest terms, is in need of redesign and rehabilitation. There are eight overnight shelter and camping areas along the trail, each containing five Adirondack-styled shelters. According to

Bob Huffman, DCNR estimates that there are approximately 12,000 overnight stays along the trail each year, with 6 day users for each overnight stay (i.e., over 70,000 users of the trail each year).

Fermata recommends the development of a trail rehabilitation and enhancement plan for the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail. We recommend that special attention be paid to spurs and connectors that would better connect trail users to area communities and sites of special attraction. This plan should include a specific signage strategy for the trail and its connectors. Fermata recommends working closely with the Allegheny Trail Alliance (where applicable), the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail, and PEC when developing this plan. Fermata also recommends the development of a comprehensive trail map that delineates all trails and spurs (authorized and otherwise) that comprise this system.

At present, responsibility for the trail is split evenly between the Linn Run Complex and Laurel Hill State Park. There is a need for interpretive and directional (way finding) signage at the trailheads, for more resources for trail maintenance, and for promotion to link the trail to the local communities (as is done with the Appalachian Trail). There is also a need for an evaluation of the water wells at the shelter areas since they need rehabilitation.

To initiate this trail rehabilitation project, Fermata recommends that a comprehensive inventory of the Laurel Highlands hiking trails be developed. The inventory would include the trail, its spurs (authorized or otherwise), and its public assets. This inventory will allow the agency to clearly identify where the critical connections are needed to be developed between trails, between spurs, and between communities.

This inventory of legal and illegal trails in the Forbes State Forest, the seven state parks, and on the PA Game Commission lands should be undertaken immediately with the goal of identifying several early implementation projects. For instance, DCNR's Doug Finger has stated that a link from the Ridge into Ligonier will be easy following existing roads, and a route from the Ridge to Johnstown may also be relative simple. A gas line runs along a large portion of the Ridge, and could easily be developed as a linking trail between other trails and/or assets on the Ridge. This gas-line corridor could in fact be a significant piece of the proposed Ridgeback Trail discussed later in this report and also could be an early-implementation action.

In recent discussions with DCNR staff Fermata suggested the creation of a trail maintenance team that would have responsibility for the entire Laurel Highlands recreation unit. In other words, trail development and maintenance responsibilities, whether or not the trail is located on state park or forest lands, should be shouldered by one trained team of professionals. Regional DCNR staff supported this idea, and therefore Fermata would like to recommend such a team to the agency.

Returning to the trail, there is a need to better connect this trail to the communities, businesses, and attractions in the region. Fermata recommends an accelerated application of the "Trail Towns" program in the region. Finally, erosion, boundary encroachment, illegal ATV use (especially in Johnstown area) and trash dumping are issues along the trail.

Of particular interest to Fermata is the opportunity to connect the northern end of the Laurel Highlands hiking trail to Johnstown. Discussions with interests in that area have focused on the possibility of connecting to Johnstown through the Johnstown funicular, the world's steepest vehicular inclined plane. The historical resources of Johnstown are exceptional, and the efforts in that town to



Johnstown/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

interpret these resources are impressively advanced. There should be every effort made to insure that Johnstown is integrated into the Laurel Highlands CLI in all of its manifestations, including physical connections such as the one just described.

An additional opportunity for connecting Johnstown and Cambria County to the Laurel Highlands would be through the development of the proposed "Ridge-to-River Trail." This trail would link the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail to the Stoneycreek River at or near Greenhouse Park and Whitewater Park. Although this trail has not received major support when proposed previously, we believe that it now makes more sense in the context of the Laurels initiative, in particular since the Stoneycreek projects are moving forward. This is particularly true since Whitewater Park is now open for the summer season. Planning on this conceptual trail stopped when funding through the Westsylvania Heritage Development Corp. was cut off in an unusual congressional budget year. Fermata proposes resurrecting this project, and for DCNR to fund the initial feasibility study of this trail.

Fermata notes, however, that these Johnstown Funicular and Ridge-to-River recommendations, along with the Conemaugh Gap Section of Mainline Canal Greenway, make clear the need to prioritize trail connections within the City of Johnstown between these features.

Fallingwater/Bear Run Nature Preserve



Fallingwater/Bear Run Nature Preserve/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

Before departing the southern Laurel Highlands, it is critical to note the presence of two iconic Frank Lloyd Wright homes - Fallingwater and Kentuck Knob. Fallingwater is managed by the WPC, and Kentuck Knob is owned and managed by Lord Peter Palumbo. Both are open to the public, with reservations booked through the WPC.

Both are critically important heritage assets for the region, and serve (particularly Fallingwater) as portals to direct travelers to the nature and outdoor recreation opportunities in the region as a whole. Therefore a close relationship between WPC and the Laurel Highlands (in this regard) should continue to be nurtured.

