

Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition



10-Year Evaluation & Success Strategy



Acknowledgments

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In Appreciation & Remembrance

The Project Support Team would like to offer its gratitude to IHTC’s many partners for contributing to this report and for your role in the coalition effort. Whether you have been involved since the start or have recently brought new energy and ideas to IHTC, you are appreciated!

We would also like to acknowledge those who are no longer physically with us. Trail champions we have lost from within the IHTC footprint include:

Mark Abbott, North Bend Rails-to-Trails Foundation

Kent Edwards, McCollom Development Strategies (Pittsburgh to Parkersburg Corridor)

Bill Foster, Harrison Rail Trails

Jim Holden, Allegheny Valley Trails Association

Tracy Stack, Pennsylvania Department of Community and Natural Resources

Dave Vasarhelyi, Trust for Public Land (Cleveland area trails)

Their work on behalf of trails and trail communities has left a lasting impact.

With a region as large as this, we recognize that some trail advocates and volunteers may have been missed in this acknowledgment. Their contributions certainly are valued by many.

Report Photography

High quality images can be hard to come by. Organizations with a heavy workload and limited budget can’t always invest in professional photos. This is why Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) worked with the coalition in 2021 to develop a database of images that can be used by anyone from within IHTC. Many of the photos featured in this report are a product of that project. Coalition members who want to learn more about the database should reach out to Eric Oberg of RTC at eric@railstotrails.org.

Cover Image: Jason Cohn, Courtesy Rails-to-Trails Conservancy

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If you are reading a printed copy of this document, you can visit www.ihearttrails.org/resources to access a digital copy. It contains live links to the resources referenced within.

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Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Renee Rosensteel.

Executive Summary

“Becoming part of something bigger is like the brain meeting the heart.”

Building off many years of prior collaboration among regional trail advocates, the Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition (IHTC) was formed in 2013 and has been bringing people together on behalf of trails ever since. In the 10 years since IHTC’s founding, trail and community partners have been working toward a shared vision to establish the Industrial Heartland as a premier destination offering a 1,500-mile multi-use trail network experience.

Shorten “Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition” and you get “I Heart Trails.” This is fitting given that dozens of partners have stayed the course due to their shared love for trails. But the emergence of a multi-state community of trail advocates and a network of interconnecting trails signifies so much more than “heart.” Nick Hoffman of The Frank Varischetti Foundation recently said of the network, “Becoming part of a bigger idea is like the brain meeting the heart.”

The brain met the heart when trail professionals decided they could work more powerfully and more effectively by joining forces. The brain meets the heart every time someone within the network reaches out to others for ideas. The brain meets the heart each time the regional trail network is referenced in a grant request or local transportation plan. And the brain meets the heart in the moment that an elected official recognizes that their local trail is “part of something bigger.”

“PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER”

Being part of something bigger is, in fact, one of the main reasons trail organizations stay involved in the coalition. Those who are on the ground building and maintaining trails know from experience that trail development is really hard work. The promise of connecting to a larger system and the benefit of having access to other trail professionals is

significant. In a recent survey of coalition members, 95% of respondents indicated they have found the coalition to be either “extremely” (52%) or “somewhat” (43%) valuable to their organization. Not only does the vision still resonate, but it also adds direct value:

60%

of partners said that a compelling multi-state vision has added credibility to their work.

55%

reported they have been able to use IHTC maps, studies, and planning documents in support of their work.

58%

said trails in their area have experienced increased political support and more engaged state and local governments since the IHTC was formed.

58%

reported that summits and gatherings have enabled them to build relationships with other trail advocates.



Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Renee Rosensteel.

ASSESSING COALITION SUCCESSES AND HOW TO MOVE FORWARD

In recognition of the IHTC having been in operation for nearly a decade, Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC) engaged Cycle Forward to assess the coalition’s success to date. Working closely with the rest of IHTC’s Project Support Team (PST) (Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and the National Park Service’s RTCA Ohio Field Office), the project team queried the coalition at large in determining how to work even more effectively in the future. Coalition members contributed their ideas and feedback through a facilitated session during the 2022 Winter Webinar, through a survey, in stakeholder focus groups, and by reviewing and commenting on this document. In addition to hearing from coalition members, the project team referred to IHTC legacy documents to review and evaluate success to date.

The IHTC 10-Year Evaluation and Success Strategy is divided into two parts:

1. 10-Year Evaluation
2. Success Strategy

KEY FINDING & RECOMMENDATIONS

The most validating findings are those that point to the **coalition’s continued value** and its ability to sustain across such a large footprint. Other important findings are that the most pressing challenges in establishing the region as a premier trail destination relate to funding, land acquisition, and better connecting communities to trails.

A **world-class regional trail network** will ultimately depend upon improved community connections, transitioning from thinking about trails to thinking about complete active transportation networks, and positioning communities for tourism and meeting the demands of the outdoor recreation centers.

In the interim, **the most important thing is getting more trail miles built**, particularly in locations that result in longer segments of open trail. The recommendations that appear in the Success Strategy portion of the report are focused on strengthening the coalition as an entity and supporting trail development.

As Nick said, “Being part of something bigger is like the brain meeting the heart.” There has been a lot of both in the IHTC over the past 10 years (one needs only review the list of accomplishments beginning on p. 15). This report gives the coalition the opportunity to celebrate its many successes and move more assertively forward in fulfilling its vision.



Credit: Members of the PST.

10-Year Assessment

IHTC BACKGROUND

Working Collaboratively Since 2013

In November 2011, a group of stakeholders gathered to consider how they could work together to make important interstate trail connections in eastern Ohio, western Pennsylvania, western Maryland, and the northern Panhandle of West Virginia. They met at the urging of the Power of 32 visioning project, which imagined a more vibrant region if people could just work across state lines more effectively. Power of 32’s tagline was “32 Counties: 4 States: 1 Vision.” Trails kept coming up as a priority at meetings throughout the region, which is why the Power of 32 leaders encouraged the meeting.

“The case was about the ‘interstate’ – working on trail connections and destinations that people use and visit all the time,” says Jim Denova, who was involved in Power of 32 via the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation. “This was a new venture in a world where money didn’t typically cross state lines,” he adds in recalling the early appeal of a multi-state trail effort.

It wasn’t the first time trail conversations extended beyond state lines. As early as 2000, the Tri-State Trail Initiative started a similar collaboration centered on 18 border counties. In this sense, the region has been working collaboratively since 2000. Early efforts like the Tri-State Trail Initiative sparked interest in regional trail planning that would later inform the work of IHTC.

With staff support from the PEC, the group that first met in 2011 via Power of 32 kept meeting. **They decided in 2013 to organize a multi-state trail coalition.** By then, regional trail connectivity had been named a priority project by Power of 32. The only “problem” was that aspirations to connect trail corridors exceeded the 32-county area. The initiative became known as the Power of 32+ Regional Trail Networking project, the plus symbol

signifying additional counties. The increasing interest and recognition of opportunities for regional trail connections ultimately spread to include 52 counties across New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia.

Tri-State Trails: IHTC’s Predecessor

Years before IHTC was put into motion, regional trail advocates ushered in the new millennium with the Tri-State Trails collective. IHTC Support Team member Andrea Irland recalls those early efforts to connect across state lines:

“Very early on, Paul Labovitz, Peggy Pings, and Mike Paprocki initiated conversations that resulted in a printed multi-state trail map. It may have been on cheap paper and without a GIS backdrop, but it was a map nonetheless! It inspired the rest of us to convene an 18-county meeting with trail folks from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia.”

That early visioning and collaboration made the IHTC more viable. There was something to build from – both in terms of mapping and relationships – rather than having to start from scratch.



Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Jason Cohn.

Early IHTC Milestones

November 2011



Initial meeting of regional trail stakeholders.

November 2012



Stakeholders reconvene and decide to host a symposium.

March 2013



129 people attend the Forks of the Ohio Symposium.

August-November 2013



Follow up meetings result in a shared vision and decision to pursue a collaboration.

March 2014



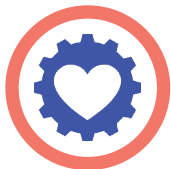
Coalition formally launches; 16 partner organizations sign on to the effort.

April 2014



Collaborated to submit a federal TIGER grant application in 2014 (see callout on p. 12).

2015



Effort is branded as the Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition (IHTC).

A Snapshot in Time

Notes from the November 2013 meeting give insights into the early thinking of those who were first involved:

“...the group had a lengthy discussion on what entities across the region should be invited to participate, and what form the coalition should take. The consensus remains that a loose coalition staffed by PEC that operates in service of completing the regional trail network should be formed. The group agreed that the tri-annual meetings should continue in the form of a small working group, and that a broader base of support could be sought at the conceptual level. It’s possible that future meetings will be divided by interest...Additionally, there was traction concerning a suggestion to have sub-groups work toward trail completion at the mega-corridor level (Cleveland to Pittsburgh, Erie to Pittsburgh, etc.). These groups would then report on progress at the tri-annual meetings.”

