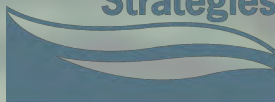


# MOUNTAINEER TRAIL NETWORK

## PRESTON COUNTY MASTER TRAIL PLAN

**Downstream  
Strategies**



Ideas that sustain.



Friends of the Cheat



Friends of the Cheat and our project partners at Downstream Strategies and the Preston County Parks and Recreation Commission are thrilled to share the first ever non-motorized trail plan for Preston County, and the first trail plan for the Mountaineer Trail Network.

Preston County is home to an array of outdoor recreation opportunities—many of which remain untapped or underutilized. Yet over the last decade, we've seen a major increase in local enthusiasm and commitment for expanding trails in Preston County.

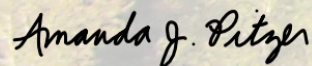
Much of this excitement was jump-started by the revival of recreation on the Cheat River, which is how FOC grew to be trail advocates and developers. The Cheat River was West Virginia's first commercially rafted river, but due to years of abuse from illegal and under-regulated mining, the river was nearly forgotten. Following two decades of work by Friends of the Cheat and our River of Promise partners, the Cheat River's water quality and reputation have been restored, and the river is now being used by paddlers of all ages and abilities.

As more and more people rediscover the Cheat, visitors and locals alike are hungry for opportunities to explore Preston County by foot, boat, and bike. This has fueled a major wave of trail development across the county. By 2022, Preston County will be home to 18 miles of new rail-trail, and cyclists will soon be able to ride from Preston County to Ohio and Washington, D.C. Now a major mountain bike destination, Big Bear Lake Trail Center is drawing visitors from across the country to experience West Virginia's famed singletrack. And with the creation of the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority, we have the chance to develop and showcase our county—and region—as an incredible outdoor destination. Friends of the Cheat is passionate about this work because we know it is hard to love a place that you can't access. As recreation increases, so does individual appreciation and stewardship of our county's amazing natural resources. And as outlined in this plan, our local economy stands to benefit as well.

We invite you to review this plan and engage with trail development in Preston County and beyond. Project partners are eager to implement the next phases of this plan, which will take cooperation from folks just like you. Through this project, we identified many opportunities to improve and expand Preston County's trails. However, this plan is a living document which will be updated with new routes and opportunities as we advance this work with partners and connect with new landowners.

If you are a private landowner interested in partnering with the Mountaineer Trail Network, please reach out to us!

Happy Trails,



Amanda Pitzer  
Executive Director, Friends of the Cheat



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Northern West Virginia is home to some of the best trail systems in the eastern United States. From Big Bear Lake and Coopers Rock to Canaan Valley, Valley Falls, and many more in between, we offer an incredible density of mountain biking, hiking, long distance cycling, fishing, hunting, skiing, climbing, and boating opportunities.

Some of our northern counties are already attracting out-of-state visitors—particularly mountain bikers—who have discovered the amazing trails and resources the Mountain State has to offer. But overall, we've *barely* scratched the surface when it comes to trail-based tourism development in the region.

Progress has undeniably been made: Within the next few years, northern West Virginia will be home to the nation's fourth-largest rail-trail corridor, spanning more than 180 miles from the Ohio border in Wood County to the Pennsylvania border in Monongalia County. In Preston County alone, two major new trails—the West Virginia Northern Rail-Trail and the Cheat River Rail-Trail—are already underway. Completed trail systems in the Monongalia, Preston, and Marion counties are already contributing to economic growth, helping attract new businesses and workers to the area, and enriching recreation opportunities and quality of life for local residents.

Yet much of our trail and tourism development has been piecemeal, with counties working independently to attract more visitors. When it comes to tourism, West Virginia counties often operate with a scarcity mindset, in which we feel pressured to compete for what seems like a limited number of potential visitors. As a result, many counties have struggled to develop robust, county-level recreation and tourism programs, even with all the potential lying in our backyards.

## A GAME-CHANGING OPPORTUNITY

In light of the success of the Hatfield-McCoy Trails and other similar trail systems, growing momentum for a regional non-motorized trail network has spurred excitement across northern West Virginia's communities.

In March 2019, Governor Jim Justice authorized the creation of the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority, which will oversee the development of a fifteen-county trail system focused on mountain biking in northern West Virginia. With this authority in place, the participating counties may now join forces to develop the region as a trail destination.

The creation of the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority presents an unprecedented opportunity for the counties in northern West Virginia to work collaboratively on recreation and tourism. Instead of each county going it alone, the Authority opens the door for developing our region as one of the nation's top trail destinations—filled with world-class trail systems and local dining, lodging, and other amenities in unique towns spread across 15+ counties. With so many existing trails to work with, the Mountaineer Trail Network gives tools to refine and expand these assets into a regional destination, as well as marketing tools to reach a much wider outside audience of potential visitors.

As a result, the Mountaineer Trail Network could truly be a game changer for our region.

## MOUNTAINEER TRAIL NETWORK COUNTIES

Barbour  
Doddridge  
Grant  
Harrison  
Lewis  
Marion  
Mineral  
Monongalia  
Preston  
Randolph  
Ritchie  
Taylor  
Tucker  
Upshur  
Wood

<sup>1</sup> The Mon River Trails generate over \$6 million to the economy of Morgantown, West Virginia, each year. (Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, 2018)

<sup>2</sup> Senate Bill 317, passed in 2019, included 10 counties. House Bill 4499 added five additional counties in 2020.

**The Mountaineer Trail Network is envisioned as a centralized marketing effort.**

Rather than being one contiguous trail, the Network will recognize numerous separate trails and trail systems across its fifteen-county footprint. The Mountaineer Trail Network Authority will then promote each of those trail systems under its regional “brand” or umbrella.



## ABOUT THIS PLAN

This document is the first in a planned series of county-level plans that will be developed for the Mountaineer Trail Network. It presents the analysis and recommendations developed from this planning framework, which was piloted in Preston County from 2019–2020.

As such, it serves two primary functions. First, this document can serve as a stand-alone planning tool for stakeholders in Preston County to guide local trail and tourism development efforts already underway.

Second, it is envisioned as a critical first piece of what will become a greater Network-wide master plan. The planning framework piloted in Preston County was intentionally designed to be replicated in each county in the Mountaineer Trail Network. These county-level plans can then be assimilated into a Mountaineer Trail Network Master Plan, with a chapter for each county in the Network.

This plan was funded through a 2019 POWER Technical Assistance Grant awarded to Friends of the Cheat by the Appalachian Regional



## KEY FINDINGS

Preston County is located in a true sweet spot for outdoor recreation. Home to the Cheat River and Big Bear Lake Trail Center, the county already attracts recreation visitors from around the region, and many more currently pass through Preston County en route to other larger destinations in neighboring counties.

### Preston County: Key strengths

- Strong assortment of existing trails and recreation opportunities
- Great highway and transportation access
- Prime location between urban areas and outdoor destinations
- World-renowned river recreation on the Cheat River

### Trail assessment and opportunities

As part of the region's growing rail-trail network, Preston County will soon be directly linked by trail to Parkersburg, Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C. and beyond. Several key trails already provide direct linkages to neighboring counties, though connections between trails and communities could stand to be enhanced. Given the number of nearby trails and recreation areas, possibilities abound for strategic trail linkages.

With so many trail and recreation assets already in place, Preston County has no shortage of potential opportunities for future trail development. Over the course of this planning effort, the project team catalogued more than 30 potential trail projects in Preston County. Included as Appendix B, this list is intended to be a living document to be maintained and updated by local trail advocates over time. Of these potential trail projects catalogued and explored through this planning process, the following trail projects emerged as key opportunities, divided among three primary goals for trail development within the Mountaineer Trail Network:

**Goal 1:** Enhance regional trail connectivity.

**Goal 2:** Link trails to local assets within each county.

**Goal 3:** Develop trails at anchor destinations.

# FEATURED TRAIL OPPORTUNITIES

GOAL	CATEGORY	TRAIL PROJECT
Enhance regional trail connectivity	Inter-county rail-trail enhancements	Deckers Creek Rail-Trail to Kingwood
	Allegheny Trail	Jenkinsburg to Snake Hill
		Albright to Cheat Canyon
	Tucker and Garrett County connections	Formalized cycling routes into Garrett County, MD Seven Islands trails
Link trails to local assets	Kingwood	Kingwood to Cheat River Rail-Trail
	Rowlesburg	Rowlesburg to Cheat River Rail-Trail
	Reedsville-Arthurdale	West Preston School to Deckers Creek Rail-Trail
Develop trails at anchor destinations	Big Bear Lake Trail Center	Beginner trail loops
	Cheat River Trail Center	Trailhead and trail development

## Tourism assessment and opportunities

While Preston County has developed a niche as a destination for whitewater boaters and mountain bikers, the county remains off the radar as a tourism destination. The county features a mix of lodging accommodations and dining venues, though current options tend to be far from the trails. Despite the abundance of outdoor recreation opportunities, relatively few existing businesses directly serve outdoor recreation markets.

Being part of the Mountaineer Trail Network presents a huge opportunity to develop trail-based tourism in Preston County. Preston County offers a number of viable market opportunities for investors and entrepreneurs, including:

- **Trail-oriented lodging and dining:** Campgrounds, short-term rentals, and local restaurants and cafes are particularly well suited for areas that already see high volumes of recreation travellers, such as the I-68 corridor and Route 7 and soon-to-be trail towns like Kingwood, Rowlesburg, and Tunnelton.
- **Private trail centers:** Enhanced trail facilities, lodging, and dining opportunities would help raise the profile of Big Bear Lake Trail Center, which is emerging as one of the top mountain biking destinations in the eastern United States.
- **Recreation-focused businesses and services:** Bike shops, gear rentals, and shuttle services are staple businesses within trail-based tourism destinations. Preston County is also well suited to host guided multi-sport tours taking advantage of the county's ample biking, boating, and fishing opportunities.

## BEST PRACTICES AND NEXT STEPS FOR PRESTON COUNTY

1. **Plan, build, and maintain** great trails in Preston County.
2. **Invest** in effective signage and supporting trailside amenities to serve visitors and trail users.
3. **Build** local tourism infrastructure (including dining, lodging, outdoor-sector businesses, and other related services) to enhance the county as a tourism destination.
4. **Work** with local partners, including private landowners, public entities, nonprofits, and others.
5. **Promote** trails through targeted marketing and outreach.
6. **Track** progress and celebrate local victories.
7. **Engage** with other counties in building out the Mountaineer Trail Network.

# PLANNING PROCESS

## PURPOSE

The goal of this plan is to help leaders, trail advocates, and Mountaineer Trail Network Authority representatives in Preston County guide local trail development in a way that maximizes economic and community benefit.

Based on this goal, the plan is guided by the following objectives.

- Define what the Mountaineer Trail Network is, how it will function, and what it means for Preston County and northern West Virginia.
- Quantify the economic potential for trail-based tourism development in our region.
- Assess existing trail and tourism assets within Preston County and recommend areas for targeted improvement.
- Showcase potential trail routes and viable market opportunities to boost trail-based tourism in Preston County.
- Highlight steps for implementing trail projects and transforming Preston County, and the greater Network, into a premier regional destination.

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

Like many trail advocates in the region, Friends of the Cheat watched the development of Senate Bill (SB) 317 excitedly in the West Virginia Legislature. Yet once the bill was approved, no natural leaders emerged to take the reins of the newly formed Mountaineer Trail Network Authority.

In response, Friends of the Cheat took steps to initiate planning efforts for the Mountaineer Trail Network. Working with consultants Downstream Strategies, Friends of the Cheat launched the Mountaineer Trail Network's pilot planning project in 2019 with funding from the ARC POWER Initiative. Through this project, Friends of the Cheat and Downstream Strategies have worked to:

- analyze what the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority legislation means for northern West Virginia,
- help the 15 Network counties understand how this opportunity can benefit our region, and
- develop a pilot trail plan as a model to be replicated in other counties across the Mountaineer Trail Network.

Completed in July 2020, this plan represents the final product of this POWER-funded planning effort.

## LEGISLATIVE AND CASE STUDY REVIEW

As the first element of the POWER planning project for the Mountaineer Trail Network, Downstream Strategies thoroughly reviewed SB 317, which authorized the creation of the Mountaineer Trail Network, to define in detail exactly what the legislation entails. The team also identified relevant trail legislation from other states and conducted extensive research on trail systems across the country that are successfully driving tourism and economic development.

Over the course of this copious research, key takeaways emerged, shedding light on what it takes to develop—and maintain—a thriving regional trail network. These insights form the underlying basis for the approach and recommendations presented in this plan.

Armed with legislative comparisons from other states, Downstream Strategies identified both strengths and weaknesses of SB 317 and worked with Friends of the Cheat and local state delegates and senators to propose a bill in the 2020 Legislative Session addressing the identified shortcomings. Introduced by Delegate Evan Hansen, the bill (HB 4499) passed both the House of Delegates and the Senate and was signed into law in April 2020. (Learn more about HB 4499 on page 14.)



## ORGANIZING AND OUTREACH EFFORTS

In 2019 Friends of the Cheat and Downstream Strategies began facilitating a team of other regional players invested in the success of the Mountaineer Trail Network.

The team held a public informational meeting on December 9, 2019, hosted at the offices of the Preston County Economic Development Authority in Kingwood, to share the initial findings of the team's legislative analysis and build momentum for further county-level engagement in the Mountaineer Trail Network. The meeting was attended by 27 participants representing seven Network counties, including officials from county commissions, chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus, and communities throughout the region.

Based on the enthusiastic response and encouragement from attendees of the December 2019 public meeting, Friends of the Cheat and Downstream Strategies gave presentations to seven county commissions within the Network's footprint (Preston, Grant, Marion, Monongalia, Randolph, Taylor, and Tucker) in the spring of 2020 to encourage them to appoint their two representatives per county to the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority board.

This combined outreach effort was extremely well received and successful: As of May 2020, five counties (Barbour, Mineral, Preston, Taylor, and Tucker) have appointed representatives to serve on the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority board of directors, and eight additional counties (Grant, Lewis, Marion, Monongalia, Randolph, Ritchie, Upshur, and Wood) have formally acknowledged their support of further planning efforts for the Mountaineer Trail Network led by Downstream Strategies and Friends of Cheat. The project team has received additional public support from:

- the Preston County Parks and Recreation Commission (PCPaRC);
- the cities of Buckhannon and Fairmont;
- the convention and visitors bureaus for Mountaineer Country (Monongalia, Taylor, and Preston counties), Marion County, Lewis County, and Tucker County;
- the economic development authorities for Preston and Taylor counties; and
- trail advocates including the Hatfield-McCoy Regional Recreation Authority, the Mountain State Trail Alliance, the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, Blackwater Bicycle Association, the Morgantown Area Mountain Bike Alliance, and the Heart of the Highlands Trail Center.

Additionally, project partner PCPaRC has assisted with workforce development aspects of the trail planning in Preston County as part of the initial planning effort funded by ARC. PCPaRC inventoried recreation tourism programs at nearby schools and will be collaborating with West Virginia University and Garrett College to host a Recreation Tourism Career Fair, scheduled for September 2020, to highlight and educational and career paths for local residents.

## PROJECT TEAM

### Friends of the Cheat

Based in Kingwood, Friends of the Cheat is a nonprofit organization working to restore a river damaged by a legacy of irresponsible land use practices; preserve the health and integrity of the watershed against future degradation; promote the watershed as a haven for beauty and recreation; and educate the community on the economic, cultural, and aesthetic value of clean water.

As of 2020, Friends of the Cheat has secured \$4.1 million in federal Abandoned Mine Lands (AML) Pilot Program funding to construct an eight-mile rail trail along one of the most popular and heavily used sections of the Cheat River. The project also launched the Preston Trail Towns Program, which works with local community groups, businesses, and volunteers to help communities in the county better leverage trails-based recreation for economic development.



Friends of the Cheat

### Downstream Strategies

Downstream Strategies is a West Virginia-based consulting firm that offers specialized services in market feasibility and planning for outdoor recreation and trail projects. Recognized as leaders in innovative economic development solutions throughout Appalachia, a core component of the company's work focuses on helping communities reshape local economies through strategic trail development. With offices in Morgantown, Davis, and Lewisburg, Downstream Strategies has put its in-house expertise in trail planning, market analysis, survey design, and community engagement to use for clients in West Virginia and beyond.



Ideas that sustain.

# PLANNING FRAMEWORK

Two of the central tasks of the team's 2019 POWER Technical Assistance project were to:

1. develop a planning framework that could be used in subsequent, complementary plans for other counties within the Mountaineer Trail Network; and
2. create a pilot plan for Preston County using the developed framework.

Planning for the Mountaineer Trail Network is a complex task: On one hand, this and subsequent county-level plans must be oriented towards creating a cohesive regional trail network. Yet at the same time, each county brings its own individuality to the Network, based on its unique trail and recreation amenities already in place. The planning framework piloted in this Preston County plan was developed specifically to blend these two objectives.

The Mountaineer Trail Network planning framework focuses on two key areas that underpin trail-based tourism development: **1) trails**, the central and defining building blocks for a trail economy, and **2) tourism infrastructure**, the underlying businesses and services needed to develop and sustain a tourism industry.

---

For **trails**, one layer of analysis focuses on three tiers of attributes that will fuel successful trail-based tourism in the county and the greater Mountaineer Trail Network.

1. **Regional connectivity:** How connected are trails in the county to those in other counties within the Mountaineer Trail Network, and beyond?
2. **Local connectivity:** Are trails within the county linked to key local assets, such as downtowns, other trails, recreation areas, and schools?
3. **Anchor attractions:** Does the county have existing trails or outdoor destinations that already attract visitors for recreation, such as mountain biking trail centers, river access points, climbing areas, or others?

A second (and equally important) layer of analysis examines **site-specific characteristics** and other underlying factors that can make or break a trail opportunity.

- **Physical features:** Are there specific mountains, waterways, or other features that either enhance or impede good trail development? Is the slope of the property suitable for trails?
- **Community Partners:** Who are the relevant people, officials, and organizations already on the ground? Are there local leaders championing the trail?
- **Land ownership:** How many parcels does the desired trail route cross? Who owns them, and are they open to the idea of trails on their land?

For **tourism infrastructure**, analysis focuses on the presence and availability of the following key businesses and services that underpin a tourism economy.

1. Lodging and overnight accommodations
2. Food and dining establishments
3. Outfitters and outdoor sector businesses
4. Other attractions and things to do
5. Supporting services, such as transportation and internet

Specifically, for each of the following five categories:

- Where are these currently located in the county?
- How accessible are they to existing recreation areas? Or to the major traffic corridors for pass-through travelers recreating outside the county?

Trails and tourism infrastructure are broken into two separate sections of the plan. For each section, the analysis follows the same overall approach:

### DATA GATHERING

1

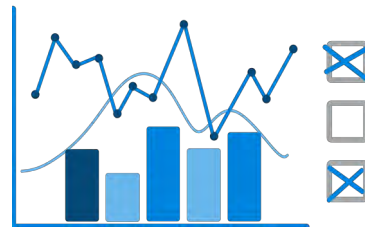
The project team gathered, inventoried, and mapped all available background data, including existing and planned trails, public lands, parks and recreation areas, existing tourism infrastructure, schools and other major community resources, parcel data, and more.



### ANALYSIS

2

During this step, the Mountaineer Trail Network County Assessment Matrix (Appendix A) was completed for the county to provide a benchmark for comparison across Network counties. The project team then examined assets in place within the county and identified gaps, strengths, and opportunities for further development.



### RECOMMENDATIONS

3

Based on the findings of the analysis phase, the project team made recommendations for strategic investment in the county.



## STAKEHOLDER INPUT

This plan was compiled over the course of several months from the fall of 2019 through the spring of 2020. To gather public input on the plan, the project team planned to showcase the draft plan to county stakeholders through a series of public events and meetings throughout the summer and fall of 2020. However, in light of the COVID-19 crisis, those planned in-person events and meetings were unable to take place.

This necessitated major shifts in the planned outreach strategy, resulting in remote interactions with key stakeholders, including web-based presentations, email, and phone correspondence beginning in early July 2020 with Preston County's two representatives appointed to the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority board, the Preston County Commission, Preston County Economic Development Authority, Preston County Chamber of Commerce, representatives from Preston "Trail Towns" (Rowlesburg, Kingwood, Tunnelton, Albright), and key business and nonprofit leaders. In the interest of incorporating as much public input as possible, the project team continues to seek feedback on an ongoing basis and explore alternative outreach methods to disseminate the plan and incorporate feedback into any revisions.

Yet given the unprecedented circumstances, it is important to keep in mind that this plan reflects a baseline from which to begin county- and region-wide trail planning discussions. Trail opportunities evolve constantly as circumstances shift and events take place. As a result, the catalogue of trail opportunities presented in Appendix B is designed to be maintained and updated by county trail advocates as new trail ideas come up and other trails reach fruition.

# ABOUT THE MOUNTAINEER TRAIL NETWORK

## CONTEXT FOR REGIONAL TRAIL DEVELOPMENT

West Virginia trails have been drawing attention for decades. Yet over the last few years, momentum for large-scale trail development has been growing in communities across the Mountain State like never before.

Much of the current excitement stems from the tremendous successes in the Southern Coalfields. In 2001, the first trail system within the Hatfield-McCoy Trail Network opened to ATVs, UTVs, and off-road motorcycles. Twenty years later, the network includes eight trail systems with 700 miles of trail spanning 250,000 acres in five southern West Virginia counties. Selling 56,000 trail permits per year to an out-of-state market,<sup>3</sup> the Hatfield-McCoy Trails generate a total economic impact of **\$38 million annually** for the local economy (CBER, 2020).

The tremendous success of the Hatfield-McCoy Trails can ultimately be traced back to key actions taken by the West Virginia Legislature in the 1990s, without which the Hatfield-McCoy Trails could not have taken off.

- First, in 1996 the West Virginia Legislature approved the creation of a regional recreation authority—the first of its kind—that could govern a multi-county trail system.
- Second and equally important, the Legislature also granted liability protections to landowners with trails on their property, which proved to be instrumental in developing trails on private land.



In light of this success story, many in West Virginia and beyond have been seeking to apply the Hatfield-McCoy model to other parts of the state. In 2019, these efforts succeeded: Governor Jim Justice signed into law **Senate Bill (SB) 317**, which authorizes three or more adjacent West Virginia counties to form a **multi-county trail network authority** for *non-motorized* modes of recreation.

Additionally, once an authority is established, the legislation also provides liability protection for landowners who have trails on their property (§20-17-8). This protection offers a powerful incentive for owners to allow trail development on their land and opens the door for making large, successful trail systems to fuel a recreation economy.

<sup>3</sup>91% of Hatfield-McCoy trail users live outside West Virginia (CBER, 2020).  
Photos: Hatfield-McCoy Trails (HMT Facebook)

## THE MOUNTAINEER TRAIL NETWORK

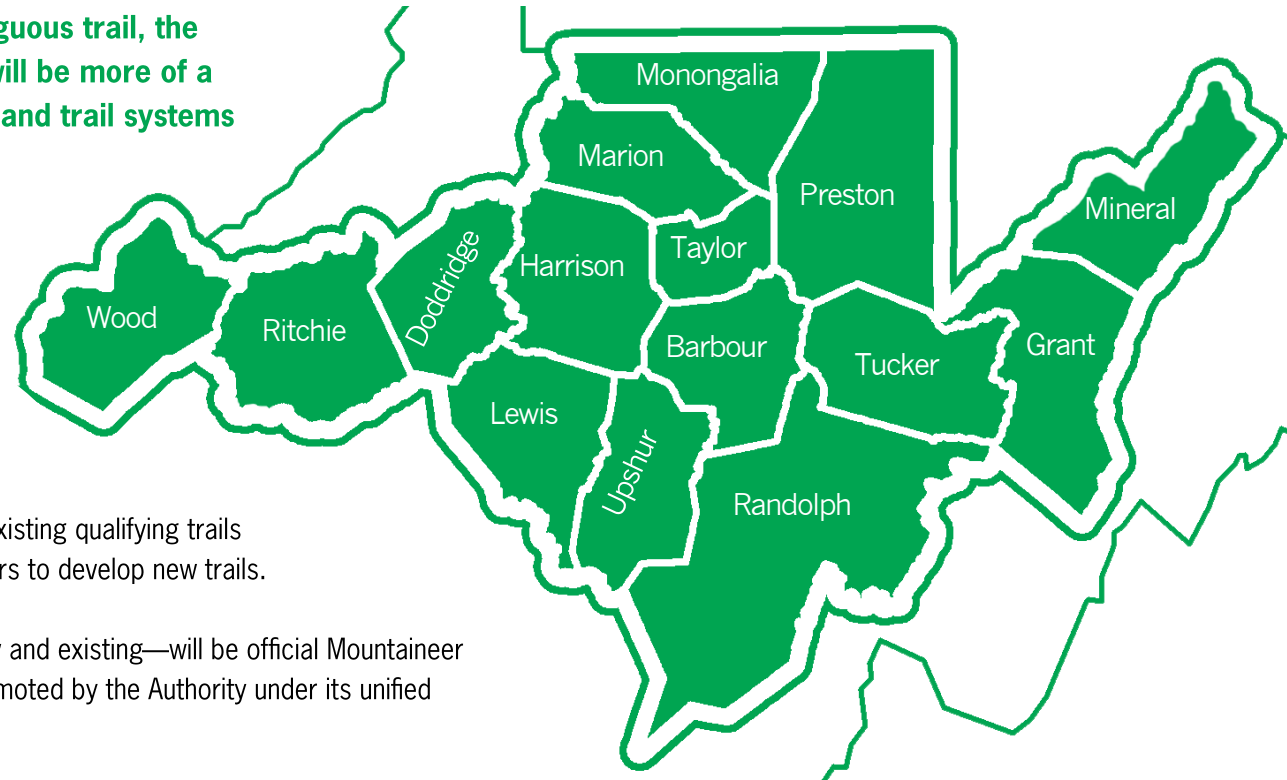
SB 317 specifically created the [Mountaineer Trail Network Authority](#), which will govern a multi-county network of trail systems across northern West Virginia known as the [Mountaineer Trail Network](#) (§20-17A-2).

**Rather than being one contiguous trail, the Mountaineer Trail Network will be more of a patchwork of different trails and trail systems spread across 15 counties.**

Empowered by recent enabling legislation, the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority will establish quality standards for what trails will be included in the Network.

The Authority will then recognize existing qualifying trails and work with interested landowners to develop new trails.

These recognized trails—both new and existing—will be official Mountaineer Trail Network trails and will be promoted by the Authority under its unified regional “brand.”



### The Mountaineer Trail Network has two key benefits.

**1 Landowner protections:** SB 317 grants liability protection to participating landowners who have trails on their property, thereby encouraging them to allow trail development on their property. Based on research from other trail systems around the country, such landowner liability protections are essential to developing successful trail destinations. (§20-17-8)

**2 Regional coordination and branding:** The Mountaineer Trail Network opens the door to marketing our counties collaboratively as a regional trail destination. Functioning somewhat like a trail-specific convention and visitors bureau (CVB), the Network will serve as a collective voice to promote recognized trail assets in the fifteen-county area, thereby amplifying our ability to grow recreation tourism in the region.

## PRIVATE TRAIL SYSTEMS

**Large trail systems on private lands are relatively rare across the country. However, two key examples stand out.**

**The Hatfield-McCoy Trails** in southern West Virginia offer over 700 miles of ATV trails spanning 250,000 acres of entirely private land. The Hatfield-McCoy Regional Recreation Authority maintains individual license agreements with 92 landowners across the network. (Lusk, 2020)



**Kingdom Trails** in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom stands out as a unique example of a large mountain biking trail network patched together across 97 unique properties (Long, 2020).



## WHY PROTECT PRIVATE LANDOWNERS?

Many of the nation's top trail destinations are located on public land. Western states boast thousands of trail miles on land owned by the U.S. Forest Service and Department of Interior, whereas trails in eastern and midwestern states are more concentrated in parks and forests owned by state or local governments. In contrast, very few large trail systems are located on private land. **Why is this?**

The answer hinges largely on liability. Risk is an inherent element of outdoor recreation. Public entities generally have built-in liability protections from accidents on public land. For example, state and federal land management agencies have sovereign immunity from lawsuits. As a result, barring outright negligence, such agencies are not liable for recreation accidents that occur on public property. Private landowners, on the other hand, generally have no such protections unless specifically granted by state law, which means they may be held liable for any trail-related accidents that occur on their land.

Yet in many communities, private land is crucial for trail development—either as connectors between existing trails or as parcels for independent trail networks. And in many cases, landowners already incur liabilities for existing, unsanctioned recreation taking place on their land. As a result, most successful trail destinations across the country have found that instituting landowner liability protections is key for large-scale trail development.

A 2017 West Virginia University study found that median home values along the rail-trail in downtown Morgantown increased at a rate **three times higher than the county average.**<sup>1</sup>



# PERMITTED USES

Envisioned principally as a way to promote mountain bike tourism in northern West Virginia, trails within the Mountaineer Trail Network will be open for non-motorized forms of recreation including:



FISHING



BOATING



HIKING



CAMPING



RUNNING & CROSS COUNTRY



NATURE STUDY



HUNTING



SWIMMING



BICYCLING & MOUNTAIN BIKING



PICNICKING



WINTER RECREATION



VIEWING & ENJOYING HISTORICAL, SCENIC, ARCHAEOLOGICAL, OR SCIENTIFIC SITES —AND MORE \*



\*§20-17A-3

## WHAT IS THE AUTHORITY, AND HOW WILL IT FUNCTION?

The Mountaineer Trail Network Authority is the legal entity that will manage and oversee the Mountaineer Trail Network.

SB 317 formally created this public body in 2019 and designated it with broad authority to work with landowners, government agencies, community leaders, recreational user groups, and other interested parties in implementing the Mountaineer Trail Network (§20-17A-1).

With the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority officially created by SB 317, counties in the Network are now actively appointing their representatives to serve on the Authority's board of directors. Once its board members are appointed, the Authority will set rules, safety standards, and other operating guidelines for the trail system. They will also establish the process through which landowners will be recognized, thereby enacting the liability protections guaranteed in SB 317. (§20-17-4)

**Per SB 317, each participating county commission must appoint two representatives to the Authority, including:**

- One representative, serving a four-year term, who represents and is associated with a corporation or individual landowner whose land is being used or is expected to be used in the future as part of the authority's recreational area.
- A second representative, serving a two-year term, that is an experienced instructor, guide, or participant in recreational activities in the county or an individual who represents and is associated with travel, regional economic development, land surveying, or relevant engineering efforts within the county. (§20-17-4)

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### Once the board is convened, the Authority has the following ongoing responsibilities (§20-17-4):

#### **Appoint officials.**

During the first meeting or as soon as possible, the board shall elect a chairman, secretary, and treasurer from among its own members to serve for two-year terms. The Authority shall appoint an executive director to act as its chief executive, who shall prepare an annual budget to be approved by the board at each fiscal year's end.



