

# TRAILS FOR TWO VALLEYS

AND THE GAP THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS BEYOND THEM

## A REPORT ON THE FINDINGS OF THE **PENNS & BRUSH VALLEYS** RAIL TRAIL FEASIBILITY STUDY



by **ALBERTIN VERNON Architecture, LLC** with **BRIAN AUMAN, Landscape Architect**

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This plan was prepared under the seal of Glenn A. Vernon, an Architect licensed to practice architecture in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.



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The following people served on the Study Committee for this project:

Henry Beiler	Penn Township
Michael Bezilla	L&T Railroad Historian
Douglas Bierly	Gregg Township
Marsha Bierly	Gregg Township citizen
Penny Blazer	Penn Township
Mike Bloom	Centre County Office of Planning & Development
Adam Brumbaugh	College Township
Darlene Confer	Centre County Grange Fair
Grant Corman	Potter Township
Al D'Ambrosia	PV High School Administrator
Bob Fox	Penn Township
Martha Futhey	business owner
Ann Glazer	Penns Valley Conservation Association
Amy Griffith	DCNR/Forestry
Dennis Hameister	Harris Township Supervisor
Ray Hankinson	Centre Hall
Betsey Howell	Central PA Convention & Visitors Bureau

Dave Koll	College Township
Patrick Leary	Gregg Township
Sally McMurry	PSU History Department
Trish Meek,	Centre Region Planning
Don Myers	Gregg Township Planning Commission, Property Owner
Joel Myers	Gregg Township Supervisor Property Owner
Shawn McLaughlin	Buffalo Valley Rail Trail
Bob Poole	S&A Homes
Daryl Schafer	Haines Township
Jane Scheuchenzuber	Gregg Township Planning Commission
Craig & Maria Shroyer	Penns Valley Outfitters
Julie Smith	equestrian, local business owner
Susan F. Smith	Lemont Village Association, College Township Parks and Rec
Lauren Tomasch	Harris Township
Michael Troyan	Potter Township
Greg Williams	Gregg Township
George Wilt	Property Owner, Ingleby
Jim Zubler	Gregg Township, Penns Valley Conservation Association

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The public process our team proposed for this project was predicated on the widely held assumption that the L&T railbed had already been abandoned and reverted back to the present owners of the lands deeded over to the L&T in the 1870's.

## PREFACE

The proposal we submitted for this project in the summer of 2012 described a plan for engaging the community in a discussion about the idea of repurposing the abandoned **Lewisburg and Tyrone (L&T)** railbed as a rail trail in what the Study Committee for this project often described as “*a robust public process.*” The public process our team proposed was predicated on the widely held assumption that the L&T railbed had already been abandoned and reverted back to the present owners of the lands deeded over to the L&T in the 1870’s. So we knew from the start that we would not be having discussions about repurposing the railbed with a single owner, as was the case with the 9 mile section of the L&T in Buffalo Valley abandoned by the West Shore Railroad Company between Mifflinburg and Lewisburg, but quite possibly with as many as several hundred owners of abandoned railbed between Lemont and the Centre County line.

To their good fortune, Union County’s section of the L&T railbed, now ***The Buffalo Valley Rail Trail***, had continued in service beyond the critical date of 1983, when Congress revised the *National Trail Systems Act of 1968* to include provisions granting qualified organizations --*like municipalities and trail organizations*-- the right to “*railbank*” abandoned corridors for rail trails as an approved “*interim use.*” The purpose of that amendment was to prevent railbeds from reverting back to the present owners of the lands that had originally been deeded over to the railroad in the event they should become economically viable to operate again as railroads.