Next steps identified during that meeting included finalizing a partner commitment letter, thinking more about the coalition structure, engaging in branding discussions, continuing data improvements to digital maps, and assessing how an economic development tool via the Trail Town Program®could benefit trail and community development efforts.

By the spring of 2014, 19 organizations had formally signed on as partners. They signed a “Regional Trail Coalition 2014-15 Commitment Letter,” which constituted a two-year commitment. Most of them elected to contribute a \$100 donation to offset 2014 meeting expenses. Most of these partners continue to be engaged with IHTC and many others have contributed to the IHTC in the years since without having formally signed on early in the life of the coalition.

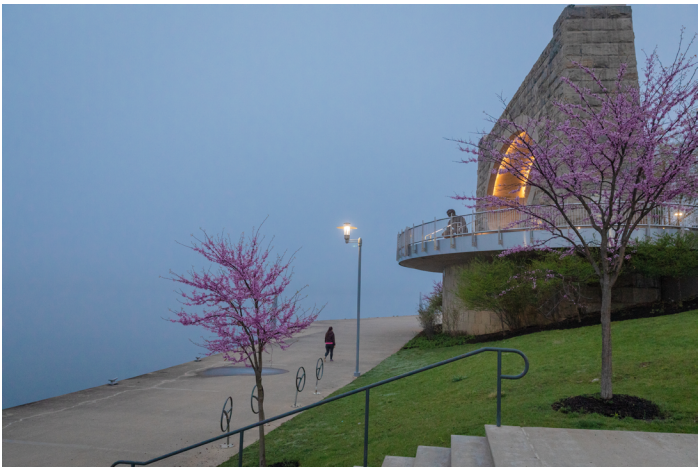
November 2013 meeting participants.



Credit: IHTC.

Initial Signed Partners, 2014-2015

- Allegheny Valley Land Trust
- Bike Cleveland
- Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation
- Friends of the Riverfront
- Jefferson Co. Trails & Greenways
- Lawrence County, Pennsylvania
- Mill Creek MetroParks
- Mon River Trails Conservancy
- NPS RTCA WV Field Office
- NPS RTCA OH Field Office
- National Road Heritage Corridor
- Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition
- Ohio River Trail Council
- Oil Region Alliance
- Pennsylvania Environmental Council
- Portage Park District
- The Progress Fund (Trail Town Program®)*
- Rails-to-Trails Conservancy
- TransAllegheny Trails



Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Renee Rosensteel.

*The Power of 32 leadership initially approached The Progress Fund given its role in administering the Trail Town Program®. The Progress Fund then solicited PEC’s involvement. The two organizations partnered in convening the first 2011 trails meeting.

A Young Coalition Seeks its First Federal Grant

Just a month into formally launching, the coalition made a bold move by applying for a federal Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant*. The \$5.7 million request included 13 projects from across three states. Although not awarded, the application prompted the coalition to develop a much needed Trail Connectivity Analysis. The collaboration was indicative of the kind of network IHTC was becoming. Particularly noteworthy was Lawrence County’s willingness to submit the grant on the coalition’s behalf. That was a big risk and responsibility taken for the betterment of the region. The TIGER grant application is remembered as a cohesive moment for the coalition and one that paved the way for the inclusion of trails in subsequent federal grant requests.

**Now called RAISE: Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity.*

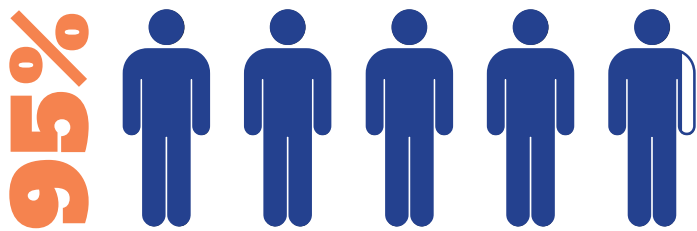
A Bold Vision

The vision of IHTC is that **the Industrial Heartland becomes a premier destination offering a 1,500-mile multi-use trail network experience.**

First articulated in 2013, the vision remains the same except for the recent removal of a target date. When originally crafted, the vision was to be realized within a 20-year timeframe. Given the significant challenge of completing and connecting trails, the coalition determined a time-bound vision is neither realistic nor motivating. It is hoped that removing the date will also de-emphasize the importance of total connectivity. While completing and connecting trails continues to be important, perceptions around the value of trails have changed in the past decade. There are plenty of trail experiences already within the collective inventory. While a connected network is the ultimate goal, waiting for total connectivity does not serve local people or economies in the interim. Helping people access portions of the network right now contributes to the eventual realization of the vision.

Also of note is that the vision focuses on the region (“the Industrial Heartland”) as a premier destination offering a network of trails. The vision is less about total trail miles than it is about the place-based experiences trails can facilitate. And while destination worthy trails continue to be part of the focus, the motivation for achieving and maintaining a high-quality trail system to the benefit of regional residents is in step with overarching economic impact goals.

Support for the vision remains. IHTC partners were recently surveyed concerning the value and future of the coalition. Ninety-five percent of the 51 survey respondents indicated that the vision continues to be a worthy pursuit.



95% of partners surveyed said the IHTC vision is still worthy of pursuit.

FULFILLING THE VISION

Successes in the First 10 Years

Knitting together dozens of trails across a 52-county area and establishing the network as a destination has been an ambitious undertaking. Before the coalition existed, many trail managers had neither professional relationships beyond their immediate geographic area nor a network of collaborators to call upon for ideas and support. Trails located a state over seemed far away if they were aware of them at all. The formation of the coalition lessened those geographic distances and fostered a network of trail professionals. As one IHTC partner put it: “The trails aren’t as far apart anymore.”

One could argue that the continued existence of a multi-state coalition a decade after those first gatherings is success enough. One stakeholder offered in a recent group interview, “Not only does it still exist, but there’s still enthusiasm.” Had the vision simply been to unite, connect, and equip trail managers around the region, IHTC would be well on its way to fulfilling the vision.

“Part of Something Bigger”

A chief success of the coalition is that local trail advocates can demonstrate that their trail projects are part of a larger vision. Throughout this 10-year evaluation, we heard repeatedly that the value of the IHTC is being “part of something bigger.” In fact, 60 percent of survey respondents said the compelling multi-state vision has added credibility to their work. Fifty-eight percent said trails in their area have experienced increased political support and more engaged state and local governments given the existence of IHTC. Simply put, **decision makers view their five or 10 miles of trail differently when they realize they are nested within a larger network.** The promise of vibrancy is hard to deny when one looks at the larger map.

As for maps, the significance of the initial mapping via the first Power of 32 gatherings cannot be overstated. It would be easy to forget that before 2013 there was no conceptual map of the 52-county area. Together, PEC and The Progress Fund directed the earliest efforts of bringing people together to map the existing, planned, and imagined routes. PEC continued to develop and improve a GIS-based online mapping tool (GoToTrails) as the coalition took form. Whether on paper or digitally, seeing the various trails and missing segments mapped across four states was impactful. Suddenly, people could visualize “something bigger.”