#### **Hold quarterly meetings.**

The Authority shall meet quarterly, unless a special meeting is called by its chairman.



#### **Establish bylaws and governing rules.**

The Authority may prescribe, amend, or repeal bylaws and rules governing the use of the trail system, safety standards for participants, and the manner in which the business of the authority is conducted.



#### **Conduct an annual audit.**

The Authority shall obtain a financial audit to be conducted by a private consulting firm in compliance with generally accepted government auditing standards.





# ANALYSIS OF THE LEGISLATION

Comparing SB 317 to similar legislation in other states, West Virginia's bill has several key strengths.

After Governor Jim Justice signed SB 317 into law in April 2019, Downstream Strategies conducted thorough analysis of the bill through Friends of the Cheat's POWER Technical Assistance project.

After researching similar legislation in other states, the project team identified several potential shortcomings of the bill and worked with local elected officials to recommend revisions to the legislation. As a result, House Bill (HB) 4499 was introduced and passed in the 2020 West Virginia Legislative Session, which made the following key amendments to the Mountaineer Trail Network legislation:

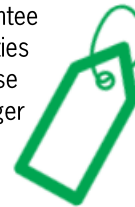
- Five additional counties were added to the Mountaineer Trail Network: Doddridge, Lewis, Ritchie, Upshur, and Wood.
- Language requiring multi-county trail networks to issue permits was eliminated.
- The word "noncommercial" was removed from the description of permissible recreational activities, thereby allowing commercial trail centers to be part of a trail network.

Most states have some kind of landowner liability protections for recreational uses, though they vary considerably in the types of uses recognized and degrees of protection granted. In the northeastern United States, these statutes have been widely embraced by the public and landowners alike; however, the protections from these recreational statutes are generally considered to be weak. In addition, recreational use statutes in most states only apply in cases where the landowner does not charge a fee.<sup>1</sup>

**By contrast, SB 317 offers significant benefits in terms of landowner protection and overall flexibility:**

### Strong protections

SB 317 grants the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority the rights to enter agreements with private landowners, recognize trails on private property, and formally limit liability for the landowners of those recognized trails. Similar trail networks maintain separate trail use agreements with landowners, which guarantee exactly what kinds of recreation and activities may take place on their land. As such, these legal protections are considered far stronger than the weak, blanket protections offered through recreational use statutes.



### Landowner compensation

SB 317 gives the Authority the option of collecting fees from trail users, and House Bill (HB) 4499, approved by the Legislature in March 2020, further clarifies the law by adding language to specifically allow commercial entities to be recognized by the Network. As a result, entities such as Big Bear Lake Camplands, a private trail system in Preston County, may continue charging use fees once part of the Mountaineer Trail Network. This provision opens the door for public-private partnerships in outdoor recreation and greatly boosts the Network's economic development potential.

### Fees and commercial use

SB 317 gives the Authority the option of collecting fees from trail users, and House Bill (HB) 4499, approved by the Legislature in March 2020, further clarifies the law by adding language to specifically allow commercial entities to be recognized by the Network. As a result, entities such as Big Bear Lake Camplands, a private trail system in Preston County, may continue charging use fees once part of the Mountaineer Trail Network. This provision opens the door for public-private partnerships in outdoor recreation and greatly boosts the Network's economic development potential.

### Permits optional

HBB 4499 also clarifies language around permits, giving the Network flexibility in requiring permits for certain sections of the system. While use permits might make sense for commercial trail centers, they would pose a logistical nightmare for other trails such as rail-trails, which are open and free to the public and likely to be a key component of the Mountaineer Trail Network. As a result, HB 4499 strikes language in the original bill requiring user permits. This change gives the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority flexibility where user permits are concerned.

<sup>1</sup> West Virginia's recreational use statute grants coverage for landowners provided that they charge fees of no more than \$50 per year per participant (West Virginia Code §19-25-5), though recent legislation has sought to lower the limit to \$25 per individual per year.

# MARKET OPPORTUNITY

As a non-motorized trail system, the Mountaineer Trail Network will be open to a wide range of activities. That said, from its inception, the concept for the Network focused primarily on one user group in particular: mountain bikers.

## WHY MOUNTAIN BIKING?

While all forms of non-motorized recreation can contribute significantly to an outdoor recreation economy, mountain biking stands out as a particularly strong market opportunity

For starters, mountain biking is uniquely suited to the geography of northern West Virginia. Our region's steep terrain and scenic landscapes provide an ideal setting for mountain bike trails. In fact, many of our existing trail systems in the Mountaineer Trail Network territory are already beloved by mountain bikers around the region: Canaan Valley, Big Bear Lake, Coopers Rock, Valley Falls, and others.

*Yet equally important, mountain biking tourism is a major growth industry for rural economies.*

Approximately **50 million people**—20% of Americans age 16 and over—mountain bike in the United States every year (Eades and Arbogast, 2019). While mountain biking is an activity for all age groups, current data shows that mountain bikers tend to be well-educated and well-paid young professionals. We also know that mountain bikers use their expendable income to ride and explore new trails.

## Mountain bikers travel.

According to a 2015 survey of mountain bikers across North America, the average mountain biker takes...

### 2 vacations

each year specifically to mountain bike



**50%**

of these trips were within

**250 miles**

of the riders' home &

**average trip**

distance was

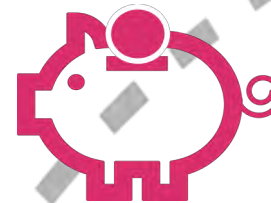
**566 miles**

## Mountain bikers spend.

National and local survey data show that mountain bikers spend an average of...

**\$382**

per trip across the nation



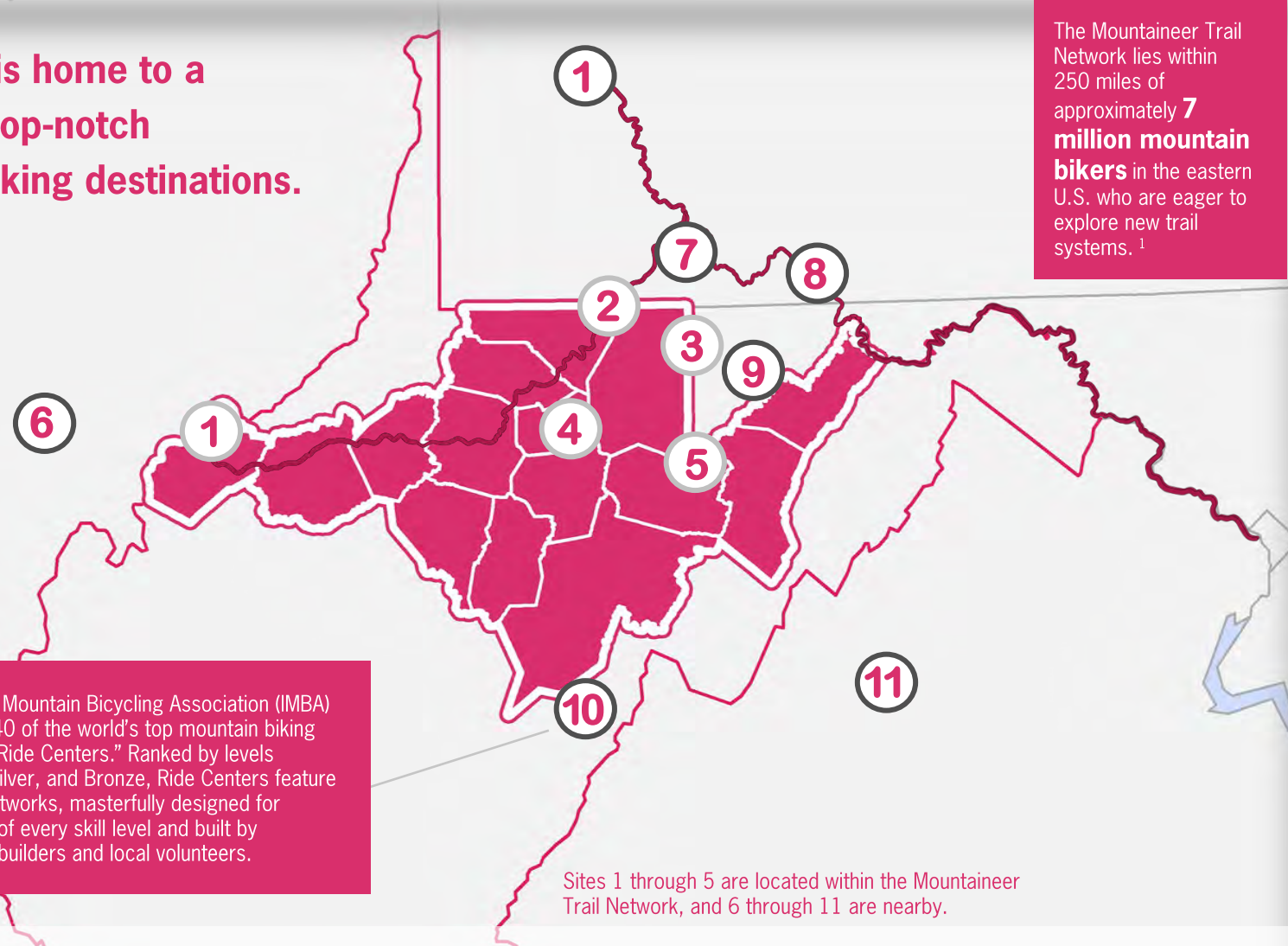
**\$387**

per trip in mountain bike races and events in Tucker and Preston counties, specifically

**That translates to significant visitor spending and economic impact for rural communities.**

**Our region is home to a number of top-notch mountain biking destinations.**

The Mountaineer Trail Network lies within 250 miles of approximately **7 million mountain bikers** in the eastern U.S. who are eager to explore new trail systems.<sup>1</sup>



The International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) has designated 40 of the world's top mountain biking destinations as "Ride Centers." Ranked by levels including Gold, Silver, and Bronze, Ride Centers feature extensive trail networks, masterfully designed for mountain bikers of every skill level and built by professional trailbuilders and local volunteers.

Sites 1 through 5 are located within the Mountaineer Trail Network, and 6 through 11 are nearby.

**1 Parkersburg to Pittsburgh (P2P)** trail is nearly complete with 238 miles of interstate rail-trail.

**2 Coopers Rock State Forest** is a well-known mountain biking destination in Monongalia and Preston counties.

**3 Big Bear Lake Trail Center** is one of the region's most popular mountain bike areas.

**4 Valley Falls State Park** is home to specialty mountain bike trails for enduro riders.

**5 Canaan Valley in Tucker County** is home to hundreds of miles of trails and draws thousands to mountain bike events each year.

**6 Baileys Trail System (OH)** is a planned 88-mile trail system throughout Wayne National Forest.

**7 Ohiopyle State Park (PA)** is always adding to its 30 miles of trails through the Laurel Highlands and is part of the Great Allegheny Passage.

**8 The Great Allegheny Passage (PA, MD)** is a 150-mile rail-trail connecting southwestern Pennsylvania to Washington, D.C. via the C&O Canal.

**9 Deep Creek Lake (MD)** is home to a growing network of professionally built mountain bike trails.

**10 Snowshoe Highlands - IMBA Ride Center (Bronze)** features 375 miles of trail through the Monongahela National Forest.

**11 Harrisonburg (VA) - IMBA Ride Center (Silver)** and the surrounding area contains 350 miles of trail.

<sup>1</sup> Downstream Strategies, 2019.

Over the last several decades, a number of successful trail areas around the country have gained fame as mountain bike destinations. After reviewing more than 20 popular mountain bike trail destinations around the country, a key trend emerged:

The majority of trails in each location are actually open for all types of non-motorized users; however, **the mountain biking opportunity is what attracts visitors from other towns and states to the area.**

While local users were likely to engage in a wide variety of activities (hiking, hunting, birding, etc.), **the bulk of local trail-based economic impact is driven by mountain bikers**, who come as overnight tourists.

This trend helps put the purpose of the Mountaineer Trail Network in perspective:

The Mountaineer Trail Network will focus specifically on targeting increased mountain bike tourism, given the tremendous economic opportunity it presents for northern West Virginia. However, the Network will also support a variety of other non-motorized uses for the enjoyment of local residents, which will be allowed on trails recognized by the Network.



### Tucker County mountain bike events

Neighboring Tucker County hosts notable mountain bike events annually, including:

- Blackwater Classic Mountain Bike Race
- Revenge of the Rattlesnake Race
- Canaan Mountain Bike Festival
- Mountain State Fat Bike Championships

Attendees of these mountain bike events spend an average of **\$533 per trip to Canaan Valley.**

Mountain bikers contributed an estimated **\$294,000 directly to Tucker County's economy** during these **six days** in 2018 alone.

## WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL MOUNTAIN BIKE DESTINATION?

In order to inform the success of the Mountaineer Trail Network, this pilot planning effort examined more than 20 popular U.S. mountain bike destinations to identify key factors and common elements behind their success.

The selected trail systems were intentionally diverse and included trail systems in both eastern and western states. Roughly one third of these destinations have been designated by the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) as official “Ride Centers,” which are recognized as the pinnacle of mountain biking communities worldwide.

### EAST

East Burke, VT	Hazleton, WV
Roanoke, VA	Fayetteville, WV
Harrisonburg, VA	Great Allegheny
Western NC	Passage (MD and PA)
Anniston, AL	The Borderlands
Allegrippis, PA	(ME, NH, VT, and
Canaan Valley, WV	Snowshoe, WV
	Quebec)

### MIDWEST

Bentonville, AR  
Copper Harbor, MI  
Marquette, MI  
Cuyuna, MN  
Bloomington, IN  
Southeastern OH

### WEST

Boise, ID  
Park City, UT  
Bend, OR  
Oakridge, OR  
Crested Butte, CO  
Downieville, CA  
Moab, UT

Each system was reviewed as a case study and evaluated for its relevance to the Mountaineer Trail Network. In particular, relevant trail systems were considered to be those that:

- feature a mix of land ownership, with an emphasis on trail systems located on private land; and
- show successful examples of rural communities that have used mountain biking as an economic driver.

Based on this review, the following key trends emerged.

## TRAIL MIX

Recent rider surveys show that mountain bike tourism is driven by riders of all skill levels. Across the board, the nation's top mountain bike destinations possess four key trail characteristics that cater to riders of all abilities.

### Singletrack networks

Large, contiguous networks of singletrack trail are the bread and butter of mountain biking. Top trail destinations typically feature hundreds of miles of singletrack trails, which are often spread over thousands of acres. Such networks include trails of varying length and difficulty so that riders of all skill levels can piece together an enjoyable ride.

### Technical skills areas

For more advanced riders, most trail destinations also feature technical riding opportunities such as downhill riding at "gravity parks" and skills courses. Frequently operated as commercial enterprises, gravity parks are commonly incorporated into ski resorts to boost off-season recreation, though technical skills courses can be housed within local parks or existing trail systems.

### Beginner-friendly trails

To round out the riding experience, nearly all top mountain bike destinations feature trail options for entry-level riders. Ranging from beginner-friendly or kids-specific trails to rail-trails, these trails ensure the destination can be enjoyed by riders of all ages and abilities.

### Community connections

Of the trail destinations reviewed, the communities that saw the greatest economic impact from trail development were those that had trail amenities linked to a downtown.



## SPOTLIGHT: BENTONVILLE, ARKANSAS

Bentonville, Arkansas (pop. 50,000) was long known as a lackluster town. In fact, in the early 2000s, Wal-Mart struggled to recruit employees to its corporate office because families did not want to move to Bentonville.

Yet around 2006, town leaders opted embraced comprehensive mountain bike trail development as a tool to improve the city's livability. Less than two decades later, mountain biking has transformed the city into a booming and highly desirable place to live.



### Technical skills areas

Coler Preserve, a private bike park located minutes outside of Bentonville, offers advanced jump lines engineered for fun on two wheels. The City has also incorporated pump tracks and jumps into city sidewalks for added fun.

### Singletrack networks

Bentonville boasts more than 230 miles of purpose-built singletrack spread across 10 mountain bike trail systems, all easily accessible from downtown.

### Beginner-friendly trails

All new trails in Bentonville are built with progression in mind to provide accessible options to riders of all ages and abilities. With special focus on family-friendly options, the City built a bike “playground” which features tunnels, bridges, and a pump track to help youth riders of all ages develop their cycling skills. Bentonville also has a 36-mile rail-trail, which links some trail systems and provides opportunities for cyclists who prefer to stay on pavement.

# WHAT MOUNTAIN BIKERS WANT

## Access

Riders look for trails that are easy to find and get to, clearly marked, and accessible for different types of riders, including beginner, intermediate, advanced, and even disabled bikers.



## Exercise

Exercise is the top reason that gets people out on their bikes and in the outdoors in general.



## Skill progression and challenge

There is an inherent level of risk involved in mountain biking, and most riders look for some level of thrill when they ride. Many of the most successful trail destinations around the country note that offering trails of all different skill levels—as well as trails intentionally built to help riders advance their skills—is key to their success.



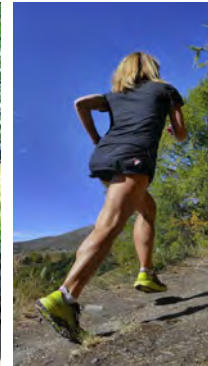
## Social aspects

Riding bikes is a very social activity, especially among mountain bikers. Opportunities such as group rides, races, and other events can play a big role in making biking a fun, inviting, and rewarding activity.



## Getting out in nature

Many riders love mountain biking because it gets them out exploring the woods on a trail. In particular, many riders living in cities plan trips to ride in remote places with a backcountry feel.



# IDEAL TRAILS

Ask five mountain bikers to describe their favorite trails, and you'll probably get five completely different answers. There's no set definition of what makes a "fun" trail for biking, since enjoyment hinges on the individual's riding style and personal preference. Yet there are a few guiding principles that make trails attractive to mountain bikers.

First, trails built specifically for mountain biking as opposed to hiking often have a different feel or "flow" when traveled on two wheels. Most bike tourists seek out places with such **purpose-built bike trails**.

**Variety** is also a very important factor, since having a mix of easy, moderate, and expert-level trails will open the trail system up to a much wider range of riders.

Finally, the **total length of a trail system** is a very important consideration for mountain bike tourism. Surveys show that the average mountain biker covers 56 miles on their typical two-to-three-day mountain bike trip (Barber, 2015). Across the board, most renowned mountain bike destinations boast hundreds of miles of singletrack trail. In choosing a location for a mountain bike vacation, many mountain bikers seek out these large, well-known trail networks where they know they can ride single-track trails for days without getting bored.





# TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE

After trails, the next most crucial underpinning of a successful trail destination is its tourism infrastructure—the businesses, amenities, and underlying services that support a tourism economy. Tourism infrastructure consists of three main elements: (1) trailside facilities, (2) lodging, dining, and other businesses where users can spend money in the local economy, and (3) supporting services and infrastructure expected in a modern destination.

## Trail economies thrive on local businesses.

Studies found the average overnight visitor **spends 6 times more per day** in a community than a local or day user. As a result, trail-based economic development hinges on strengthening the local tourism infrastructure and ensuring that local businesses and entrepreneurs are prepared to take advantage of a trail opportunity.

### TRAILSIDE FACILITIES

- Dedicated parking areas
- Restrooms
- Trailhead kiosks
- Signage

### SUPPORTING SERVICES and INFRASTRUCTURE

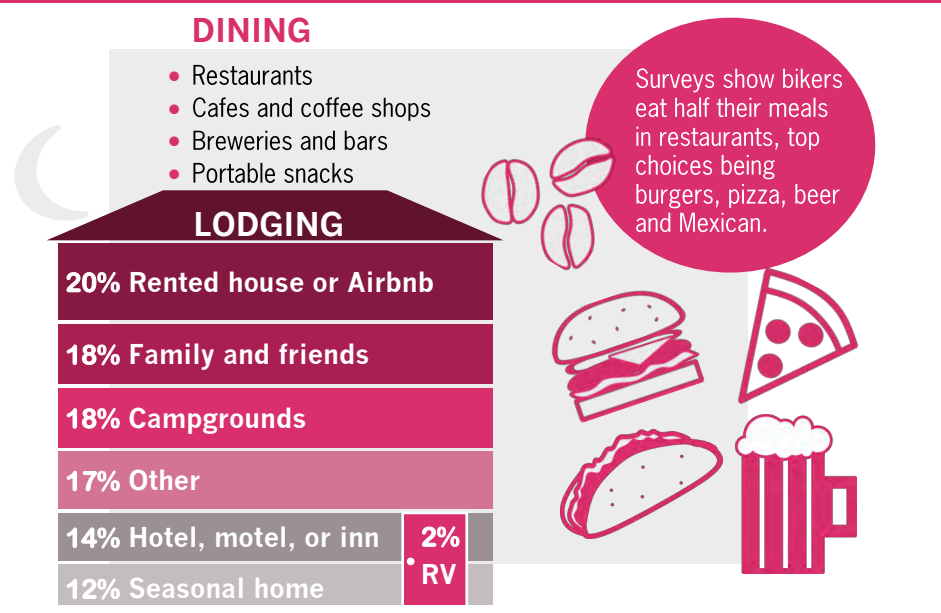
- Cell service and WiFi access
- Good roads and transportation
- Access to emergency medical care

### GEAR SHOPS and RENTALS

- Outdoor stores and bike shops
- Gear rentals
- Shuttle services

## Consumer preferences

National data show that, as a user group with above-average incomes and spending patterns, **mountain bikers lean toward higher-end lodging and dining options.**



## Have options!

Without a doubt, trails are a key draw for bike tourists. However, successful destinations offer a variety of activities and things to do. For example, other top activities mountain bikers participate in while traveling include hiking, dining, camping, swimming, kayaking, fishing, eating, running, rock climbing, sightseeing, and photography. As a result, linking trails to popular spots for climbing, boating, and dining is a key best practice for trail towns.

### OTHER ACTIVITIES

- Opportunities for other types of outdoor recreation
- Local stores and retail

Sources: Barber, 2015; Cottingham and Osborne, 2019; Downstream Strategies, 2019; Eades and Arbogast, 2019  
 Photos (left):Big Bear Lake Trail Center (BBLTC Facebook)

## CASE STUDIES

Many top mountain bike destinations are small and rural—just like most of the towns in Preston County and the Mountaineer Trail Network.

### Kingdom Trails, Vermont | [kingdomtrails.org](http://kingdomtrails.org)

Kingdom Trails is a private trail system tucked in a corner of northeastern Vermont known as the Northeast Kingdom. Known as one of the preeminent mountain biking destinations in the country, Kingdom Trails' ownership structure sets it apart from other mountain bike destinations. Run by the nonprofit Kingdom Trails Association (KTA), the system's 100 miles of trails are located *entirely on private land*. KTA maintains individual use agreements with 97 private landowners who allow KTA to build and maintain trails on their properties.

Kingdom Trails had humble beginnings. In the early 1990s, as the logging industry declined and the local ski mountain went bankrupt, local mountain bikers began going door to door to their neighbors asking for permission to build trails on their properties. Two decades later, trail-based recreation has transformed the economies of the four surrounding towns, whose combined falls under 4,000 people.

Much of this impact is attributed to the trails' direct connection to communities. The village of East Burke (pop. 132) houses the Kingdom Trails Welcome Center, and several of the most popular trailheads are located right downtown, making it easy for mountain bikers to grab a meal and visit local shops after their ride. This has fueled the development of a local tourism industry and revived this once forgotten corner of New England.

While the trails are open for various types of non-motorized recreation, mountain biking is undeniably the biggest draw of non-local visitors and the real impetus behind Kingdom Trail's success. As a private trail system, all users must purchase either a season or day pass to use the trails. The trails are open for the summer season from roughly April or May (depending on weather) through the end of October. KTA closes the trails for the month of November to allow locals to hunt and reopens in the winter for cross country skiing, snowshoeing, and fat-biking on designated trails. Though Kingdom Trails covers a drastically smaller footprint than the Mountaineer Trail Network, it offers a model for trail development on private land that could be replicated at trail centers throughout the Mountaineer Trail Network.

A photograph of a person riding a mountain bike on a dirt trail through a dense forest. The rider is wearing a helmet and a backpack, and is seen from behind, moving away from the camera. The trail is surrounded by tall, thin trees and lush green undergrowth. The lighting is soft, suggesting a shaded forest environment.

Each year Kingdom Trails attracts 138,000 visitors (85% from outside the state), generating **\$10 million** for the local economy.

Much like West Virginia, Minnesota's Cuyuna Lakes region has faced the ups and downs of its industrial past: The Cuyuna Iron Range was one of the nation's top iron producers until the 1960s when the industry collapsed. By the mid-1980s, the last of the area's 30 mines closed for good. The surrounding communities of Crosby, Cuyuna, Ironton, Riverton, and Trommald—with a combined population of under 3,000—suffered immediate economic declines.

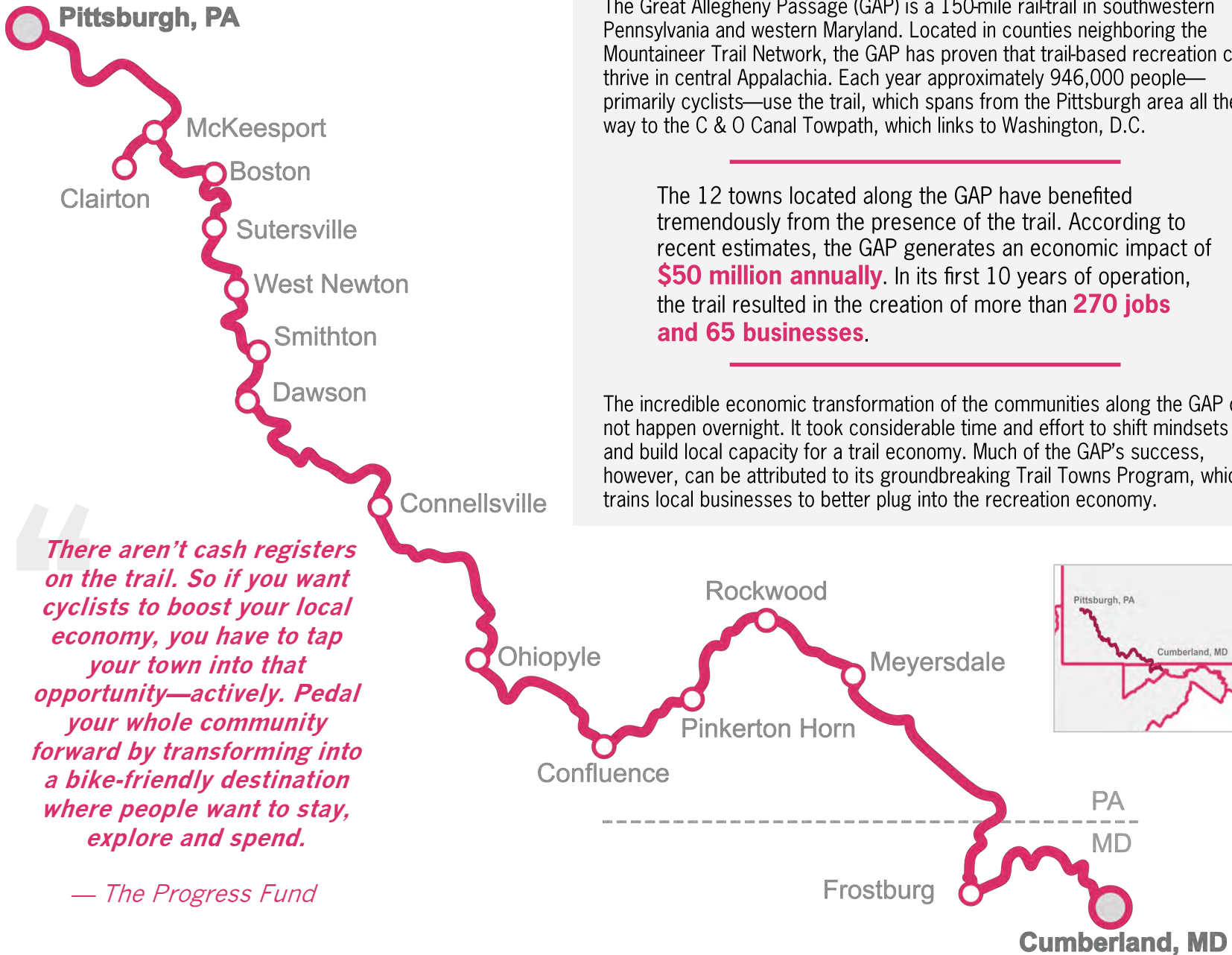
Taking a gamble on recreation as a possible means to revive the depressed local economy, local leaders invested in trails in the Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area. Funded by federal and state grants matched by contributions from local businesses, local advocates were

able to have trails professionally designed and constructed. The project resulted in 25 miles of purpose-built mountain bike trails built across 800 acres of the Recreation Area in 2010, which earned the area a designation as Bronze Level IMBA Ride Center.

Ten years later, Cuyuna Lakes is a thriving place. While the region still cherishes its mining past, recreation has rebooted the area's economy. Five years after opening the Cuyuna Lakes Mountain Bike Trail System, the Recreation Area saw visitation soar from 80,000 annual visits in 2011 to 185,000 in 2016. The area added 132 jobs in the same timeframe, and trends are still on the rise.



Landlords in the Cuyuna Lakes area who once leased homes to residents for \$600 per month are now leasing them to bikers for **\$600 per week.**



The Great Allegheny Passage (GAP) is a 150-mile rail-trail in southwestern Pennsylvania and western Maryland. Located in counties neighboring the Mountaineer Trail Network, the GAP has proven that trail-based recreation can thrive in central Appalachia. Each year approximately 946,000 people—primarily cyclists—use the trail, which spans from the Pittsburgh area all the way to the C & O Canal Towpath, which links to Washington, D.C.

The 12 towns located along the GAP have benefited tremendously from the presence of the trail. According to recent estimates, the GAP generates an economic impact of **\$50 million annually**. In its first 10 years of operation, the trail resulted in the creation of more than **270 jobs and 65 businesses**.

The incredible economic transformation of the communities along the GAP did not happen overnight. It took considerable time and effort to shift mindsets and build local capacity for a trail economy. Much of the GAP's success, however, can be attributed to its groundbreaking Trail Towns Program, which trains local businesses to better plug into the recreation economy.

