

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Albertin Vernon Architecture, LLC, with Brian Auman, Landscape Architect (the consulting team) was hired in the fall of 2012 to explore the feasibility of repurposing a 27 mile long section of the abandoned railbed of the former **Lewisburg and Tyrone Railroad (L&TRR)** as a rail trail for non-motorized recreational use by the general public. The L&T RR was owned and operated by the *Pennsylvania Railroad* and its successor, *Penn Central*, for freight and passenger rail service for almost a century until the early 1970's, when the Centre County section of the line was formally abandoned.

This feasibility study was designed to answer the question, "Is it feasible to repurpose the abandoned L&T railbed, or any section of it between Lemont and the Centre County line, as a rail trail?"

The answer to that question required finding answers to 7 more questions:

1. **Legal Feasibility**-how did the L&T railroad come into being, and who owns the right of way now?
2. **Physical Feasibility**- what is the condition of the railbed and what are the opportunities and constraints to repurposing it as a trail?
3. **Political Feasibility**- do landowners and the community support the idea of repurposing the L&T railbed or any portion of it as a trail?
4. **Market Feasibility**- who would use the trail, and for what purpose?
5. **Design Feasibility**- what is the community's vision for the trail?
6. **Financial Feasibility**- how much would the trail cost, how would construction and operations be funded?
7. **Operational Feasibility**- who would manage and maintain the trail?



In 1880, the *Lewisburg, Centre and Spruce Creek Railroad Company* was taken over by the *Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR)*--already well on its way to becoming the largest company in the world-- and rechristened the *Lewisburg and Tyrone (L&T) Railroad*.

How did the L&T railroad come into being, and who owns the right of way now?

An entire half century passed between the day the first meeting was held to discuss a railroad through Penns Valley and the day the first train rolled into the station in Lemont from its departure in Montandon in July of 1886. Plans to link the commerce and culture of Penns and Brush Valleys with more populous regions of the country faced a multitude of challenges on the local, regional and national level. In its early days, the project was a local affair spearheaded and financed by men of proven accomplishment, including Centre Furnace ironmaster Moses Thompson, Boalsburg namesake and Christopher Columbus descendent George Boal, Centre Hall Grange Fair founder Leonard Rhone, and Aaronsburg attorney James Coburn, namesake of the railroad village formerly known as the Forks. But the project soon proved to be even beyond the vast resources and skills of the region's most accomplished leaders and, by 1880, the *Lewisburg, Centre and Spruce Creek Railroad Company* was taken over by the *Pennsylvania Railroad (PRR)*, which was already well on its way to becoming the largest company in the world. A century later, they too would succumb to forces even beyond their resources and expertise, as the nation shifted its attention to what was thought of then as a more democratic form of transportation, the automobile. By the 1970's, the PRR was bankrupt to the tune of \$2 billion (in current dollars), much of its rights of way abandoned and reverted back to the then current owners of the lands originally deeded over to it, including the *Lewisburg & Tyrone Railroad*, referred to most often in the community and in this study simply as "**the L&T.**"



Although many sections of the railbed are overgrown with small trees and impassable thickets of invasive shrubs, the stone ballast oftentimes hidden from view beneath verdant beds of grass and moss, much of the L&T's gravel ballast rail bed also remains largely intact and viable for repurposing as a rail trail.

What is the condition of the railbed now, and what are the opportunities and constraints to repurposing it as a trail?

Like the ingenuous footpaths Native Americans mapped out along the most dry level and direct route through the ridges and valleys centuries ago, the L&T's surveyors and engineers followed the lowlands near the center of the valley and the gaps through the mountains carved by the creek. To avoid washouts from annual Spring freshets and the occasional 100 year flood, the L&T's engineers located the railbed on the natural bench above the creek or created a new bench for the railbed where none existed before. For the most part, that strategy worked, explaining why much of the railbed remains intact today, more than a century after it was built. Nevertheless, the corridor is not without its issues. Many sections of the railbed are overgrown with small trees and impassable thickets of invasive shrubs, the stone ballast oftentimes hidden from view beneath verdant beds of grass and moss. Puddling occurs in places where culverts filled in after the railbed was abandoned. In some areas, the railbed has been altered, removed or already repurposed for driveways, fencerows and cropland, or more intensive uses, like the Penn Township sewer plant and the Grange Fair concessions area. Some lands are in ag preservation, which prohibits non-agricultural activities, including trails. The floor of both tunnels are littered with rock, calling into question the safety of their use by the general public. Most bridges lack decking and some are missing altogether. Two areas, the Sinking Creek Prairie west of Spring Mills and the Penns Creek Conservation/ Hardwood Areas in Bald Eagle State Forest east of Ingleby, will require further review by state agencies. The entire Penns/Brush valley region was determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as a Conservation Landscape, meaning a Section 106 review will be required before any publicly funded trail development occurs. While some of these constraints can be worked around, others cannot. Nevertheless, much of the gravel ballast railbed remains viable for repurposing as a rail trail.