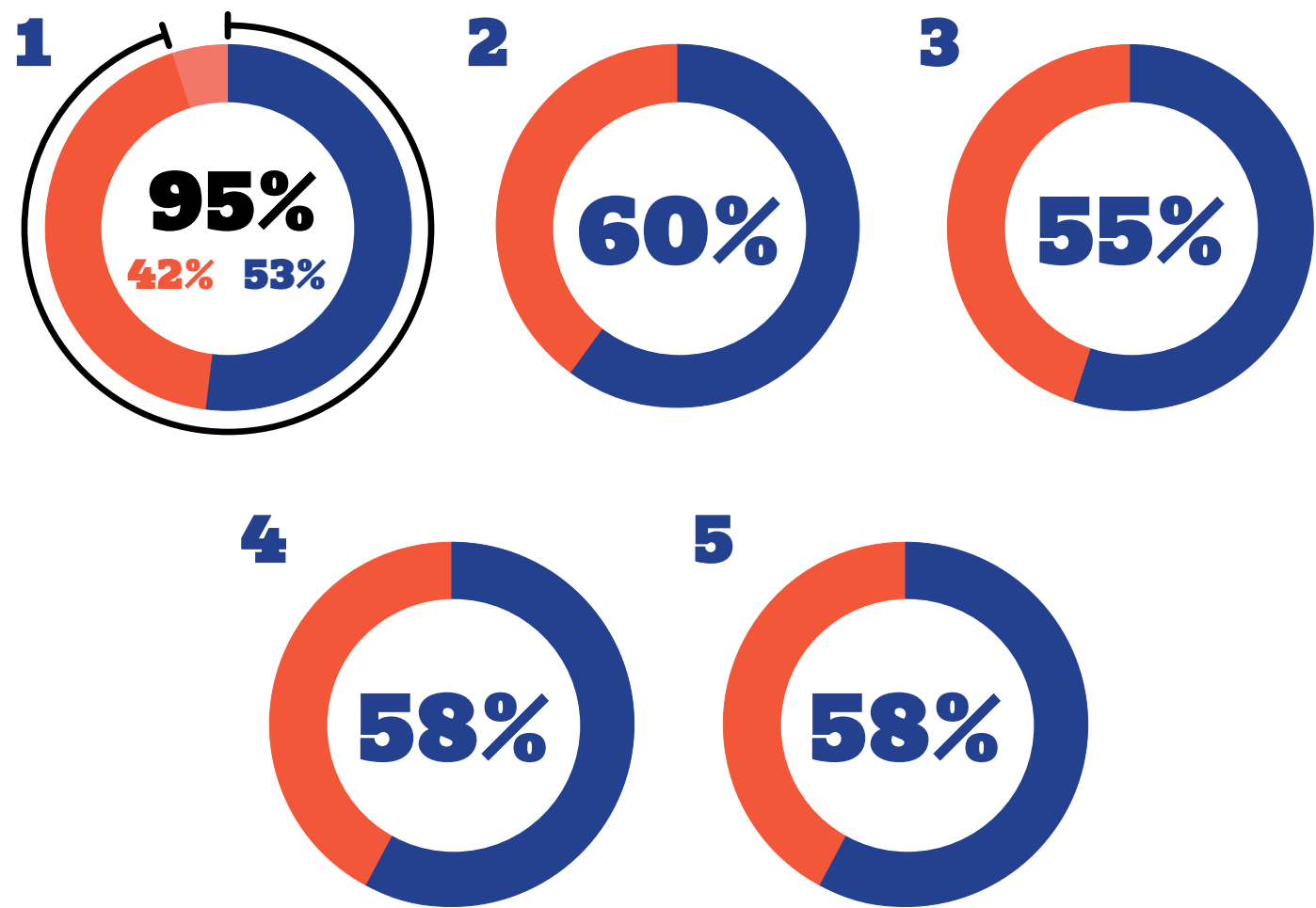
Credit: IHTC PST.

The availability of maps and other tools was noted as a benefit in the recent partner survey. Fifty-five percent of respondents reported they have been able to use IHTC maps, studies, and planning documents in support of their work. It seems the combination of an aspiring vision and physical materials has lightened the load for trail planners throughout the footprint. One respondent said “the availability of maps and moral support” combined to make a difference for their trail efforts. Having access to such resources and a cadre of like-minded trail planners can be particularly helpful for those working in communities with limited resources. The network becomes a matter of networking, with the peer-to-peer relationships resulting in both encouragement and information sharing.

Useful IHTC Resources

- [Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition](#)
- [Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition Project Summary](#)
- [GoToTrails Mapping Website](#)
- [2014 Connectivity Analysis](#)
- [Trail Town Program](#)
- [Corridor Studies](#)
- [The Heart of Our Community video](#)
- 2021 Trails Summit Sessions:
 - » [Tourism Panel Discussion](#)
 - » [Community Development Panel Discussion](#)
 - » [Leadership from Elected Officials Video and Panel Discussion](#)
 - » [Entrepreneurship Video and Panel Discussion](#)

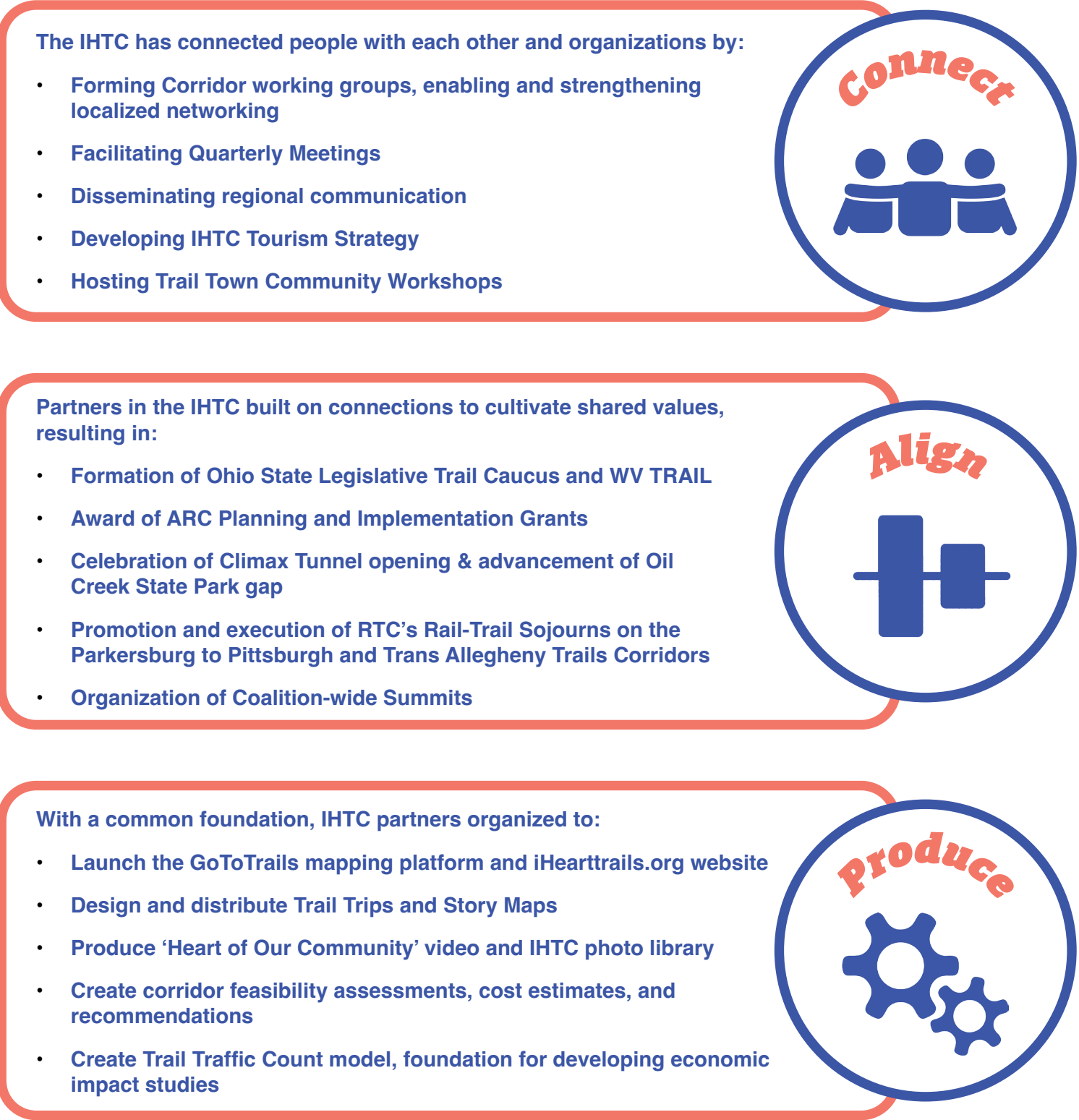
By the Numbers: Partner Survey Highlights



- 1. 95% of survey respondents indicated they have found the coalition to be either “extremely” (52%) or “somewhat” (43%) valuable to their organization.
- 2. 60% said that a compelling multi-state vision has added credibility to their work.
- 3. 55% reported they have been able to use IHTC maps, studies, and planning documents in support of their work.
- 4. 58% said trails in their area have experienced increased political support and more engaged state and local governments.
- 5. 58% reported that summits and gatherings have enabled them to build relationships with other trail advocates.

The Collaboration Continuum

Collaboration is a central and recurring theme throughout this report. The organizational structure of the IHTC encouraged engagement at every level, with the PST acting primarily as a coordinating entity. Peter Pastrik and Madeleine Taylor developed the Collaboration Continuum as a means to help nonprofit networks self evaluate. The Institute for Conservation Leadership introduced this model to the PST. The model maps coalition activities to a set of stages, helping to illustrate the role of the IHTC in the context of a regional coordinator.