*There aren't cash registers on the trail. So if you want cyclists to boost your local economy, you have to tap your town into that opportunity—actively. Pedal your whole community forward by transforming into a bike-friendly destination where people want to stay, explore and spend.*

— The Progress Fund

**Ohiopyle, Pennsylvania** is a major trail town on the GAP. Located at a breathtaking waterfall on the Youghiogheny River, Ohiopyle has been a popular destination for whitewater boaters and hikers who enjoy countless trails in and around Ohiopyle State Park. Yet after making dedicated trail improvements, enhancing wayfinding, and increasing biking opportunities offered by local rafting outfitters, Ohiopyle has grown into a biking destination in its own right.



According to one local restaurant owner, *“When they first talked about the bike trail, no one here ever imagined the volume of travelers. Ohiopyle has always been a boating town, but the bicyclists have now become a larger percent of visitors than our boaters”* (The Progress Fund, 2015).

Not every town has a waterfall running through downtown. Yet the GAP's experience has proven that with planning and hard work, any town can take measurable steps to benefit from trail tourism. For example, **Meyersdale, Pennsylvania**, sits at Mile 32 of the GAP, and while it had one popular trailhead and visitor center, the town's southern entry was lacking in curb appeal.

The GAP Trail Towns Program and The Progress Fund added interpretive signage about the "Maple City" and its annual Maple Festival, plus a row of its famous sap-producing trees. They also installed bike racks, a fix-it station, and signage about the nearby downtown. These simple improvements encourage more visitors to visit restaurants, attractions, and businesses in Meyersdale.



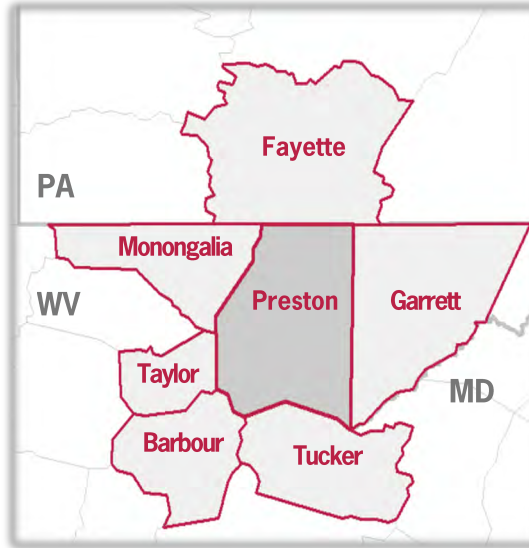


Mitchell C. Stickler  
PHOTOGRAPH

# PRESTON COUNTY OVERVIEW

In many respects, Preston County offers the best of both worlds: Residents of the county enjoy a relatively low cost of living amidst picturesque scenery, friendly towns, and abundant recreation opportunities. Yet they live within easy reach of several urban areas such as Morgantown, where they can access a research university and high-quality healthcare from two major medical centers.

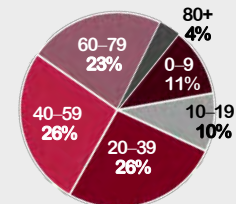
The county's location across several key transportation corridors also provides unique advantages to Preston County. The Interstate 68 (I-68) corridor crosses the northern part of the county, which serves as the major highway connecting West Virginia to Maryland and on to the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Other roads crossing Preston County such as Routes 7, 92, and 50 offer the most direct routes from the Morgantown metropolitan area to popular destinations in Randolph and Tucker counties. This means that many tourists from West Virginia and other states already drive across Preston County on a regular basis en route to other nearby locations.



## at a glance



**33,500**  
county population



**AGE BREAKDOWN**  
(years)

**\$106,800**  
median housing value



**\$48,300**  
median household income

### TOWNS

Albright  
Aurora  
Brandonville  
Bruceton Mills



Newburg  
Reedsville  
Rowlesburg  
Terra Alta  
Tunnelton

### PUBLIC NATURAL AREAS

Monongahela National Forest  
Coopers Rock State Forest  
Fairfax Stone State Park  
Upper Deckers Creek Wildlife Management Area  
Snake Hill Wildlife Management Area  
Cathedral State Park

### MAJOR INDUSTRIES

by employment



Healthcare



Construction



Retail trade



Federal government

### Commuter travel

As in much of the Mountaineer Trail Network territory, attracting and retaining a capable workforce is a major challenge for Preston County. Though Preston County is part of the Morgantown, WV, Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), recent growth and prosperity within the MSA have largely bypassed Preston County, as locally available jobs are scarce. The county's unemployment rate is low at 4.9%, but few of those jobs are actually in Preston County, leaving residents to find employment elsewhere and commuting an average of 31 minutes (ACS, 2019). In fact, only about 10.5% of residents live and work within the county, and more than 70% of the county's workforce commutes to jobs in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and other West Virginia counties as they cannot find gainful employment within Preston County.<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> TIP Strategies, 2017; Photo: Cheat River Trail Trestle Bridge below Rowlesburg (Mitchell Stickler)

# OUTDOOR RECREATION IN PRESTON COUNTY

Preston County lies in a true sweet spot for outdoor recreation. With ample trails and the Cheat River in the county and additional destinations bordering on all sides, the county offers a strong slate of complementary outdoor activities for visitors.

Preston County has been a major **whitewater boating** destination since the 1960s, prized for its incredible density of quality, easily accessible whitewater runs. The Cheat Narrows and Cheat Canyon are considered legendary among boaters, and many tributaries such as the Big Sandy and Little Sandy are extremely popular among expert whitewater kayakers.



**Rock climbing** is a popular activity at Coopers Rock State Forest and Snake Hill WMA, which are considered hidden gems for climbers in the Mid-Atlantic region.



The Cheat River is a productive **fishery** for smallmouth bass, walleye, and muskie. Preston County is also home to numerous stocked and native trout streams. Several Cheat River tributaries maintain native brook trout populations, and others are stocked by both private entities and the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources.



West Virginia is home to the highest density of whitewater streams and rivers in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Preston County is one of the most productive counties for **hunting** in West Virginia. In 2017 Preston County topped the statewide charts for antlerless deer, muzzleloader, and crossbow harvests.<sup>2</sup>



**Flatwater boating** is available on numerous private lakes and the **Cheat River Water Trail**, which offers 40 miles of pristine paddling on the Upper Cheat River from Hendricks in Tucker County to Rowlesburg. The river features sections of calm pools, shallow riffles, and a few class I rapids, making it perfect for novice boaters, family trips, and overnights with a canoe full of camping gear and fishing poles.



**ATV, UTV, and off-road motorcycle riding** is a major pastime in Preston County, with many popular routes traversing unpaved roads on private and public lands.

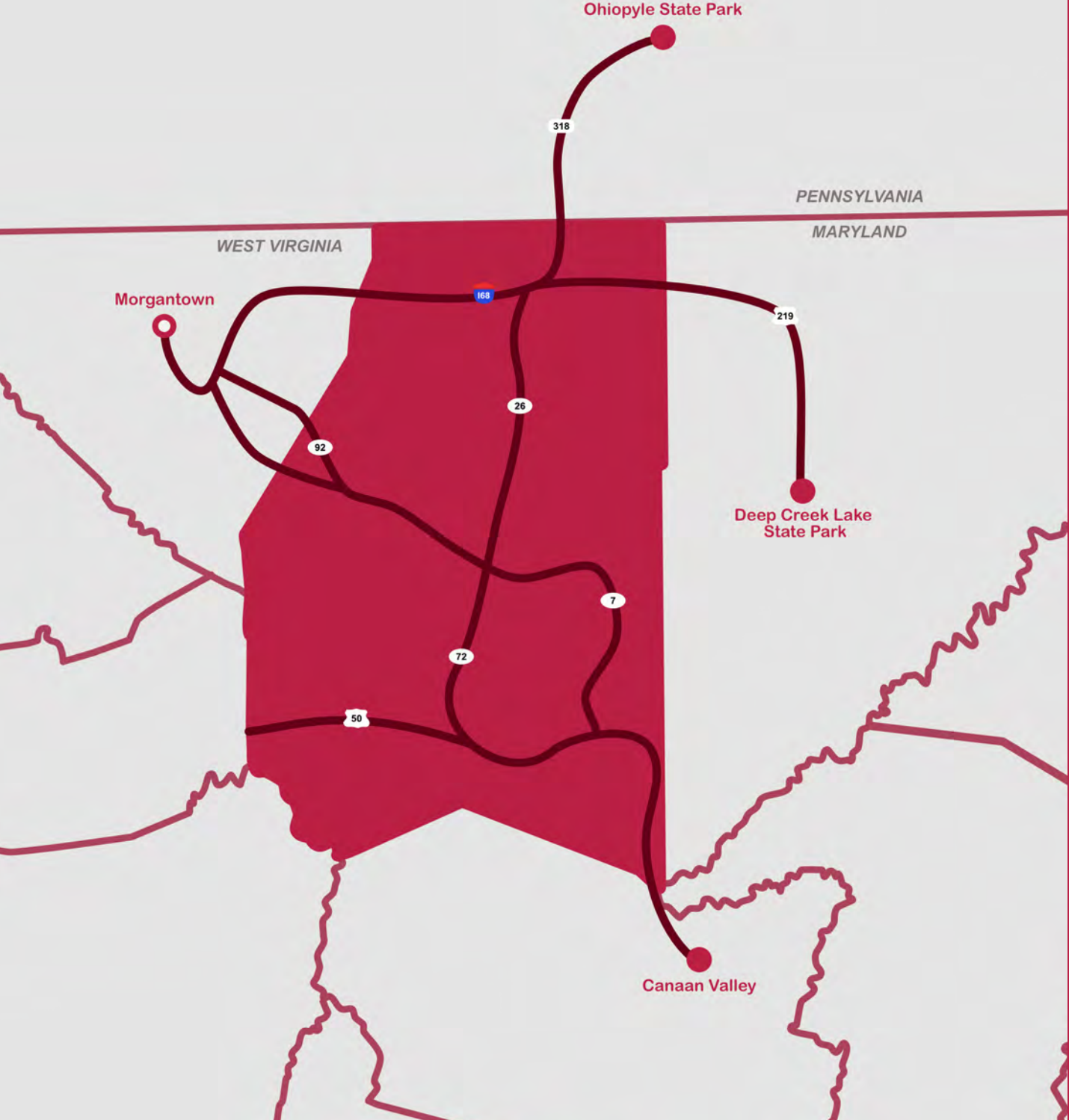
Additional opportunities for **downhill skiing, cross country skiing, motorboating, and other activities** are found nearby in neighboring counties.





# Recreation travel in Preston County

Preston County already attracts visitors who come to the county to recreate outdoors. Yet the county also lies across several major routes between the Morgantown metropolitan area and prominent outdoor recreation destinations in neighboring counties, including Deep Creek Lake (Maryland), Ohiopyle (Pennsylvania), and Canaan Valley (Tucker County). This graphic shows the major corridors for recreation traffic across Preston County.



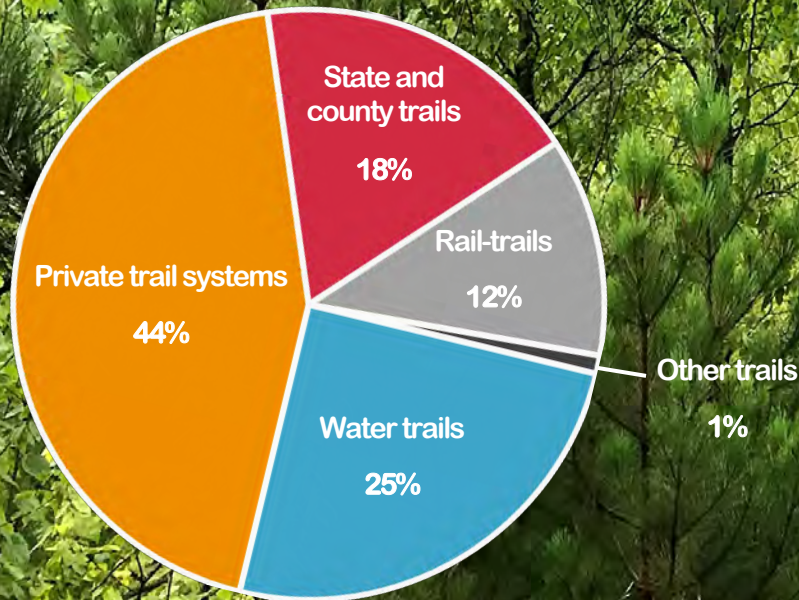
# TRAILS

Preston County is also home to 65 miles of the Allegheny Trail, a 290-mile trail route across eastern West Virginia. However, the majority (54 miles) of the trail in Preston County is motorized, routed on public roads including major road corridors such as Route 50. The trail through Cheat Canyon is the only non-motorized section of the Allegheny Trail within Preston County.

The 137 miles of non-motorized trails in Preston County can be broken into two primary categories: land-based trails and water trails.

- 98.5 miles: traditional, land-based trails
- 38.5 miles: the Upper Cheat River Water Trail

These can be further broken down into proportion by trail type, shown in the chart below.



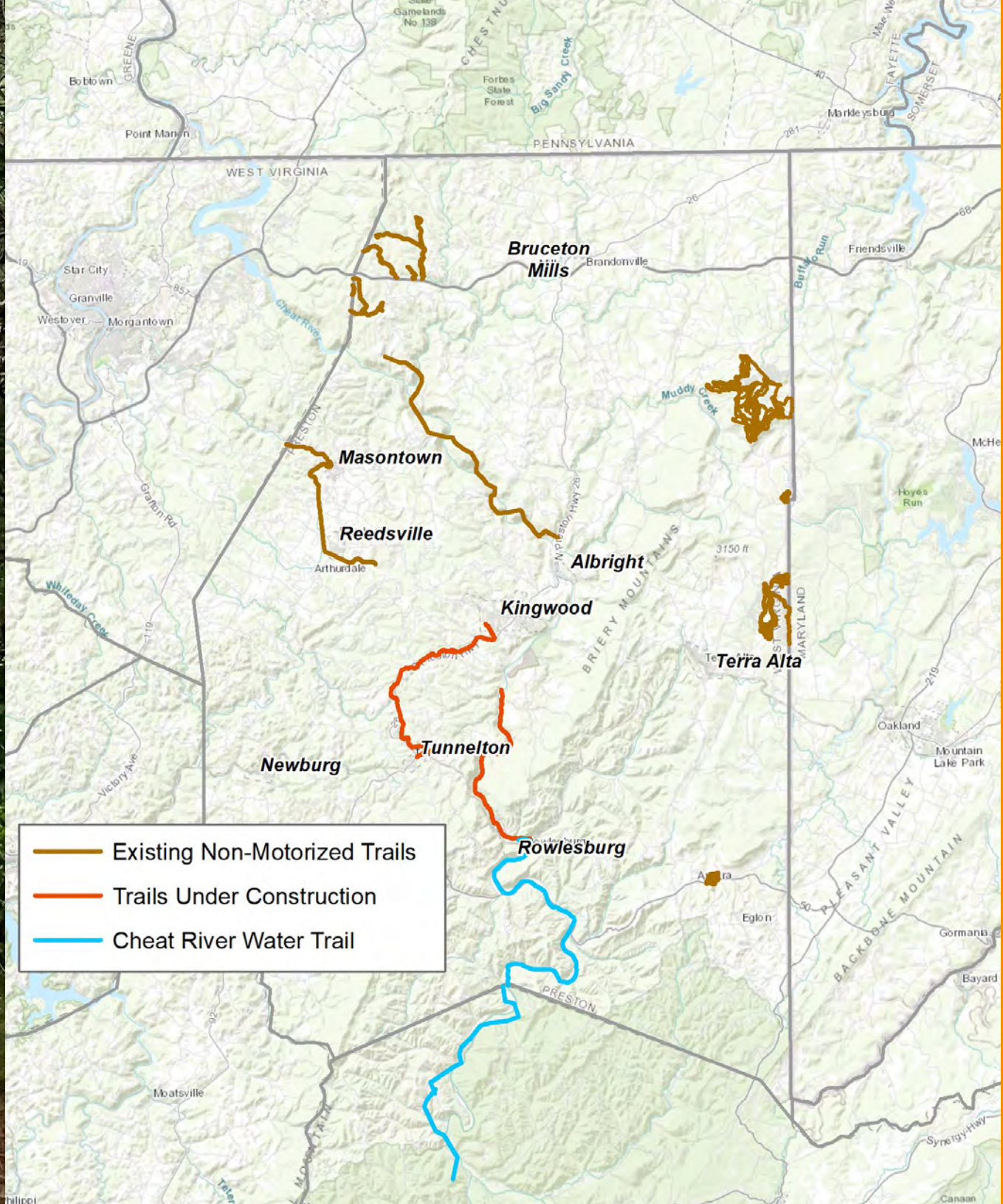


Photo: The Pines, Big Bear Lake Trail Center (Jeff Simcoe)

## TRAILS ON LAND

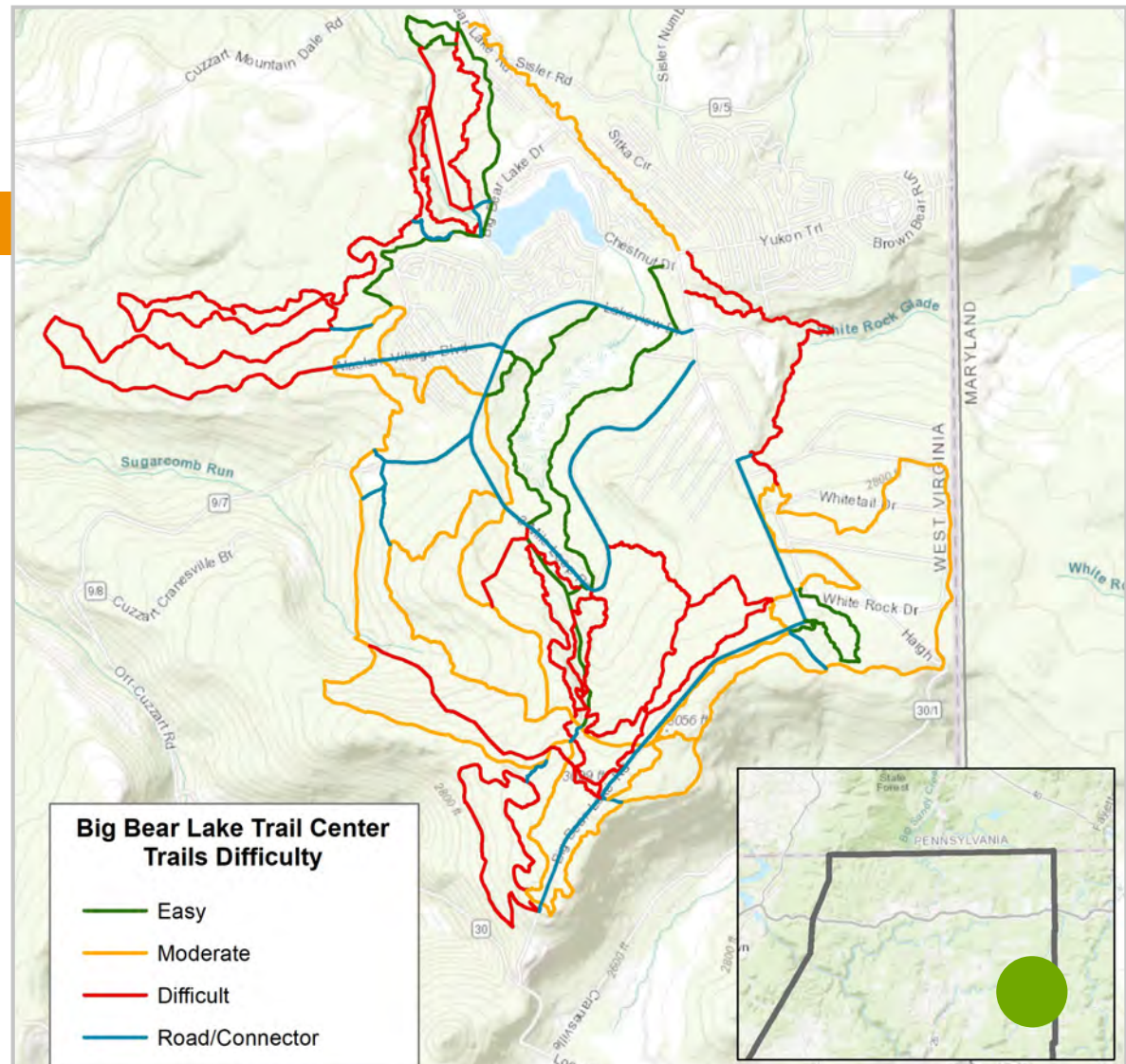
Preston County has 98.8 miles of non-motorized, land-based trails, described below.

### PRIVATE TRAIL SYSTEMS (58%)

#### Big Bear Lake Trail Center

The Big Bear Lake Trail Center is a privately owned trail system within Big Bear Lake Family Campgrounds. Big Bear's 50 miles of purpose-built trails—most built specifically for mountain biking—make up 43% of the total trail miles within Preston County.

As the host of several prominent trail races and mountain bike festivals, Big Bear is now one of the leading mountain bike trail centers in the Mid-Atlantic. Decades of trail development by experienced mountain bikers resulted in a network of trails across roughly 3,000 acres. The terrain at Big Bear Lake has everything to offer: gradual climbs, large embedded rocks, tight slaloms, challenging rock gardens, and steep downhills. The trails wind through knee-deep ferns, soft needle pine plantations, and groves of mountain laurel. Per Big Bear's reporting system, the bulk of trails are rated as moderate or greater difficulty. However, recent trail additions include the creation of a race course for youth mountain bike teams sanctioned by the National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA).



**Existing trip corridors:** According to the Big Bear Lake Trail Center, a significant portion of their existing overnight visitors plan mountain bike trips that include stops at Big Bear, Canaan Valley, and Deep Creek Lake in neighboring Garrett County, Maryland (Simcoe, 2019). This existing trip corridor underscores the Mountaineer Trail Network's potential for collaborative regional marketing.

## Trail tourism at Big Bear Lake

**Big Bear Lake Trail Center sells approximately 200–300 season mountain bike trail passes per year for \$30 each, as well as an additional 500 or so day use passes at \$10 each. Several major trail events are held each year onsite, including:**

**The Ragnar Trail Appalachia:** Part of a national series of running relay races, this event brings 2,000 runners to Big Bear for the three-day event every summer.

**Dirt Fest WV:** Formerly sponsored by the now defunct Dirt Rag Magazine, the Dirt Fest WV was a three-day event that, in 2019, had 1,200 participants and 60 vendors, including 15 bike companies that offered onsite bike demos. With the closure of Dirt Rag Magazine in 2020, Big Bear Lake Trail Center plans to reboot the event as Big Bear Bike Bash in order to continue this favorite Mid-Atlantic mountain bike festival.

**Big Bear XC Classic:** This eight and 16-mile bike race is part of the West Virginia Mountain Bike Association's annual race series. 108 participants raced in 2019.

Other events include an annual race hosted for the NICA youth mountain bike league and a number of smaller events, skills clinics, and camps.

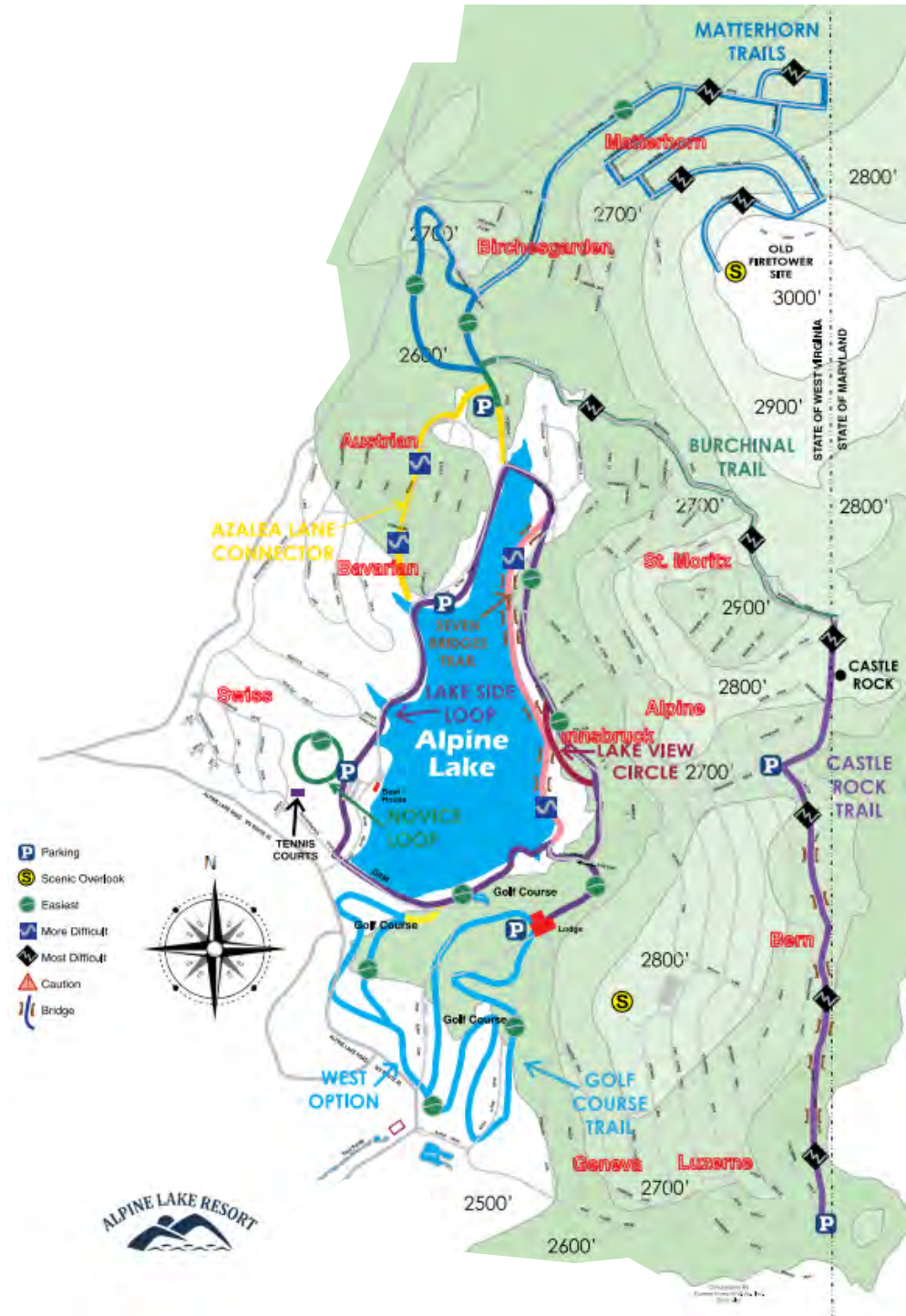


These events bring riders from up and down the east coast and Canada and have helped Big Bear get exposure among a wider network of riders around the region and country.



## Alpine Lake Resort

Alpine Lake Resort is a 2,000-acre private resort just east of Terra Alta, WV, located right on the Maryland border. Owned by the Alpine Lake Property Owners Association, the resort boasts a number of features including a 150-acre lake, an 18-hole golf course and driving range, a beach, a 35-room hotel, a historic lodge with meeting rooms and other amenities, and over 17 miles of trails for hiking, biking, cross country skiing, and snowshoeing. The trails cover a range of difficulty, ranging from wide, gravel paths to narrow, natural surface singletrack, and are open to the public for day-use. Strava data and other anecdotal evidence suggests that at least some trail users regularly cross the West Virginia/Maryland border between Alpine Lake Resort and the neighboring Garrett State Forest which, in turn, connects directly to Swallow Falls Natural Area and Herrington Manor State Park.



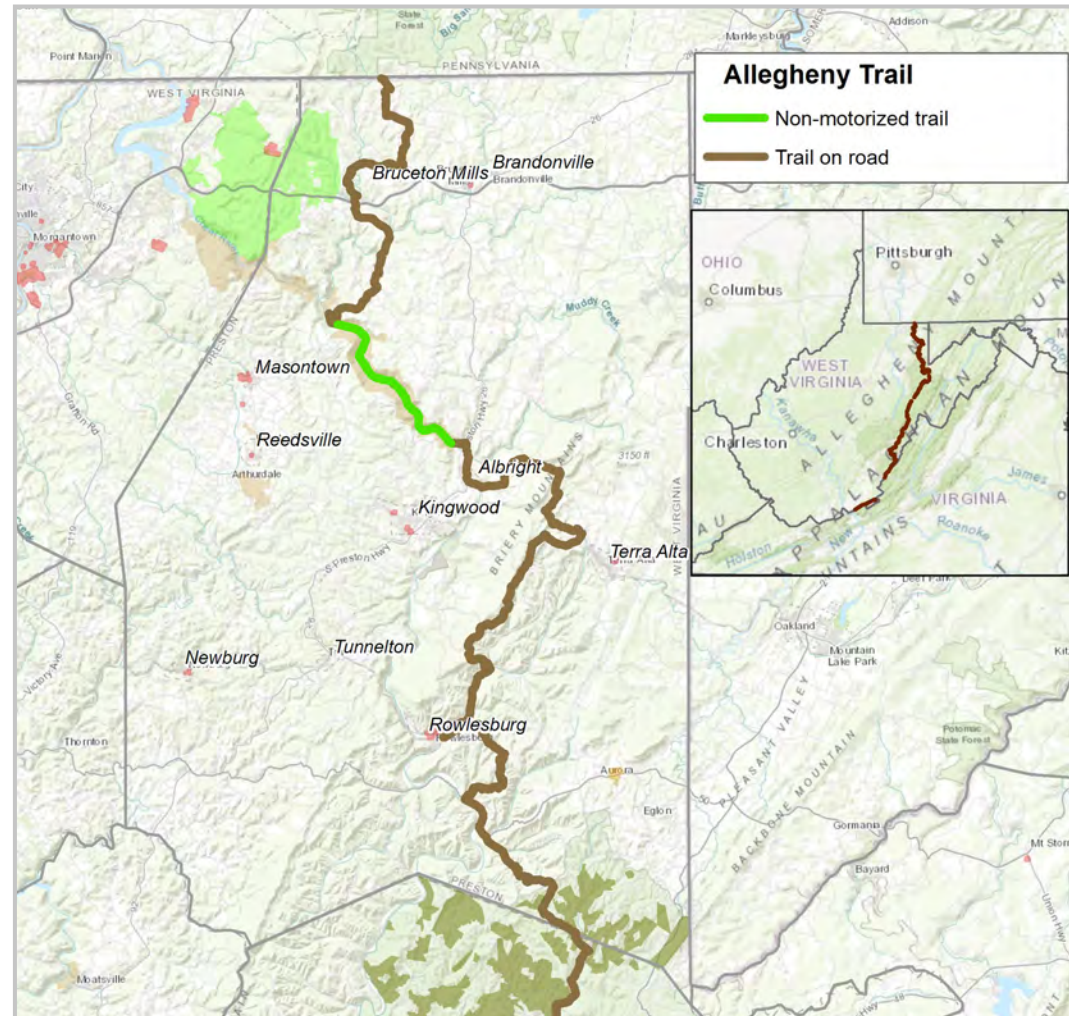


## STATE AND COUNTY TRAILS (23%)

Twenty-three percent (27.2 miles) of trails are located on traditional public lands in Preston County. These include:

### Allegheny Trail

Built and maintained by the West Virginia Scenic Trails Association, the Allegheny Trail follows an old railroad and logging road for 9.4 miles along the north shore of the iconic Cheat Canyon Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Surrounded by steep canyon walls, the trail offers a relatively flat course, with portions maintained in recent years as a haul road. The West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (WVDNR) currently limits recreational use of the Cheat Canyon WMA to hunting, fishing, hiking, and nature study. As a result, biking is not currently permitted on the WMA section of the Allegheny Trail. A short section of the Allegheny Trail, approximately between Terra Alta and Camp Dawson, is non-motorized. The section partially utilizes abandoned county road rights-of-way and crosses private land.



