



Building Trails

1,450-Mile Developing Trail Network to Revitalize America's Industrial Heartland

Posted 03/29/16 by [Jake Lynch](#) in [Building Trails](#), [America's Trails](#) | Tagged with [Connected Systems](#), [New York](#), [Ohio](#), [Pennsylvania](#), [Tourism and Economic Development](#), [Trail Destinations](#), [Walkability](#) and [Bikeability](#), [West Virginia](#)



Fort Duquesne Bridge and Walkway along the Three Rivers Heritage Trail in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (the hub for the developing 1,450-mile Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition vision). | Photo courtesy [Wally Gobetz](#) | CC by 2.0

The Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition envisions a 1,450-mile system of off-road trails that will connect many of the major centers of America's Rust Belt and industrial Appalachia. The trail network will span 48 counties across Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio and New York. Here's more about this ambitious project.

FULL STORY

<http://www.railstotrails.org/trailblog/2016/march/29/1-450-mile-developing-trail-network-to-revitalize-america-s-industrial-heartland/>



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Fort Duquesne Bridge and Walkway along the Three Rivers Heritage Trail in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (the hub for the developing 1,450-mile Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition vision). | Photo courtesy [Wally Gobetz](#) | CC by 2.0

One of my strongest memories from my time working for Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) was of a visit to the [Longleaf Trace](#) in southern Mississippi. It's a lovely part of America—and a terrific ride. But it was during my long conversations with the trail's chief pioneer, Harlon Pierce, that I first began to learn what trails are really about and what drives trail advocates across America like Harlon. I asked him what the one thing was he would like to see to improve the Longleaf Trace.



Longleaf Trace in Mississippi | Photo by Jake Lynch

"Another trail nearby," he answered without a moment's thought.

I was expecting him to say "new paving" or "lights" or something along those lines. But I later learned that Harlon was getting at an essential truth about the real value and appeal of paved pathways for biking or walking: a trail is only as good as the other things it connects to. That could be other trails, or parks, shopping areas or schools—any place, really, that people want to go.

The strength is in the system. It's a philosophy that guides RTC's work. And it's a concept which is at the very core of what is possibly the most exciting trail development project the organization has undertaken in its 30 years: the [Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition](#).

Massive Vision Take Shape

Driven by a regional coalition of trail groups, government agencies, funders and land managers, the Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition envisions a 1,450-mile system of off-road trails that will connect many of the major centers of America's Rust Belt and industrial Appalachia.



Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath in Ohio | Photo courtesy [Tom Bower](#) | CC by2.0

The envisioned trail network will span 48 counties across four states, running through western Pennsylvania, northern West Virginia and eastern Ohio and reaching into the southwest corner of New York State. Pittsburgh will serve as the network's hub, with trails radiating out of the metro area and connecting to Cleveland and Ashtabula in Ohio, Morgantown and Parkersburg in West Virginia, and Erie in northern Pennsylvania.

As massive and unimaginable as it sounds, this is essentially a project of building strategic, coordinated connections. Much of the framework is already in place and includes some of America's most well-known and loved trails, including the [Ohio and Erie Canal Towpath in Northeast Ohio](#), [Three Rivers Heritage Trail](#) and [Montour Trail](#) in Pennsylvania, and the [North Bend Rail Trail](#) and [Mon River Trail North and South](#) in West Virginia.

Combined, these trails already travel hundreds of miles throughout the nexus of the three states. They just don't all connect to each other. Yet.



Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition (IHTC) project footprint | Courtesy IHTC

In some cases, only a few miles separate one trail from another, including trails outside the formal network, as with the short but vital missing link between the Montour Trail and Great Allegheny Passage, which will unlock more than 300 miles of connected trail all the way down to Washington, D.C.

In other cases, more substantial trail connections will have to be made. A proposed 60-mile trail through Tuscarawas, Harrison and Belmont counties in Ohio would connect the southern end of the Towpath Trail with Wheeling, on the Ohio River in West Virginia, and on to Pittsburgh, creating a linked Cleveland-to-Pittsburgh corridor.

This might take some time. And some money. But good people are working on it, and now that they have a coordinated masterplan, and the strength and support of a broad and respected coalition of partners, doors are opening to potential funding sources.

(Let that be a lesson for community development planners and volunteers everywhere; it's amazing what a good vision can do.)

Collaboration and Coordination

These various local efforts are being coordinated under the umbrella of the Industrial Heartlands Trails Coalition, whose working core of 19 organizations includes the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, the National Park Service Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program and RTC, as well as trail and conservation organizations, government agencies and private foundations.



Montour Trail in Pennsylvania | Photo courtesy [MissMessie](#) | CC by 2.0

Even CSX is at the table. Once a stumbling block for rail-trail builders and advocates, the region's largest owner of disused rail corridors has been a willing and welcome participant in Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition meetings, adding to the air of genuine optimism and excitement about this enormous, though attainable, trail vision.

I heard from trail advocates in West Virginia's Northern Panhandle this week who are working to complete the last 7 miles of trails that will connect D.C. to Wheeling, and create a gateway to Ohio. This project is a great example of how playing "small ball" can lead to big wins when everyone is on the same page. On its own, 7 miles isn't much. But in concert with other planned and exciting trails, it will help unlock a magnificent, expansive trail system.

And, it's happening.

"We have five supporting trail groups, plus local government agencies and many citizens wishing us well," says Doug Wayt. Wayt is president of Ohio Valley Trail Partners, a key member of the Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition.



Montour Trail in Pennsylvania | Photo by RTC/Katie Harris

Just like that player on the baseball team focusing on his own “small ball” role, Wayt understands the importance of each partner to the grander goal. “As part of the Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition, we feel an obligation to connect counties and states as the movement westward continues,” he says.

In addition to the remarkable trail planning, the other interesting aspect of the emerging network is the forging of a new regional identity that is happening as well.

By working toward the completion of the Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition’s vision over the years to come, trail advocates in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio and New York are also building a connected identity—a new brand—for a region whose communities are attached by a shared past, present and future of innovation, steel, agriculture, manufacturing, boom, bust, reinvention, renewal and innovation once more.

Before now, few had found a pertinent and compelling way to connect the cultural dots between places like Ashtabula and Morgantown, or Pittsburgh and Parkersburg. But those connections are undeniably there; the Rust Belt and the western foothills of Appalachia are characters cut from the same cloth. Now, the Industrial Heartland Trails Coalition is strengthening this emerging region by building better physical connections between their communities.

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Jake Lynch is a former marketing and media relations specialist for RTC.