Measuring Success: It's About More than Trail Miles

At the outset, the coalition articulated a lofty vision without providing the supporting infrastructure of a strategic plan. This may appear to be a curious oversight, but the group's preference in the planning phase was to develop a "loose coalition." Goals and objectives may have seemed too constricting to a budding coalition with limited support staff. The dream was new, as were the relationships, the mapping resources, and even the footprint. (The "Industrial Heartland" identity was an outgrowth of coalition building in a somewhat imagined geography bound together by trails and industrial heritage.) Goals and objectives simply were not articulated from the start, although a 2015-17 workplan did identify intended long-term outcomes and a four-part strategy for achieving them. The plan did not specify measurable short-term or intermediate goals.

The desired long-term outcomes identified in the 2015-17 plan were:

- Economic development
- Improved public health
- Creation of pioneering tools and strategies that facilitate regional trail development

The strategies identified for achieving these outcomes were:

1. Building a network of partners and supporters
2. Economic impact analysis and trail traffic modeling
3. Funding for infrastructure development and maintenance
4. Marketing and communications



Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Jason Cohn.

Much of the 2015-17 workplan was accomplished, while some of the outcomes and supporting deliverables were not pursued. A 2015 staff transition at PEC, limited overall staff capacity, and shifting priorities among coalition members likely resulted in refocusing efforts.

Gauging success can be challenging. Nevertheless, the coalition can point to many accomplishments, as already demonstrated, and a track record of focusing on the above-mentioned strategies. But how do we measure or evaluate the coalition's success to date?

The obvious metric is that of trail miles completed. A 2014 connectivity analysis conducted by the planning firm Environmental Planning & Design identified each corridor's state of completion. The analysis detailed three kinds of trail gaps:

1. Implementation roadblocks (portions of planned, but incomplete trail)
2. "Planning deficits" (portions of the alignment without a completion plan)
3. "Experiential shifts" (sections in which there is a disruption in the user experience, such as transitioning to an on-road segment).

The analysis indicated that the total system was more than 50 percent complete in 2014. The analysis identified an envisioned system of more than 1,600 miles, 860 of which were complete at the time. There were approximately 700 miles of missing trail segments at the time. With a 20-year vision, it was recognized that 35-40 miles a year would need to be completed to fill the gaps by 2033.

This was an ambitious goal. IHTC is not on track to complete the network by 2033, the central reason the date was removed from the vision. Trail development takes the right combination of expertise, time, luck, and grit. Attaching a date to an initiative so behemoth and tenuous can be a futile effort.

Beyond the challenge of land acquisition and trail development, IHTC has faced an even more basic challenge of record-keeping. The PST has struggled to get trail development updates from coalition members. The upshot is the coalition cannot currently report the system-wide trail completion rate.

As for land acquisition, certainly, there have been some setbacks since the connectivity analysis was completed in 2014. For example, coalition members were deep into negotiations with CSX to acquire a 4-mile segment along the Parkersburg to Pittsburgh corridor. CSX ultimately walked from the deal in 2019. If that segment is acquired and converted to trail, it will result in approximately 83 miles of continuous trail. Securing a large segment for trail development is always a big win. One such example is the 14 miles of the Kiski Junction Railroad recently acquired by Armstrong Trails. This is expected to create important connections in the Allegheny River Valley.

Short of these larger acquisitions and the resulting mileage increases, one way to track success is in terms of trail gaps completed. The connectivity analysis identified 50 gaps or missing segments within the IHTC footprint. At the time this report was completed, it was not known how many gaps remain.

Why Filling Trail Gaps – Even the Tiny Ones – Matters

Part of the rail-trail promise is that they're car-free and the grade is typically level. It's an enticing option for recreation, exercise, and getting from here to there. When a trail is incomplete and people have to detour onto roadways, concerns arise around safety and inconvenience. On the Redbank Valley Trail in Pennsylvania, cyclists used to hit a dead end at the 520-foot Climax Tunnel. Until the tunnel was reopened in 2018, instead of passing through in a breeze, those approaching from the west would have to climb a steep roadway and take some additional turns until being reunited with the trail. This was a significant deterrent at the midway point of the 42-mile trail. Addressing the missing segment – in total only a tenth of a mile – resulted in 51 miles of contiguous open trail, demonstrating that tackling the missing segments can be just as important as landing large chunks of corridor. An improvement of 520 feet barely registers when working toward completing a 1,500-mile system, but it carries a rather outsized importance in terms of fulfilling the vision. With the intent to establish the Industrial Heartland as a premier trail destination, completing critical segments, maintaining high-quality trails, and connecting into communities just may carry more weight than connecting the last mile.

The reopening of the Climax Tunnel in 2018.



Credit: Ned Williams, IHTC.

Other Success Measures

Physical trail development is not the only success measure. When asked in the partner survey how their organizations measure success, respondents offered:

- Completed or increased trail mileage (59 percent selected this option)
- Increase in overall trail use (59 percent)
- Easier access to trails, more frequent trailheads (30 percent)
- Increase in trail use by diverse audiences (30 percent)
- Regular programming or events using trails (27 percent)

Open-ended responses included:

- Increased membership/membership funding base
- More support from local elected officials
- Resurfaced/well-maintained trails – a “high standard of maintenance”
- Increased economic impact (from trail use) in communities
- Trail user satisfaction

This view of success, which includes increased trail use, quality trails, user satisfaction and more, remind us that the vision is about more than trail on the ground. The vision of the IHTC is that the Industrial Heartland becomes a premier destination offering a 1,500-mile multi-use trail network experience. The second half of the report, the Success Strategy, addresses how to establish the region as a trails destination.

Bridging The Gap: Meaningful Connections Locally and Regionally

When Cleveland formally cut the ribbon to open the Wendy Park Bridge in June 2021 the 500-foot trail connection created opportunity that far outsized its stature. As the final piece of trail that connects the IHTC Cleveland to Pittsburgh corridor to the shore of Lake Erie its regional importance is obvious. But unknown to many is that it also restores lake access for local residents who have been cut off from the lake for decades. Neighborhoods cut off from the lakeshore by interstate and industrial development have only been able to access the lakefront using a car. Now a simple walk or bike ride gets them to the region’s biggest natural asset which is again on their doorstep.

The bridge, with an overall price tag of \$6 million was in the works for years. Cleveland Metroparks played the lead project management role and skillfully created a funding package to get the project built. The bridge was included in a successful TIGER funding application along with other priority projects. Local businessman and supporter Dan Moore supplied half the project cost, and the bridge is named after his late daughter, Wendy.

The Wendy Park Bridge literally “bridged the gap” connecting residents and visitors over the Cuyahoga River, the busiest railroad corridor between Chicago and New York and an industrial roadway, thus allowing access to the waterfront via walking and biking for the first time in generations.

The Wendy Park Bridge.



Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Jason Cohn.

Trail Investments in the Lifetime of IHTC

In 2021 the Pennsylvania Environmental Council endeavored to quantify regional trail investments in the lifetime of the coalition. Most of these investments cannot be directly attributed to the existence of the IHTC, but certainly the coalition has reinforced the importance of regional trails, influenced funding decisions, and offered support to trail advocates during this period. In Pennsylvania, a combination of federal, state, and other grant funds dedicated to trail development within the IHTC footprint amounted to nearly \$20 million. From 2015-2020, the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources granted approximately \$10.2 million of this amount, generating more than \$14 million in local matching funds. Together, these investments resulted in 72.34 miles of trail development projects (some of these projects are currently in progress).

Another significant funding source was the Marcellus Shale Legacy Fund (Act 13/Commonwealth Financing Authority) managed through the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development. Since that fund’s first disbursement in 2013, \$2.8 million has been awarded to regional trail projects (and another \$2.8 million in matching funds).

In West Virginia, \$17.7 million has been invested in trail development within the IHTC footprint (some of this amount was awarded prior to the formation of the coalition). At least eight miles of trail have been

A new bridge being installed on the Montour Trail.



Credit: Ned Williams, IHTC.

completed as a result of the investment. The number of miles in progress is less discernible.

Note: investment totals were acquired for Pennsylvania and West Virginia, but not New York or Ohio. The grants and trail completion projects ranged primarily from 2015-2020 in Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Investments during 2014 (the first year of the coalition) and 2022 are not included. Additionally, some of the West Virginia investments may have occurred prior to 2014.