Laurel Hill State Park

Laurel Hill has traditionally provided significant group camping opportunities for the region. Laurel Hill has the most significant collection of CCC structures in the Commonwealth. These historic structures require investment if they are to remain a viable part of the park inventory and provide an important link to the past. However, Fermata does not recommend changes at the park that would alter the general rustic feel or ambience to the facility. We do recognize a need to develop additional family (particularly multi-family) cabins in the park. The Pennsylvania legislature approved capital funding for a Laurel Hill environmental education/visitor center in 1994, and capital budget bills typically sunset in 20-30 years. The legislature approved \$2.53 million for this project, and Fermata recommends investigating whether or not these funds remain available.



Cucumber Falls/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

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Kooser/Linn Run State Parks



Beam Rocks Trail/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

Both of these state parks provide important facilities for those venturing north from Ohio. The most pressing need (in both Linn Run and Kooser) is for repair and paving of the entrance roads. Fermata recommends discussions between PENNDOT and DCNR to explore an agency agreement for this work. Our understanding is that Linn Run Road from Linn Run State Park up to Laurel Summit State Park is the responsibility of the Bureau of Forestry. South of Linn Run State Park the road is the responsibility of PENNDOT.

In addition, there are cabin renovations underway at Linn Run that could be accelerated. Like Laurel Hill, Fermata is not recommending significant changes to the overall character of Linn Run or Kooser. Additional recommendations regarding facility upgrades may be found in the appendix.

Laurel Mountain State Park



Laurel Mountain Lodge/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

Fermata has met with a number of local interests concerning the future of the winter sports facility at Laurel Mountain. In our meeting with Somerset Bank we were told that there is a pressing need to dispose of the concessionaire's assets by the end of 2007. However, it is difficult (in our opinion) for the agency to act on any given request until it develops a public use plan that (1) complies with agency mandate's, and (2) is agreeable to the original donors and their wishes. Therefore Fermata recommends that the agency immediately begin to develop a public use feasibility study of the park and its facilities (particularly the lodge). Once the study is complete, and a set of options have been identified and explored, Fermata recommends

initiating deliberations with the donors about which of the options are acceptable to them. Only then will DCNR be able to make hard decisions about an appropriate direction for this park.

Fermata's recommendations regarding this facility are clear. Given the increasingly inconsistent nature of winter snows in the region, and the prospect that winters will be increasingly warm, there is little to suggest that a winter sports-only facility will be viable. Without recognition of this fact by the original donors, and their willingness to explore a four-season strategy, DCNR is placed in the unenviable position of keeping this park shuttered.

Laurel Summit State Park



Spruce Flats Bog/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

Laurel Summit State Park is a small public use facility within the much larger Forbes State Forest. However, from Laurel Summit one can access one of the most significant (and singular) natural features in the Laurel Highlands - Spruce Flats Bog. Fermata recommends improvements that include a restroom upgrade (composting facility), a new

parking area, and renovation of the existing pavilion (to be used for environmental and recreational programming). We also recommend enhancement of the access trail to the bog, and the replacement and expansion of the boardwalk. This boardwalk should provide significant interpretive opportunities, along the lines of Black Moshannon.

Laurel Ridge State Park



Great Allegheny Passage at Ohiopyle State Park/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

The northern terminus of the Laurel Highlands hiking trail is within Laurel Ridge State Park. This terminus (mile 70) approaches the outskirts of Johnstown. Fermata believe there to be an opportunity to work with Johnstown to directly connect the trail to the community. Johnstown contains impressive historical assets, and also serves a connector to the Stoneycreek/Quemahoning sub-landscape. Additionally, there is great potential to link the Laurel Ridge with Ligonier, Donegal (via the proposed extension of the Indian Creek Valley Trail), Bear Run Nature Reserve and potentially Fallingwater, as well as to other communities and assets. In some cases, these links should strictly be hiking trails, while in other cases, multi-purpose trails might be considered where appropriate.

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Additional Recreational Opportunities



Ohiopyle Borough/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

Within the Laurel Highlands there is a diversity of recreational opportunities that have not been previously mentioned. In fact, Fermata believes that the Laurel Highlands in general, and Ohiopyle in particular, have been miscast. There are presently recreations such as whitewater canoeing and kayaking that tend to overshadow those more subtle recreations that take place in the region (out of sight, out of mind). But the latest outdoor recreation market data would indicate that the Laurel Highlands is well-positioned to take advantage of its many recreational assets. Consider the following.

- Of the total U.S. travel market in 2006, 41% (representing 658 million over-nights) is considered to be for "marketable pleasure."
- Of this marketable pleasure segment, 14% traveled for an outdoor experience.
- This outdoor segment grew by 6% between 2005 and 2006.