**The Allegheny Trail** is a 290-mile trail route across eastern West Virginia, including 65 miles through Preston County. The majority (54 miles) of the trail in Preston County is motorized, routed on public roads including major road corridors such as Route 50. The trail through Cheat Canyon is the only non-motorized section of the Allegheny Trail within Preston County.

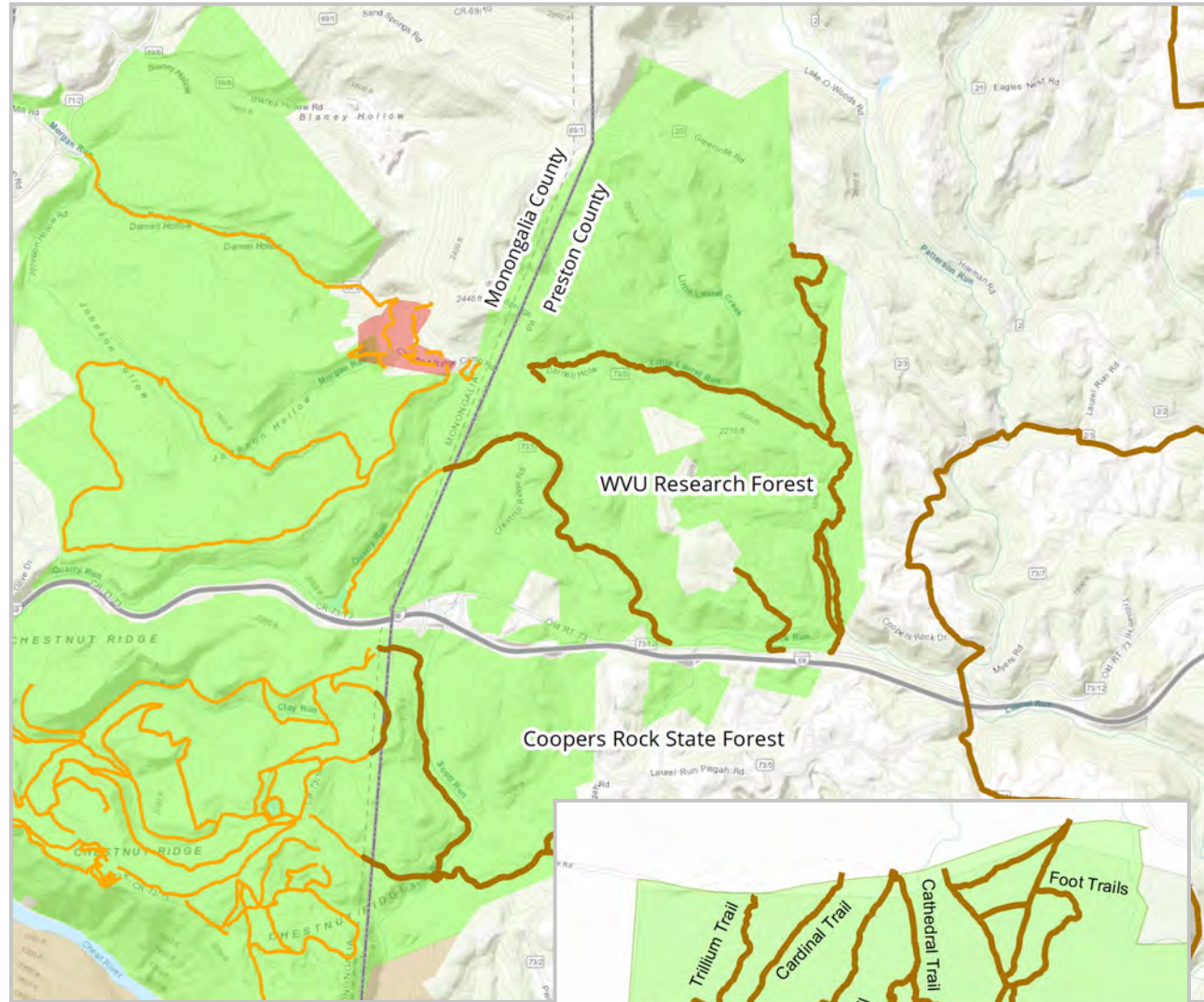


### Coopers Rock State Forest/ West Virginia University (WVU) Research Forest

The section of Coopers Rock State Forest that lies north of Interstate 68 is managed under agreement by WVU. The area is home to numerous trails, many of which are within Preston County. This section of Coopers Rock State Forest is not as heavily utilized by mountain bikers but is popular with day-hikers, hunters, and other visitors. Most of the trails in this section are wide and not challenging from a technical standpoint.

### Coopers Rock State Forest and State Park

Coopers Rock State Forest and State Park collectively make up the portion of Coopers Rock that lies on the southern side of Interstate 68. The majority of mountain biking occurs within this section of the park and, with the exception of Scott's Run Trail, the vast majority of Coopers Rock trails that are heavily used by mountain bikers fall within Monongalia County. Coopers Rock hosts numerous trail events each year, including at least two mountain bike races: the Henry Clay 30K and the Coopers Rock Benduro. A wide variety of trail difficulties can be found within the park, though most trails feature some level of rocky sandstone features for which Coopers Rock is known.



### Cathedral State Park

Cathedral's marquee attraction is the largest stand of uncut hemlock forest in West Virginia. The park is quite small (133 acres), but offers three miles of wide, easily accessible hiking trails. Mountain biking is not permitted in the park.



## RAIL-TRAILS (16%)

**Rail-trails are vital resources for health, wellness, connection, and recreation in Preston County. Preston County is home to a growing network of 18.5 miles of rail-trail, and several additional rail-trail projects are currently underway.**

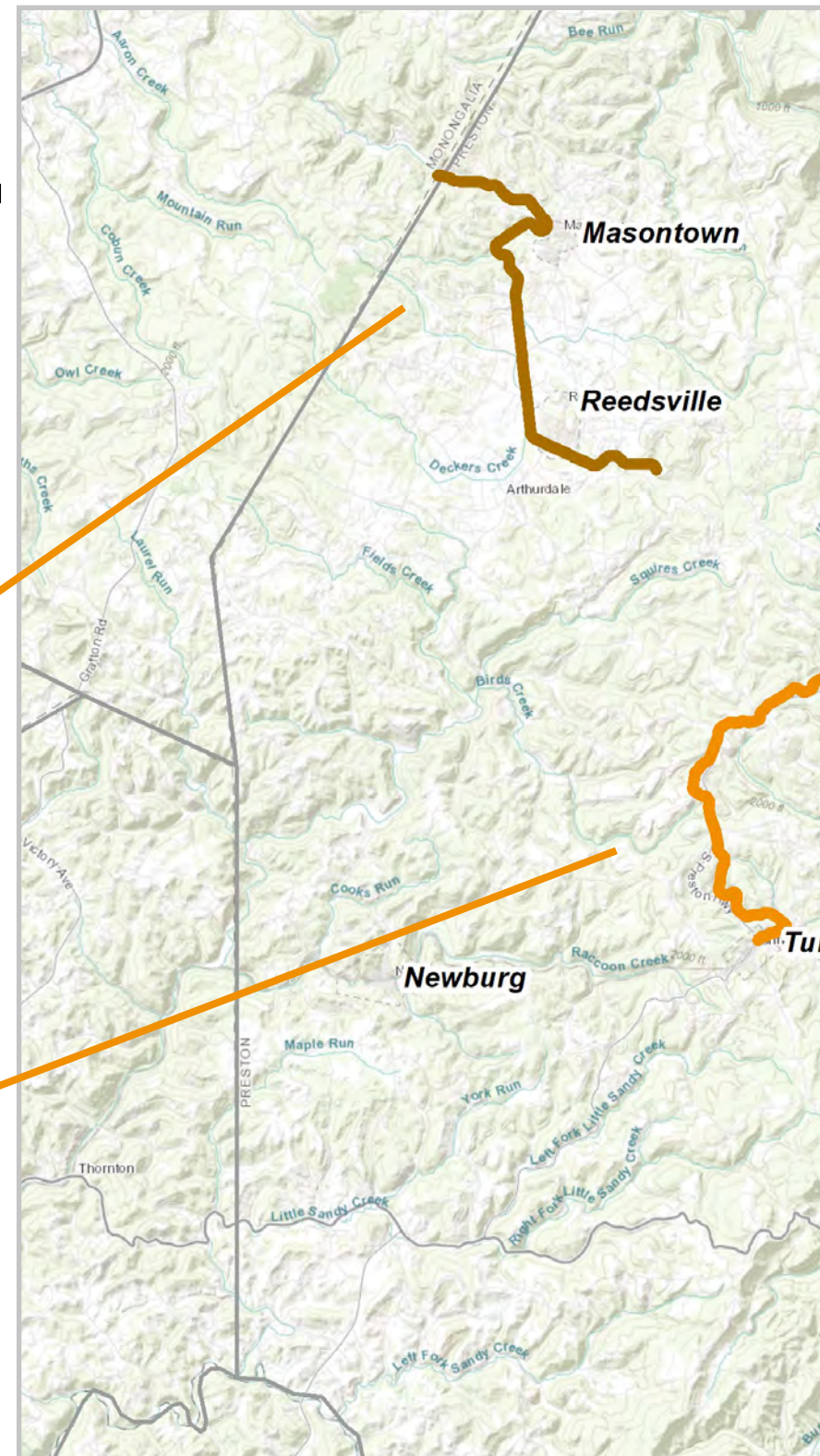
With existing connections to the Mon River Trail System and the soon-to-be-completed Parkersburg to Pittsburgh Corridor, cyclists will soon be able to ride their bikes from Preston County to Ohio and Washington, D.C., launching it into the same class as such famous attractions as the Great Allegheny Passage in neighboring Pennsylvania and Maryland. Just last year the GAP trail played host to over 63,000 through-riders (cyclists who rode from one end to the other) and nearly a million trail users total, many of whom utilize nearby services. Once planned rail-trail expansions are completed, Preston County will effectively be connected to the GAP, which will further enhance Preston County as a trail destination.

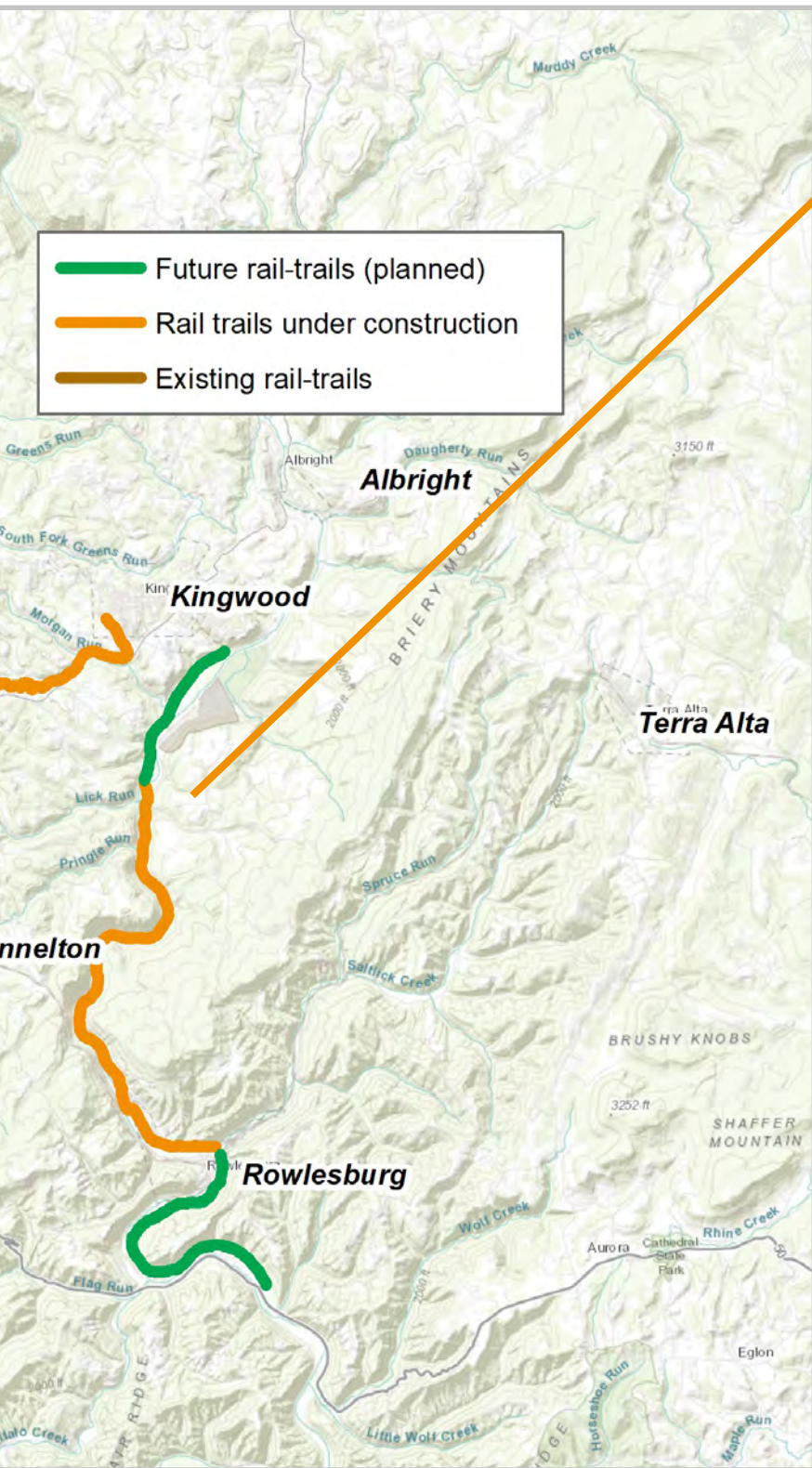
### Deckers Creek Rail-Trail

The Deckers Creek Rail-Trail extends eight miles through Preston County from its current terminus near Reedsville to the Monongalia County line, from which it continues an additional 11 miles to downtown Morgantown. The Deckers Creek Rail-Trail is part of the greater Mon River Trail System, a vibrant 48-mile rail-trail network in north-central West Virginia and a critical link in the 330-mile Parkersburg to Pittsburgh Corridor currently underway. More than 205,000 rail-trail riders spent approximately \$6 million within the trails' three-county footprint in 2017, and local trail usage skyrocketed in 2020 during the COVID-19 crisis. While much of this activity is concentrated around downtown Morgantown, Preston County's inclusion in this major rail-trail corridor opens tremendous opportunity for further development and enhancement.

### The West Virginia Northern Rail-Trail

Purchased by Friends of the Cheat and the Preston County Parks and Recreation Commission (PCPaRC) in 2015, the West Virginia Northern Rail-Trail is a scenic 10-mile greenway running from Kingwood to Tunnelton. The condition of the trail corridor varies widely along the route. As of June 2020, the first 0.75 miles of the trail in Tunnelton has been completed, and the first two miles of trail in Kingwood is expected to be completed in the summer of 2020, funded by a \$420,000 Recreational Trails Program grant. PCPaRC is actively pursuing funding for design and other pre-construction activities for other sections of trail (estimated around \$2.6 million) as well as trailheads and other adjacent features and continues to work closely with the communities that the trail corridor passes through to raise funds, increase awareness, and engage in activities such as cleanups. Estimated \$3,000,000 for design and construction of the whole 10-mile corridor.





### The Cheat River Rail-Trail

After nearly fifteen years of planning, fundraising, and negotiations, the Cheat River Rail-Trail will soon be a reality. Friends of the Cheat secured over \$4 million from the West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection's (WVDEP's) Abandoned Mine Lands (AML) Pilot Program to construct eight miles of trail along the abandoned railroad corridor and destination trailhead. From its future trailhead in Manheim, the Cheat River Rail-Trail will follow the east bank of the river along the Cheat Narrows, a renowned stretch of whitewater with Class III rapids. The trail will then cross the river across the historic trestle bridge and into the future Cheat River Interpretive Center and Trailhead, then continuing for a few more miles to the Route 7 Bridge. Bringing trail access to the Cheat Narrows will offer unparalleled access to one of most scenic parts of the river and open the door for increased recreational use. Further stages of development will bring the trail all the way into downtown Rowlesburg.

### PCPaRC Initiatives

PCPaRC is engaged in numerous trail projects beyond the West Virginia Northern Rail Trail. Some of these projects are small in scope but result in large improvements, such as the connector to Deckers Creek Rail-Trail in Reedsville, completed in early spring 2020. This project formalized a small corridor already in use by residents that connects the trail to a residential neighborhood and, through walkable streets, to Reedsville City Park. There are plans to add other features to this access point. There are similar plans to develop enhanced access features in Masontown. PCPaRC is also involved with maintaining, improving, and publicizing existing trail assets, such as the Chestnut Trail (a one-mile loop adjacent to Preston High School) and has a number of bike-focused trail projects in the very early planning stages for that area. These projects are likely to be accelerated by a number of factors, including the possibility of a Preston County-based team joining the West Virginia Interscholastic Cycling League.



## OTHER TRAILS (3%)

Preston County is also home to several small trails. One such trail is found at the Cranesville Swamp Nature Preserve, a property of The Nature Conservancy, which features 1.7 miles of trails and a 1,500-foot boardwalk for foot traffic only. Several other trails, all less than a half-mile in length, are found at the Bruceton Mills Public Fishing Area, Bruceton School, the Terra Alta Community Park, and the Terra Alta/East Preston School.



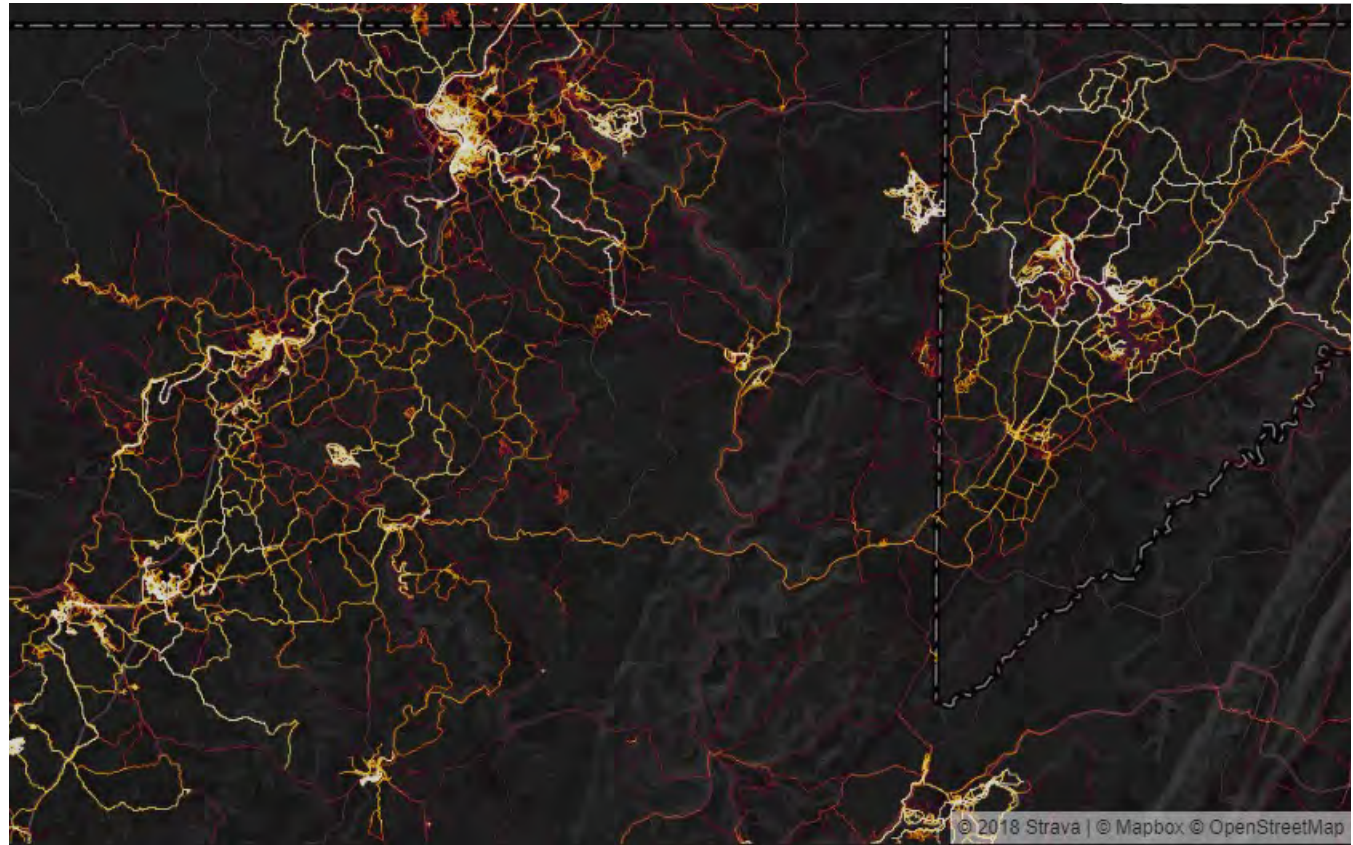
Photo: Cranesville Swamp boardwalk (The Nature Conservancy)

This table outlines types of recreation permitted as well as other designed features for each existing trail system. This data shows the bulk of Preston County's trails are intended for walking or hiking, while biking is permitted on nearly three-quarters of all trails.

Area/Trail	Trail length (miles)	Hiking allowed	Biking allowed	ADA accessible	Fitness stations
Big Bear Lake Camplands	49.1	48.5	49.1	0	0
Alpine Lake Resort	17.5	17.5	17.5	0	0
Bruceton Mills Public Fishing Area	0.1	0.1	0	0	0
Bruceton School	0.3	0.3	0	0	0
Cathedral State Park	3.8	3.8	0	0	0
Cheat Canyon Wildlife Management Area	9.4	9.4	0	0	0
Coopers Rock State Park/Forest	4.0	4.0	4	0	0
Coopers Rock State/WVU Research Forest	8.8	8.8	8.7	0	0
Cranesville Swamp Nature Preserve	1.7	1.7	0	0	0
Terra Alta Community Park	0.5	0.5	0	0	0.5
Terra Alta/East Preston School	0.3	0.3	0	0	0.3
Allegheny Trail, Section 1 (non-road partition)	2.3	2.3	0	0	0
Deckers Creek Rail-Trail	8.3	8.3	0	8.3	0
West Virginia Northern Rail-Trail (under construction)	10.2	10.2	10.2	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>116.3</b>	<b>116.3</b>	<b>89.5</b>	<b>8.3</b>	<b>0.8</b>

## Recreational trail and road use in Preston County

What are the most popular trails for hiking and biking in Preston County? In the absence of comprehensive trail user survey data, one way to determine the relative popularity of recreational routes is by analyzing data from social media and location-aware devices, such as cell phones, Fitbits, smart watches, and GPS bike computers. Increasingly used by runners, cyclists, and other athletes to track their workouts, these devices yield powerful data that provides key insights into what trails and roads are most frequently used for outdoor recreation. For example, this heat map from Strava<sup>5</sup> visualizes routes in and around Preston County that are most utilized by runners and cyclists. Based on this information, the relative popularity of trails and routes can be inferred.



### Key takeaways from the Strava Heat Map

#### **Preston County lies directly between two very active clusters of recreational activity.**

The Morgantown-Fairmont-Clarksburg metropolitan area to the west and the Deep Creek Lake area in Garrett County, Maryland, to the east.

**Big Bear Lake Trail Center is extremely popular.** The heat map indicates that it is in the highest tier of use.

#### **Rail-trails are also highly utilized.**

The Deckers Creek Rail-Trail is the only trail asset within the county that appears to equal the popularity of Big Bear Lake.

**Preston County's existing trail assets are all utilized to varying degrees.** Some parks and trails are more popular than others: Cathedral State Park and the exercise trail around Bruceton School are very popular, whereas Cranesville Swamp and the Terra Alta school and park trails see less traffic.

Most of Preston County's towns are home to runners, walkers, and/or cyclists who are using their local roads, streets, and sidewalks for exercise and recreation.

While road use by cyclists in Preston County is noticeably less than in surrounding counties, there are a few heavily utilized routes. These routes are often associated with the county's rail-trails and other highly popular locales, such as neighboring Garrett County, Maryland.

<sup>5</sup>Strava is a popular and widely used platform for recording and sharing location-aware workout information. [www.strava.com/heatmap](http://www.strava.com/heatmap)

**Road and gravel cycling in Preston County.** Preston County is home to more miles of county roads than any other county in the state. With connections to highly accessible rail trails, countless breathtaking views, and routes of historical significance, Preston County is a popular destination for road cyclists, many of whom live in Preston and neighboring counties. Mirroring national trends, cycling on gravel roads (known gravel riding) has grown particularly popular with cyclists in Preston County who enjoy the county's low traffic volume and seemingly endless gravel roads.

Preston County once hosted a number of cycling races on the county's notoriously challenging, adventurous backgrounds, such as the Dirty Double and Battle on Briery. While these organized events fell by the wayside in recent years, the region continues to support numerous formal and informal road cycling races and events. Fueled by enthusiasm from local riders, PCPaRC will be helping to formally revive the Dirty Double, a 70-mile gravel road race through the heart of Preston County that starts and ends in Rowlesburg.



## WATER TRAILS

**What is a water trail?** Water trails are designated routes along lakes, rivers, canals, and other bodies of water specifically designed for people using small boats like kayaks, canoes, single sailboats, or rowboats. Sometimes called “blueways,” water trails are the aquatic equivalent of a hiking trail (or “greenway”).

### Cheat River

The Cheat River is a central, defining feature of Preston County. From its headwaters in the Monongahela National Forest, the five forks of the Cheat join to form the Cheat River near the town of Parsons in neighboring Tucker County. The Cheat then flows north past the towns of St. George, Rowlesburg, Albright, and Cheat Lake before discharging into the Monongahela River at Point Marion in Pennsylvania.

While portions of the Cheat River flow through Tucker and Monongalia counties, 40 miles of the river’s 78-mile main stem pass through Preston County. The Cheat River watershed offers a broad range of social, economic and recreational opportunities for its estimated 40,000 residents. The towns of Parsons (1,523), Rowlesburg (461), Kingwood (2,943), Albright (311), and others draw their drinking water from the Cheat River. While some residents in the watershed boast of multiple generations born and raised on the same homestead, others have chosen to settle in the area specifically for its incredible natural beauty and abundant recreational opportunities.

Home to some of the best recreational boating in the country, the Cheat River and its tributaries are known as a haven for whitewater enthusiasts. Boaters took to the Cheat River in the 1960s, making it the first commercially rafted river in West Virginia. Since then, the commercial whitewater industry in the Cheat has waned, but the river remains extremely popular among expert whitewater paddlers from across the eastern U.S. who come each year to float the Cheat Canyon, the Cheat Narrows, and tributaries such as Big Sandy Creek.

Calmer sections of the river, including the Upper Cheat River Water Trail and the flatwater section of Big Sandy Creek located above Bruceton Mills, offer scenic flat water float trips, swimming holes, and fishing opportunities.





## Upper Cheat River Water Trail

Designated as an official water trail in 2013, the Upper Cheat River Water Trail offers 38.5 miles of scenic flatwater boating through some of West Virginia's most lush and biodiverse terrain.

The water trail starts in Tucker County, with access points on both the Black Fork and Shavers Fork, these major tributaries meet to form the main stem of the Cheat River in the city of Parsons. From there, it flows north into Preston County through deep, clear pools, and wide, rocky shallows to the trail's terminus in Rowlesburg.

There are currently nine public access points located throughout the Upper Cheat River Water Trail, which allow for trips of various lengths and scenic opportunities. Of these nine river access points, two are located within Preston County, including:

- Riverview Lounge on Route 50, and
- Rowlesburg Town Park, the terminus of the water trail.

These and other takeouts offer food, camping, restrooms, and other amenities, making the water trail accessible for both day and overnight float trips.

The Upper Cheat River Water Trail is managed by a committee led by Friends of the Cheat and including the following organizations: the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources; National Park Service's Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program; Kingwood Veterans of Foreign Wars; Blackwater Outdoor Adventures; and representatives from the cities of Rowlesburg, Parsons, and Hendricks.

The popularity of the water trail has grown each year, evident through formal participation in FOC's annual "Meet the Cheat" events and anecdotal observation by riverside landowners and frequent trail users. Further, local businesses report growth in rental equipment (kayaks and tubes) and use of shuttle services (Blackwater Outdoor Adventures and Patriots 4 Resort, both in St. George).



Maps: Adapted from Friends of the Cheat, Photo: Adam Webster

## Restoring the Cheat

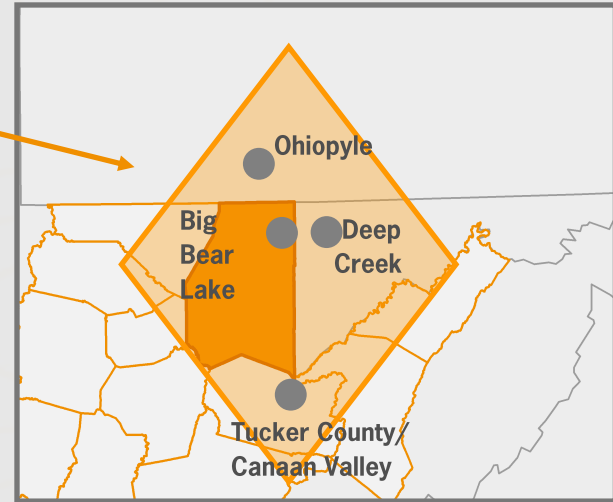
The health and vibrancy of the Cheat River today is testament to successful watershed restoration undertaken over the last three decades. Beginning in the 1970s, whitewater paddlers began noticing effects of acid mine drainage on the Cheat River. Then in 1994 and 1995, two major mine blowouts released acidic mine water into the river just upstream of Cheat Canyon. These disasters turned the river orange for miles and had devastating impacts on the river. Following the major mine blow outs, Cheat's commercial whitewater industry suffered over a 50% drop in business, even while national rafting participation increased by 33% during the same time period. As a result, American Rivers named the Cheat River one of the country's ten most endangered rivers in 1995.