AN EVOLVING & ENDURING COALITION

“There’s an intrinsic success in being able to hold any coalition together, let alone one across multiple states,” says Jim Denova, a long-time supporter of IHTC via The Benedum Foundation. But just what did it take for this coalition to survive? It evolved over time, these being a few **significant changes** that took place over the years:

1. Branching out from a single organization (PEC) leading the effort to a shared leadership model. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) and the National Park Service RTCA program (Ohio field office) became key partners, bringing expertise, practices, and relationships from beyond the region to the project. Early on, staff members from the three organizations comprised what was called the Project Leadership Team.
2. Another key change was shifting away from the notion of these organizations “leading” the coalition to them working in service of the larger group. This followed a somewhat tumultuous period a few years into the effort. The coalition had yet to build a high-trust environment and having entities of regional and national scope lead the way did not instill further trust or confidence. “Why should these organizations call the shots?” may have been the sentiment of some partners. The coalition reworked the model. The Project Leadership Team became the Project Support Team (PST). Local trail advocates were offered leadership positions (leading corridor working groups, for example). While the PST

continues to support the coalition by initiating and managing meetings, projects, and conversations from a regional perspective, the intent is to support the larger group rather than leading it.

3. As the coalition regrouped, it determined that the most needed work is that of trail development. PST members and others shifted their focus to the corridor level while still keeping in mind the big picture. Corridor working groups were created. Comprehensive studies were completed for four of the corridors. Members rolled up their sleeves and worked together on the most challenging local issues and continue to do so.

4. Another change that contributed to the evolution of the IHTC was opening involvement to a larger group. The initial meetings (other than the summits and larger gatherings) consisted of a group of 25-30 people representing specific partner organizations. Those entities were asked to formally sign on (19 did), assign representatives, and help defray costs. This later gave way to a “big tent” approach, opening partnership and involvement to hundreds of organizations. Trail-supportive organizations from across the region could be part of the effort, raising awareness and engagement throughout the footprint. There may still be benefit of identifying a smaller advisory or leadership group that can be held accountable and propel the coalition forward, but this group, if created, should not replace the big tent partners.

5. Finally, while not a “change,” a positive outcome of years of coalition building was the gradual transition from members depending upon the PST to leaning on each other for support, advice, expertise, and advocacy. Rather organically, coalition members began to reach out to each other without the need for an intermediary. The “loose network” progressed to networking and mutually-beneficial peer relationships.

LESSONS LEARNED

Some of the lessons learned since the formation of the coalition include:

1. A top-down approach is not effective for this coalition, at least it was not in the early years of building the coalition. Similarly, a hierarchy approach in which there is a single representative per trail reporting metrics to a single corridor representative (and that person then reporting to the PST) was not effective for IHTC.
2. Efforts to date, while they have resulted in a better informed, more equipped, more connected group of trail managers, have not resulted in significant increases in completed trail.
3. Mileage matters less so than contiguous miles, gaps filled, and community connectivity.
4. Only so much progress and systemization can be achieved without a dedicated staff person or a centralized staff. IHTC’s status quo is that several staff members across three organizations work with the coalition to move the effort forward. This approach results in a valiant team effort and incremental success. The PST and others recognize more could be accomplished with additional and centralized resources, but the model is unlikely to change over the next few years.
5. Like the members of the PST, all coalition members are faced with a full workload and competing priorities. Earlier in the life of the coalition, a reporting structure was in place in which one individual from each member

organization was asked to liaise between their group and the IHTC. This did not prove to be an effective way of conveying news, progress reports, or other information. This might be further explored to see what processes would result in a more reliable information exchange.

6. People and partners remain committed and enthused, but their ability to participate may fluctuate. Additionally, staff and volunteer turnover in organizations is inevitable.
7. Achieving balance between big picture regional messaging and showcasing local partners is not easy, but is important to many partners.
8. Over the years, coalition members have identified the large scale of the footprint as both a challenge and a selling point. While some find the scope to be useful (“part of something bigger”) others struggle with demonstrating relevance to their local decision makers.

CURRENT CHALLENGES FACED BY PARTNERS

Top Barriers to Fulfilling the Vision

#1 barrier to establishing trails as destinations: trail gaps

#1 obstacle to addressing trail gaps: funding, closely followed by land acquisition

Current challenges were identified by querying coalition members through the partner survey, key stakeholder interviews,* and IHTC’s February 2022 Winter Webinar. The survey had partners rank the main barriers to establishing their trails as destinations. Overwhelmingly, the most selected option was “gaps in the trail system.” The next most selected option was “lack of community connectivity to trails.”

A separate question asked partners what obstacles they face in completing trails. The primary obstacle noted was funding, followed by land acquisition (a close second), limited technical/planning expertise, and internal organizational challenges.

When asked specifically about funding challenges, they ranked raising local matching funds as the most significant issue. Just 21 percent of respondents noted lack of state government support, and six percent selected the inability to secure federal funds.

Open-ended funding challenges mentioned included issues related to state DOTs and state agencies in general, the timing of matching grant sources, finding funds for routine maintenance, limited cooperation from local governments, and perceptions that the work has been completed and funds are no longer needed.

In addition to the survey, we interviewed key stakeholders in groupings by state. The following key challenges were identified in those meetings:

Land Acquisition

One participant shared that completing their missing trail segment probably won’t occur in the next 10 years. “Right of way acquisition is the key block; you can sell a project a lot easier if you have the land.” Advocacy was identified as a crucial way the coalition can help, providing organized, outside, collective pressure on corporate landowners.



Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Renee Rosensteel.



Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Jason Cohn.

Physical Constraints

Land acquisition was not the only impediment discussed pertaining to trail development. Participants described serious topographical and other physical constraints that make planning and fundraising for certain trail segments extremely challenging. Constraints such as trails dead-ending at scrapyards and four-lane highways, steep inclines out of a river valley, and narrow bridges (“It’s not even a great bridge to drive in a car.”) were described. A larger vision (and various entities advocating on behalf of a local project) is “acknowledgement of the possibility” even when the physical constraint is significant. The need to get creative in addressing physical constraints came up across the meetings.

Accessing State and Federal Support and Funding

The states suggest that they value the outdoor economy, but the funding is not necessarily reflective of this. Federal funding is a challenge as well. One stakeholder shared, “Even accessing federal funds feels nearly impossible, completely impractical.” He explained that after being awarded funds, sometimes the wait is so long that the applicants are no longer there to implement a project or local government leadership will have changed. It was suggested that more present state and regional support would ease the process. Having state agency representatives more engaged in IHTC efforts was discussed for other reasons at a separate meeting. Involving representatives from state agencies, metropolitan planning associations, regional tourism organizations, and others would help lessen the impact of limited local capacity and personnel changes. The more those higher level partners know about the big picture and the local projects the more that the projects have a chance to be successful.

Capacity

Capacity challenges (both in terms of time availability and expertise) were discussed in all the meetings. Local trail organizations face capacity issues, as do local governments and Project Support Team members (although it is more difficult for people to see that the PST has a limited capacity with their “large amount of staff”). Like the physical trail construction challenges, human capacity is not a matter of will. Present staffing and volunteer levels

cannot meet the demands and opportunities. For some organizations, they recognize that funding is available, but they do not have the capacity to secure the funds or manage the projects when awarded. One participant said she is working on \$15 million in projects and one day she will have to manage them all. “How do you get out and do the maintenance as well? It doesn’t take any less time than other things, but people put it on the back burner.” Beyond time availability, outside expertise may be needed to address the most challenging trail development issues.

Great Ohio Lake-to-River Greenway Logo a Nod to IHTC

IHTC was first referred to as the “Power of 32+ Regional Trail Networking Project”. The cumbersome language was replaced in 2015, after a Cleveland branding agency was engaged to help brand the coalition. The Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition emerged as a result of that project. IHTC for short (or “I Heart Trails”), the brand reflected a shared love for trails as well as a shared industrial heritage in this part of America’s heartland. Some partners have embraced the brand, using it to leverage their own efforts. Take the Great Ohio Lake-to-River Greenway, for example. When it was time to rebrand the Greenway a few years ago, trail manager Justin Rogers suggested working in the familiar IHTC heart and cog. The decision suggests connection to the larger system and helps increase familiarity with IHTC, while still maintaining its unique identity.



Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Renee Rosensteel.

Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition Logic Model

What We Do:

To establish the Industrial Heartland as a premier destination offering a 1,500-mile multi-use trail network experience, the coalition works to improve trail connectivity, influence decisions made about trails, support fellow coalition members, and raise the profile of regional trails.

Who We Serve:

Coalition member organizations that are working to complete and improve multi-use trails as well as decision makers who are working in support of the IHTC vision.

