

Friends of Blackwater: Blackwater Canyon Trails Master Plan

Introduction

The network of trails connecting Tucker County communities and the northern Monongahela National Forest (MON) are a critical resource for outdoor recreation, historical interpretation, and ecological integrity. Tourism, including activities like hiking, biking, camping and bird-watching, are important drivers for local employment and economic development. However, current limitations on access, connectivity, and maintenance may be preventing the full usage and enjoyment of these trails. The following trail plan identifies potential projects that could expand trail usership while also being congruent with key Forest Service goals. In particular, we believe this plan to be congruent with Forest Service Objective RCo6, in that it entails cooperation with local entities to promote recreation, and to contribute towards attainment of Objective RCo4, which sets annual goals for trail maintenance and reconstruction.

Tucker County, West Virginia is famous for its unique ecology, world-class scenic views, and outdoor and heritage tourist economy. With the coming of Corridor H to the Thomas/Davis area, there is a need to further develop this economy by improving and connecting multiple-use trails that create more accessible open space and family-friendly activities. Friends of Blackwater (FOB) has received funds to improve public trails and adjoining open space on the Monongahela National Forest. As they are improved, these trails will draw hikers and bikers into the unique upper Blackwater Canyon North region, and introduce them to natural and historic resources along the Rail Trail from Thomas to Douglas.

Economic Benefits

With over a quarter of private employees in Tucker County working in the leisure and hospitality business, it is easy to see why tourism is a key focus for future economic development. The arrival of Corridor H in the area has the potential to significantly increase visitation, providing visitors from urban areas like Baltimore and Washington D.C. a direct route to the West Virginia Highlands. A survey of area visitors, conducted by the Tucker County Cultural District Authority, revealed an appetite for both conventional trail development for outdoor recreation, and heritage tourism opportunities. Heritage tourists tend to spend an above average amount of time and money on their trips, meaning that there is a particular incentive to highlight the unique historical resources available. In addition to visitors, many residents and small business owners identify the natural resources and recreation opportunities as motivating factors in their decision to move to the area. Ensuring that the trail system is complete, accessible, and well-maintained is therefore a sound economic investment for the surrounding communities.

Friends of Blackwater & Monongahela National Forest Partnership

Friends of Blackwater has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Forest Service to improve the trails, heritage resources and water quality on the Monongahela National Forest. Friends of Blackwater's (FOB's) area of focus is the northern portion of the MON, a region that is famous for mountain biking, scenic views, natural and heritage resources.

Project Goals

Our vision for the Blackwater Canyon Trail System over the next five years is to develop recreational and heritage trails from Thomas to the Olson Fire Tower and down to Hendricks. This expanded trail system will also include mini parks and informational kiosks for visitors along the way.

Specifically, Friends of Blackwater's (FOB) Trail Project will improve Canyon Rim Trail, Lime Rock Trail, Fansler Trail at the Olson Fire Tower, and two mile of the Blackwater Rail Trail to lead hikers and bikers from historic downtown Thomas to the wild Blackwater Canyon backcountry, just three miles away. These ten miles of trails are part of the Monongahela National Forest (MON) deferred maintenance backlog. Their improvements will lead tourists from historic downtown Thomas to the wild Blackwater Canyon backcountry, just three miles away. By developing the variety of recreational experiences on this part of the MON, we will boost the economy of the area and increase appreciation for the National Forest and its unique ecology.

In addition to ensuring the trails are physically connected, we also aim to create vital connections between local community organizations, business owners, and concerned citizens. Therefore, an important part of this plan will be soliciting opinions from the nearby communities, and educating them about the natural and historic resources available in their area. Talks, posters, maps and power point presentations may all be utilized to build local support for this project.

Project Support

Partners

To date we have worked with the Landscape Architecture Department of West Virginia University, Experience Learning, the Allegheny Trails group, Tucker County Historical Society and the US Forest Service. Volunteers, with support from the MON, have opened up three trails. Future work includes creating park-like trailheads with maps, displays and trail guides for the new trail system. Young volunteers from WVU's Soils Science Club and freshmen orientation program, high school students from

Experience Learning's summer programs and a trail team from the Greater Allegheny Valley Conservation Corps have opened up the trails.