Yet today the Cheat River is once again teeming with life thanks to decades of coalition building, collaboration, and restoration. Since 1995, the Friends of the Cheat and its partners have implemented 19 acid mine drainage treatment systems on abandoned mine lands in the lower Cheat River watershed. The Cheat River main stem has been removed from the state's list of impaired waters for mining-related impacts, and Big Sandy Creek and Sovern Run are also on the verge of removal from this list.



## ASSESSMENT: EXISTING AND PLANNED TRAILS

Preston County is geographically positioned within a region of strong mountain bike and outdoor recreation activity, formed by neighboring **Tucker County, the Ohio-pyle area in southwestern Pennsylvania, and the Deep Creek Lake area of western Maryland.** **Big Bear Lake Trail Center** is a highly regarded trail system in the region and is already drawing out-of-state visitors to the county. In addition, Preston County is part of an established network of rail-trails linked to Monongalia County and beyond. However, key weaknesses are the lack of beginner-level trails and technical skills areas, as well as most trails' disconnection from population centers.



### Key strengths and assets: Preston County

- Strong assortment of existing trails
- Great highway and transportation access
- Prime location between urban areas and outdoor destinations
- Cheat River recreation opportunities

### REGIONAL CONNECTIVITY

- + The Deckers Creek Rail-Trail and Upper Cheat River Water Trail provide direct, existing linkages to other counties (Monongalia and Tucker)
- + Given the number of nearby trails and recreation areas, possibilities abound for strategic trail linkages

### LOCAL CONNECTIVITY

- While some existing trails are linked to communities, there is much room for improvement on connecting trails to local assets within the county

### ANCHOR DESTINATIONS

- + The county is already home to several key recreation areas that attract cyclists, whitewater boaters, hikers, and more

### How Preston County's biking-specific trails stack up:

#### Singletrack networks

- + Big Bear Lake Trail Center offers excellent system of singletrack trails

#### +Technical areas

- + Some trails at Big Bear offer technical features
- The county overall lacks technical areas

#### Beginner-friendly trails

- + The county features excellent rail-trails and a new NICA course at Big Bear
- + Entry-level trails are overall in short supply in Preston County
- + The Allegheny Trail through Cheat Canyon is a prime opportunity for biking, though management constraints do not currently allow it

## TRAIL OPPORTUNITIES

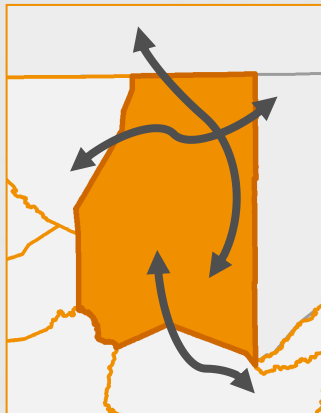
Given Preston County's slate of existing trails and recreation assets already in place, opportunities abound for new trail projects that will make the county even more attractive as an outdoor recreation destination.

Over the course of the planning process, the project team worked with stakeholders in Preston County to start a catalogue of potential trail opportunities on the horizon. In Appendix B, this list is designed as a tool

that local trail advocates can maintain and update over time.

Among these many potential projects, several emerged as key opportunities for Preston County and the Mountaineer Trail Network. Following the planning framework described on page 7, these potential trail projects fall in three categories of trail resources deemed important for successful trail-based tourism development:

### Trails that enhance regional connectivity between counties.



- Intercounty rail-trails
- Allegheny Trail
- Tucker and Garrett County connections

### Trails that link key assets within Preston County.



- Kingwood trail connections
- Rowlesburg trail connections
- Reedsville and Arthurdale connections

### Trails that develop or enhance an anchor attraction in the county.



- Big Bear Lake Trail Center
- Cheat River Trail Center

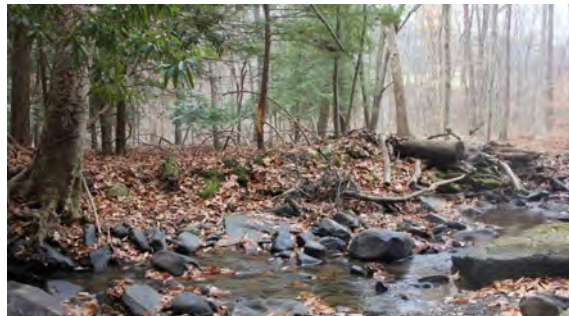
These opportunities represent just a few of the myriad of evolving trail options in the county and do not comprise a comprehensive. Local stakeholders are encouraged to update the catalogue in Appendix B as trail opportunities evolve over time.

## REGIONAL TRAIL CONNECTIVITY

Once built out, the Mountaineer Trail Network will consist of a patchwork of top-notch trail systems spread across northern West Virginia. Since the Network covers a vast footprint across 15 counties, not every trail recognized by the Mountaineer Trail Network will be physically connected. However, some existing trail assets across the Network are already linked, and many more could easily be connected by building strategic trail linkages.

Connecting trails within the Network represents a major opportunity for the Mountaineer Trail Network, and one that will set the Network apart as a world-class destination. After all, many parts of the country have great trails; yet how many places offer a regional destination where visitors can ride their bikes between top-tier trail systems, all linked to other outdoor recreation activities?

Preston County lies at the epicenter of several potential linkages that would physically connect existing trail assets within the Mountaineer Trail Network. The county already has some key trails already linking to neighboring counties. As outlined below, expanding these and building more strategic connections with other counties in the Mountaineer Trail Network presents a major opportunity for Preston County.



Photos: Daniel Boyd, Mike Breiding

## OPPORTUNITY: INTERCOUNTY RAIL-TRAILS

As of July 2020, Preston County is home to just 8.2 miles of rail-trails, made up entirely of the Deckers Creek Rail-Trail. Thanks to recent funding and planned projects, this figure is expected to more than double by 2022 to 29.1 miles of rail-trails across three different trails, launching Preston County into a new era of highly accessible scenic trails that will benefit residents and visitors alike.

While this progress represents a major win for the county, much work remains to be done. Each of the three rail-trails is effectively disconnected from each other, and, in some cases, disconnected from nearby communities. The Mountaineer Trail Network legislation has the potential to boost connectivity efforts into overdrive, paving the way for new access agreements for rail bed corridors and/or the development of other alternative routes.

The Deckers Creek Rail-Trail is the most well-used and popular single trail in Preston County. The trail begins in Morgantown, where Deckers Creek enters the Monongahela River, and follows the former Morgantown & Kingwood (M&K) railroad grade for approximately 11 miles before entering Preston County. Within Preston County, the trail continues for another eight miles through (or very near) the communities of Cascade, Masontown, Bretz, Reedsville, and Arthurdale before abruptly ending just east of Morgan Mine Road.

At some point in recent history, most of the M&K's rail bed between the current trail's end point and Kingwood was abandoned. Today, the sections of the rail bed are owned by at least 26 separate individuals, corporations, or public entities. This has complicated extension of the trail in the past, but the liability and other protections afforded by the Mountaineer Trail Network legislation may pave the way for a solution. Completing the Deckers Creek Rail-Trail would connect numerous communities from Kingwood to Morgantown along a contiguous, easy-to-access route, and, in the near future, connect those same communities to the larger rail-trail network extending from Parkersburg, WV, north to Pittsburgh, and east all the way to Washington D.C. via the Great Allegheny Passage trail.

## Deckers Creek Rail-Trail extension

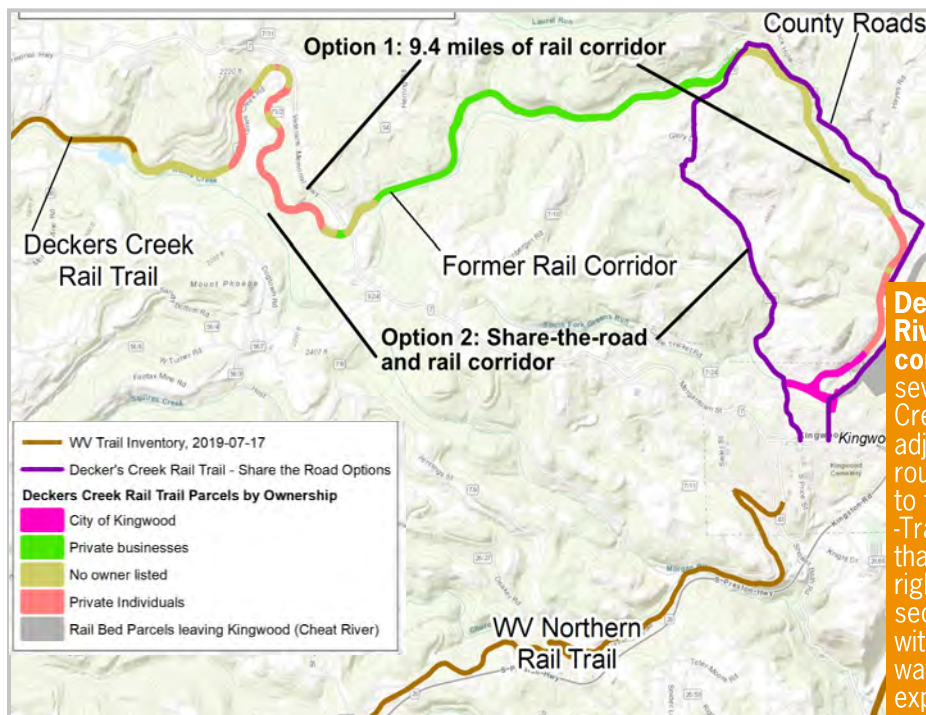
There are two possible options (or combination of options) for extending the Deckers Creek Rail-Trail to Kingwood.

**Option 1.** The first option is to utilize the protections and other mechanisms provided by Mountaineer Trail Network legislation to acquire or create right-of-way agreements along the M&K rail corridor. As visible in the map to the right, the M&K railroad grade winds its way through scenic farmland and forests before coming into Kingwood from the north. This map divides the owners into four groups for easy viewing, though the ownership of the rail bed is highly fragmented. With new, unprecedented protections for private landowners, the Mountaineer Trail Network legislation will likely have an appreciable effect on the willingness of current owners to engage in trail planning.

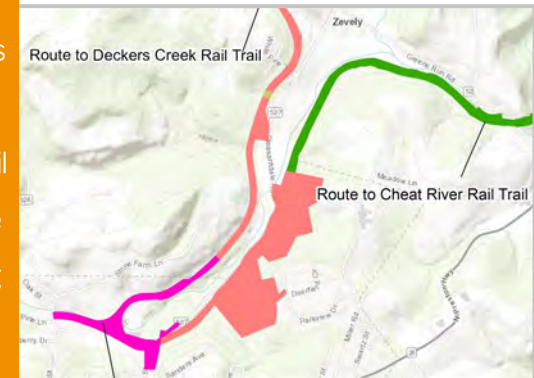
- 9.4 miles of rail-trail
- Requires purchase or right-of-way agreements with private landowners
- Approximate timeframe for completion: 5–10 years
- Estimated cost: \$3 million–5 million
- Key partners: private landowners

**Option 2.** The second option is to establish routes along roads using “share the road” signage, dedicated lanes, and/or other route establishment tools to effectively connect Kingwood with the Deckers Creek Trail. Using nearby and adjacent roads as alternative pathways offers its own set of complications, such as safety concerns, available shoulder space, etc; however, this option may enable a greater length of accessible trail to be established in a shorter amount of time. Shown below, the eastern third of the M&K railroad grade is paralleled by two county roads: Pleasantdale Road and Green’s Run Road (Oak Street & Hackel Barney Road, also pictured, offer a less coincident alternative). At the point at which Green’s Run Road reaches Pleasantdale (near the intersection with Hackel Barney Road), the M&K rail grade enters into a forested, rural area. Between this location and Rt. 7, the railroad grade is owned by two land holding companies. This fact, paired with the low incidence of intersection with residential areas makes it a relatively promising section to negotiate use as a rail-trail. The remaining 3.5 miles of rail bed, however, are not well-mirrored by county roads, so route-finding for this section remains a challenge.

- 2.6 miles of on-road corridors and 3.4 miles of rail-trail
- Requires using “share the road” signage
- Approximate timeframe for completion: 3–5 years
- Estimated cost: \$1.8 million
- Key partners: West Virginia Division of Highways, private landowners



**Deckers Creek to Cheat River Rail-Trail connections.** The last several miles of the Deckers Creek Rail-Trail fall almost adjacent to a proposed route connecting Kingwood to the future Cheat River Rail-Trail (see page 57). Given that these trail corridors are right next to each other, securing one of them, along with a few shorter rights-of-way could significantly expedite this trail connection.



## OPPORTUNITY: ALLEGHENY TRAIL

Perhaps more than any other trail in the county, the Allegheny Trail has the most to gain from Mountaineer Trail Network legislation. This long-distance trail spans the entire state, from the Mason-Dixon Line near Bruceton Mills all the way to the Virginia border, where it meets the Appalachian Trail. Fifty-four miles of the Allegheny Trail's route pass through Preston County and link the trail to two neighboring counties: Fayette County, Pennsylvania, to the north, and Tucker County to the south.

The Allegheny Trail could be a significant asset for Preston County and the Mountaineer Trail Network. However, the vast majority of that route follows roads—including Route 50 and other high-traffic roads—with no actual designated, separate trail for non-motorized users. The Mountaineer Trail Network legislation presents an opportunity for re-routing the current Allegheny Trail course through Preston County off of major roads and onto more scenic, back-country locales, which would enhance the trail's popularity and usage—especially through hikers and, potentially, bike-packers. While this would be a significant undertaking, it should nonetheless be part of the county's long-term vision for trail development.

In the shorter term, however, there are definite opportunities for enhancing the Cheat Canyon portion of the Allegheny Trail, which is currently the only off-road section of the trail within Preston County. Surrounded by steep canyon walls, this 9.4-mile section of the trail between Jenkinsburg and Albright offers a truly unique hiking experience, replete with scenic vistas, unique geography and physiography, and ample opportunity for wildlife viewing.

**Jenkinsburg to Snake Hill.** The canyon's northern terminus in Jenkinsburg lies just upstream from Snake Hill WMA and Coopers Rock State Forest in Monongalia County. This presents a strategic opportunity to link Cheat Canyon (and Preston County) to a key recreation area in Monongalia County.

Recent reconnaissance by FOC and Cheat Lake Rotary has shown an abandoned (and largely intact) rail-bed lies on the west side of the Cheat River between Jenkinsburg and Buzzard Run. This rail-bed connects to an unimproved, gated road that connects to Snake Hill Road and the adjoining Snake Hill WMA. As a result, a 7.9-mile trail (3.1 miles in Preston County, and 4.8 miles in Monongalia County) following this route could link Jenkinsburg and Cheat Canyon to Snake Hill WMA.

Much of this route lies on public land: The route would pass through only three parcels, owned by two private landowners. Because of the steep geography of the canyon, this route interferes very little, if at all, with current uses of the WMA or of adjoining private land.

Though the trail would largely follow a former rail-bed, much of the allure of this opportunity—and Cheat Canyon in general—is its rugged nature. As a result, this route could technically be recognized in its current condition as a trail. However, additional limited improvements could be conducted inexpensively by volunteers to enhance the access and quality of the trail.

- 7.9 miles of rail-trail (3.1 miles in Preston County)
- Requires purchase or right-of-way agreements and changing current bike access restrictions within Cheat Canyon WMA
- Approximate timeframe for completion: 2–3 years
- Estimated cost: \$10,000
- Key partners: private landowners, WVDNR

**Albright to Cheat Canyon connection.** While rerouting the entire Allegheny Trail off of public roads may be a long-term vision, plans are currently underway to re-route one highly used section from Cheat Canyon to Albright.

From the southern end of Cheat Canyon, the Allegheny Trail route currently follows Route 26 (the North Preston Highway) less than two miles to the center of Albright. This incredible short distance presents an opportunity to connect downtown Albright to the canyon via a new, non-motorized trail route.

Friends of the Cheat and other local partners have already begun initial legwork to identify a potential trail route which would pass through a number of private parcels with owners who are amenable to hosting a trail right-of-way, and several verbal commitments with landowners are already in place to make this happen. Several key properties in this corridor are owned by whitewater outfitters that have traditionally granted open river access. The map to the right illustrates a mostly agreed upon route for the westernmost portion of this route.

- 1.6 miles of rail-trail
- Requires purchase or right-of-way agreements
- Approximate timeframe for completion: 2–5 years
- Estimated cost: \$250,000–500,000
- Key partners: private landowners



Map: Friends of the Cheat

### Bike access in Cheat Canyon

While WVDNR does not currently allow bicycles within the Cheat Canyon WMA, cycling nonetheless maintains a presence in the canyon. Bull Run Road through Jenkinsburg is a popular cycling route, and anecdotal feedback indicates that bikes travel on the Allegheny Trail within the canyon with some frequency.

Restricting bike usage within Cheat Canyon is a missed opportunity as cycling offers a way to increase recreation within the canyon in a sustainable way. Limiting bike usage to the Allegheny Trail, which follows the course of a former railroad and logging road along a moderate grade along the river, would ensure that the canyon's rare and sensitive species would be minimally impacted. Connecting Jenkinsburg to Albright through the Canyon for cyclists is a strategic move that will have ripple effects for recreational traffic along the Cheat River.

The lawsuit settlement through which Cheat Canyon WMA was created lists biking as a prohibited activity within the protected area of the canyon. However, key players in the lawsuit, including the Sierra Club, Friends of Blackwater, and CLEAR, have all voiced openness to allow biking within the property. An amendment to the settlement agreement could effectively open the door for biking in the canyon.

## OPPORTUNITY: TUCKER AND GARRETT COUNTY CONNECTIONS

Traffic flows indicate that many travelers cross Preston County every day en route to other outdoor recreation areas in neighboring counties—particularly Tucker County to the southeast and Garrett County, Maryland, to the east. These travel patterns indicate that the eastern and southeastern parts of Preston County are ideally positioned for tourism-focused trail development focused on connections with Tucker and Garrett counties.

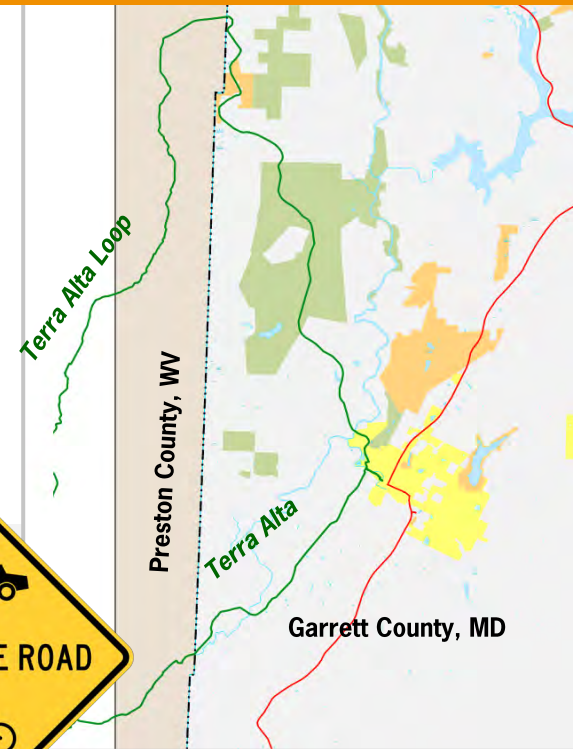
**Formalized cycling routes into Garrett County.** In recent years, Garrett County, Maryland has devoted some capital to formally recognizing popular road cycling routes within the county. The county is home to several large cycling events each year, including the Garrett County Gran Fondo and the Mountain Man Triathlon. Garrett Trails, a non-profit trails development organization in the county, has worked with these groups to accurately map popular routes as a baseline for planning future designated cycling routes.

Among these routes, the Terra Alta Loop passes through Preston County, which presents a strong opportunity for co-planning across state and county. The route passes directly through both Terra Alta and Aurora, and nearby locations such as Alpine Lake Resort, Cranesville Swamp, and several tourism and hospitality businesses could benefit from targeted promotion. Based on Strava data, the route is currently used by many riders, though not to the same degree as those entirely within Garrett County. Formal designation is very likely to increase ridership, exposing more people to Preston County's numerous assets.

- 20 miles of on-road routes with “share the road” signage
- Approximate timeframe for completion: 2–3 years
- Estimated cost: \$100,00
- Key partners: WVDOH, Maryland Department of Transportation State Highway Administration, Garrett County tourism entities and/or CVBs, event promoters



According to informal surveys at Big Bear Lake Trail Center, many non-local visitors planning trips to the region to mountain bike combine stops to ride at Big Bear Lake in Preston County, Deep Creek Lake in Garrett County, and Canaan Valley in Tucker County.



## Trails in the Monongahela National For-

Spanning 921,000 acres across 10 West Virginia counties, the Monongahela National Forest is a major recreation area in West Virginia. While only one percent (3,974 acres) of the National Forest falls within Preston County, significantly larger portions of the forest fall within neighboring Tucker County just south of the Preston County line.

Little trail or recreation development has taken place in this part of the Monongahela National Forest as management in this area focuses on timber resources and wildlife habitat, though forest roads are accessible for hunting and fishing. Significant planning and coordination with the U.S. Forest Service would be needed before any specific trail routes could be entertained. However, partnerships between the Mon Forest Towns Program and the Mountaineer Trail Network could open the door to possibilities for recreation development in this part of Preston and Tucker counties.

**Mon Forest Towns Program** is a partnership between the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development, West Virginia University (WVU), and others focused on connecting and supporting communities within the Monongahela National Forest.





**Upper Cheat River Water Trail connections.** Spanning 38.5 miles, the Upper Cheat River Water Trail is a central feature linking Preston County to Tucker County. One of the key locations along the water trail lies right on the border with Tucker County, where seven small, close islands lie in close proximity across the river channel. Known as Seven Islands, this area is highly desirable for enhancement for the water trail.

The islands themselves are owned by Allegheny Forestlands and experience intense, unsanctioned use. Perhaps more than any other feature of the Upper Cheat Water Trail, Seven Islands is in need of intentional recreation-minded management for both the benefit of users, the protection of owners, and the overall ecological health of the islands. Presently, the islands are utilized mostly as an adhoc campground.

Friends of the Cheat and its Cheat River Water Trail Committee have long-term visions of working with the West Virginia Land Trust to formally protect the islands, though the organization has been unable to secure access to the islands to date. However, the Mountaineer Trail Network legislation may allow for new avenues to be considered for this property. For example, a day-use area or an official campground on the islands would be an asset of almost immeasurable value to the water trail and would certainly become an extremely popular destination.

In the shorter term, there is still opportunity to increase access in this area, offer primitive, riverside camping options, and connect Preston and Tucker County via both water- and land-based trails.

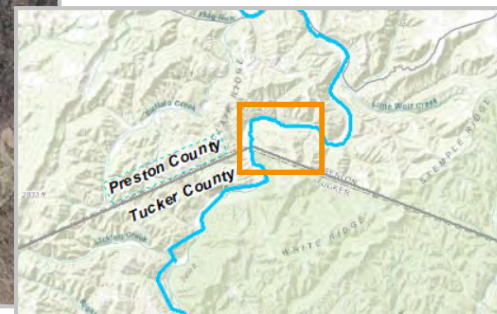
Friends of the Cheat has developed a working relationship with the Ward family, which owns land in the Seven Islands area and is interested in expanding non-motorized trail access and river access. In particular, the Ward family is interested in developing a 2.5-mile walking and biking trail following the western side (river left) of the Cheat River through their property, based on the abandoned portion of the Seven Islands Road. They envision public parking being available from two trailheads:

- A northern trailhead would be accessed from 5 miles in on the Seven Islands Road, as accessed from where US Rt. 50 intersects the road just north of Cheat River bridge, with a parking lot constructed on leased land.
- A southern trailhead location can be accessed from the intersection of the Seven Islands Road and Dog Run Road, near the Preston and Tucker county border. A new parking lot could be constructed at some point near this location, as well, depending on lease agreements.



Three day-use picnic areas, consisting of a flattened and graveled area and few picnic tables, will be constructed at each of the three major stream crossings: Big Run, Dead Man's Run, and Muddy Creek. Each picnic area will be accessible from both the trail and the river.

- 2.5 miles of double-track gravel trail
- Approximate timeframe for completion: 3–5 years
- Estimated cost: \$136,000
- Key partners: Friends of the Cheat, the Ward Family



## LOCAL CONNECTIVITY ENHANCEMENTS

A second major focus for trail opportunities in Preston County hinges on building trails that link assets within the county, including trails and recreation areas, towns, schools, and other key community assets.

- **Towns:** Economic development from trails is most powerful in places where trails link directly to a downtown. The presence of trails also enhances local quality of life and helps attract healthcare workers, educators, and other vital players in the local workforce. As a result, trail projects that link trails to towns represent a major priority for Preston County.
- **Trails, parks, and recreation areas:** As described throughout this plan, Preston County boasts an incredible density of outdoor recreation areas for a range of activities. Linking these areas by trail presents a major opportunity to enhance Preston County as an outdoor recreation destination.
- **Schools:** Linking trails to schools and other key community centers benefits the quality of life for local communities. Like other counties in the Mountaineer Trail Network, Preston County's rates of obesity (32%) and chronic diseases are elevated compared to other states (WVDHHR, 2014). Creating, improving, and promoting trails and other places to be physically active will likely translate into improved health outcomes for local children and other residents.

With several key trail projects currently underway, Preston County is already taking steps towards improving community connectivity. The following projects highlight some of the additional trail improvements that would enhance community and economic benefits within Preston County.





## OPPORTUNITY: KINGWOOD TRAIL CONNECTIONS

By 2022, Kingwood will be home to at least two rail-trails. Kingwood will be the northern terminus of the planned West Virginia Northern Rail-Trail, and its Northern Gateway will bring the trail adjacent to the Kingwood Civic Center upon completion.

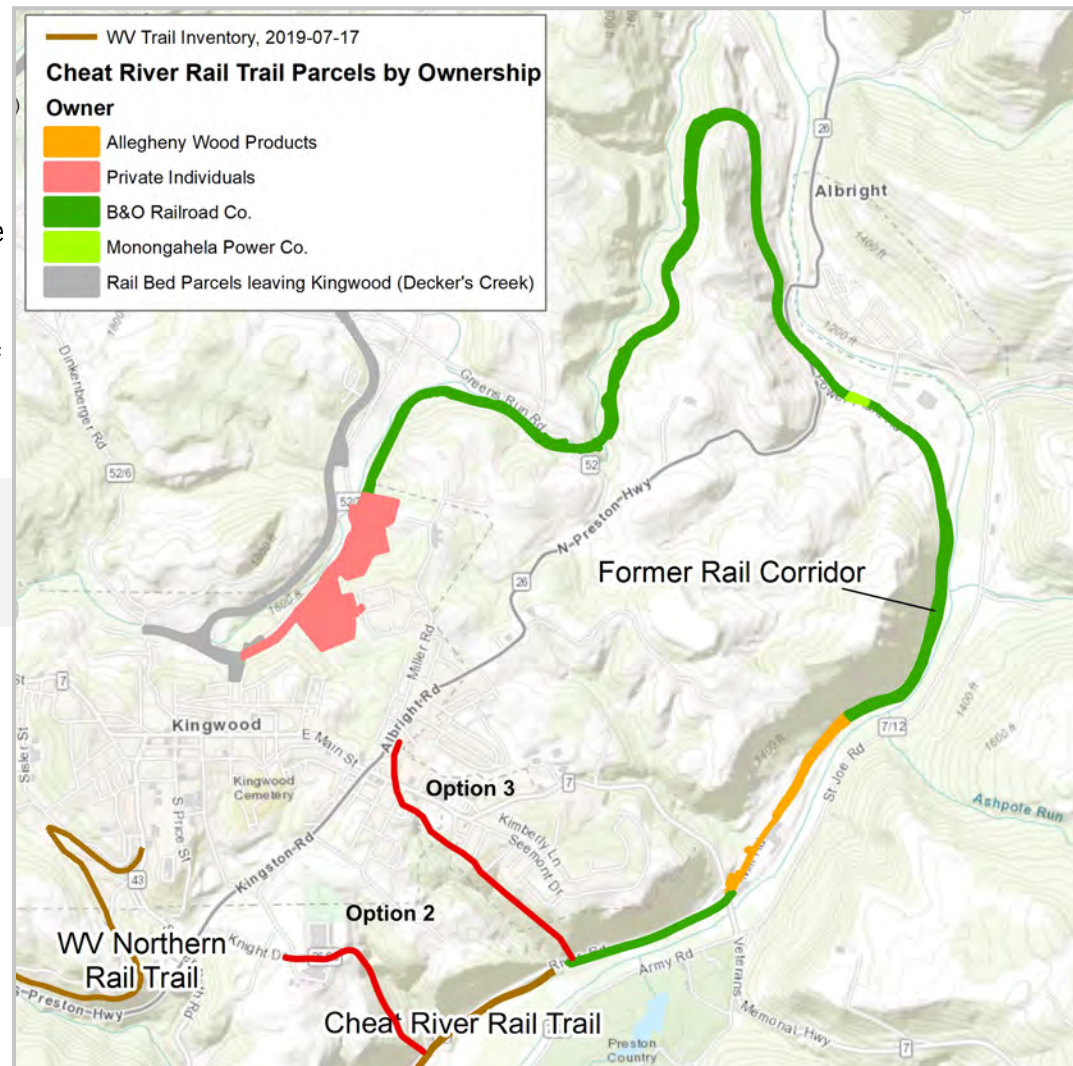
The Cheat River Rail-Trail's northern terminus is also planned to be located just east of Kingwood where Route 7 crosses the Cheat River.

Kingwood's location at the convergence of these two planned trailheads—located just two miles apart—presents a significant opportunity for targeted trail-based development through downtown. Yet while creating a physical linkage between these trails is highly desirable, several logistical hurdles complicate this seemingly short span.