The consensus of the 200 people in attendance at the 1st public meeting was strong support for the idea of repurposing the abandoned railbed as a rail trail, and equally strong support for the right of each property owner to decide whether a trail was an appropriate use for their land.

Do landowners and the community support the idea of repurposing the L&T railbed --or any portion of it-- as a trail?

The answer to this question came through a variety of forums, beginning with a 40 person study committee established for this project by Gregg Township, with assistance from the *Centre County Office of Planning and Community Development*. Efforts to engage the public also included 2 public meetings, a Facebook page; dozens of one on one “key person” interviews with landowners, community leaders and representatives from outdoor recreation groups throughout the region; 244 surveys of potential trail users; and 9 neighborhood meetings with landowners and advocates interested in exploring community based trails on their lands. We also met with five different regional planning agencies that requested information on the project, and participated in a full day workshop with the graduate class of Penn State’s Community and Economic Development Summer Institute, where the Penns/Brush Valley Rail Trail feasibility study was featured as a case study on community engagement. Approximately 200 people attended the first public meeting; Many spoke in favor of the rail trail and many others expressed concerns about it. The consensus of those in attendance was strong support for the idea of repurposing the abandoned railbed as a rail trail, and equally strong support for the right of each property owner to decide whether a trail was an appropriate use for their land.



244 people responded to our User Preference Survey. The majority of potential users (195) said they would use this trail for walking (80% of 244 users) and almost as many (192 of 244) said they would use the trail for biking (79%).

Who would use the trail, and for what purpose?

Although originally christened *The “Penns Valley” Rail Trail* Feasibility Study by the planners who first imagined the possibility of a rail trail on the former *Lewisburg and Tyrone (L&T)* railbed, the abandoned rail corridor actually passes through two valleys in eastern *Centre County* -- *Upper Brush Valley* east of Lemont and west of *Centre Hall*, the hinge point of the valleys and the railbed, and *Lower Penns Valley*, between *Centre Hall* and Coburn-- before slipping through the gap between Thick and Poe Paddy mountains carved by Penns Creek between Coburn and the *Centre County* line. The people who occupy these three communities: Penns Valley, Brush Valley, and “the gap through the mountains beyond them” are as “culturally distinct” as they are “geographically distinct.” In many cases, attitudes about rail trails and people’s likelihood of using them may have as much to do with values and lifestyle choices as they do about the places they chose to live, work and play.

244 people responded to our User Preference Survey. The majority of potential users (195) said they would use this trail for walking (80% of 244 users) and almost as many (192 of 244) said they would use the trail for biking (79%). 145 people said they would use the trail for hiking (59% of 244), 74 for cross country skiing (30% of 244), 50 for access to public lands (20% of 244), fishing (10% of 244), horseback riding (8%), teaching (8%), commuting (4%), and hunting (1%). Respondents who filled in the “Other” category (8%) listed birdwatching, observing nature, bike-paddle-shuttle, rollerblading, water sports, running, jogging, dog walking, and campgrounds.

Most users (58% of 245 responses) said they would use the trail occasionally, 37% would use it weekly, 4% daily, and 1% listed other. Most users (70% of 268) expected to spend 2 to 4 hours on the trail, 20% for less than 2 hours, and 10% for more than 4 hours. Two thirds of users (173 of 259) planned to travel less than 10 miles, 24% planned more than 10 miles, and 9% would use it for treks less than 10 miles.

The majority of potential users (89%) said they might visit a café or restaurant during their trail trip, 51% expected to use a convenience store, and 34% would fuel up at a gas station. Only 10% planned an overnight stay with lodging, but a surprisingly high percentage (31%) thought they might hire a guide or an outfitter. The majority of users (57%) also thought they would spend less than \$25 per visit, while 29% expected to spend \$25 to \$50, 10% expected to spend between \$50 and \$75, 3% expected to spend between \$75 and \$100, and only 2% expected to spend more than \$100.