- Of the U.S. personal vehicle marketable trip segment, 14% traveled for an outdoor experience (third only to special events and touring).

- These travelers gave the following examples of outdoor experiences they desired:

- Wilderness areas (61%)
- Lakes/Rivers (60%)
- To explore natural environments (33%)
- Mountains (33%)
- Hiking (28%)
- View wildlife/birds (25%)

Of this travel segment, 48% were willing to drive up to 300 miles for an outdoor experience (see map). When considering information sources about where to travel, 52% relied on "personal experience" (either their own or word-of-mouth from others).

After losing ground in the early 1990s, wildlife-related activities such as bird watching and photography increased 13 percent over the last decade (US Fish and Wildlife Service 2007).

In 1996, 62.9 million Americans observed wildlife; 66.1 million did so in 2001, and 71.1 million in 2006.

During this period wildlife watchers' spending increased 19 percent, from \$37.7 billion in 1996, \$43.8 billion in 2001, to \$45.7 billion last year.

In 2006:

- 1.6 million 6-to-15 year olds hunted.
- 8.3 million fished.
- 12 million watched wildlife.

In other words, wildlife watching activities such as those that are available in the Laurel Highlands provide important avenues for children looking to find a way to nature.

Given these market trends, Fermata believes it important to develop a broad range of recreational activities (both passive and active) in the Laurel Highlands. The following are a few examples of these.

Recreation Programming

The Laurel Highlands region provides significant winter recreational opportunities that are relatively well developed (Seven Springs, groomed snowmobile and cross-country trails, Laurel Mountain State Park ski slopes). However, the inconsistency of winters in recent years has challenged the industry. While DCNR presently provides noteworthy winter recreation opportunities, it is difficult for Fermata to recommend additional investments at this time (i.e., reopening the Laurel Mountain SP slopes). Fermata is not recommending a diminution in the present level of effort and investment in winter sports; we are simply not recommending additional expenditures or expanded programming.

Referencing the travel survey data listed above, Fermata believes that there are significant opportunities within the “exploring natural environments” and “viewing wildlife/birds” segments of the market (we will treat the wilderness recreation and hiking opportunities later in this report). The enhancement and expansion of these recreational opportunities will be contingent on a robust interpretive plan supported by interpretive staff, facilities, and materials. Such an expansion can be accomplished both internally (the addition of I&E staff at the park and forest level), and through strategic partnerships (such as with Powdermill).

Fermata recommends organizing the wildlife recreational (nonconsumptive) opportunities in the region in a series of interpretive trails and guides. These trails should be theme-based (such as a birding trail). Given the natural diversity in the region, we recommend the development of several of these thematic trails in the near term (birds, butterflies, odonates, invertebrates). We

are particularly interested in the development of a geology trail and guide, connecting those sites of particular geological significance in the area. Of course these trails could be expanded to include history, particularly the French and Indian, as well as Revolutionary War sites, which abound in this region.

We recognize that there are a number of thematic trails already in existence, some as noteworthy as the National Road and Lincoln Highway. Fermata recommends incorporating all of these existing trails into a single web-based source. Once a new interpretive plan is completed, this web resource will become a primary communication platform for the messages developed in the interpretive planning process.

Fermata also recommends that DCNR and its partners consider the development of an over-arching, multi-modal discovery trail for the Laurel Highlands. Such a trail combines the different themes and modes of transportation into a single, cohesive adventure experience.

The Laurel Highlands discovery trail would be designed to offer travelers to the region a broad-based exposure to the wonders of this special part of the Commonwealth, offering them a “little of a lot.”

We also recommend that this broad-based discovery trail be segmented into a series of single-day itineraries (almost curricula) for children and their parents. These discovery day-trips would offer a prepackaged plan and supporting materials, and would be structured as self-led adventures. For example, one discovery trip might focus on discovering the salamanders of the Laurel Highlands, and another might focus on a specific geological feature (such as Mount Davis). Fermata believes that the opportunity

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Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail site visit/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

to connect children with nature abounds in the Laurel Highlands, and that recreational programming must be geared to provide visiting families with an endless variety of discovery opportunities in the region.

As mentioned above, Fermata believes that DCNR will not need to shoulder the entire recreational planning load. There are a number of other entities, organizations, and individuals who are already involved in providing exceptional recreational opportunities to visitors. We believe, however, that the DCNR conservation message must be delivered clearly and consistently across all of these venues. Fermata has proposed the development of a guide education and certification program in the Poconos. We believe that such a program would be beneficial in the Laurel Highlands as well. Fermata recommends that the Pocono and Laurel Highlands CLIs join forces to explore the opportunities related

to guide training, education, and certification. Fermata has joined with Sam Ham (Professor and Director for the Center for International Training and Outreach at the University of Idaho) in developing a new conservation-based guide training program. We believe that this program may have significant application in the Commonwealth.