**Option 1: Rail-trail extension.** As visible in the map to the right, the former rail bed connecting the planned terminus of the Cheat River Rail-Trail (the Rt. 7 bridge over the river) is still almost entirely owned by CSX. While this route offers the best option for a trail extension that would maintain a wide path and low gradient, it presents several key challenges: First, properties would need to be acquired, and environmental liabilities managed. Second, a route would need to be negotiated around an existing Allegheny Wood Products facility located on the north side of Rt. 7. Challenges aside, the single-owner status of this corridor makes this route extremely attractive for developing the Cheat River Rail-Trail to its terminus in Kingwood.

- 6.3 miles of rail-trail
- Approximate timeframe for completion: 3–5 years
- Estimated cost: \$3.2 million
- Key partners: CSX, Allegheny Wood Products

An alternative mode of connecting the Cheat River Rail-Trail to Kingwood is to bypass the existing rail bed and establish a more direct connection through properties owned by public entities such as the Preston County Board of Education, Preston County Commission, and/or the federal government. These routes, sketched out very generally in both maps, would require construction of trails from scratch and are unlikely to comply with the gentle grades and ease of access of rail-trails. Additionally, this connection would fail to connect any new communities via rail-trail.



### Option 2: U.S. Government and Preston County Commission connection.

This option links the rail-trail to Pratt Ave and/or Pleasant Ave (and potentially the Holleran Addition neighborhood) in Kingwood by following a former farm road. This road follows a fairly moderate grade, but it requires trails to be built across two properties, owned by the U.S. National Guard and the Preston County Commission respectively. Securing access agreements across the federal property could pose a significant hurdle to the timely implementation of this trail.

- 0.75 miles of gradual-grade trail
- Crosses federal and county property
- Approximate timeframe for completion: 1–2 years
- Estimated cost: \$500,000
- Key partners: U.S. National Guard, Preston County Commission, private landowners

**Option 3: School connection.** A third option would connect the Cheat River Rail-Trail to Preston High School and Central Preston Middle School by way of properties owned by the Preston County Board of Education and the U.S. National Guard. Given the steep topography, this trail would be significantly steeper than a rail-trail. As with Option 2, securing access to cross federal property may be a difficult task. However, connecting two local schools to the rail-trail would be a highly desirable outcome for the community in terms of the health, wellness, and recreation opportunities.

- 1.1 miles of steep trail
- Crosses federal and county property
- Approximate timeframe for completion: 1–2 years
- Estimated cost: \$600,000
- Key partners: U.S. National Guard, Preston County Board of Education



### School connections

Preston County communities take great pride in their schools.

Several schools in the county have developed short trails on their property (such as the Bruceton School fitness path), and local feedback and geospatial data confirm that these trails are heavily utilized by their local communities.

While trails on school grounds are unlikely to play a significant role in terms of economic impact, they are invaluable assets to the community. In many rural communities, school sports fields and playgrounds are the most accessible recreation resources available to local residents.

By providing safe, accessible places to exercise outside, trails connecting to schools are incredibly beneficial for the entire community.

## OPPORTUNITY: ROWLESBURG TRAIL CONNECTIONS

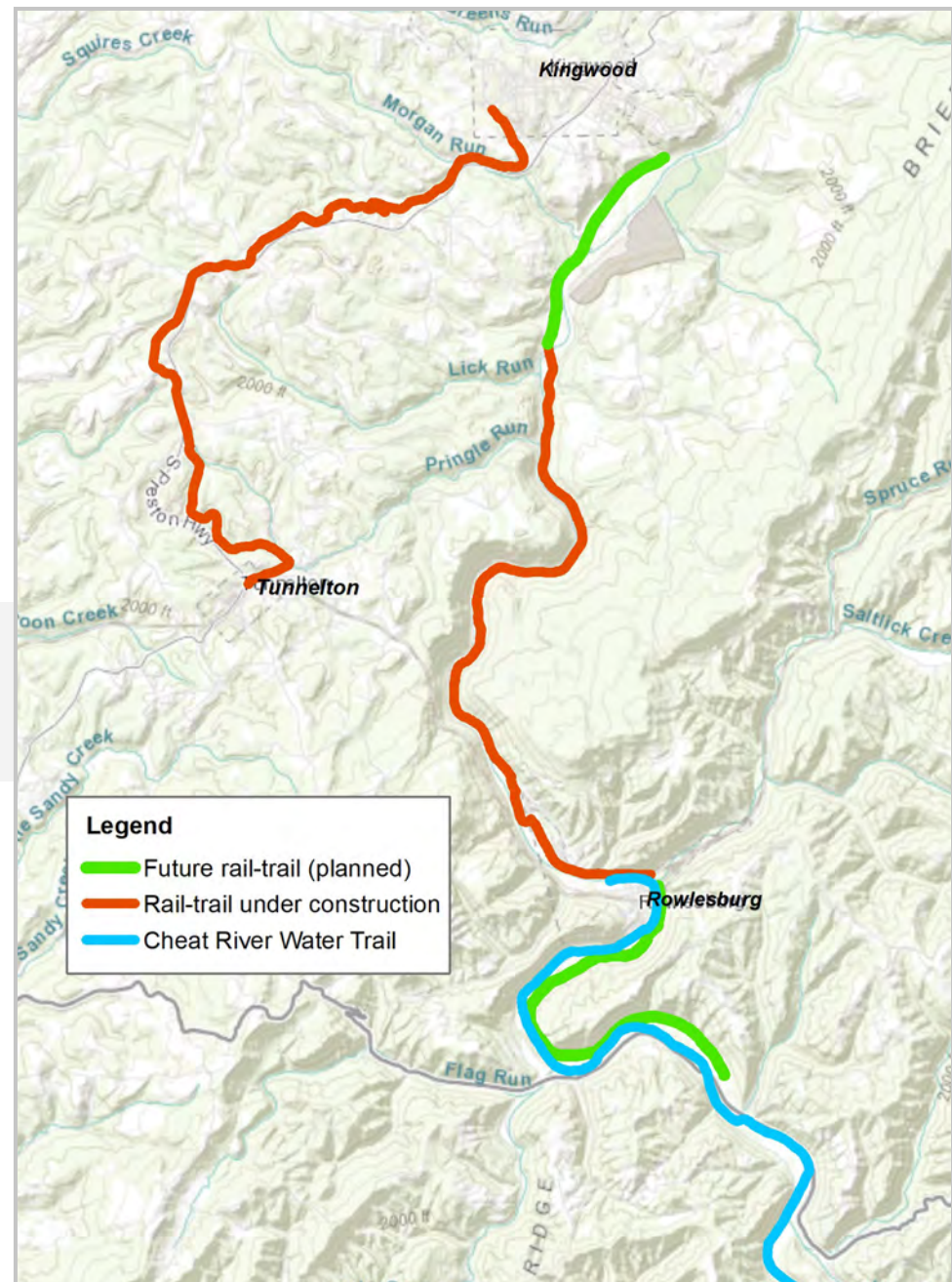
One of the top priorities for the Cheat River Rail-Trail is connecting its southern terminus into Rowlesburg. Friends of the Cheat and the West Virginia State Rail Authority, a key partner, have ownership of the Cheat River Rail-Trail corridor to railroad milepost 3.0, which ends just north of Greer's Cheat River Limestone facility. As a result, the next crucial phase of trail development will involve creating a trail diversion around the limestone facility, securing a right-of-way along the former railbed adjacent to Manheim Avenue, and then routing the trail across the Maple Avenue bridge into downtown Rowlesburg.

As of 2020, Friends of the Cheat has secured funding from the AML Pilot Program to appraise, negotiate, and purchase the necessary right-of-way to bring the trail to Manheim and create a trailhead across from the Rowlesburg School. Additional funding will be needed to construct that segment of trail as well as to extend it to downtown Rowlesburg.

- 3.2 miles of trail
- Approximate timeframe for completion: 3–5 years
- Estimated cost: \$300,000–750,000
- Key partners: Greer Industries, Town of Rowlesburg, West Virginia State Rail Authority

**School bike clubs:** Since the creation of the West Virginia Interscholastic Cycling League (WVICL), a statewide chapter of the National Interscholastic Cycling League (NICA), communities across the state have shown increasing interest in trails on school grounds.

While Preston County currently does not have a team, it does have interested riders: Current youth members from Preston County participate in the nearby teams in Monongalia and Tucker counties as well as Garrett County, Maryland.



## OPPORTUNITY: REEDSVILLE AND ARTHURDALE CONNECTIONS

Located in western Preston County, the communities of Reedsville and Arthurdale are separated by 1.5 miles along Route 92. The Deckers Creek Rail-Trail passes through Reedsville, which presents several opportunities to link the towns to one another as well as to other local resources near the trail.

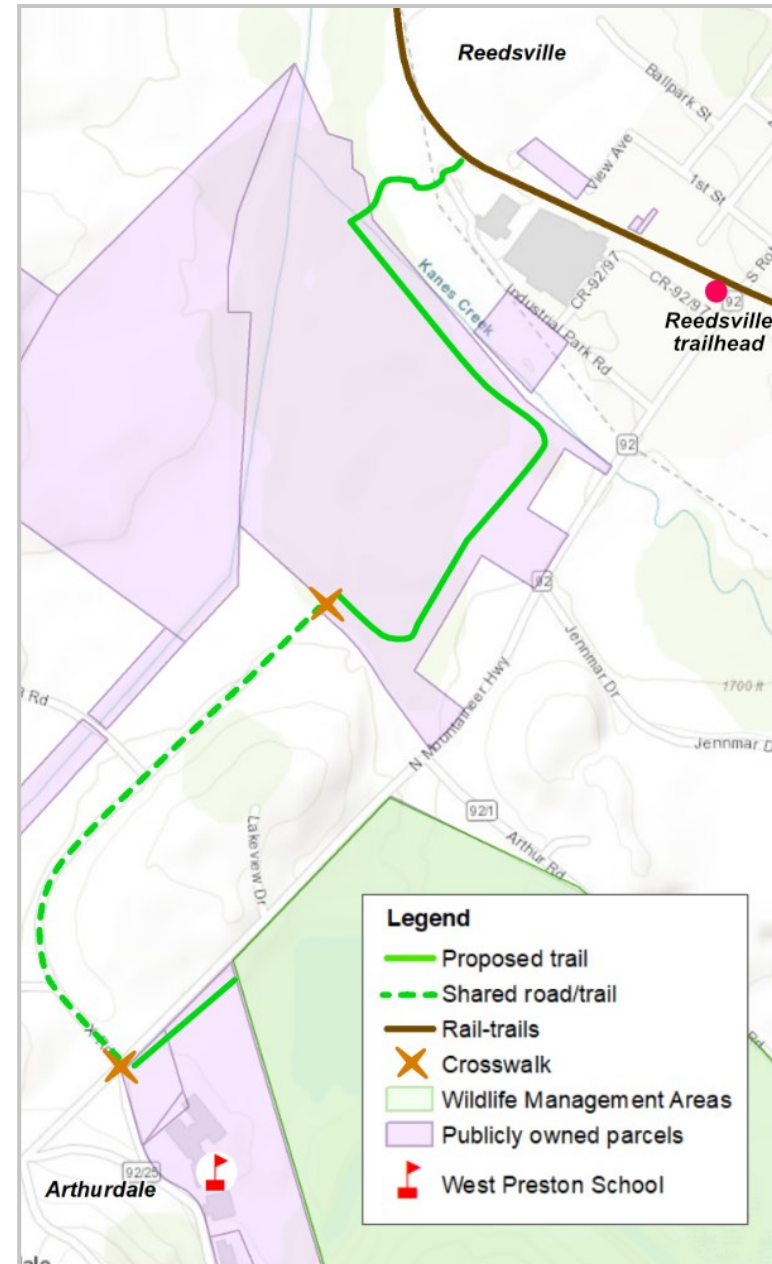
**Deckers Creek connections.** The West Preston School in Arthurdale is located less than one mile from the Deckers Creek Rail-Trail in Reedsville. Connecting the school to the rail-trail offers benefits to students and the greater community. The route could also cross through the Fairfax Pond-Rehe WMA, located immediately adjacent to the school, linking multiple community assets to the trail system.

The Reedsville Trailhead sits at the corner of Route 92 on a parking lot owned by Superior Fibers. It accommodates approximately 7–10 cars and is the only trail parking for the town, with the next closest trailhead 6 miles away in Masontown. The Monongahela River Trails Conservancy (MRTC) is in the process of putting the trailhead under Reedsville's ownership as part of a land swap in order to secure its use as a permanent, public trailhead.

The 0.6-mile connector trail between Reedsville and Arthurdale is currently being planned, with a proposed route (shown in green on the right) running from the Deckers Creek Rail-Trail, through properties owned by Superior Fibers and the WVU JW Ruby Research Farm, and to Arthurdale Heritage.

Further connections to the school and/or WMA are possible with additional planning. There are two options for a WMA connection: 1) from the rail-trail east of the Reedsville Trailhead, and 2) as part of the connection to West Preston School. While a number of parcels exist along this half-mile stretch in the first option, a route could be developed that would only cross properties of two private landowners. Existing trails within the WMA could then be used to reach West Preston School. However, both connections can be accomplished via the Arthurdale connector trail, which can include a combination of “share the road” style signs along X Road and a formal crosswalk between X Road and West Preston School across Route 92. West Preston School is already immediately adjacent to the WMA, and minimal work will be required to create a formal trail connection between the two properties.

Lastly, the Upper Deckers Creek WMA in Reedsville currently comes within 1,000 feet of the Deckers Creek Rail-Trail and is separated by one private parcel. Increasing non-motorized access to these resources will greatly benefit residents who currently enjoy fishing and modest walking paths on the WMA. However, given the location of existing trails within Upper Deckers Creek WMA, the best means of connecting the property to the rail-trail is likely through signage along Burke and Pineview Roads to the WMA's entrance. This distance is one-third of a mile and may require additional measures to accommodate safe foot travel.



- 1–2 miles of foot trail
- Approximate timeframe for completion: 1–2 years
- Estimated cost: \$15,000–30,000
- Key partners: Preston County Board of Education, WVDNR, West Virginia University, private landowners

## ANCHOR DESTINATIONS

A third major tier of opportunities for Preston County and the Mountaineer Trail Network focuses on developing and enhancing signature trail centers within the county. Visitors already come to Preston County each year to mountain bike, paddle, rock climb, fish, and more. Strategic trail development at these locations will help grow them into anchor destinations within the Mountaineer Trail Network that will attract visitors from near and far.

Building upon existing recreation destinations and recreation hubs, the following trail centers present strategic opportunities for enhancement in Preston County.

### OPPORTUNITY: BIG BEAR LAKE TRAIL CENTER

Big Bear Lake Trail Center offers a strong example for anchor trail destinations in the Mountaineer Trail Network. Big Bear's purpose-built mountain biking trail system is already attracting visitors from around the eastern U.S., and a few strategic enhancements could result in significant increases in annual usage, profitability, and economic development.

**Beginner trails at Big Bear Lake.** The majority of trails at Big Bear Lake Trail Center are rated for intermediate to advanced skill levels, built by hand over time as "rake-and-ride" trails. Big Bear Lake trail managers recognize the need for more entry-level trails, which would make the trail center more accessible to a larger potential audience of riders.

Big Bear Lake recently added a 2–3 mile beginner loop meeting NICA specifications for a youth mountain bike course. However, managers have identified the need for planned beginner trail loops, designed and built with machines by professional trail crews. According to Big Bear Lake's Recreational Lands Manager Jeff Simcoe, two key locations would be ideal for beginner loops: one at the front of the property near the main trailhead, and another around the property's airstrip, which serves as the main event venue. While such trails would greatly enhance their offerings, Big Bear Lake managers also recognize that professionally machine-built trails would represent a significant capital investment and would require outside funding to implement.

- 10 miles of machine-built, single-track mountain bike trail
- Approximate timeframe for completion: 1–2 years
- Estimated cost: \$150,000–400,000 (\$15,000–40,000 per mile)
- Key partners: Big Bear Lake Trail Center and Family Camplands, outside investors, professional trail builders

**Alpine Lake Resort:** Alpine Lake Resort is already an anchor destination in Preston County. In addition to its onsite golf course, lake, and other tourism amenities, Alpine Lake features 17.5 miles of trails for hiking, biking, cross country skiing, and snowshoeing for visitors to enjoy. The resort area borders Garrett County, Maryland, and is located adjacent to Herrington Manor State Park, a larger trail destination within the greater Deep Creek Lake area tourism area.

As a result, increased trail connectivity could help put Alpine Lake on the map as a trail-based tourism destination. A few short trail linkages onto state lands across the Maryland border could greatly expand trail access for Alpine Lake and raise the resort's profile among tourists in the Deep Creek Lake area. Similarly, the proposed cycling routes mentioned on page 56 pass right by Alpine Lake on Oak Grove Road and could bring enhanced visibility to all the resort has to offer.



## OPPORTUNITY: CHEAT RIVER TRAIL CENTER

As of 2020, Friends of Cheat has secured funds to develop the 17.5-acre Cheat River Trail Center into a premier, multi-use trailhead and activity center on the Cheat River Rail-Trail.

Formerly home to a coal preparation plant, the Cheat River Trail Center will soon be a major river and trail access point for a wide range of users, including whitewater boaters floating the renowned Cheat Narrows; cyclists, runners, and equestrian users on the rail-trail; and anglers using the rail-trail to access their favorite fishing holes on the river.

By 2023, the site will feature a major trailhead, paved parking lot, and new access road connecting to Route 72. It will also feature a new boater takeout for the Cheat Narrows whitewater section, which will replace the existing, overcrowded Pringle Run Road takeout. This new takeout will effectively re-route boater traffic to the Cheat River Trail Center, which will be built to safely accommodate larger groups of recreational users.

The Cheat River Rail-Trail will pass directly through site via a historic railroad bridge over the river and will be enhanced with trail signage, lighting, and picnic areas along a spacious green-space using native vegetation. Planned site development will also entail remediation of abandoned mine features and repurposing of two ponds onsite with funds from the AML Pilot Program.

Longer term, Friends of the Cheat plans to develop a multi-purpose building onsite as a resource for community events. Current funding will extend utilities to the site to future building construction.

- Develop a 17.5 acre former coal processing plant into a multi-use trailhead
- Approximate timeframe for completion: 2–3 years
- Estimated cost: \$725,000
- Key partners: Friends of the Cheat



Photos and rendering: Friends of the Cheat

# TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE

## PRESTON COUNTY TOURISM

Travel in Preston County accounts for **\$32.4 million** in direct spending and supports approximately **350 jobs** (Dean Runyan Associates, 2019). Yet as with most of the Mountaineer Trail Network counties, tourism is a largely undeveloped industry in Preston County. While Preston County does currently draw overnight visitors coming specifically to recreate in the county, most of Preston County's tourism infrastructure has been developed in an ad hoc manner and caters to travelers passing through the area en route to other destinations.

Visitors coming to Preston County fall largely under the following major categories.

### Recreation visitors

Approximately 3,600 visitors—mostly bikers and trail runners—come to Big Bear Lake Trail Center to recreate each year. The Cheat River is a popular destination for private (non-commercial) boaters, many of whom come from neighboring Maryland, Pennsylvania, and the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area to kayak the Cheat Canyon or the Narrows on key weekends.<sup>6</sup> The river is also a popular destination for swimming and fishing, though most are day users rather than overnight visitors.

### Special event visitors

Held every September, the Preston County Buckwheat Festival attracts 100,000 visitors annually, though most are considered to be day users rather than overnight visitors. Cheat Fest, held every May as a fundraiser for the Friends of the Cheat, attracts 4,000 visitors annually, of which 50% camp onsite or at adjacent campgrounds for the weekend. Other smaller festivals, such as the Preston County Heritage Festival and the Rowlesburg Ox Roast, attract additional day visitors to the area.

### Spillover visitors

Preston County lies right in the middle of several major corridors between the Morgantown and Washington, D.C. metropolitan areas and existing tourist destinations such as Deep Creek Lake, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and public lands in Tucker County. As a result, many of Preston County's visitors stop only briefly in the county as they travel to other destinations.

Commercial whitewater rafting on the Cheat River once fueled significant recreation-based tourism from the 1960s through the early 1990s. In its heyday in the late 1980s, roughly 25,000 commercial users rafted the Cheat River each year; however, commercial whitewater rafting on the Cheat collapsed in the mid-1990s due to two major mine blowouts and national shifts in the rafting industry. While commercial rafting is still present, it is no longer a major driver of tourism or recreation in Preston County.<sup>5, 6</sup>



<sup>5</sup> 649 commercial users rafted the Cheat River in 2017, down from 25,000 annual users in the late 1980s

<sup>6</sup> Cottingham, 2018

# ASSETS IN PLACE

## LODGING

Preston County has a mix of lodging options across types and price ranges.

- **Hotels, motels, lodges, and inns (9):** Appalachian Hotel\* (under construction as of 2020), Alpine Lake Resort Hotel, Camp Dawson Event Center, Heldreth Motel, Maple Leaf Motel, Microtel Inn and Suites, Modern Homestead, Preston County Inn, River House Lodge
- **Camping (8):** Beaver Creek Village at Big Bear Lake, Cannon Hill Park, Cheat Canyon Campground, Friends of the Cheat Campground, Chestnut Ridge Park and Campgrounds, Glade Farms Campgrounds, Laurel Peaks Campground, Pine Hill Campground, Silver Lake Park
- **Short-term rentals (25):** Vacation rentals including cabins, homes, apartments, and guest suites in private dwellings. Most short-term rentals are offered through Airbnb, with several listed through VRBO and HomeAway.



Overall, this reflects room capacity for about **1,170** people.



**Camp Dawson Event Center** is a conference center located within the West Virginia Army National Guard's Camp Dawson facility. As a government facility, events and conferences are limited to branches of the military and local, state, or federal users. As a result, revenue from the event center's 546 guest rooms is exempt from Preston County's business and occupation (B&O) tax.

This spread of lodging options offers fairly strong diversity, which stacks up well against the documented market preferences among mountain bike tourists. National data show that while camping remains a popular option among mountain bike tourists, they frequently prefer higher-end lodging options, such as short-term rentals and bike-friendly hotels, inns, and bed and breakfasts (Barber, 2015).

These consumer preferences are already playing out in Preston County. According to officials at Big Bear Lake Trail Center, each summer they see increasing numbers of out-of-state visitors who opt for higher-end cabin rentals and hotels. While many attendees of their summer trail events camp along the trails, Big Bear's cabin rentals during festival weekends are in high demand, and growing numbers of visitors report staying offsite at the Microtel Inn & Suites in Hazelton. (Simcoe, 2019). Anecdotal feedback from attendees of the annual Cheat Fest event in Albright indicates similar preference for more local lodging options (FOC, 2020).



Photos: Alpine Lake Resort, various locations (Airbnb)

## FOOD AND DINING

Preston County is home to approximately 33 dining establishments.

- **Coffee shop/bakery (3):** JoDia's Creative Creations, M&M Bake Shop, Scoops & Joy
- **Brewery (2):** High Ground Brewing, Screech Owl Brewing
- **Local diners, cafes, and restaurants (20):** Alpine Lake Resort, Bell's Rowlesburg Grocery, Big Bear Lake Country Store, Company's Comin' Diner, Cox-Roosevelt Inn, Donna Jean's Family Restaurant, Little Sandy's, Maxime's at the Inn, Melanie's Family Restaurant, Miller's Eats and Sweets, Modern Homestead, Monroe's Deli Style Eatery, New China, On the Go, PC's Pizza, Prime Thyme, Rosemary's Thyme Mexican Restaurant, Russ' Ribs, Spent Grain Cafe, Sidetracked Bar and Grille, T&K Kettle and Pub
- **Fast food chains (8):** Several branches of Subway, Dairy Queen, Little Caesars, Fox's Pizza Den, McDonald's, Hardees, Pizza Hut

Several Preston County eateries have gained a following among visitors and tourists, including Modern Homestead's Cozy Dinner evenings in Reedsville, Rosemary's Thyme and Monroe's in Kingwood, and the county's two local breweries.

Most of the county's food and dining venues are quite distant from existing trail assets. There are a few exceptions: Big Bear Lake Camplands also features a store and restaurant known as the Country Store onsite, which offers food and ice cream to hungry riders. Screech Owl Brewing and its attached eatery, the Spent Grain Cafe, are located just four miles from Big Bear Lake Trail Center. Screech Owl brewing cites Big Bear mountain bikers as an important source of traffic that has grown year after year. The success of these establishments points to strong opportunities for increased dining options within easy access to Big Bear Lake Trail Center and other prominent trails in the county.



## OUTFITTERS AND GEAR

While Preston County boasts an enviable number of trail- and river-based recreation opportunities, the county is home to relatively few businesses serving the outdoor recreation market.

- **Cheat River Outfitters (CRO)** is the last of the commercial whitewater rafting companies based in Preston County. In addition to river trips, CRO offers guided rock climbing trips in Coopers Rock State Forest and paintball courses at their facility in Albright. Two additional companies based in Ohio, Wilderness Voyageurs and Laurel Highlands, also offer limited commercial rafting trips on the Cheat when conditions are suitable.
- **Padlz Canoe & Kayak Rentals** offers boat rentals on the flat waters of the Big Sandy River in Bruceton Mills.
- **Preston PowerSports & Guns** is a dealer of ATVs, UTVs, and motorcycles and a full supplier of guns and ammunition.
- **A service station and boat rental** with shuttle service are planned for Rowlesburg across from the sawmill on Route 72.
- **Street's Store** in Masontown sells hunting equipment and fishing tackle.
- **Cool Springs Park** sells fishing gear and licenses.

The nearest full outdoor stores and bike shops are located in Morgantown, West Virginia, and Oakland, Maryland.



### Trailside amenities and signage

Amenities such as trailheads, informational kiosks, and signage are core elements that can make or break a visitor's experience at a trail. Existing trailside amenities in Preston County vary widely. While some trailheads such as the Deckers Creek Rail-Trail trailhead in Masontown feature restrooms, vending machines, trailside shelters, and bike repair stations, many others remain more primitive and could be greatly improved. Beginning in the summer of 2020, the Preston Trail Towns Program will conduct a comprehensive inventory of trail amenities throughout the county, which will offer baseline data from which targeted improvements can be recommended. This work represents a major step in the right direction for Preston County trails.



## OTHER THINGS TO DO

Preston County offers a strong slate of complementary outdoor activities for visitors. It also boasts a number of significant cultural and historical attractions, hosts large-scale festivals and events, and supports a variety of unique businesses, including the following:

- **Alpine Lake Resort** sits on 2,000 acres of wooded land in eastern Preston County just across the border from Herrington Manor State Park in Garrett County, Maryland. In addition to a 35-room hotel, the resort features a lodge, 150-acre stocked lake with a boathouse, an 18-hole golf course and driving range, and tennis, basketball, and bocce courts.
- **Arthurdale Heritage** maintains a museum and hosts craft and heritage events throughout the year in the historic community of Arthurdale.
- **Big Bear Lake Camplands** features two lakes and Bearfoot Springs Water Park, which includes two 350-foot water slides, a lazy river, and a children's splash area. Additional onsite amenities include an 18-hole miniature golf course and a community center for events and live music.
- **Cool Springs Park** features a unique restaurant, antique farm, general store, and gift shop.
- **Friends of the Cheat's Festival Site** is home to the Doug Ferris Outdoor Classroom, campground, walking loop, nature viewing, interpretive signage, Cheat Canyon access, vault toilets, and a future reroute of the Allegheny Trail.
- **Hovatter's Wildlife Zoo** is home to over 30 different species of native and exotic animals from around the world.
- **Preston Community Arts Center** offers art classes, workshops, and a gallery in Kingwood
- **Pretzel Arena** is a rodeo arena in Bruceton Mills that features various rodeos, music events, and camping.
- **Rowlesburg B & O Depot and Railroad Museum** sits in a former Baltimore & Ohio railroad freight and passenger station, which now houses hundreds of artifacts.
- **Szilagy Center for the Visual and Performing Arts** houses the Greatest Generation WWII Museum, a bridge exhibit on loan from the B & O Railroad, a pottery craft room, two sports museums, the Preston County 4-H museum, a room for quilters, a café, a catering kitchen, and an auditorium. The building provides a venue for cultural and artistic classes, events, and festivals.
- **Special events** include the Preston County Buckwheat Festival, Cheat Fest, the New Deal Festival, the Preston County Farm Crawl, the Preston County Music and Arts Festival, Domefest, the annual Rowlesburg Labor Day Ox Roast, and more.



Photos: Hovatter's Wildlife Zoo ([westvirginiazoo.com](http://westvirginiazoo.com)), Pretzel Arena (Matt Sunday), Cheat Fest (Friends of the Cheat), Cool Springs, Rowlesburg B & O Depot and Railroad Museum (Keith Takarsh)

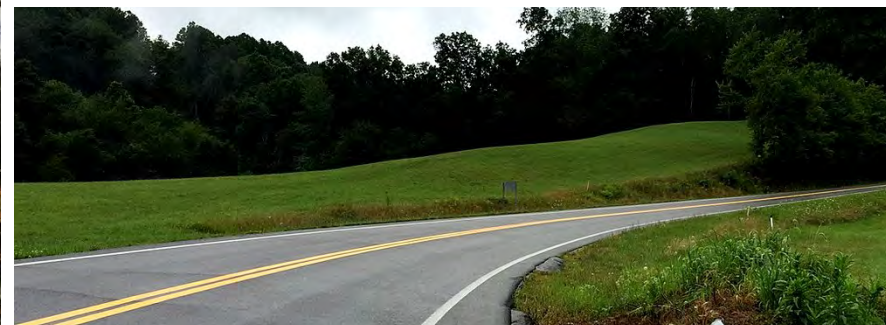
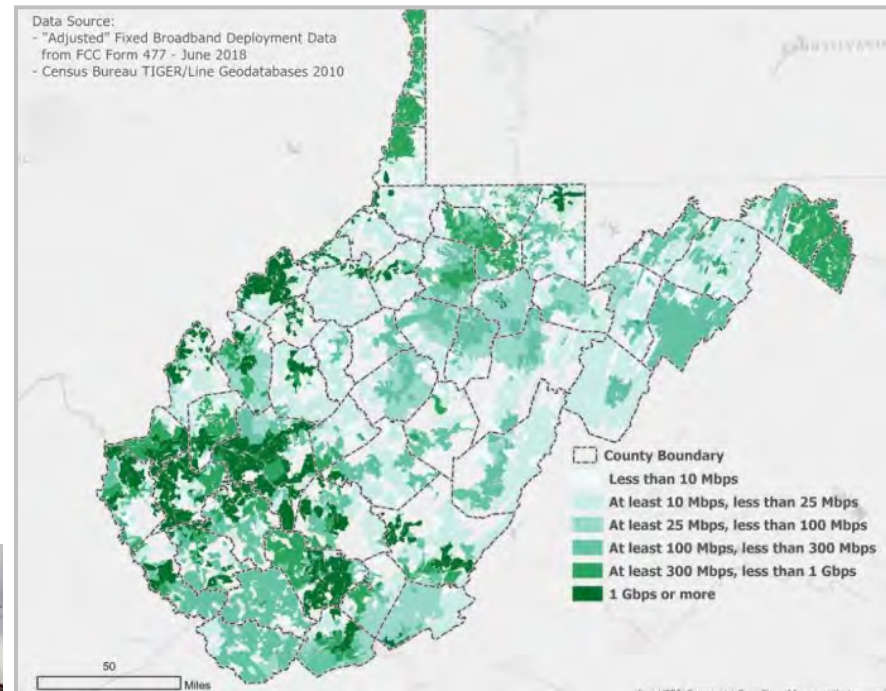
## SUPPORTING SERVICES

**Transportation:** With Interstate 68 crossing the northernmost end of the county, Preston County is well-connected to larger metropolitan and out-of-state user bases. Trail centers such as Big Bear Lake and Coopers Rock State Forest benefit tremendously from their easy access to the highway. The county is served by roughly 22 gas stations, which provide generally adequate coverage for visitors.