According to Andrea C. Ferster, general counsel to the *Rails-to-Trails Conservancy*, a non-profit organization founded in 1986 for the purpose of identifying, preserving, and converting rail corridors that are not currently needed for rail transportation into public trails, non-motorized transportation corridors, and other public uses:

*“Starting in the 1970’s, several major railroads went bankrupt, and carriers began abandoning rail lines at an alarming rate. Our nation’s rail corridor system, ‘painstakingly created over several generations,’ was at risk of becoming irreparably fragmented. Like the difficulty of putting Humpty Dumpty together again, it would be virtually impossible to recreate our national rail corridor system after it was broken into hundreds of parcels of land, due to the difficulties and costs of assembling land in a more populous, increasingly urbanized 21<sup>st</sup> century America.”*



*Centre County's Recreation and Greenways Plan* envisioned the 27 mile segment of the L&T corridor in Centre County as a regional connector trail (R2 on the map above) between State College and Lewisburg's Buffalo Valley Rail Trail

Four years after Congress amended the National Trail Systems Act designed to preserve rail corridors, President Ronald Reagan's *Commission on Americans Outdoors* issued a report that proposed an engaging vision for the rails to trails movement. Responding to a new concern that the nation's waistline was expanding as fast as its open space was shrinking, the report's authors imagined a network of park-like recreation corridors that would stretch across the country, proverbially killing two birds—obesity and sprawl—with one stone. But it was the report's engaging vision of "connectedness" that seemed to capture the hearts and minds of many Americans. The report's authors described "*fingers of green that reach out from and around communities all across America.*"

Inspired by the commission's vision, the Greenways and Trails movement took off. Few trail advocates offer a more stirring description of what this movement was all about than Charles Little, as this passage from his 1990 classic, **Greenways for America**, demonstrates:

*"At a time in our national history when a lack of comity, indeed of ordinary civility, seems to have us in its grip an astonishing counter-trend is taking hold—a beautiful exception that ought to give everyone hope. I refer to the greenways movement, the effort made by a large number of wonderfully decent, civic minded Americans to link people with one another and with nature via corridors of green that run into, around, and through the places we live and work: poor places and rich ones, in cities, suburbs and the countryside. To make a greenway...is to make a community. And that, above all else, is what the movement is all about."*

Pennsylvania joined the Greenways and Trails movement in 1998 under the administration of Republican Governor Tom Ridge. An avid cyclist himself, Ridge envisioned *a network of greenways and trails throughout the Commonwealth as recognizable as the state highway system*. In fact, every Pennsylvania Governor since then has supported the Greenways and Trails movement, regardless of party affiliation. It's an idea that seems to transcend political agendas, and has continued to receive widespread support from the public through a succession of voter approved Growing Greener bonds, a primary source of funding for the Commonwealth's early greenway and trails planning, design, acquisition and development.

Beginning in 2005, then Governor Ed Rendell's Democratic administration asked every county in the Commonwealth to add a Greenways and Trails component to its Comprehensive Plan. *Centre County's Recreation and Greenways Plan*, formally adapted in July of 2010, originally imagined the 27 mile segment of the L&T corridor in Centre County as a connector trail between State College and Lewisburg's Buffalo Valley Rail Trail, a seemingly good fit for two communities accustomed to an active outdoor lifestyle.



With a steam locomotive as its logo and “Trails End Ale” as its brew, the Rusty Rail Brewing Company in the repurposed factory building sitting alongside the repurposed L&T railbed is a testament to the economic potential rail trails offer communities.

Photo courtesy Rusty Rail Brewing Company’s Facebook page

By all accounts, Lewisburg's Buffalo Valley Rail Trail has been a huge success. A user survey completed in 2012, a year after the trail opened, reported that 100,000 people used the 9.2 mile trail that stretches between Lewisburg and Mifflinburg through a landscape that looks remarkably like the picturesque agrarian landscape of Penns and Brush valleys. In fact, that trail has not only proven to be a resounding success as a recreational amenity, it has also brought new life to many of the businesses located along its path, and is helping give birth to others.

Even as I write this report, an army of carpenters, masons, electricians, plumbers, and pipefitters are hard at work retrofitting a once vacant brick factory building located at the western gateway to the Buffalo Valley Rail Trail in Mifflinburg as a brew pub and restaurant. With a steam locomotive as its logo and "Trails End Ale" as its brew, the Rusty Rail Brewing Company in the repurposed factory building sitting alongside the repurposed L&T railbed is a testament to the economic potential rail trails offer communities. And should there be any concern that rail trails may not appeal to the working class men and women of this region, Rusty Rails on-line tribute to the "*rugged workers who got by on the determination in their hearts, the strength of their backs and the dirt on their hands,*" lays aside any misunderstanding about the kind of customer they expect to attract, the kind of people who frequent the Buffalo Valley Rail Trail now, the kind of people who frequent rail trails every day all across America.