Geology

According to Jim Shaulis, DCNR, geologist for the Bureau of Topographic and Geologic Survey, "this region is one of the best places to experience the geology of southwestern Pennsylvania. Cross-sectional exposures of three major geologic structures - Negro Mountain, Laurel Hill, and Chestnut Ridge - exist along the rivers and railroad corridors (now GAP) and provide opportunities for detailed examination of the elements that comprise the geology of this region. Because many of these opportunities occur in Ohio State Park and along the rail-trail corridors, they can be often associated with quality recreational activities such as bike riding, hiking, climbing, rafting, and caving (Laurel Caverns). Highways and quarries in the region may have more rock exposed but are not venues conducive to learning because of noise, accessibility, safety and liability issues."

"Also, there are many geologic sites in the Laurel Highlands region that are of historic and cultural significance but one is most noteworthy because of its uniqueness to Pennsylvania. About one-half mile up-stream on Opossum Run, adjacent to the borough of Connellsville, is the location of the outcrop where the first formal geologic report was made in Pennsylvania. A formal paper describing the geology of a spectacular water fall outcrop was delivered to the American Philosophical Society in 1/18/1786 in Philadelphia by Thomas Hutchins, the first geographer of the United States under George Washington. From his detailed description it is possible to conclude that the outcrop is virtually unchanged after nearly 250 years. The rock ledge that forms the lip of the falls is also part of the Catawba Indian trail used by General Braddock."

Wilderness (undeveloped) Recreation

While developed recreation is a point of entry for a significant percentage of the recreating public, another segment of the population comes to the Laurel Highlands to get as far away from development as possible. These recreationists are found hiking, exploring 'wilderness,' mountain biking, hunting, and looking for wildlife in the undeveloped and more extensive and remote sections of Forbes State Forest and connecting state parks.

This segment of the recreational public demands access and information. The development of additional parking areas and trailheads near these more remote destinations would assist these recreationists in accessing the areas of the region that are generally off the beaten path. Maps, guides, and recreational information (organized by specific recreation) should be easily accessible. However, wilderness recreation is contingent on the "earned" experience. These enhancements should not be considered in those areas where increased visitation would put sensitive resources or the wilderness experience at risk.

Cross-Country (Nordic) skiing

The Pennsylvania Cross-Country Ski Association (PACCA) is already working with DCNR to develop Nordic skiing opportunities. Fermata recommends expanding the existing cooperative effort between the concessionaire and PACCA. We also recommend developing sustainable parking, restroom facilities, and a new concession building for the area.

Conemaugh Gap Section of the Pennsylvania Mainline Canal Greenway

A feasibility study is under way for a hiking-bicycling trail through Conemaugh Gap as part of the 320-mile Pennsylvania Mainline Canal Greenway from Pittsburgh to Harrisburg. Both sides of the Gap are primarily within Laurel Ridge State Park and Gallitzin State Forest, so completion of this trail offers only two

options: place signage along a busy highway with heavy truck use, or construct the trail through DCNR property. On the southwestern side, this proposed trail would intersect the start of the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail. On the northeastern side, this trail would intersect with the Charles F. Lewis Natural Area. Either intersection would need to be clearly marked to alert bicycle riders through the Gap that Laurel Highlands and Lewis trails are strictly off limits for bicycles.

Constructing a trail through Conemaugh Gap is an important medium- to long-term project for the Laurel Highlands because it would connect a substantial resident and visitor population to this incredibly scenic and historic natural corridor, and would be a very popular section of the much larger Mainline Canal Greenway. Note: the largest property in Conemaugh Gap that is not within DCNR is a 233-acre property owned by Lyme Timber Company, which cut timbering roads through their property when the tract was timbered about 1996. DCNR should consider purchasing this property to essentially complete the conservation of the Gap and to use the timbering roads for a mountain-bike trail and/or part of the Conemaugh Gap section of the Mainline Greenway.

Ridgeback Trail

The Ridgeback is a stacked loop, multi-use trail system for mountain biking that is akin to a cross-country ski system. This approach allows users of varying skill or interest levels to recreate in the same general resource area. The project is anchored in the north by Laurel Ridge State Park and anchored in the south by Coopers Rock State Forest in West Virginia. Each of these existing hubs has more than 25 miles of existing trails.

The Ridgeback will connect these two hubs with a comprehensive system of multi-use trails that are available to mountain bikers. There is the potential to put together a system of trails in excess of 300 miles with a variety of activity

hubs to harness the positive economic impact of a nationally recognized trail system (see appendix for full proposal).