Bus transportation in Preston County is provided by the Buckwheat Express, operated by Preston County Senior Citizens, Inc. The Buckwheat Express offers daily service between Corinth, Hopemont, Terra Alta, Kingwood, Reedsville, Arthurdale, Masontown, and Morgantown, as well as biweekly service from Kingwood to Bruceton Mills, Newburg, Rowlesburg, and Tunnelton.

Like much of the Mountaineer Trail Network, however, Preston County is very rural and served primarily by small, winding roads. While this adds to the county's scenic beauty and character, it can be a deterrent for tourism and recreation development—in terms of visibility, access, and safety. Noticeable declines in road maintenance in recent decades also have deterred road cycling. Anecdotal feedback from cyclists indicates that many road and gravel riders prefer to route their rides in neighboring Garrett County, Maryland, where roads are better maintained and generally perceived as safer for cyclists (Simcoe, 2019). This feedback supports data from the Strava Heat Map, which show swift declines in recreational road use in Preston County as compared to its neighbors.

**Internet connectivity:** Like much of rural America, Preston County struggles with inadequate broadband access. While much of the county faces low internet speed, large swaths have no service at all. In 2019 Preston County Economic Development Authority secured a \$3 million USDA Community Connect Grant to construct 83.4 miles of fiber broadband for 1,337 households. The County also received \$54,595 from the Federal Communications Commission in 2019 to help expand broadband internet to 94 locations, focused on the northern end of the county. County officials are seeking additional funds to expand access specifically from Terra Alta to Aurora.



# ASSESSMENT: TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE

Preston County has an incredible density of existing trails and outdoor recreation assets that already draw visitors to the county. Overall, however, there are few recreation and tourism-focused businesses serving the county, and even fewer within close proximity to the county's top trail centers.

## LODGING

- ✚ County features a mix of lodging across different types.
- Most lodging is "traveler focused" rather than "tourism focused."
- While existing lodging capacity may be adequate for current visitation levels, more lodging across all types would be needed to accommodate increased trail users and tourists.

## FOOD AND DINING

- ✚ Preston County has two local breweries, one of which (Screech Owl) is located near Big Bear Lake Trail Center.
- Most of the county's food and dining venues are quite distant from existing trail assets and are unlikely to co-market with trails and other recreation.

## OUTFITTERS AND GEAR

- Relatively few existing businesses directly serve outdoor recreation markets. The nearest full outdoor gear store and bike shops are located in Morgantown and Oakland.

## OTHER RETAIL AND ACTIVITIES

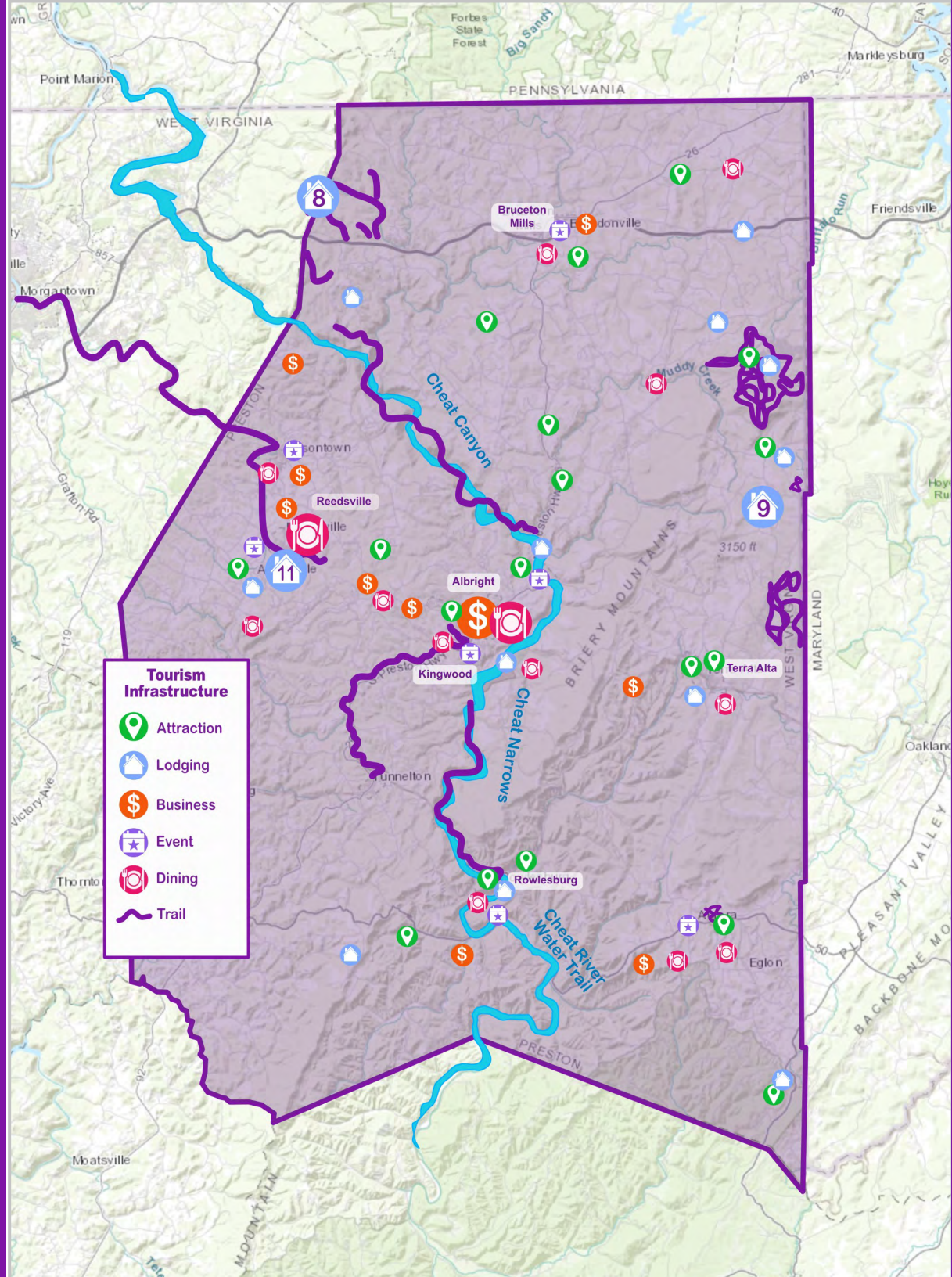
- ✚ The Cheat River opens up ample additional recreation opportunities for visiting trail users.
- Beyond abundant outdoor recreation opportunities, other forms of retail and activities are limited in the county.



## KEY TRENDS

**Food venues** are largely concentrated in the center of the county on the Route 7 corridor between Reedsville, Kingwood, and Terra Alta. However, there are comparatively few dining establishments along the I-68 corridor—the most highly trafficked highway in the county.

**Lodging** is more evenly spread around the county, though most hotels cater to pass-through travelers stopping in Preston County rather than those coming specifically to recreate. However, short-term rentals in the county are largely concentrated in three areas, all linked to trails and recreation: Reedsville/Arthurdale (11), Alpine Lake (9), Coopers Rock area (8).



# MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

Based on this assessment, the following opportunities emerged as viable investments for Preston County’s budding trail economy.

## TRAIL-ORIENTED LODGING AND DINING

### What

- Restaurants, cafés, food trucks, and other local eateries
- Campgrounds, short-term rentals, and small-scale bed and breakfasts

### Where

- I-68 corridor near Bruceton Mills and Hazelton
- Kingwood, Rowlesburg, Tunnelton, and other soon-to-be trail towns

While Preston County is starting with a strong slate of lodging options, relatively few restaurants or lodging venues are located alongside or within easy access to the county’s trails.

However, current businesses located near trails and catering to trail users are doing well: The Big Bear Lake Trail Center and Family Camplands have proven the market potential for trailside RV camping,

tent camping, cabins, and outdoor event space in Preston County. Similarly, Screech Owl Brewing and its Spent Grain Café—the only full dining establishment within close proximity to the Big Bear Lake Trail Center—are exceedingly popular venues and see significant traffic from mountain bikers. Yet as compared to other mountain bike destinations, lodging and dining opportunities at Big Bear Lake Trail Center are still largely underdeveloped.

The following table shows the number of restaurants and breakdown of lodging options for Bruceton Mills as compared to similarly sized towns that feature major mountain biking destinations. Based on these figures, as more and more visitors come to Big Bear Lake Trail Center, the surrounding area will be able to support significantly more dining and lodging establishments. (More information on these case studies can be found in the Market Opportunity section.)

Trail	Town	Population	Est. annual trail usage	Restaurants	Hotels/ lodges/inns	Campgrounds	Airbnb listings
<b>Big Bear Lake Trail Center</b>	Bruceton Mills and Hazelton, WV	<100	5,000	5	4	3	21
<b>Copper Harbor Trails</b>	Copper Harbor, MI	100	20,000+	10	12	3	35
<b>Cuyuna Lakes Trail System</b>	Cuyuna, MN	332	100,000+	12	6	8	58
<b>Kingdom Trails</b>	East Burke, VT	132	94,000	20	16	4	38

For Preston County to support concerted trail and tourism development, more lodging and dining options across all types will be needed. Given the relatively few existing options for lodging or dining within easy access to the trails, there is tremendous opportunity for expansion in these areas.

Once planned trails such as the Cheat River Rail-Trail and West Virginia Northern Rail-Trail are completed, Kingwood, Rowlesburg, and Tunnelton will be key areas for investments in lodging and dining venues. I-68 near Bruceton Mills and Hazelton also presents a key location for restaurants and lodging given the proximity to Big Bear Lake and the high volumes of pass-through recreation travelers en route to destinations in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and beyond.

**Given documented consumer preferences, the following options are likely to be viable as Preston County's tourism economy expands.**

- Restaurants, cafés, food trucks, and other eateries serving burgers, pizza, beer, high-end coffee, and/or Mexican are well-suited to mountain bike tourism.
- Campgrounds, short-term cabin and home rentals, and small-scale bed and breakfasts.

The growing popularity of **food trucks** nationally presents opportunities for entrepreneurs to provide high-end food without investing in a brick and mortar location. In Preston County, where tourism is still in relatively early stages of development, food trucks open possibilities for testing growing markets. For example, siting a food truck at Big Bear Lake or other popular recreation areas on weekends would be a flexible, low-risk way to test the viability of a restaurant on site.

**Water trail camping opportunities:** The Seven Islands area offers great potential for development on the Upper Cheat River Water Trail. Located right where the Cheat enters Preston County, an organized area for primitive camping along the eastern bank of the river (river right) would add a valuable stopping place for multi-day float trips on the water trail.



## PRIVATE TRAIL CENTERS

### What

- Commercial trail centers, bike parks, and other anchor destinations

### Where

- Big Bear Lake Trail Center
- Future opportunities on private land

Private, commercial trail centers are gaining traction around the country and are becoming key drivers of trail-based economic development.

At venues like Big Bear Lake Trail Center and Kingdom Trails, visitors pay to access trails generally built and maintained for specific uses, such as mountain biking or cross-country skiing.

Ski resorts are perhaps the best known commercial trail centers: In addition to offering fee-for-use downhill ski trails, many now have expanded their warm-season offerings to include trails for hiking and biking as well as gravity parks for downhill mountain biking.

Charging fees for use guarantees a funding stream for trail maintenance and construction, which means that private trail centers often earn reputations for high-quality trails. As a result, high-end private trail systems often become key anchor destinations that attract visitors from far and wide.

Not every trail can or should be fee-based. Many trails, such as rail-trails, are public resources that are free for the common good. However, the Mountaineer Trail Network legislation opens the door for developing specific kinds of high-end, commercial trail centers on privately owned property. (See trail opportunities for anchor destinations in Preston County on page 61.)

### Big Bear Lake Trail Center enhancements

As an existing trail center with a growing national following, Big Bear Lake Trail Center offers solid opportunities for further enhancement and investment. With outside investment, several capital-intensive projects could yield significant return for both the trail center and camplands.

#### Trailhead improvements

The main trailhead by the entry gate is the first thing many trail users experience when they get to Big Bear Lake Trail Center. As a result, targeted enhancements to the trailhead would enhance the trail center both aesthetically and practically. Water access, currently limited at that area, would open possibilities for building restrooms and a bike wash area for trail users. Additional improvements, such as a welcome center, bike maintenance station, additional signage and kiosks, and landscaped picnic areas would further enhance the trailhead for increased visitation.

#### Beginner trail construction

As noted in the Trails section, Big Bear Lake and Preston County as a whole largely lack beginner-friendly singletrack trails. Adding professionally designed and built trails would open Big Bear Lake up to an even wider range of potential riders, which in turn would fuel increased visitation and revenue from user fees.

#### Lodging expansion

Big Bear managers have seen growing numbers of trail visitors opting for higher-end accommodations. The Big Bear Lake Family Camplands recently added three simple cabins within their Beaver Creek Village, which have proven to be extremely popular and routinely booked for all onsite events. Big Bear managers note that existing demand could easily support three to five additional cabins, which could be considered with additional outside investment.

#### Onsite food offerings

While events at Big Bear Lake generally attract food vendors, regular trail users are limited in nearby food options to the onsite Country Store and nearby Screech Owl Brewing and Spent Grain Café, approximately four miles away. As Big Bear Lake Trail Center continues to grow in popularity, it will likely be able to support a trailside café. In the meantime, hosting a food truck for designated weekends during the popular summer months is a feasible option that would further enhance trail use.

## BIG BEAR LAKE FAMILY CAMPLANDS

Big Bear Lake Family Camplands and Trail Center offer a great model for private camping and trail development in the Mountaineer Trail Network.

Established in 1972, Big Bear Lake Family Camplands near Hazelton is a private, family-owned RV campland. It is also home to Big Bear Lake Trail Center, one of the most prominent mountain bike trail centers in the Mid-Atlantic. Within their 5,000-acre property, roughly 3,000 acres are now developed and managed as a mountain bike trail center with about 50 miles of bike trails open annually from January 1 to October 31.

Big Bear's business is primarily fueled by its camplands. Approximately 2,200 property owners own 3,000 small, deeded lots across the camplands, which includes both permanent and seasonal residents. Short-term and day use camping and cabin rentals are also available at the Beaver Creek Campground. In addition, Big Bear officials designed additional camping space to accommodate onsite event camping for trail races and festivals. As a result, the Trail Center doubles as a turnkey camping venue, with tent camping space for 2,000 people as well as restrooms and portable toilets onsite.

In addition to the renowned mountain bike trail system, Big Bear Lake includes other recreational amenities for owners and guests, including two lakes, Bearfoot Springs Water Park, an 18-hole miniature golf course, and a community center for events and live music.



## Private bike parks

Across the country, ski resorts are increasing interest in developing technical trails for “gravity” or downhill mountain biking. With slopes often already cleared for trails and existing chair-lift infrastructure in place, ski areas welcome the off-season revenue brought in by mountain biking. But due to warming winters with less reliable snow, many ski areas have closed over the last few decades, and a growing number of communities are transforming such abandoned ski areas into mountain bike centers.

Preston County is home to at least one former ski area: Gregg's Knob, located eight miles north of Terra Alta off Cranesville Road, operated as a ski area from 1955–1961. Located on one of the highest peaks in the county, the knob's northeastern face was open for winter skiing, with two tow-rope lifts running during its years of operation. While Gregg's Knob is divided between parcels with different owners, the Mountaineer Trail Network could open the door for utilizing such areas for developing private gravity parks.

## RECREATION-FOCUSED BUSINESSES AND SERVICES

### What

- Bike and gear shops, rental services, and multi-sport tours

### Where

- Downtown Kingwood or other trail towns, Big Bear Lake Trail Center, Alpine Lake Resort

Bike shops and other gear stores are an important staple of any trail town. Such shops tend to be located in a downtown area with high visibility and traffic *or co-located with a trail center or resort and frequently become the hub of the local outdoor community.*

While Preston County has a legacy of commercial rafting, relatively few businesses in the area currently address the needs or market opportunity presented by outdoor recreation. This gap presents a market opportunity for the county's budding trail economy.

Independent outdoor stores can be successful enterprises in small, rural communities. The key to success often hinges on diversification: While having a market niche is important, there are definite limits to how many high-end bikes a bike shop in a small community is only likely to sell in a given month. As a result, while successful shops do have bikes

for sale, much of their business falls in other services provided, such as bike repairs and tune-ups, bike and equipment rentals, and guided tours for visitors. Others, such as Blackwater Bikes in neighboring Tucker County, offer a vacation rental in the same building as their bike shop. Having multiple income streams ensures that the business can thrive even when bike sales are slow.

Other opportunities include guided tours and adventures. Given the presence of commercial rafting in Preston and neighboring counties, entrepreneurs could take advantage of growing trends for bike tours in Preston County. For example, Wilderness Voyageurs is a multi-sport adventure company based in Ohiopyle, Pennsylvania. In addition to offering a small number of commercial rafting trips on the Cheat each year, the company offers guided rafting trips, bike tours, and fly fishing trips at destinations around the U.S. and Cuba.

### Reports from industry officials indicate growing interest in joint endeavors, such as:

- Bike-packing trips, where participants carry lightweight camping gear strapped to their bikes for overnight adventures; and
- Bike-fishing trips, where participants use riverfront bike paths to access scenic fishing holes.

With trails and the Cheat River as major recreational assets, Preston County is well suited for expansion of guided outdoor adventures. As mountain biking and other cycling opportunities grow in popularity in Preston County, this could open the door to significant expansion of such tours with Wilderness Voyageurs and other private outfitters. The Cheat River Rail-Trail will likely be of particular interest: Following the river along the Cheat Narrows, this rail-trail will make one of the most popular whitewater sections of the Cheat River accessible by bike.



In addition, other existing businesses can make small changes to their inventories and offerings to tap into the recreation market. For example:

- Local businesses can stock basic bike gear, including mechanical items such as spare tubes, tools, protective gear, some basic bike parts and tools, rain gear, packs, and other wearables. Other miscellaneous but essential items such as water bottles, snacks, and outdoor gear that might be easily transferable to other outdoor activities are a good investment.
- While most will opt to bring their own bikes on their travels, having a small fleet of entry-level mountain bikes available for rent would meet the needs of casual rail-trail riders and other visitors packing light. Bike rentals could be an especially viable fit for visitors coming to Camp Dawson and the Kingwood area, which will soon be a trail hub.
- Local outfitters and potential entrepreneurs can consider providing paid shuttle services for bikers. All you need is a truck to get started!
- Many bikers spend their time off the trails camping or fishing. Identify routes that lead to prime fishing spots or clear trailside campground areas for bike-packers. Promote access to these additional endeavors through marketing as well as selling or renting supplies such as tents, sleeping bags, and other camping essentials.



### Community benefits

In addition to bringing tremendous economic potential, trails enrich the communities they serve through a myriad of ways. Existing trails in Preston County are heavily used by local residents, and countless community events and gatherings take place along rail-trails and the Upper Cheat River Water Trail. In this way, trails and their associated amenities serve as pseudo-community centers, offering free meeting space with built-in health, wellness, and recreation opportunities.

## PRESTON TRAIL TOWNS PROGRAM

Created in 2019, the Preston Trail Towns Program is designed to help communities, businesses, and leaders in the county access economic opportunities presented by local trail development. Preston Trail Towns currently engages the towns of Rowlesburg and Albright on the Cheat River Rail-Trail and the Allegheny Trail, and the towns of Tunnelton and Kingwood on the West Virginia Northern Rail-Trail.

The Trail Towns method is a highly successful variation of the “Main Street Approach” to community development. The Main Street Approach consists of four main phases: Organizing, Design, Economic Restructuring, and Promotion. The Trail Towns Method contours these phases in its five-part approach of:

- developing partnerships,
- conducting assessment and research,
- connecting towns to trails,
- development, and
- marketing.

Strategically, Preston Trail Towns focuses on Trail Town livability and design as a springboard toward developing appropriate tourism infrastructure. The Trail Town of Rowlesburg is a prime example of how this strategy looks on a practical level. When Preston Trail Towns began, residents identified needs for expanded sewer infrastructure and continued operation of the town’s only grocery store as Rowlesburg’s primary challenges. These livability concerns in turn have prevented at least one Rowlesburg developer from building out an RV campsite and diminishes Rowlesburg’s ability to retain visitors to the Upper Cheat River Water Trail for overnight stays.

To address these concerns, the Preston Trail Towns project begins by humbly observing where people—residents and visitors alike—struggle. Then, utilizing community resources and local input, the program works collaboratively to identify and execute small projects that directly address that struggle. Building upon these small, community-centered projects, the program strives to make visible progress that improves small-town livability while developing the infrastructure needed for a vibrant outdoor recreation economy.







Photos: Adventure WV students clean up trash at Jenkinsburg; Road work on Bull Run Road in Jenkinsburg (Friends of the Cheat); Preston County Trail Towns program ceremony (Joseph Hauger)

# PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships are crucial to any successful trail project. The following stakeholder groups will be key to the future of trail development within Preston County and the Mountaineer Trail Network.

## PRIVATE LANDOWNERS

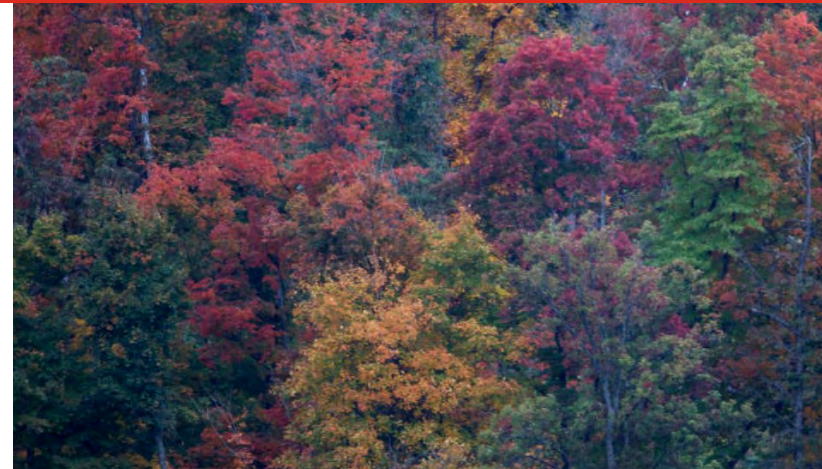
More than 86,000 acres of potential recreation lands in Preston County are owned by private landowners. The majority of that land (~53,000 acres) is held by 15 private landowners, each of which holds more than 1,000 acres. Of these top 15 landowners, 13 are private companies, and two are individuals. (The list of these landowners is included in Appendix C.)

Most of the large land-holding companies in Preston County are tied to coal and timber extraction. As local coal production has plummeted over the last two decades, many such companies have shifted (and diversified) their management strategies to be more favorable towards outdoor recreation. Timber companies, in particular, have embraced hunting leases on their land as a way to expand revenue streams and meet local needs while still maintaining their focus on sustainable timber production. With the added liability protections offered by the Mountaineer Trail Network, these properties could be prime locations for future trail development.



**The Forestland Group**, the nation's third largest timberland management company, currently manages 70 pieces of property in Preston County as hunting leases. [forestlandgroup.com](http://forestlandgroup.com), [tfghuntleases.com](http://tfghuntleases.com)

**Timber companies and trail development.** Galbraith Mountain, one of the most popular mountain bike trail systems in Bellingham, Washington, is a 3,000-acre private property owned by a logging company. The Whatcom Mountain Bike Coalition maintains a Recreational Use Agreement with the owners, which allows cyclists, hikers, and horseback riders to use and maintain the trails for recreation.



The Mountaineer Trail Network offers considerable benefits for both large and small landowners in Preston County. Whether they realize it or not, many landowners already have recreational users accessing their property, raising considerable liability risk. Participating in the Mountaineer Trail Network essentially offers a free management service to protect landowners from those unauthorized users currently trespassing on their property.

Better still, working with the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority allows landowners to set the terms on what kinds of recreation will be allowed, and what parts of the property visitors may access. This effectively manages the flow of people on the property and can keep areas reserved for mining or logging off limits.

Trail development also presents further opportunities for landowners to benefit financially from recreation. Hunting is an exceedingly popular activity in Preston County, but it is season-limited. Hiking and biking are complementary activities that can take place year-round or (if preferred) outside of hunting season. Working through the Mountaineer Trail Network, landowners have an opportunity to set terms for user permits and/or other trail access fees, similar to a hunting lease. This poses an opportunity for both locals and tourists to develop, utilize, and maintain an exciting resource, while still benefiting the landowner.



### **Opportunities on private land.**

Mountain bikers, whitewater boaters, and other seasonal visitors form a major customer base for many businesses in eastern Preston County. Some of these businesses, such as Screech Owl Brewing, have expressed an interest in developing small trail systems or other recreation assets to enhance their businesses for these patrons. The Mountaineer Trail Network is tailored to assist in the development and promotion of projects of this nature.

**Fishing access.** In addition to the Cheat River, countless Preston County streams offer top-notch fishing opportunities—many of which are only accessible through private land.

Using the landmark liability protections offered by the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority legislation, access to these world-class fisheries on private land could be greatly expanded for public recreation.



Photo (top): Cheat River Canyon takeout at Jenkinsburg (Friends of the Cheat)

## PUBLIC ENTITIES

Recreation assets of all types—from trails and scenic overlooks to picnic tables and tennis courts—have long been associated with public parks, public ownership, and publicly funded agencies and organizations. As a result, government agencies and other public entities remain key stakeholders for trail and outdoor recreation development.

### **Preston County Parks and Recreation Commission**

**(PCPaRC):** PCPaRC is the organization tasked with managing the development, operations, and maintenance of lifelong leisure and recreational opportunities for the citizens and visitors of Preston County. Created by the Preston County Commission as the county's parks and recreation governmental entity, PCPaRC has already successfully spearheaded the development of the West Virginia Northern Rail-Trail and will be a key partner for the Mountaineer Trail Network. PCPaRC currently oversees county trail crews for the West Virginia Northern Rail-Trail, which could be expanded and utilized for other trail projects in Preston County. PCPaRC is also positioned to help other entities obtain maintenance equipment for county trails and could assist with collaborative marketing and administration of Mountaineer Trail Network assets in Preston County.

### **Visit Mountaineer Country Convention & Visitors Bureau**

**(CVB):** Preston County is a member of the Visit Mountaineer Country CVB, which serves Monongalia, Preston, and Taylor counties. With its focus on tourism promotion, the CVB will be a key player in the targeted development of trail-based tourism in the county. In many ways, the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority is positioned to act as a trail-focused tourism promotion entity. As a result, the Authority will benefit from learning from the Visit Mountaineer Country CVB's experience in how to best focus in a way that build upon (rather than duplicate) the CVB's existing efforts.

**Preston County Chamber of Commerce:** New and existing businesses stand to benefit from an expansion of recreational trail assets in Preston County, but before this happens, businesses will need assistance and guidance for how to capture these customers. Additionally, the network of Chamber of Commerce businesses will be vital as partners in promoting the Mountaineer Trail Network.

**Preston County Commission:** County commissions in West Virginia are responsible for allocating spending on specific programs, projects, and agencies. In this way, county commissions hold a great deal of sway over the priorities of a county. The Preston County Commission has frequently supported recreational trail projects and has, through the development of this plan, expressed strong support for the Mountaineer Trail Network project, going so far as to take a leading role in organizing other counties. Continued collaboration with the Preston County Commission will be vital for the long-term success of the next generation of recreational trail projects in Preston County.

**West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (WVDNR):** The WVDNR manages five WMAs in Preston County, totaling approximately 6,250 acres. Many of these properties are heavily utilized by people engaged in activities other than fishing and hunting, and, in some cases, this has resulted in conflicts between local users and WVDNR management. The primary revenue stream through which WVDNR funds WMA management is the sale of hunting and fishing licenses; as a result, the agency generally views other users as outside of management concerns. Despite this, hikers, cyclists, and other user groups will continue to seek out obvious public assets upon which to recreate, and WVDNR managed lands are prime locales. As this recreation use increases, a serious discussion between all parties involved is merited. One possible solution is to formally establish, for a nominal fee, a recreational user pass for WVDNR lands.

**West Virginia Division of Highways (WVDOH):** The Recreation Trails Fund Program is a federally funded program administered by the WVDOH. It has been a primary funding vehicle for small to medium trail projects in West Virginia and will continue to be an important source of funding.

**West Virginia Department of Environmental Protection (WVDEP):** Through their responsibilities with adjudicating AML Pilot funding, the WVDEP has become a de facto funding leader in the development of new trail projects in West Virginia. While it is unclear how long this funding stream will continue, in the near term it would appear that this funding stream is among the most important available, especially for large projects that include a broad swath of partners.

## NONPROFITS AND ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

Community groups, nonprofits, and other advocacy organizations are key players for trail projects in Preston County and beyond.

**Friends of the Cheat** and **Friends of Deckers Creek** are both watershed organizations and major proponents of recreation in Preston County. Friends of the Cheat has spearheaded the creation of the Cheat River Rail-Trail. Friends of Deckers Creek works to clean up the decades of environmental degradation inflicted on our watershed through AMD remediation projects, trash cleanups, community outreach, and environmental education.

The **Morgantown Area Mountain Bike Alliance (MAMBA)** is a newly formed chapter of the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) that is dedicated to building and supporting the future of mountain biking in the greater Morgantown area, including Preston County. The organization is keenly interested in the Mountaineer Trail Network and in trail development efforts in Preston and neighboring counties. They will provide vital on-the-ground knowledge of trail systems and can be instrumental in helping to maintain and build trails within the Network.