Funding for the project to Date

Dominion: \$25,000 trail grant 2017

American Hiking Society \$3,700 trail grant 2016

National Forest Foundation \$10,000 for 2016 with FOB \$10,000 match (part from American Hiking) and \$10,000 for 2017 with a \$10,000 match from FOB/Dominion

WV Department of Transportation \$74,000 (awarded and pending planning)

West Virginia Humanities Foundation \$5,460 for heritage trail signage

Tucker County Cultural District Authority: \$3,000 heritage trail signage and part-time AmeriCorps member

Business Support

Fairfax Materials

Lowe's

Ricotillies

Support letters:

Purple Fiddle

Blackwater Chapter of the International Mountain Biking Association

Alpine Heritage Preservation

Mountain Top Library

Vandalia Heritage Society

Tucker County Historical Society

Funding for WV Historic Roadside Marker for Blackwater Grade at Hendricks:

Tucker County Landmarks Commission \$500

Tucker County Historical Society \$250

Dave Watson bike guy \$500

Town of Hendricks: \$250

Additional Historical Projects

While not all of our projects are related to the physical trail, it is also worth mentioning some other efforts that could help to highlight the unique history of the area. One example would be the brochure on the West Virginia Central and Pittsburg Railroad, which has already been produced and is ready for distribution. This brochure highlights the unique engineering achievements of the rail grade, historical context, and notable events like wrecks. The JR Clifford Civil Rights Case is another example, which incorporated lectures, theater, and physical products like pamphlets. The existing Coketon Colored School Historic Marker, located near the Buxton and Landstreet building, could be tied into the other historical signage, to bring in an additional dimension of history.

Area of Work

This section is a narrative description of our intended projects, organized according to rough geographic area.

Area 1: Thomas Rail Trails, Davis Coal & Coke Historical Area

The Forest Service's Blackwater Rail Trail, an old railroad grade, follows the North Fork of the Blackwater River from downtown Thomas to the site of the Thomas depot (across from the current sewage treatment plant). Here the Francis Grade goes off to the left and uphill to the Buxton Landstreet Building and the Davis Coal and Coke headquarters on its way to Davis.

There are several places along this section of trail where interpretive signage could enhance the visitor's experience. Beginning in downtown Thomas, there is an existing Forest Service interpretive sign, which could be enhanced by the addition of a kiosk with maps. Another option would be to add an additional historical sign in that area describing the Thomas business district as it would have once existed.

The site of the old power plant, which would have stood near the site of the current Sunshine Sanitation plant, would be the next opportunity for interpretation. This plant was a mine-mouth operation which took coal directly from the Davis Coal and Coke works and converted it into electricity for the company facilities and the town of Thomas. The towering smoke stacks would have dominated the view in that direction.

Continuing from there, visitors would pass by the wastewater treatment plant. While the facility might not be considered scenic in and of itself, there is an opportunity to enhance that area with a mural reflecting some aspect of history or relating to the water resources of the area.

Shortly thereafter visitors reach the area once occupied by the Thomas Depot, near where the Francis Grade splits off from the main rail trail. This particular spot is

rich with possibilities for informative signage, with the depot, a set of coke ovens and the intersection of the trails all located within a relatively limited area. An additional trail, headed to the opposite side of the river, could be improved and defined to eventually become an official part of the Forest Service trail system.

The next landmark as you continue down the trail would be a decked railroad bridge. The bridge is in good condition, but vegetation could be cleared in the nearby area to create a spot for visitors to view the river and the structure of the bridge.

At this point, the Francis Grade splits off to run uphill to the Buxton and Landstreet Building. A trailhead kiosk with maps and other information could be installed near the Buxton and Landstreet to direct tourists visiting the gallery or other attractions down to the rail trail. Proposals have been made for a sculpture garden in that area, to enhance the connection between Thomas' art scene and outdoor recreation.