However, Fermata also believes that a Ridgeback Trail should also be considered as part of an overall recreation plan for the region. The Great Allegheny Passage is effectively a bicycle-only trail, and the Laurel Highlands Trail is generally reserved for pedestrian hikers.

We believe that caution should be exercised before introducing biking into what has been an area traditional reserved for hikers. The Laurel Ridge trails inventory mentioned earlier should include a feasibility analysis of the Ridgeback Trail.

On a final note, Ed Callahan of Forbes State Forest notes that “Laurel Mountain State Park does not contain a trail system, but it would serve as a hub for the trails on the Forbes State Forest. The Forbes SF has an extensive system of trails that interconnect already with the LHHT from our northern border (near Laurel Mtn. State Park) south connecting to Seven Springs.

According to our local IMBA clubs, these are the best examples of single-track in the east. My point being that mountain biking has long been a use of this area, along with the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail.”

C2C (Confluence to Connellsville) Water Trail

At this time there is no complete water trail for the entire Youghiogheny River. According to DCNR’s Tracy Stack, there are two River Conservation Plans (copies available in Pittsburgh and Harrisburg) that contain excellent baseline information for beginning the planning of this water trail. The details of these plans are as follows:

The potential for the C2C water trail, or even a more extended trail that would incorporate a lengthier segment of the Youghiogheny River, cannot be overstated. There are approximately 18 miles of shoreline in Ohioopyle State Park along the middle and lower Yough, along with 27 miles of rail trail/GAP.

- Mackin Engineering, in conjunction with LLR Landscape Architects in 1998, developed the plan for the stretch of river that runs from McKeesport to Connellsville. This plan did locate public boat ramps and trail access areas.

- Paul C. Rizzo Associates developed the Middle Youghiogheny River Conservation Plan in 2000 that covers the other half from Connellsville to the Pennsylvania line, which includes the Yough Lake.

Fermata believes that this early implementation project can be fast-tracked by working through existing funding rather than isolating (and delaying) this as a “new project.” Fermata recommends working with PEC and Hannah Hardy to develop an initial cost estimate, and then relying on Tracy Stack and Mike Piaskowski to find the funding in existing projects.

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Airglow Observatory

An astronomical observatory is situated along the Laurel Ridge that offers significant dark skies interpretive opportunities. The contact for the observatory is Dr. Alec Stewart, Dean of the University of Pittsburgh Honors College. Fermata recommends contacting Dr. Stewart

to discuss ways in which the university and the agency might cooperate in offering dark skies programming along the lines of Cherry Springs.

PW&S Railroad

At one time the Pittsburgh Westmoreland and Somerset Railroad (PW&S) served this region's logging industry. There is a potential partner for DCNR (the newly formed Ligonier Valley Rail Road Association) for interpreting this interesting era in the region's history. According to Doug Finger, this new non-profit has been formed to bring back to life the railroading history of the valley, and more tangibly to restore the railroad station near the Idlewild Amusement Park. Their initial funding has been from local foundations, and they have communicated an interest in helping DCNR to tell the story of the PW&S logging Railroad.

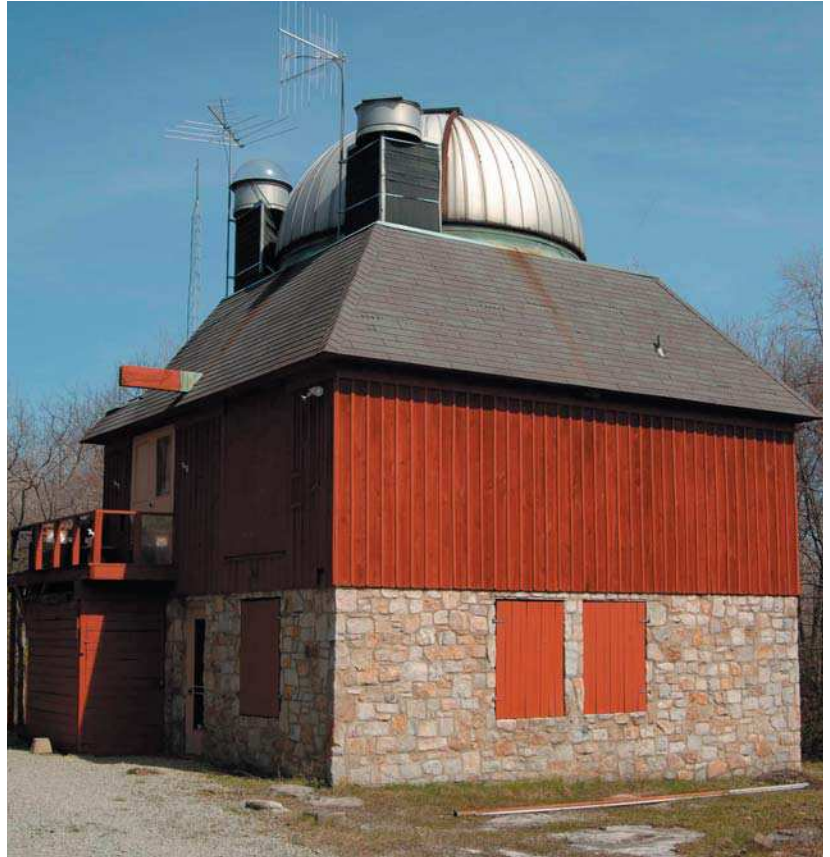
One of their goals of the organization is to acquire railroad cars circa 1899 - 1918 which are available locally (Somerset PA) for the restored historic train station. The willing owner is Mike Miller who has made the following offer to the LVRRA:

- Log Loader \$12,000.00
 - \$4,000.00 Donation
 - \$8,000.00 Total cost
- Flat Car \$2,500.00
 - \$1,000.00 Donation
 - \$1,500.00 Total cost
- Two Truck Shay Engine \$25,000.00

Fermata recommends exploring ways in which the agency might work with this not-for-profit in displaying and interpreting the railroad history of the region.

The Lincoln Highway Visitors Center

Because of PHMC constraints, then a complete reversal of their opinion and consultant problems, this visitor center is back at square one. The LHC is ready to send out an RFP to



Airglow Observatory/Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

consultants for a master site development plan (MSDP). According to Tracy Stack, there is now an opportunity to include the CLI concept as part of this master site planning process. All of the preliminary site work is available and the new RFP will basically be just for designing the building. Fermata recommends that we work with Olga Herbert on crafting a scope of work to include both the LHC and Laurel Highlands CLI visitor center. Tracy notes that:

- This center is planned to be open 7 days a week
- The LHC is very interested in the "green" building potential
- This could be an early implementation project for construction, since the planning process can start right away and will only take about 4 months. The construction funding (from PennDOT T-21) is in hand.

Powdermill Nature Reserve and Avian Research Center

Fermata, DCNR, and PEC staff met with Powdermill to explore ways in which center might work with DCNR to conduct bird programming and research in the Laurel Highlands. Fermata believes that the lodge at Laurel Mountain, should it be possible to expand public use there beyond winter sports, would be an ideal location for such a program. Fermata recommends that the discussions between Powdermill and DCNR continue, and that the overall recreation plan include specific consideration of birding and wildlife watching.

Indian Creek

Indian Creek offers the opportunity for a high-profile restorative development project within the Laurel Highlands. The headwaters of Indian Creek are on Bureau of Forestry land just yards north of the Pennsylvania Turnpike at about the 99-mile marker. Parts of the old railroad bed along Indian Creek, within Forbes State Forest, are already improved and used as part of the state forest trail system. Indian Creek flows parallel to Route 381, which connects the vital Turnpike gateway of Donegal with Ohiopyle State Park and Ohiopyle Borough. Indian Creek continues through both DCNR and private lands, crossing PA Game Commission lands before joining the Youghiogheny upriver (south) of South Connellesville along the proposed C2C water trail.

Davitt Woodwell of PEC offers these thoughts about why Indian Creek should be singled out for restoration:

- It flows south through over half of the Laurel Ridge area under consideration.
- DCNR controls the headwaters of both the main stem and the important tributaries of the creek.
- There is a great deal of work already underway.

- Efforts to date on the creek include about \$3 million of DEP monies to the Mountain Watershed Association for AMD remediation.
- There is a complete restoration plan for the entire watershed already in place.
- Mountain Watershed Association has completed a DCNR Rivers Conservation Plan, a Headwaters Study, an assessment of the Mill Run sub-basin, and an Unsuitable for Mining technical study.
- There are real opportunities for Chapter 93 redesignations to Exceptional Value Waters for at least two (and perhaps three) sections of the watershed.
- There are possible candidate sections for PA Wild and Scenic designation, especially near the confluence with the Yough in what is referred to as the gorge.
- The Turnpike Commission has expressed willingness to work on headwater protection efforts as they plan to rebuild (2011) part of the toll road directly impacting the stream.

Tracy Stack noted that the Mountain Watershed Association, assisted by a DCNR grant, is conducting a Rail-Trail feasibility study for the 22-mile Indian Creek Valley Bike Trail. This study is scheduled to be completed in the near future.

There is one caveat: a somewhat controversial limestone operation has been permitted near the headwaters. DCNR previously declined to fund acquisition of the property prior to permitting. The permit is currently in litigation. While there may be impacts to the stream should the quarry move forward, this would not diminish Indian Creek's importance or the opportunities to work on the one stream in which DCNR arguably has the longest stake in the Laurel Highlands.