The **Cheat Canyon Climbers Coalition** is an organization that seeks to preserve, protect, and expand climbing access and environmental stewardship in the Cheat Canyon area. Key areas of interest for this group within or near Preston County include Cheat Canyon, Coopers Rock, and Snake Hill.

The **West Virginia Interscholastic Cycling League (WVICL)** is West Virginia's chapter of the National Interscholastic Cycling Association (NICA). While Preston County currently does not have a team, a number of youth members from Preston County currently participate in the nearby teams in Monongalia and Tucker counties as well as Garrett County, Maryland. The league holds an annual race in Preston County at Big Bear Lake.

The **Rowlesburg Revitalization Committee (RRC)** has been a longstanding force for tourism-based economic development in Rowlesburg, West Virginia. With a vision of Rowlesburg as the center of Cheat River Valley Tourism, the RRC collaborates with town government and other key stakeholders to develop and promote monthly events from May through November. This highly motivated grassroots organization has been at the center of many development efforts in Rowlesburg, including the town's ON TRAC designation and the design and execution of a pocket park in the center of town.

**Blueprint Kingwood** utilizes the South Price Street corridor in Kingwood as the epicenter of a town revitalization strategy. This street is the past and present home to a variety of trail friendly businesses, including photographers, clothing consignors, and coffee shops.



## MOTORIZED TRAIL USERS

The Mountaineer Trail Network is officially limited to non-motorized modes of recreation. However, there is no doubt that ATVs are an important part of recreation in West Virginia. Off-road riding is extremely popular among Preston County residents and visitors alike. In fact, Cheat Canyon likely sees more use from offroad vehicles—including all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), utility terrain vehicles (UTVs), and dirt bikes—than any other recreation user group.

Given the importance of balancing recreational use with ecological preservation, the Mountaineer Trail Network Authority should work with ATV users, PCPaRC, and other local stakeholders to identify ways to better manage off-road vehicle usage and collaboratively plan for sustainable recreational access in Preston County.



There are even cases to partner on joint projects with motorized recreation. For example, Preston County is home to a number of small, semi-formal motocross parks, such as Marvin's Mountaintop, Sand Hill Raceway, Bull Run Raceway, and Scott Farm. These parks are all part of a race series known as the Mountain State Hare Scramble ([mountainstateharescramble.com](http://mountainstateharescramble.com)). Hare Scrambles are a form of motocross racing wherein competitors race in laps around a closed course. Many (if not all) of these courses do not allow competitors to ride the course on a motorized vehicle in the days leading up to the competition and, as a result, many individuals have taken to using e-bikes or mountain bikes to scout the courses. With many overlaps and shared culture between mountain bike enduro racing, dirt track BMX racing, and motorized racing, there could very well be opportunities to partner on joint trails in the future.





Photo: Cheat River Narrows (Mitchell Stickler)

Mitchell C. Stickler  
PHOTOGRAPHY

# IMPLEMENTATION

## PRIORITIZING TRAIL PROJECTS

This section presents key aspects and considerations for implementing trail projects in Preston County and the Mountaineer Trail Network.

### Prioritizing trail projects

Long-term trail planning is the best way to map out a community, county, or region’s vision and priorities for trail development. But with so many potential trail projects in Preston County, where should local leaders start in prioritizing trail opportunities to pursue?

Category	Trail project	Length	Timeframe	Estimated cost
<b>Projects already underway</b>	Cheat River Rail-Trail	8 mi	Completion by 2022	\$3 million (funded)
	WV Northern Rail-Trail	10 mi	Completion by 2020	\$3 million (partially funded)
<b>Regional connectivity enhancements</b>	Deckers Creek to Kingwood (Option 1)	9.4 mi	10+ years	\$3 million–5 million
	Deckers Creek to Kingwood (Option 2)	6 mi	3–5 years	\$1.8 million
	Jenkinsburg to Snake Hill	8 mi	2–3 years	\$10,000
	Albright to Cheat Canyon	1.6 mi	2–5 years	\$250,000–500,000
	Formalized cycling routes into Garrett County, MD	20 mi	2–3 years	\$100,000
	Molly Jones and Joyce Ward Memorial Trail	2.5 mi	3–5 years	\$136,000
<b>Local connectivity enhancements</b>	Kingwood to Cheat River Rail-Trail (Option 1)	6.3 mi	3–5 years	\$3.2 million
	Kingwood to Cheat River Rail-Trail (Option 2)	0.75 mi	1–2 years	\$500,000
	Kingwood to Cheat River Rail-Trail (Option 3)	1.1 mi	1–2 years	\$600,000
	Rowlesburg to Cheat River Rail-Trail	3.2 mi	3–5 years	\$600,000
	West Preston School to Deckers Creek	1–2 mi	1–2 years	\$15,000–30,000
<b>Trails for anchor destinations</b>	Big Bear Lake Trail Center beginner trails	10 mi	1-2 years	\$150,000–400,000
	Cheat River Trail Center trailhead development	Trailhead	2–3 years	\$1 million (funded)



## KEY FACTORS FOR TRAIL PRIORITIZATION

### Trail benefits

What benefits will the proposed trail bring to the local community or region? Does the trail enhance connectivity between counties, or between local assets such as communities, schools, or local recreation areas? Does the trail enhance an anchor destination or offer other promising benefits for the local economy?



### Landowner willingness

Who owns the land needed for the trail project, and are they willing to allow trail development on the property? If not, can the property be acquired, and at what cost?



### Cost

What is the ballpark cost for the project, and are funds available to finance the work? Can it be completed with volunteers, or would it need to be built by professional contractors? (Read more about cost estimates and funding sources for trail projects in the following pages.)



### Time to complete

How long will it take to secure funds? Can the trail be built within a few years, or will the project take decades to reach fruition?



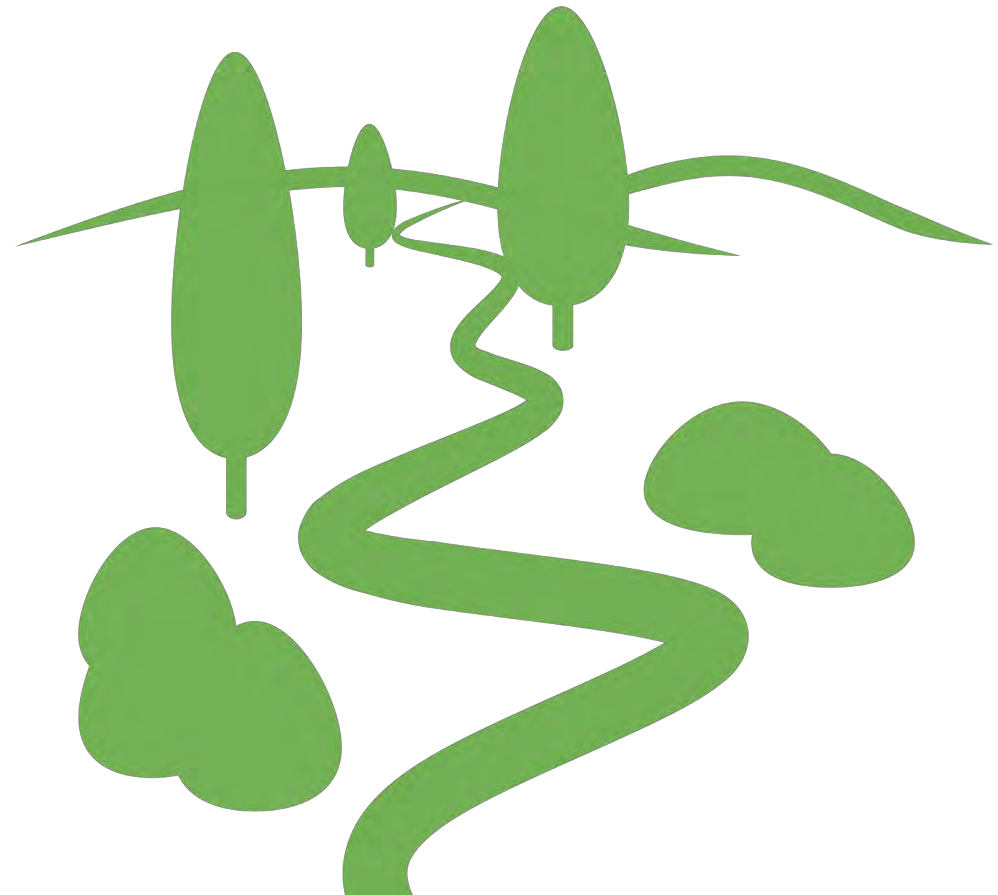
### Community enthusiasm

Are there local champions willing to spearhead the project and engage additional community support?



Trail prioritization is a balancing act, where a number of key factors must be considered and evaluated.

Yet even with the best planning, the outlook and feasibility for a trail project can change on a dime in response to events and other evolving situations. For instance, a trail project that has been stalled for years by an uninterested landowner might change completely when that property comes up for sale. As a result, communities should stay nimble to respond to unexpected opportunities that fit into their long-term vision for trail development.



## ACCESSING LAND

To build a trail, trail advocates must either secure permission from the owner of the property or acquire the property outright.

### Working with private landowners

As part of the Mountaineer Trail Network, Preston County faces new and unprecedented opportunities to work with willing landowners to build trails on private property. This will require careful conversations and negotiations between Mountaineer Trail Network officials and the landowners. Once an agreement is reached, the Mountaineer Trail Network will establish a formal recreational use agreement with the landowner, spelling out the trail development and users that will be allowed. Once this agreement is in place, the property is officially recognized as part of the Mountaineer Trail Network, granting the Network's liability protection to the landowner.

### Working with rail corridors

For rail-trails, the status of the rail corridor is a critical consideration for any potential project. When a rail corridor is formally designated as "abandoned," its ownership reverts back to the original (pre-railroad) owner, which typically poses significant roadblocks for communities aspiring to develop rail-trails. However, more options exist for railbeds that are not formally abandoned. For example, communities can enter a voluntary agreement with railroad companies to use an out-of-service rail corridor as a trail until a railroad might need the corridor again for rail service. Known as "railbanking," this technique preserves the rail corridor's connectivity across properties while still tying it to the national railroad system. For more detailed information about rail-trail projects, visit the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy website ([railstotrails.org](http://railstotrails.org)).

In cases where voluntary agreements cannot be reached, the next best option is to acquire the rail corridor outright. While public entities frequently lead the purchase and development of rail-trails, a growing number of nonprofits and other community organizations are successfully driving rail-trail development. In Preston County, Mon River Trails, Friends of the Cheat, and PCPaRC have led the charge for local rail-trails.

**CSX Transportation** maintains ownership of most of the intact railroad corridors in Preston County and northern West Virginia. Unfortunately, many West Virginia communities have found CSX to be a challenging partner for trail projects. The company requires that recreational buyers take on any environmental liabilities associated with their properties. In recent years, several key rail-trail expansions needed for the Parkersburg-to-Pittsburgh corridor in Harrison and Marion counties stalled after CSX changed ownership. CSX also recently backed out of a small sale agreement with Friends of the Cheat, and changed their internal procedures/requests when dealing with recreational buyers.



## TRAIL DESIGN

Whether built professionally or with volunteers, careful thought must go into ensuring the long-term sustainability of the trail. The following key aspects play into the sustainability (and success) of a trail:



- **Physical:** Trails should be built to minimize erosion or other degradation to the landscape.



- **Environmental:** With proper consideration and planning, trails can minimize disturbance to local plants, animals, watersheds, and sensitive habitats. For rail-trails and any other potentially contaminated trails, protecting workers and trail users from environmental contaminants is also a key focus.



- **Social:** Depending on the type of trail and desired uses, trails should be built to meet recreational needs, provide a high-quality experience, limit user conflict, and yield a net positive influence to neighboring communities.



- **Managerial:** Though less glamorous than construction, trail maintenance and administration are critical to maintaining a quality trail over time. (SLVGO, 2014)

Trail design is generally performed by professional contractors and/or engineering firms, which can cost from \$1,000–5,000 per mile, depending on the terrain and trail specifications. Hard surface trails like rail-trails generally require higher levels of design and engineering than natural surface trails. However, trails built specifically for mountain biking may require specialized planning, particularly for higher-end features.

## TRAIL CONSTRUCTION

Trail construction methods and costs vary widely based on the intended use of the trail.

- Simple, natural surface trails for foot or bike traffic can often be built by skilled volunteers using hand tools. Estimated cost: <\$5,000 per mile.
- More complex natural surface trails requiring features such as armoring, switchbacks, steps, retaining walls, and/or bridges are typically constructed by professional trail building contractors or firms. Estimated cost: \$5,000–20,000 per mile, depending on the terrain, complexity of the trail, and any required environmental remediation.
- While many mountain bike trails have been built by volunteers and bikers, higher-end mountain bike-specific trails are increasingly being built by professional trail crews using a mix of machinery and hand tools. Estimated cost: \$15,000–30,000 per mile, depending on the terrain and desired trail features.
- Rail-trails and other harder surface trails typically use concrete, asphalt, or crusher fines. Many former rail corridors have past contamination issues, which requires additional levels of environmental due diligence and remediation. In areas with high contamination, some trail projects necessitate capping the soil or alternatively, replacing contaminated soil with clean soil. Such necessary remediation results in significantly higher costs per mile than most natural surface trails. Estimated cost: \$1 million+ per mile for asphalt trail, \$300,000 per mile for crushed stone trail.

The International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) offers publications and training programs for volunteers interested in learning how to build trails. Preston County trail advocates can best access these resources through the Morgantown Area Mountain Bike Alliance (MAMBA), the local IMBA chapter for Monongalia and Preston counties.

# FUNDING TRAIL PROJECTS

While there are many potential ways to fund a trail project, several key funding mechanisms (or combinations thereof) are employed by many of the nation's successful trail systems.

## Common funding streams

### Trail building:

- Federal/state grants
- Budgetary allocations
- Trail pass revenue
- Private support

### Trail maintenance:

- Fundraising events
- Grants
- Membership dues
- Regional property tax levies
- Volunteer and in-kind assistance
- User fees

## Funding models used by other trail systems:

- **Hatfield-McCoy Trails (WV):** The Hatfield-McCoy Trails constructed their first trail system in 2000 through \$1.5 million in funds from the West Virginia Legislature. Subsequent development has largely been funded through the Recreational Trails Program (WVDOT), Transportation Alternatives Program (WVDOT), AML Pilot Program (WVDEP), POWER Initiative (ARC), state construction loans, and the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA). They also earn annual revenue from trail user permits (over \$2.6 million in 2019), which helps fund the operations and maintenance of the trails.
- **Kingdom Trails (VT):** Kingdom Trails has received major support from the U.S. National Park Service; the Vermont Community Foundation; the Vermont Department of Forest, Parks and Recreation; the Connecticut River Valley Partnership Program; The Windham Foundation; Northern Borders Regional Commission, USDA, Northern Vermont Development Association, Northern Community Investment Corporation, the Northern Forest Center, as well as local businesses, members, volunteers, and private landowners. In 2018, they earned just over \$1 million from trail user fees, which helps fund ongoing maintenance and operations. (KTA, 2020)
- **Great Allegheny Passage (PA/MC):** The first funding for the Great Allegheny Passage came in the form of \$16 million in capital budget allocations from the State of Pennsylvania in 1997 and 1998. Additional and significant funding for trail development has come from the Recreational Trails Programs and Transportation Alternatives Programs administered by Pennsylvania and Maryland. (GAP, 2020)
- **Bentonville (AR):** The Walton Family Foundation has poured over \$20 million into trail development in Bentonville, Arkansas. While other sources of funding have been leveraged, this private foundation basically single-handedly financed Bentonville's development as a world-class mountain bike destination.
- **Cuyuna Lakes (MN):** Trail advocates in the Cuyuna Lakes area utilized Recreational Trails Program funds matched with support from the state and local industry to complete mountain-bike specific trail planning and construction for their IMBA Ride Center (IMBA, 2014).
- **Copper Harbor (MI):** The Copper Harbor Trails Club has funded trail building efforts for their IMBA Ride Center largely through generous donations, fundraising events, and grant writing.

## Key grant programs for West Virginia trail projects

Much of recent trail development in West Virginia has been funded by four key programs.

Two of the most significant government funding streams for recreational trails are administered by the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and managed at the state level by WVDOH.

- **Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP)** is a grant program for nontraditional transportation projects including building or improving non-motorized recreational trails and related facilities and conducting environmental mitigation. It is considered to be the state's largest funding source for rail-trail acquisition, engineering, building and maintenance. TAP is a reimbursement grant program that requires a 20% local match. While the lead application for TAP grants must be a government agency, nonprofits are often able to manage and/or implement the projects.
- **Recreational Trails Program (RTP)** provides funds for competitive projects that develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities for both non-motorized and motorized recreational trail uses. Like TAP grants, RTP grants are reimbursable and require a 20% local match. A key difference, however, is that nonprofits *are eligible to apply for RTP funds*.

Though awarded annually, WVDOH has a significant backlog in managing projects, reportedly due to under-resourced staff and federal requirements by FHWA. In many cases, this backlog has delayed awarded TAP and RTP projects for a number of years. While these institutional limitations represent real setbacks to trail implementation projects, TAP and RTP funds remain critical nonetheless to long-term trail development in West Virginia. Projects awarded in 2020 included a riverwalk trail in Buckhannon (\$50,000) and a riverfront connector bridge in Thomas (\$490,000). [transportation.wv.gov/highways/programplanning/planning/grant\\_administration/](https://transportation.wv.gov/highways/programplanning/planning/grant_administration/)

Another major grant program used increasingly for trail and tourism development in West Virginia is the U.S. Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement (OSMRE) **Abandoned Mine Lands (AML) Pilot Program**. Administered at the state level by WVDEP, this program awards funds to economic development projects on abandoned mine lands in six Appalachian states. Since 2016, the AML Pilot Program has disbursed \$105 million in grant funding to assist projects all across the West Virginia coalfields. The requirements of the AML Pilot program are relatively flexible: Projects must be located on or adjacent to pre-law mine sites and focus strongly on economic development. Each state within the program received \$25 million in 2020 to distribute, and typical grant awards over one million dollars.

Friends of the Cheat has secured two rounds (\$4 million total) of AML Pilot funding for trail development in Preston County to construct the Cheat River Rail-Trail, create the Preston Trail Towns Program, build a trailhead at the Cheat River Trail Center, purchase trail maintenance equipment, and negotiate the purchase of an additional corridor into Rowlesburg. Other recently awarded trail projects include two grants (\$6 million total) in 2020 to the Hatfield-McCoy Regional Recreation Authority for developing an ATV resort, campgrounds, and cabins to support the Hatfield-McCoy Trails. [dep.wv.gov/dlr/aml/Pages/AML-Pilot-Program.aspx](https://dep.wv.gov/dlr/aml/Pages/AML-Pilot-Program.aspx)

Finally, the **ARC POWER Initiative** rounds out the current list of top trail and tourism-development grant opportunities. Since 2015, ARC has invested over \$195 million in 242 POWER projects throughout Appalachia. The POWER Initiative funds projects that create a more vibrant economic future for coal-impacted communities by cultivating economic diversity, enhancing job training and re-employment opportunities, creating jobs in existing or new industries, and attracting new sources of investment. POWER grants fall within two types: Technical Assistance Grants (typically up to \$50,000) and Implementation Grants (typically between \$400,000–\$1.5 million). Examples of recent projects include Friends of the Cheat's 2019 Technical Assistance Grant which funded this plan and initial organizing efforts for the Mountaineer Trail Network. [arc.gov/funding/power.asp](https://arc.gov/funding/power.asp)

<sup>8</sup> Pre-law mine sites are those that ceased operations prior to the signing of the Surface Mine Control and Reclamation Act (SMCRA) on Aug. 3, 1977.

Additional sources of funding and support for trail projects are available through the following programs and entities.

- The **Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG)** provides funds for housing and for other community development purposes. Most CDBG funding is used for infrastructure development (water and sewage, building subsidized housing, etc.), though funds have been used for trail construction.
- The **International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA)** offers Trail Accelerator Grants to organizations and communities interested in planning and implementing mountain bike trail systems.
- The **Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) Stateside Program** provides matching grants to States and local governments for the acquisition and development of public outdoor recreation areas and facilities.
- The **National Recreation Trails (NRT) Program** recognizes exceptional land- and water-based trails. While the program offers no funding, an NRT designation may help trail systems leverage additional funds.
- The **National Park Service Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA)** provides technical assistance to communities undertaking trail projects.
- The **Urban and Community Forestry Program** is a U.S. Forest Service program that funding and technical assistance to local government, nonprofit organizations, community groups, educational institutions, and tribal governments. Trails and greenways are a key part of the program, which is administered by forestry agencies in each state.
- The **U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Brownfields Program** provides grants for assessing and remediating contaminated sites, including rail corridors.
- The **U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) Public Works Program** investments help facilitate the transition of communities from being distressed to becoming competitive by developing key public infrastructure. The EDA also offers limited local technical assistance to distressed areas in times of need.





# NEXT STEPS FOR PRESTON COUNTY

**What's next for Preston County? The following steps incorporate best practices and lessons learned from leading trail systems that can help Preston County and the Mountaineer Trail Network plan success.**

## 1. Plan, build, and maintain great trails

There's no way around it: Trail tourism has to start with great trails. Preston County and the other 14 Mountaineer Trail Network counties already feature some top-notch trails, but there's always room for improvement.

Based on feedback from the Hatfield-McCoy Trails, initial planning is the most important aspect for a trail network's long-term success. The Hatfield-McCoy Regional Recreation Authority spent nearly four years in planning and design before opening their first trail system in 2000, and the results paid off tremendously: In their first year, the Hatfield-McCoy Trails sold 5,000 user permits. Nearly two decades later, they sold over 56,000 permits in 2019 (Lusk, 2020). Hatfield-McCoy Trails leaders attribute much of their continued success to their initial planning work, which paved the way for their future growth.

While there's no set definition for what makes a "great" trail, Preston County would be well served to think about the kinds of users it wants to attract, and to play to its strengths. The county's existing reputation as a whitewater mecca and growing mountain biking presence offers a niche, and capitalizing on river and trail connections may very well present a competitive advantage for local tourism development.

It's also important to remember that trails are not a one-time investment: Rather, once built, trails must be maintained on an annual basis, which requires a steady investment of time and adequate resources to keep the trails in prime shape year after year. While trail maintenance represents an ongoing commitment, most communities find the benefits trails bring far outweigh the costs and upkeep.

## 2. Invest in effective signage and supporting trailside amenities

While trailheads, signage, and parking lots may seem less glamorous than trails themselves, they are a critical—and often overlooked—component that can significantly improve a trail's tourism potential. While locals may know their way around, visitors need extra guidance in navigating the area. Preston County is taking steps in the right direction through PCPaRC and the Preston Trail Towns Program, which will soon be undertaking an inventory of trail amenities in the county. Highlighting areas for improvement, this inventory will steer local trail leaders toward targeted developments of amenities such as restrooms, picnic areas, garbage cans, lighting, and wayfinding at key areas.

## 3. Build local tourism infrastructure

Overnight visitors are the key ingredient in the recipe for trail-based economic development. While Preston County trails are, and will always be, used by local residents, tourists are the key force driving visitor spending, which in turn fuels local economic growth for trail towns.

As a result, Preston County and its neighbors within the Mountaineer Trail Network must prioritize business growth for overnight lodging, restaurants, gear shops, and other retail opportunities where visitors can spend money and support the local economy.

Created in 2019, the Preston Trail Towns Program is designed to help communities, businesses, and leaders in the county access economic opportunities presented by local trail development. The program is currently engaged in the towns of Rowlesburg, Albright, and Tunnelton, which will soon be key stops on the West Virginia Northern Rail-Trail and Cheat River Rail-Trail.

Preston Trail Towns is in the first stages of developing a portfolio of "Next Smallest Projects" that will have an outsized impact on its Trail Towns. These projects are expected to be completed by December 2021.



## 4. Work with local partners to promote trails through marketing and outreach

Building and promoting trails is a community undertaking. The following key points, based on PCPaRC's Outreach and Workforce Development Toolkit for Preston County, highlight key ways the county can collaborate with local partners to promote local trails.

**Talk to your government entities and influential organizations.** Use the MTNA for Economic Growth presentation and tailor it to present to your commission, EDA, CVB, COC, etc. It addresses economic gain and quality of life improvements, has important examples of successes, includes the MTNA logo, and has slides for you to fill in your Survey for your trail users. Distribute the MTNA county trail user survey to collect data on how to design and implement the MTNA in your county. Tailor the survey to your county by filling out the description section of the survey prior to distribution.

**Prepare your workforce.** 1. Establish a Recreation Tourism Career Opportunities webpage under your county parks and recreation department. 2. Partner with either your county BOE or another educational entity to offer the MTNA Recreation Tourism Training Program (RTTP). With this program comes educators from and curriculum developed by West Virginia University and the Adventure Sports Institute at Garrett College. The RTTP includes the following 4 classes:

- outdoor skills and leadership
- business management
- safety and risk management
- public lands management

**Get your county youth involved.** Collaborate with scouts and 4-H groups. Show them the MTNA for Youth video and facilitate a discussion using the MTNA youth focus group discussion questions.

**Get county-wide community support.** Show the MTNA Promo video every chance you can. Host town hall meetings for residents, landowners, and local businesses. The Promo video addresses quality of life improvements, increased family recreation opportunities, the financial incentive and landowner protections that come with the MTNA, and opportunities for local businesses and entrepreneurs. Meet with environmental organizations, hunt clubs, churches, fire departments, Rotary & Lions Clubs, and others.

**Make use of your local media.** Customize the MTNA media press release template to your county and let them broadcast the arrival of the MTNA and how to find out more information.

## 5. Track your progress

Trail projects generally don't happen overnight; in many cases, projects can take years to fund and reach fruition. While the slow pace can be discouraging, one of the best ways to keep communities engaged is to carefully collect data to track progress happening on the ground. Plan on tracking the number of miles of trails built (and underway), as well as the number (and type) of trailhead improvement projects completed, the number of volunteers engaged in trail building and community cleanups, and more.

In addition, surveying trail users is a key way to understand the dynamics of who is using your trails, where they go, and how often they visit. Having this data at your fingertips will strengthen your community's grant proposals and can be a powerful tool for fundraising for trail projects

## 6. Engage in the Mountaineer Trail Network

Finally, with all Preston County has to offer in terms of outdoor recreation, it stands to benefit tremendously from participating in the Mountaineer Trail Network. Preston County has been a key leader in building momentum for this innovative regional trail network, and its continued involvement and leadership will help set the Network on the right footing.

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# APPENDIX A: Mountaineer Trail Network County Assessment Matrix

## Mountaineer Trail Network: County Assessment Rubric

### TRAIL BREAKDOWN

- **Types of non-motorized trails in the county:**
  - Bike trails
  - Hiking trails
  - Water trails
  - Equestrian trails
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
  
- **Bike trail tourism matrix**
  - Does the county have...
  - Rail-trails and/or other beginner-friendly trails?
  - Large (high-mileage) singletrack networks?
  - Skills parks and difficult trails for advanced riders?
  
- **Trail connectivity**
  - Does the county have any trails or recreation assets that span or adjoin neighboring counties?
    - Are those counties in the Mountaineer Trail Network?
  - Does the county have trails that connect to...
    - Downtowns? \_\_\_\_\_
    - Parks or other recreation areas? \_\_\_\_\_
    - Rivers or lakes? \_\_\_\_\_
    - Schools? \_\_\_\_\_
  
- **Other recreation assets in the county:**
  - Climbing: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Hunting: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Fishing: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE

Does the county have the following types of businesses or services?

	Yes (and #)	No	Open weekdays?	Open weekends?
<b>FOOD</b>				
Outdoor vending machines				
Grocery or portable food				
Coffee shop				
Ice cream				
Brewery				
Fast food or chain restaurant				
Informal café with wait service				
Restaurant with liquor service				
Restaurants with outdoor seating				
Restaurants serving local food				
<b>LODGING</b>				
Hotel, motel, inn, and bed & breakfasts				
Camping				
Short-term rentals (cabins, homes, apartments, other)				
<b>OUTDOOR INDUSTRY</b>				
Outfitters and gear rental services				
Bike or other outdoor gear stores				
<b>OTHER ACTIVITIES</b>				

# **APPENDIX B: CATALOGUED TRAIL OPPORTUNITIES**

## **Tier 1**

- Cheat River Rail-Trail construction (underway)
- WV Northern Rail-Trail construction (underway)
- Connector trail from Kingwood Civic Center to WV Northern (PCPaRC) (underway)
- Connector trail from Kingwood Civic Center to Preston High School (PCPaRC)
- WV Northern Rail-Trail community projects (Tunnelton and Howesville)
- Cheat River Water Trail access points (improvements and upgrades)
- Specific school projects
- Trail and/or cycling focused events
- Share the road/bike lane/etc projects along highly desirable road cycling routes in Preston County

## **Tier 2**

- WV Farm Commission/WVDHHR “mountain” property near Terra Alta (very high quality public property for MTB development in Preston County)
- Trail recreation focused reclamation and management plan for Mon Power property (to be WV Land Stewardship Corporation) above Albright
- Cheat River water access points (new sites and improvement to existing sites)
- Cheat River Rail-Trail trailhead development
- Cheat River Park plan, Albright
- Deckers Creek Rail-Trail connection to Kingwood via a sign based “Share the Road” connection
- Plan for the Seven Islands property
- Preston High School (or nearby) NICA course and skills park (PCPaRC)
- Management plan for Cheat Canyon Rail-Trail
- Cheat Canyon to Cheat Lake connector trail
- Big Bear proximity
- Specific school projects

## **Tier 3**

- Cheat River Rail-Trail extension to Kingwood (rail bed or alternative route; alternative route could possibly be Tier 2)
- Cheat River Rail-Trail extension south along already owned corridor
- Deckers Creek Rail-Trail extension to Kingwood (rail bed or alternative route)

# APPENDIX C: LANDOWNER INFORMATION

## Top 15 private landowners by acreage

Owner	Acres	Based in-state	Current recreation use
Allegheny Fiorestlands LLC	20,547	No	
Messenger Limited Partnership	7,733	Yes	
Grimm Lumber Inc.	6,143	Yes	
Alyeska Inc. (Big Bear)	3,733	Yes	Yes
Allegheny Wood Products Inc.	3,681	Yes	
Lakin Properties LLC	3,074	Yes	
Coastal Forest Resources	3,009	No	
Lexington Coal Company LLC	2,122	No	
Frazee Resource Management LLC	1,410	Yes	
Interstate Hardwoods Co. Inc.	1,357	No	
Thomas, Phyllis J.	1,208	Yes	
Preston County Coal and Coke	1,137	Yes	
Teppy Dreams LLC	1,135	Yes	Yes
Patriot Mining	1,131	No	
Ward, Thomas	1,022	Yes	