Continuing along the rail trail from where it intersects with the Francis Grade, the trail passes between the foundations of a water tank, and the site of the machine shop and roundhouse. These pieces of railroad infrastructure could be explained through interpretive signs, using old photographs and survey maps to help visitors envision the location and dimension of the original structures. A survey of the existing foundations in that area would help to inform the eventual signs.

The trail crosses a road not long after this, and the intersection, like all intersections along the rail trail, will require some form of directional signage to ensure that trail and road traffic co-exist safely. There is also the option to provide slightly more detailed signage at road crossings, in order to inform visitors of the attractions available down the rail trail.

The next historic spot following the road crossing is the site of the "wye", a triangular section of the railroad which was used for turning locomotives. The sign would likely be located at a remaining cut stone archway that once supported the railroad. This sign could contain information about the nearby community of Benbush, as well as the wye and the arch at Snyder Run.

Area 2: Douglas Rail Trails, Davis Coal & Coke Historical Area

This section begins at the parking area where Douglas Road crosses the rail trail.

The first point of interest the visitor will encounter is the Coketon Mine Pool AMD Treatment. A long trench, the wetland anoxic limestone drain, is visible parallel to the trail. A sign installed at that point could provide basic information about the effects of historic coal mining on the water quality in this area, and what is being done to reverse the degradation. In light of that ongoing work, it might be appropriate to wait for more definite treatment plans before attempting to finalize sign text.

An old cement arch located along the rail trail would have supported a bridge crossing the North Fork of the Blackwater River, and connected to a power plant that was sited at the mouth of the mine, and may have provided the power needed to operate mechanized mine equipment.

The coke ovens are an obvious historic landmark, since they have existing interpretive signage. However, that area could be further developed into a mini park, with a trail allowing visitors to access the back of the bank of coke ovens.

Further along the trail is a site that once housed the train depot for the town of Douglas, which could be noted with a sign. At this spot the rail grade is close to Forest

Road 18, and a connector trail between the two would encourage visitors to use the woodland trails accessible from FR 18.

The rail trail crosses a railroad bridge at Long Run, and improving the surface of this bridge might improve the usability of that section of the trail overall. Directional signs at the parking area would take visitors to Douglas Falls and to the larger Blackwater Canyon. Although already fairly well-known locally, we believe that Douglas Falls itself is an area that could benefit from an interpretive sign and improved accessibility, since the current path down to the falls may be unmanageable for some visitors.

Area 3: Olson Fire Tower Trails

Forest Road 18 is the main access point for the trails (Canyon Rim and Limerock) that begin in this area, and is in need of maintenance. Improving Forest Road 18 would also make restoration efforts on Finley Run easier, meaning that the project also facilitates water quality improvement.

The trailheads for Limerock and Canyon Rim could be made more visible with improved signage on both ends of the trails, marked as intersections on the map.

Trail maintenance remains on both trails, with water on Canyon Rim necessitating turnpiking, and Limerock needing treadwork to improve the surface of the trail.

The Big Run overlook would be safer and more appealing with new railings, as it is an easily accessible point for visitors. Depending on funding, there could be a sign at that point providing information about Big Run Bog, an ecologically unique landmark, or the nearby waterfalls. The Big Run area also features a large field that was once the site of a logging camp, which at a later date could have an interpretive sign relating to the history of timber development in the area.

The Olson fire tower is one of the central features of this plan. Restoring and refurbishing the fire tower, along with providing an interpretive sign to explain its history can enhance what is already a popular spot.

An interpretive sign for the lost railroad town of Limerock would provide information on the town of Limerock and the preserved graveyard. This sign could be located near the intersection of the Blackwater Rail Trail and the Limerock Trail.

Work to date

One mile of the Rail Trail has received a new gravel surfacing, and bollards to limit motorized access thanks to our 2016 grant from Dominion matched by funds from the National Forest Foundation. In 2017 young hires and groups of young volunteers continued the work to make the single track woodland trails more sustainable by adding improved tread and turnpiking for crossing over wet areas. FOB has formed a committee to create signage along railroad grade in partnership with FS Archaeologist Gavin Hale and his team. We have raised sufficient funds for 4 signs, and intend to eventually secure funding for 4 more