Communications and Marketing

The primary means by which DCNR connects the public to its resources and conservation ethic is through interpretation. No communications scheme or strategy is more effective than that which relies on the in situ experience. Therefore Fermata reiterates the importance of developing an overarching interpretive strategy for the Laurel Highlands at the first possible moment.

There are additional opportunities to distribute DCNR's message by cooperating with the regional TPA - the Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau. We refer back to the market data presented above and the impressive percentage of outdoor travelers (52%) that relies on "personal experience" in determining travel destinations. Fermata believes that such an experience can be provided (at least in a surrogate form) through the development of a Laurel Highlands traveling exhibit. One obvious venue would be the Pittsburgh International Airport. Such an exhibit could be developed in concert with the Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau, and be able for display throughout the state. Fermata also believes that the integration of the Cambria County CVB into this effort will provide another critical link to Johnstown.

Fermata also recommends that a comprehensive trail and outdoor recreation guide be developed for the region. The trail guide should initially focus on the Laurel Highlands hiking trail. The guide should be made available in both a printed form as well as a digital version.



DCNR Secretary Michael DiBerardinis banding birds at Powdermill Nature Reserve/
Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

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Conclusions



Ted Lee Eubanks, Fermata, Inc.

Fermata recognizes that there are additional DCNR opportunities within the three sub-landscapes not discussed in this report. For example, PEC is working with the U.S. Office of Surface Mining and PA Department of Environmental Protection in developing a project to plant chestnut trees on Chestnut Ridge. This potentially could be an early implementation project (EIP) for the Chestnut Ridge sub-landscape. The replanting could involve several sites, including sites in the southern end of Chestnut Ridge on or near state lands. However, the two agencies are particularly interested in reforestation of abandoned mine land.

Within the Stoneycreek / Quemahoning sub-landscape there is an opportunity to develop a small park and canoe/kayak launch facility at Benson-Hollsopple. This EIP could be a joint effort by DCNR and PA Fish and Boat.

Fermata also believes that there is an opportunity for DCNR to work with DCED in working with the gateway communities in the region. Fermata has recognized the following as potential gateway communities in the region:

- Donegal
- Jennerstown
- Somerset
- Connellsville
- Ligonier
- Confluence
- Johnstown
- Uniontown

These communities will need to be shown how to best take advantage of the investments that the agency is planning for the CLI. We believe that the existing “Trail Town” program offers an appropriate approach to working with these communities, particularly if the Trail Town protocol can be expanded to include multiple recreations and diverse business opportunities. Fermata also urges that the Trail Town approach be expanded to include a green infrastructure component.

Fermata believes that by initially focusing on the Laurel Highlands DCNR and its partners can create a model that will propel the entire CLI forward. In addition, we believe that the Laurel Highlands may serve as a model for how to catalyze other CLI’s in the Commonwealth that are similar weighted down by inertia. Therefore we recommend that the agency take advantage of the “low hanging fruit,” as well as the impressive (and energetic) DCNR staff in the region. We strongly believe that with proper planning and investment, the Laurel Highlands will serve the agency as an ideal example of how to marry the interests of communities, agencies, and individuals in a cohesive and sustainable economic, recreation, and conservation initiative.