Despite all the good intentions of the planners who imagined similar trail related businesses springing up alongside the now vacant railbed in Lemont, Linden Hall, Centre Hall, Spring Mills, and Coburn or even smaller villages and hamlets located along the 27 mile corridor winding its way through Penns and Upper Brush Valleys, it was clear early on in this study that there would be strong opinions for and equally strong ones against repurposing the railbed as a rail trail among the present owners of the L&T right of way in Centre County. But as the project unfolded, the community also made it clear that it was just as important to respect the rights of property owners who wished to continue to explore the recreational and economic opportunities a rail trail could bring to their community on their land as it was to respect the rights and opinions of those property owners who said they were not interested in seeing their land repurposed as a rail trail.

So we shifted gears and concentrated on helping landowners interested in continuing to explore the feasibility of making smaller, community based trails designed principally to serve the recreational needs of their community. In fact that's exactly where this project stands now, in the hands of a handful of right of way owners who continue to be interested in exploring ways to move forward with planning, designing, funding, building and maintaining small, community based trails for their neighborhood on the back of the abandoned L&T.



Repurposing the L&T as a rail trail would undoubtedly shape the valleys' path and direction again, so it's understandable that this community would want to take time to consider that possibility much like they did when the railroad was first built over a century ago-- one mile at a time.

It took 40 years from the day a group of local civic minded people gathered at the hotel in Old Fort for the first “meaningful” discussion about a railroad through these valleys until it actually got built-- one mile at a time, beginning in the east and heading toward the west. The first excursion train packed with 600 people arrived in Lemont from Montandon in the summer of 1886. For the four decades leading up to that day, the ridge and valleys shaped the path and direction of the L&T, and then for the next entire century, the L&T shaped the path and direction of these ridges and valleys. Repurposing the L&T as a rail trail would undoubtedly shape their path and direction again, so it’s understandable that this community would want to take time to consider that possibility much like they did before, one mile at a time. Some people argued that the time to repurpose the railbed as a rail trail was back in 1972, right after it was abandoned, and that the opportunity has passed this community by now. Others said that would be like ignoring the effort it took to build this railroad in the first place, the vision of the men who first imagined it, the genius of the men who engineered it, the sweat and blood of the men and boys who built it, or the countless stories of men, women and children who simply out of necessity, convenience or amusement flagged down or boarded the train at a local station to get to work, to school, to visit their neighbors, or to just take a “joy ride” on a hot and lazy Sunday afternoon. The advantage of repurposing sections of this railbed as a rail trail now is that most of the hard work has already been done—much of the railbed is still here, intact-- imagined, engineered, built, financed and maintained for an entire century on the backs and shoulders of the people these valleys stand upon today--families that have lived here for centuries-- in some cases, great, great grandparents of the present owners of this right of way. Many of them continue to think of this railbed as a grand inheritance lying fallow, offering little to no return now on the huge investment the people of this community made in it, yet offering the same promise of necessity, convenience, and amusement for a new generation of valley folks-- a safe, convenient and uplifting place for young and old alike to ride a bike or walk to work, to school, to visit neighbors, or to just take a joy ride on a hot and lazy Sunday afternoon. As geographer James Howard Kunstler said, *“We ought to know how to assemble a human habitat of high quality that equitably allows citizens of all classes to get around in a dignified, comfortable, even pleasurable manner, that gives children and old people equal access to society’s institutions, that produces safe neighborhoods for the well-off and the less well-off, that promotes a sense of belonging to a community, that honors what is beautiful, and which doesn’t destroy its rural and agricultural surrounding.”* A rail trail in this community could do all of that... and more.

**For the team of Albertin, Vernon and Auman,**

Glenn A. Vernon, Architect, Logan Mills, Pennsylvania, June 1, 2015

PENNS & BRUSH VALLEY RAIL TRAIL  
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feasibility study



somewhere between Lemont & the County line east of Ingleby?

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