Outcomes:

Short-Term (Learning)

- Recommend to the coalition model and adjust operations as necessary
- Amplify the work of trail groups
- Identify priority projects

Immediate (Skills in Action)

- Eliminate critical trail gaps
- Facilitate satisfying visitor experiences
- Entice locals to actively use trails

Long-Term (Habits/Disposition)

- A region that values multi-use trails, experiencing a bolstered trail economy, improved public health, and a more complete trail network

Activities:

- Host educational/networking meetings
- Share news of local trails via social media
- Marketing support via photo library, visitor itineraries, etc
- Continued technical assistance around trail planning, development, and management
- Continue website management
- Notify partners of funding opportunities and support grant applications

Outputs (Next 3 Years):

These should be measurable:

- Update list of trail gaps
- 3-4 educational/networking meetings each year
- 2023 IHTC Summit
- IHTC newsletter
- Corridor meetings
- Community engagement

Resources (+) & Constraints (-):

- + Partners with a breadth of skills & experiences
- + PST with regional & national trail development experience
- + Local governments that recognize the value of trails
- Land acquisition challenges
- Securing funds (federal, state, local)
- Physical/topographical constraints
- Decentralized coalition model without a single lead
- Capacity of both the PST and coalition member organizations

Success Strategy

The coalition's aim is to establish the Industrial Heartland as a premier destination offering a 1,500-mile multi-use trail network experience. Ninety-five percent of the partners surveyed continue to believe this is a worthy pursuit.

In recognition that the IHTC still holds value, the project team has created a "Success Strategy" which is laid out in this section of the document. The strategy addresses the key obstacles that were identified throughout the course of the project.

Obstacles to be addressed include:

- Securing local funds to match federal and state grant sources
- Land acquisition and access

- Lack of community connectivity to trails
- Organizational capacity (time and expertise)
- Physical constraints that are not easily resolved through funding or land acquisition



Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Jason Cohn.

Destination Appeal and Planning

Not rising to the level of most pressing challenges are issues related to the quality of trail experiences and marketing the IHTC as a destination. However, the IHTC vision is one of tourism and destination appeal. Issues pertaining to trail quality, safe and appealing community connections, and a culture of hospitality are ones that will need to be addressed in the future. IHTC's 2016 Trail Tourism Strategy provides specific guidance relevant to trail tourism that can be referenced when the coalition is ready to pursue a more robust tourism strategy. In the meantime, current resources support continuing a modest marketing and communications program. This is addressed in the recommendations.



Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Jason Cohn.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are intended to contribute to a region that values multi-use trails and experiences a bolstered outdoor economy, improved public health, and a more complete trail network. They should be treated as a range of options the coalition might pursue over the next 3-5 years. Some of them will require further discussion within the coalition, needing to be agreed upon and prioritized. Pursuing the recommendations may be limited by the coalition’s current staffing model and available resources. (The coalition’s current resources consist of project-specific grant funds, a decentralized Project Support Team, and the coalition membership.)

Regional trail networks are situated between traditional trail development, which is focused on the physical amenities, and community development and tourism. Much like how the “trail town” approach was influenced by the longstanding Main Street approach to community development, the IHTC could benefit from modeling the best of Main Street. Therefore, the recommendations mirror Main Street’s four transformation strategies: Organization, Design, Economic Vitality, and Promotion. The intent is to apply proven community transformation strategies to this regional trail community. For purposes of this strategy, “Design” will be referred to as “Trail Development.”

Organizational Recommendations

- 1. Explore regional funding sources that would enable IHTC to centralize and increase its staffing
- 2. Articulate IHTC’s value proposition and continue to add value over time
- 3. Recommit to the coalition model and formalize participation
- 4. Empower coalition members to share peer-to-peer experiences and expertise

Trail Development Recommendations

- 1. Develop a regional “Trail Match” fund accessible to member organizations
- 2. Prioritize trail gaps to bring focus on the most impactful connection opportunities
- 3. Empower and mobilize the coalition to advocate for trail projects

Economic Vitality Recommendations

- 1. Conduct an economic positioning assessment that demonstrates that trails are key economic drivers within the outdoor economy and identify strategies for accelerating economic growth related to trails
- 2. Make a concerted effort to involve stakeholders from the economic development and tourism communities in the coalition
- 3. Re-engage trail communities concerning increasing community connectivity to trails and the regional trail network vision

Promotion Recommendations

- 1. Continue to highlight member trails through existing marketing
- 2. Continue to raise awareness of the coalition and its vision



Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Jason Cohn.

Detailed Organization Recommendations

The following organizational recommendations relate to creating a strong foundation for a long-lasting and successful coalition.

- 1. Explore regional funding sources that would enable IHTC to centralize and increase its staffing

While all other recommendations are based on current staffing resources, this one urges the coalition to explore funding sources that would allow it to hire at least one full time employee who is entirely dedicated to the coalition. While there are many strong coalition member organizations none of them have the perspective to work at the regional level that IHTC exists. Having such a position would increase the chances of a viable, long term destination network through increased staff capacity and centralized responsibilities. The PST could be kept in place, but having a person who spends 40 hours a week advancing the vision would be of great benefit to the coalition. This person may be located within one of the existing organizations or could potentially be housed elsewhere. Recognizing the challenge of finding funds for this purpose, the recommendation at this time is simply to explore the funding possibilities and the return on such an investment.

- 2. Articulate IHTC’s value proposition and continue to add value over time

Nearly all coalition members (95%) who completed the project survey reported still finding IHTC’s vision to be worthwhile. The value has been demonstrated in the many successes shared earlier in this document. Even so, varying levels of need and organizational capacity exist within the network. Those mature trail systems may find it less advantageous to dedicate their time, expertise, and other resources to participating. Conversely, those with greatest need may not have the ability to actively participate. Even those who are committed to the concept cannot always dedicate the time. IHTC must articulate its value proposition – that it amplifies the hard work of trail groups and showcases their successes to leverage additional trail development. Success begets success. The IHTC not only holds a mirror up to the region, but it broadens the view.

The power of the coalition model must be articulated to members and others in order for IHTC to remain relevant and supported. Beyond this, the IHTC must continue to evolve and add value over time.

- 3. Recommit to the coalition model and formalize participation

Early in the life of the coalition, organizations were asked to formally commit to the coalition with a support letter, point of contact, and a donation to help defray costs. Nineteen organizations signed on to what was essentially an unproven concept. Now, with years of successful projects and relationships built, the coalition should return to formalizing participation. A working group consisting of partners can be formed to recommend specific actions. The group may explore the value of introducing a tiered participation model in which a smaller advisory group (likely consisting of many of the coalition’s most active members) would take on a different role than the general membership. Finally, the working group can evaluate how the coalition can become strengthened by involving additional stakeholders beyond the trail community. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy has a “power mapping” tool through its TrailNation program that can be used for this purpose.

- 4. Empower coalition members to share peer-to-peer experiences and expertise

Coalition members have organically connected over the years, but IHTC can be modeled to encourage more direct peer relationships and to put members in more leadership roles. One of the stakeholder



Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Jason Cohn.

interviews uncovered an interest in having members give more presentations, sharing experiences with certain projects and grant processes. The members represent a range of technical and lived experiences and can be put into positions of sharing with and learning from one another.

As suggested in the stakeholder interview, developing a skill set inventory would enable participants to reach out to each other for assistance. As was shared by one participant, between the support staff and peer to peer relationships, “It would be nice to know there is someone you can reach out to.” Organizing the network in a way that empowers participants to be part of the solution and problem-solving would also reduce the burden placed on project staff.

Detailed Trail Development Recommendations

The following trail development recommendations relate to physical trail development and supporting infrastructure.

- 1. Develop a regional “Trail Match” fund accessible to member organizations

If trail gaps are the biggest barrier to destination development, and if funding is the biggest obstacle to filling the gaps, then addressing the funding challenges may be the most important issue the collective can take on. Specifically, groups cited the challenge of raising local matching funds. Working



Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Jason Cohn.

with coalition members to source matching funds should become the top priority of the whole. A “Trail Match” fund can be built and made available to coalition member organizations. With the PST’s organizations having wider geographic scope than coalition members, potential funders for this activity could include national and regional opportunities not typically accessible to member organizations. The fund should be streamlined and flexible enough that organizations can reduce the complexity of matching to federal and state grants. Qualifying projects should meet certain requirements centered on how the proposed trail segment will address known trail gaps and result in contiguous trail miles in strategic locations along the corridors.

In addition to trail development projects, a portion of the funds should be dedicated to supplying matching funds for land acquisition. Successful transactions can help spur further enthusiasm and donations (“You can sell a project a lot easier if you have the land,” in the words of one stakeholder). Marketing and fund development partners can be called upon to develop a template “call to action” that can be used to raise funds for acquiring strategic segments and then building upon the enthusiasm once the land has been acquired. The coalition can learn from the land trust community and some of the nation’s long-distance trail organizations that convert a passion for the whole to support local and time-sensitive, urgent issues (Ash tree preservation along the Appalachian Trail, for example).

A combination of innovative financing (perhaps borrowing from the conservation financing model) and private contributions would establish and maintain the fund. Those making donations could be assured that the benefitting trail projects are ones that meet the strategic trail development goals of the region. Member organizations may also have the opportunity to borrow funds as well (contributing to a revolving fund rather than simply receiving grants).