Sustainability

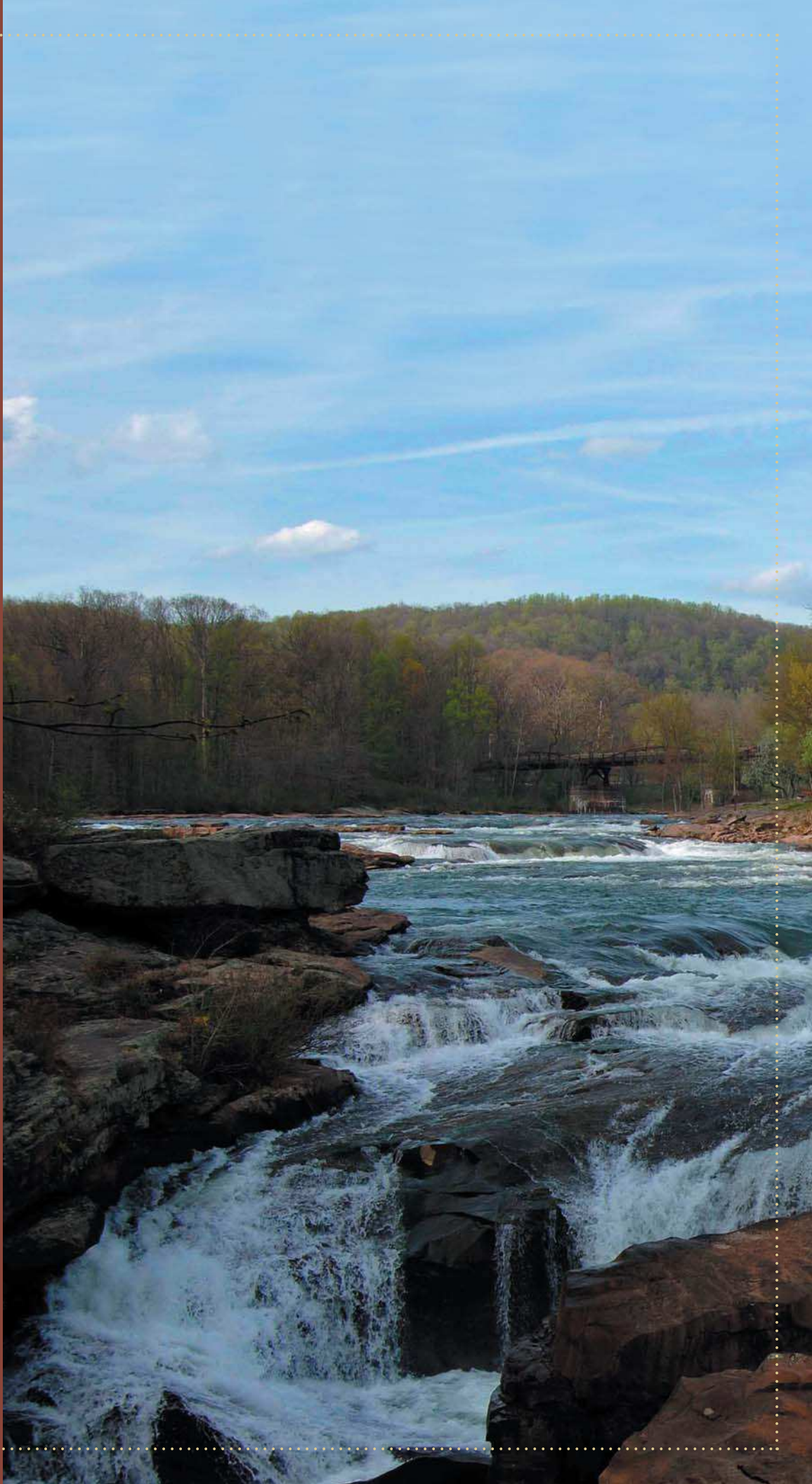
To create an enduring society, we will need a system of commerce and production where each and every act is inherently sustainable and restorative...we must design a system where...the natural, everyday acts of work and life accumulate into a better world as a matter of course, not a matter of conscious altruism.--Paul Hawken

The Laurel Highlands CLI, and specifically Ohiopyle State Park and the community (both Ohiopyle Borough and Stewart Township), offer the opportunity to demonstrate in a tangible (and coherent) fashion how a region can improve its social and economic well-being while remaining protective of its heritage (its nature, culture, and history). Sustainable development, concerned with the long-term continuance of the social, economic, and ecological resources of the region, must be integral to the CLI efforts in the region.

The text book version of sustainability is the “socio-ecological process characterized by the fulfillment of human needs while maintaining the quality of the natural environment indefinitely.” Yet, what about those instances when the social, economic, or ecological environments are stressed, damaged, or dysfunctional? No one would recommend **sustaining** the acid mine drainage in regional rivers and streams. No one would recommend **sustaining** many of the area’s communities in their current post-steel industry condition. No one would recommend **sustaining** the traditional strained relationship between Ohiopyle State Park and the borough. What all aspire to is a restored economy, a restored society, a restored ecosystem, and a restored hope for the future.

Therefore Fermata recommends that under the DCNR umbrella of sustainability, the principles (the ethic) of restoration be adopted by which all CLI actions may be measured. This is hardly novel for this agency. For over a century DCNR and its predecessors have been investing time and resources in restoring the forests of the state. Yet it is not sufficient for this generation or agency to simply **aspire** to restoration and sustainability. DCNR, and its CLI partners, should be committed to designing, funding, and implementing those plans and programs that will deliver tangible and measurable results. The lessons learned will serve not only the Commonwealth, but potentially the world as a whole.

Fermata, therefore, recommends the development of a sustainability strategy to be used as a guide for future efforts in the CLI. Within this broad strategy there should be clearly defined goals relative to the restoration (and ultimate sustainability) of the social, economic, and ecological fabric of the region. This strategy should test the bounds of what is presently known in this field, and serve as a model for how Pennsylvania might become a leader in the field of sustainable development, as well as in subsidiary fields of restorative development and restoration economics. Although shop-worn, the old proverb still rings true: “He who fails to plan, plans to fail.” The goal of sustainability is far too important to leave to chance.



Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
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