

Capturing the Opportunities in the Monongahela River Valley

Executive Summary/Action Plan

January 2014

Background

In 2011, the Pennsylvania Environmental Council launched the River Town Program in five communities bordering the Monongahela River. These communities represented three counties and included Point Marion in Fayette County; Rices Landing and Greensboro (Greene County) and Fredericktown and California (Washington County). In 2012, Brownsville, (Fayette County) asked to join the program and in 2013, Monongahela and Charleroi (Washington County) also joined the collaborative effort as well as three communities in West Virginia—Morgantown, Star City and Grandville.

In partnership with the National Road Heritage Corridor's efforts in the same area, the River Towns have accomplished much in the three years of collaborative efforts. Over one million dollars for projects has been raised. The focus of the work was: trail development, river access, improving view corridors, services and amenities, and a broad marketing campaign, to effectively raise the visibility of the Mon River as a regional recreational asset. New opportunities abound for these communities as they work together to capture the visitor market and improve their communities' economic vitality.

In the summer of 2013, Pennsylvania Representative Pamela Snyder (50th District) , met with the directors of the River Town Program and the National Road Heritage Corridor, and urged them to develop a regional action agenda that would serve as a foundation for future regional efforts capitalizing on heritage tourism and outdoor recreation, and the economic benefits they offer. This regional collaborative action plan would include methods and funding options for making recreational and heritage tourism a long-term priority.

Over the ensuing months, over three dozen municipal and civic leaders attended several Monongahela River Valley Coalition meetings. Participants included business owners, concerned citizens, members of council and mayors, tourism professionals, representatives from California and West Virginia universities, county economic development planning directors, Representatives Pam Snyder and Pete Daley, all three Washington County Commissioners as well as a representative from Senator Solobay's office.

Following a review of accomplishments and projects underway in the River Towns, participants discussed how to best position the Mon Valley for tourism. Legislators urged the Coalition to prioritize regional projects in an Action Plan for dissemination among legislative leadership to garner support. Previous planning efforts were reviewed to determine applicable regional priorities.

A consensus was reached for a five year regional plan, represented here as the Monongahela River Valley Plan: A Five-Year Action Agenda to increase Tourism to the Region.

Boxed text—

An economic and community development effort, the River Town Program engages civic and municipal leadership in a visitor and business attraction strategy based on the growing outdoor recreational market. Connecting to the navigable and recreational Monongahela River in a visible manner, the participating communities work together to offer visitors improved access and multiple opportunities to explore the river in recreational pursuits.

Region Wide Priorities

There are nine communities—*Point Marion, Greensboro, Rices Landing, Fredericktown, Brownsville, West Brownsville, California, Charleroi and Monongahela*, two regional planning organizations—*Mon Valley Progress Council and Mid Mon Valley Cultural Trust*, three tourism promotion agencies—*Washington County Tourist Promotion Agency, Greene County Tourism and the Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau* as well as the three county-wide economic development agencies (Fayette, Greene and Washington) engaged in this undertaking. With a focus on visitor and business attraction, these participating communities and entities were asked to select five priorities for their towns. They were urged to review previous planning efforts as well as their River Town Assessments and to consider possible regional impacts. The results revealed several priorities in common, leading to the following regional initiatives outlined in this document.

Improvement of River Access and Riverfront Amenities

- Improvement of River Access and Riverfront Amenities
- An inventory of the participating River Towns revealed multiple points of access to the Monongahela River but considerable variation in quality and attractiveness in access points. There were also a large number unsigned and thus not easily available to visitors
- Total estimated budget to construct or upgrade river access as well as signage: **\$1,110**

Action Steps:

- Community representatives to present plan to municipal leadership and verify municipal commitment

- Community representatives to request letter of support from municipal leadership for specific community projects to be undertaken
- Determine appropriate funding sources
- Determine appropriate applicant per resource

Develop Canoe/Kayak Rental Businesses

- Existing businesses in each community will likely offer the best opportunity to expand into Canoe/Kayak rentals and possible bicycle rentals; particularly in Point Marion where the Sheepskin Trail represents the longest distance biking/hiking trail in the area. Other trails include the 1.25 mile long Nathanael Greene in Greensboro and the 5.2 mile Greene River Trail connecting Rices Landing to just outside Fredericktown
- Total estimated to conduct workshop and hold the Entrepreneurial Contest: **\$160,000**

Action Steps:

- Host a workshop in Summer, 2014 for all business interests that might consider expanding to include Canoe/Kayak Rental business
- Entrepreneurial Contest for most appropriate and thoughtful Business Plan for expansion: Award the three top businesses \$50,000 to help launch the business within the year. The contest will be modeled after a similar one conducted in Oil City, PA

Develop Regional Signage Program

- Create a signage system that will both visibly connect communities to the recreational resource and each other as well as brand the destination
- Design, obtain necessary permits fabricate and install 12 signs: **\$285,000**

Action Steps:

- Map locations for State Route signage
- Preliminary design for Monongahela River Valley regional signage
- Meet with PENNDOT officials/district engineers to determine acceptable design
- Request Regional signage package consideration; modeled after Laurel Highlands region
- Outline Plan, number of signs, locations and design
- Request meeting with legislative representatives and PENNDOT officials to request regional signage package
- Raise necessary funding for manufacturing and installation of signage

Develop a Database of Public Art and Performance Spaces and Artisans

Live/Work Space

- Database will allow the coalition (communities & partners) to proactively market available live/work space throughout the valley
- Total estimated cost to develop database populated with specific building information: **\$25,000**

Action Steps:

- Inventory available and appropriate buildings

- Determine ownership and cost of leasing, owning, and restoring as needed
- Locate on map and prioritize based on code requirements and costs

Develop a Regional Brand and Marketing Plan

- Convene a Marketing Committee as a sub group of the Coalition to begin efforts to develop a Plan
- Total estimated cost for Plan development and early implementation: **\$120,000**

Action steps:

- January, 2014: Convene a Marketing Committee to outline a draft plan
- March 2014: Produce Unique Brand and Visual Program for Monongahela River Valley
- Summer, 2014: Implement Marketing Outreach Plan

Human Capital and Higher Education Partnership—the Future

Along with the 9 communities and the regional entities, two universities that sit along the Monongahela River—California University of Pennsylvania and West Virginia University have also been participating as members of the coalition. A subcommittee named the University Community Partnership has been formed as a working committee to examine and address issues such as the need for human capital to assist the communities—short and long-term as well as the need to develop, build and add additional coalition partners. What follows below are three projects identified by this team. The committee is currently refining these items into detailed scopes of work and proposals with the goal of identifying timelines and associated budgets.

- Organize a 2-3 day conference/workshop that would focus public attention on the needs and opportunities for the Monongahela River Valley (MRV) region. Preliminarily titled, “The Monongahela River Summit: Science, Policy, and Action,” this conference might convene in California, PA and then continue on board the Gateway Clipper as we ply the waters between California and Morgantown, WV where the conference would continue and wrap-up.
Estimated cost (WV and PA funding): \$30,000
- Organize a “Monongahela River Valley Connect Program” that, through a community-based assessment process, would work to match the intellectual resources of CALU and WVU to

the interests and needs of MRV communities through discrete field projects. **Estimated cost (WV and PA funding): \$80,000**

- Implement a Recreation Use Study that would inventory the recreation assets of the Monongahela River Valley corridor in Pennsylvania and West Virginia as well as better understand the needs and preferences of river recreation users and stakeholders. Results from this study will be used to support regional decision-making. **Estimated cost (WV and PA funding): \$40,000**