- 2. Prioritize trail gaps to bring focus on the most impactful connection opportunities
 - » While the coalition has been hesitant to prioritize trail gaps in the past, the only way to bring focus to regional trail development efforts is to set priorities and act upon them. The coalition should engage in a prioritization process that:



Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Renee Rosensteel.

- » Revisits the 2014 Connectivity Analysis, bringing the list of trail gaps up to date
- » Determines 1-2 priority projects per corridor, as determined by the corridor working groups, that would result in increased destination appeal (through longer and more attractive trails) and in local quality of life improvements (through additional miles or new trail segments located adjacent to neighborhoods and places of employment).
- » Elevate a small number of projects across the region that would represent “game changer” trail developments and seek Federal funding via the RAISE grant and other programs.
- » Assist local trail organizations in making decisions about alignments that are not presently viable.

- 3. Empower and mobilize the coalition to advocate for trail projects

Members who participated in the group stakeholder interviews made it clear that they are willing to be called upon to show up for trails. Part of the value of being part of a larger system is that it is both

aspirational and “puts the pressure on” (to complete local missing segments). Create an advocacy mechanism that is more active and present than writing support letters. Organize opportunities for members to physically “show up” for trails - in Charleston, Columbus, Harrisburg, and Washington, D.C.

Detailed Economic Vitality Recommendations

Economic Vitality recommendations relate to creating an environment that positions trail communities to leverage trails and access the outdoor recreation economy.

- 1. Conduct an economic positioning assessment that demonstrates that trails are key economic drivers within the outdoor economy and identify strategies for accelerating economic growth related to trails

Conduct a study that assesses the role of IHTC trails in the regional outdoor economy and use the assessment to position trails as key economic drivers. The assessment should provide strategies for accelerating the trail network and further integrating it into the regional economy. Non-traditional partners such as those in tourism, economic development,

and the business community should be consulted in the assessment to ensure that the end product incorporates perspectives beyond the trail community.

- 2. Make a concerted effort to involve stakeholders from the economic development and tourism communities in the coalition

Building from the first recommendation to seek input from non-traditional partners, make an ongoing concerted effort to involve stakeholders from the economic development and tourism communities in the coalition. The active involvement of these stakeholders was intended at the outset of the coalition. In involving such partners, the PST will have to design agendas that are relevant to trail partners and other stakeholders who are not as focused on physical trail development issues.

- 3. Re-engage trail communities concerning increasing community connectivity to trails and the regional trail network vision

Communities adjacent to IHTC trails must be engaged and made aware of the needs and opportunities associated with the regional trail network. IHTC has engaged select communities in the past by hosting community meetings (IHTC “Community Chats” which involved walking assessments of downtown areas). A more extensive community outreach program might be considered so that a broader support base can be established. This community engagement should address issues such as the trail economy and economic opportunities, establishing a more robust trail culture, how trails contribute to health and wellness, and trail- and active transportation infrastructure that enables communities to improve trail-to-town connections. RTC has a TrailNation toolkit that includes a community engagement section that can be consulted in considering an outreach strategy. The coalition can work together to determine how this engagement is conducted.

Detailed Promotion Recommendations

The following promotion recommendations relate to positioning the Industrial Heartland as premier destination offering an extensive network of multi-use trails.

- 1. Continue to highlight member trails through existing marketing

The PST currently highlights news and success stories of member trails through its Facebook page and, occasionally, through other marketing channels. PEC also produces the “Trail Trip” print and digital itineraries for existing trails. With some updates, those may continue to be of value, particularly if released early in the trail season and again prior to fall foliage trip planning. If updating the Trail Trips, they might be reframed to further highlight the local trail organizations and inform people of how to support them (or support all regional trails through the Local Match program).

- 2. Continue to raise awareness of the coalition and its vision

IHTC has a strong brand that can be built upon to raise awareness around the coalition and its vision. Doing so will enable the coalition to improve trail connectivity, influence decisions made about trails, support fellow coalition members, and raise the profile of regional trails. Partners have repeatedly emphasized the power of being “part of something bigger.” This powerful and aspirational pull should be leveraged to support trail organizations facing their biggest challenges: fundraising and land acquisition. Available tools include the [Heart of Our Community](#) video, the IHTC website, and the IHTC photo library. The coalition should take a fresh look at materials that are made available to partners (summaries, templates, talking points, and so forth), ensure consistency in messaging across the coalition, and potentially engage some non-traditional partners (tourism and planning organizations) in revamping them to ensure they are both compelling and current. (The desire for more supporting materials was something that came up in both the stakeholder interviews and the Winter Webinar.) Also, encourage existing trails to highlight IHTC in their work.

CONNECTING CHALLENGES TO RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the recommendations offered connect directly to the coalition’s most pressing challenges, as identified in the table below. Other recommendations are ones that will help strengthen the coalition model and operations as well as continue existing programs.

OTHER POTENTIAL ACTIONS

This report and the above recommendations were generated based on a multi-month process of gathering feedback from coalition members. Only so many suggestions could be incorporated as formal recommendations. Many other worthy ideas were generated through the stakeholder conversations

Challenge	Addressed?	Specific Recommendation
Securing local funds to match federal and state grant sources	Yes	Trail Development #1, Promotion #2
Land acquisition and access	Yes	Trail Development #1, Promotion #2
Lack of community connectivity to trails	Yes	Economic Vitality #3
Organizational capacity (time and expertise)	Yes	Organization #1, Organization #4
Physical constraints that are not easily resolved via funding or land acquisition	Yes	Trail Development #1, Trail Development #2, Trail Development #3

Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Renee Rosensteel.



and other outreach activities. Some of those ideas are included below and should be kept on record for future consideration. IHTC members are quoted throughout this section without attribution.

Technical and Other Support to Trail Organizations

- Working together to transition existing on-road portions to dedicated trail would contribute to a network that broadens the trail user audience.
- Addressing wayfinding potentially on two levels. First, some areas have limited wayfinding infrastructure. Second, there is not consistent wayfinding throughout the system. There may be opportunities to reinforce the IHTC brand and establish wayfinding standards or, at the very least, have groups use similar materials and styles to accomplish a “familiar” (if not “consistent”) look from trail to trail.
- Helping struggling groups with post-COVID recovery (or generally with capacity building). A group along a major trail was mentioned as no longer meeting. As an IHTC member said, “COVID has knocked their capacity out from under them.”

- Addressing hospitality improvement opportunities throughout the region. Great hospitality can compensate for other shortcomings, whether that is gaps in the trail system, wayfinding issues, or missing business services. “Hospitality is a state of mind, a way to be more ready without facilities.” How can the coalition help communities to become more enthusiastic and welcoming?
- Recognizing when outside expertise is needed. While trail advocates recognize their own savvy and the value of the trust and relationships they have built, they are not subject area experts in dealing with railroads, corporations, and so forth. Outside support from regional planning bodies, RTC (with its D.C. presence), and others was mentioned as something that would be helpful. This assistance is likely to be appreciated as long as outside organizations do not step in to “save the day.” Local trail advocates have spent decades building trust, relationships, and intimate knowledge of the issues and should be positioned as primary points of contact and the capable trail professionals that they are.

- Providing hands-on assistance in getting trails built. It was recognized that trail building occurs in small increments. Getting assistance and resources to build more trails “right now” would make a tangible difference, generate enthusiasm, and contribute to IHTC’s vision.

Strengthening the Coalition

- Hiring a full-time staff for the next 10 years (and querying the members as to whether they would financially support a full-time position). Having a dedicated staff would position the IHTC to more assertively and consistently pursue its vision.
- Getting state agencies more involved and present would result in more informed agency staff and the likelihood that they can help address critical issues.
- Incorporating active transportation language and approaches into regional trail network conversations, funding requests, and decisions. Trails can no longer be considered in a vacuum.
- Systematically addressing maintenance issues along regional trails. Maintenance has been referred to as the “ugly stepsister.” The possibility of a trail maintenance fund was mentioned at one stakeholder meeting.

- Spending more time on marketing open segments so that communities with gaps are more eager to be included. Also frame marketing in a way that local trails and organizations are prominently featured.
- Reframing the benefits of trails to focus less on tourism and more on local quality of life. Economic development cases should be about more than tourism and instead include trail construction and real estate framing according to at least one stakeholder group that was gathered. “True economic development is from the actual construction of the trail,” said one participant. Another offered that this is how you “get the rural communities, not social media. Tell someone 50 jobs are a direct impact of this project, then their ears perk up.”
- Making the case for trails with clear, consistent messaging and talking points made available to all partners, possibly also providing materials for groups to share with their communities and county commissions.
 - » Having more economic statistics was mentioned, and not just those relevant to trail tourism. “It is not only about money users drop on the trail, but also how they make communities more attractive to young families and users.”
 - » Another participant expressed a desire to have access to data and talking points on real estate benefits.

Marketing & Communications

- Providing “regular, bite-sized information on progress being made across the network.” While commitment remains (“We’re just as committed and dedicated as we were on Day 1.”), availability and interest ebbs and flows. Keep people informed on a regular basis so they know what is happening even if they cannot make a meeting. Being that new people and organizations are continuously introduced to the coalition, welcome and “onboard” new members in a more substantial way.

Public Health

Trails by their very nature improve public health. The issue is really about data gathering and analysis to try to quantify the impact over time. I think the best value IHTC could bring to this space is working to find a way to get at least a portion of the footprint used as a test case for health impacts trails can have over time. I would expect this is all about partnerships with health care providers, public health agencies, and perhaps a university.

Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Renee Rosensteel.



Conclusion

IHTC was first initiated a decade ago, born out of the recognition that regional trail networks contribute to vibrant communities. What started as a 32-county, tri-state effort grew into the larger Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition.

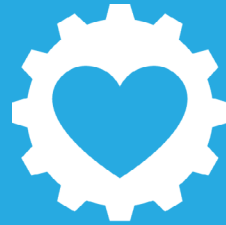
It is remarkable that a loosely defined coalition across such a large geographic area has sustained over the course of ten years. But the glue that bonds trail advocates is stronger than the obstacles the group has faced. The coalition has endured changes in elected leadership, differences in policies and resources across state lines, disappointing trail advocacy setbacks, limited staffing, and even a global pandemic. In this same time, it has added miles of trails, provided resources to coalition members, leveraged funding, deepened relationships, and celebrated successes.

Ninety-five percent of coalition members believe the IHTC vision continues to be a worthy pursuit. This bold vision of the Industrial Heartland becoming a premier destination offering a 1,500-mile multi-use trail network experience is as relevant now as it ever was.

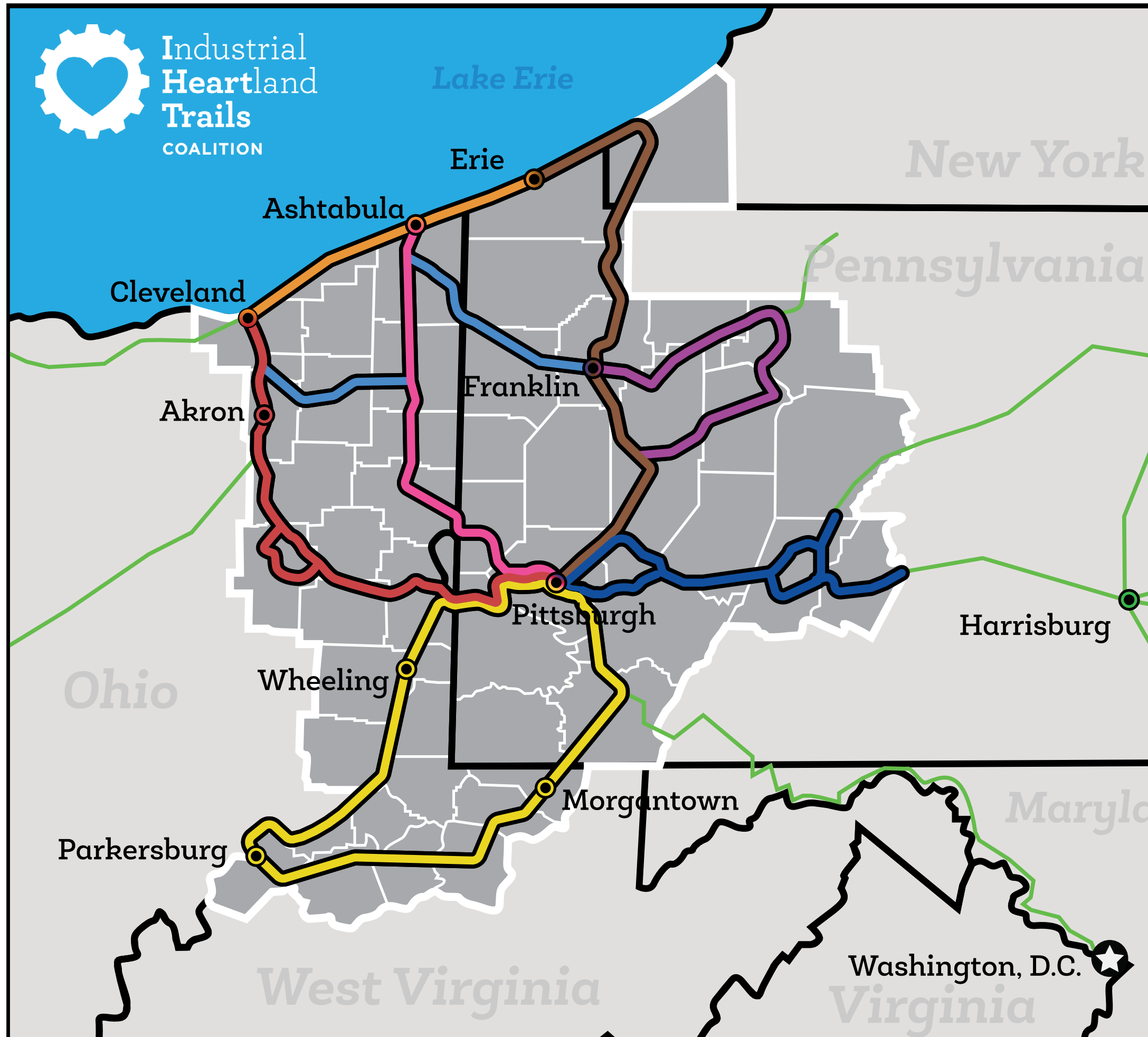
May our shared commitment to trails – and to each other, the trails community – continue to drive us as we work to fulfill the vision.

Credit: Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Renee Rosensteel.





Industrial
Heartland
Trails
COALITION



Mega Corridors and Major Trails of the Industrial Heartland

PARKERSBURG TO PITTSBURGH CORRIDOR

North Bend Rail Trail - WV
Harrison North Rail Trail - WV
West Fork River Trail - WV
McTrail - WV
Mon River Rail Trail - WV
Sheepskin Rail Trail - PA
Three Rivers Heritage Trail - PA

PITTSBURGH TO HARRISBURG CORRIDOR

Apollo's Kiski Riverfront Trail - PA
Roaring Run Trail - PA
West Penn Trail - PA
Ghost Town Trail - PA
Path of the Flood Trail - PA
Lower Trail - PA

PA WILDS CONNECTOR

Sandy Creek Trail - PA
Clarion Highlands Trail - PA
Summit County Hike & Bike Trail - OH
Portage County Hike & Bike Trail - OH

ASHTABULA TO PITTSBURGH CORRIDOR

Western Reserve Greenway - OH
Mill Creek MetroParks Bikeway - OH
Little Beaver Creek Trail - OH
Three Rivers Heritage Trail - PA

CLEVELAND TO ERIE CORRIDOR

Cleveland Lakefront Trail - OH
Great Lakes Seaway Trail - PA

CLEVELAND TO PITTSBURGH CORRIDOR

Cleveland Foundation Centennial
Lake Link Trail - OH
Ohio and Erie Canal Towpath Trail - OH
Conotton Creek Trail - OH
Panhandle Trail - PA/WV
Montour Trail - PA
Three Rivers Heritage Trail - PA

PA WILD, WILD WEST CONNECTOR

Redbank Valley Trail - PA

ERIE TO PITTSBURGH CORRIDOR

Great Lakes Seaway Trail - PA
Chautauqua Rail-Trail - NY
Corry Junction Trail - PA
East Branch Trail - PA
Queen City Trail - PA
Oil Creek State Park Recreational Trail - PA
McClintock Trail - PA
Oil City Trail - PA
Samuel Justus Trail - PA
Allegheny River Trail - PA
Armstrong Trail - PA
Three Rivers Heritage Trail - PA

The IHTC envisions a network of trails

that stretch from the shores of Lake Erie to the confluence of Three Rivers in Pittsburgh and on to the Ohio River and the Appalachian foothills of West Virginia. This connected off-road trail system will allow locals and visitors to explore the small towns, major cities, historical sites, rivers and mountains that characterize America's first frontier. In this region, one discovers the birthplace of America's industrial revolution.

IHeartTrails.org



The Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition is a TrailNation™ Project, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's national trail-network building initiative designed to prove what's possible when we connect people and places by trail.

Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition - 10-Year Evaluation & Success Strategy

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