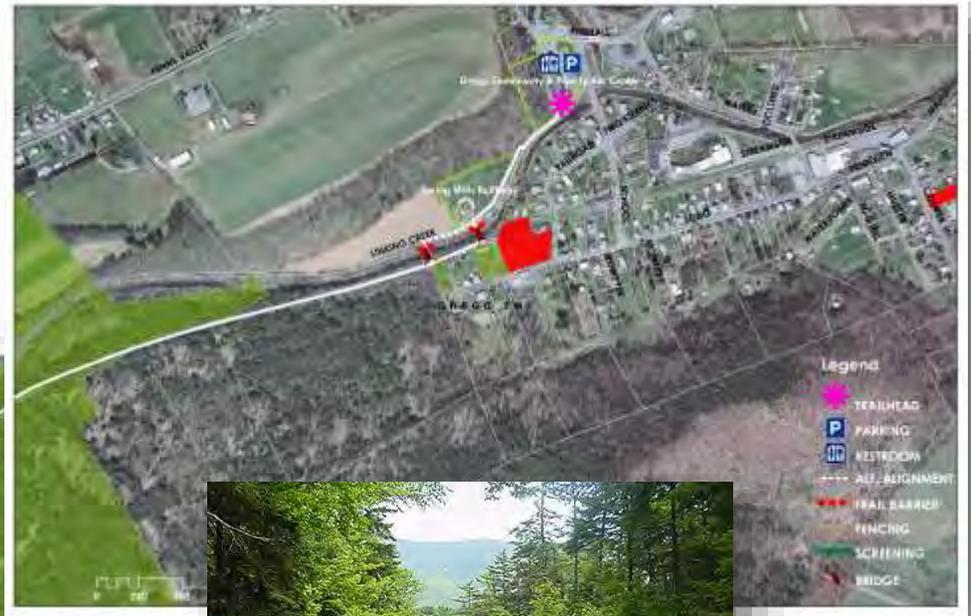
The same robust public process that exposed landowner concerns in some areas of the railbed also revealed other areas where landowners continued to express interest in exploring shorter community based trails designed principally to serve the needs of their local communities, like the 1.7 mile stretch of the L&T at the base of the hill below the straw bale guesthouse at Bergenblick's Scottish Highland Cattle Farm east of Smith Lane.

What is the community's vision for the trail?

The growing demand for places where the general public can safely walk, bike, hike, visit a neighbor, watch wildlife, cross country ski, snowshoe, ride a horse, fish or hunt prompted leaders of this community to search for a safe alternative to the region's heavily traveled roads and highways along the 27 mile stretch of abandoned L&T railbed. As the feasibility study unfolded, landowners concerns about privacy, liability and the right of property owners to decide what is the best use of their land overshadowed the vision of a linear park winding its way through the valleys and the gap through the mountains beyond them. But the same robust public process that exposed those concerns also revealed several areas where a handful of landowners continued to express interest in exploring shorter community based trails designed principally to serve the needs of their local communities, including,

- a 1.7 mile stretch of the L&T at the base of the hill below the straw bale guesthouse at Bergenblick's Scottish Highland Cattle Farm east of Smith Lane and the grounds of Dr. Richard Morgan's Rhoneymeade Farm sitting atop the knoll in the middle of this wide farming valley just west of Gregg Station Lane
- a 1.6 mile stretch of the L&T between Wildflower Lane and Spring Mills

In addition to those shorter community based trails, and in deference to landowner's concerns to not increase visitor pressure on the Coburn to Ingleby segment of the railbed, Bald Eagle State Forester Amy Griffith suggested a 10 mile route for equestrians and mountain bike enthusiasts along existing forest roads. The route follows the Millheim to Siglerville Pike to the top of the ridge, and then makes a left onto Pine Swamp Road before joining Poe Paddy Road, ending at Poe Paddy State Park.



The largest cost item for the Spring Mills trail is \$290,950 to install two 100 foot long prefabricated fiberglass bridges, one to replace the missing bridge across Sinking Creek Road on Myers Farm and one to cross Sinking Creek across from the ballfields.

How much would the trail cost; how would construction and operations be funded?

Based on Means Construction Cost Data, the cost to construct 8,570 feet (1.62 miles) of an 8 foot wide gravel trail with 2 foot wide gravel shoulders between Wildflower Lane and Old Gregg School is \$601,527, or \$370,602/mile, including hard costs of \$501,272, and soft costs (engineering and inspection fees estimated at 20% of hard costs) of \$100,254. The largest element (at 58% of hard costs) includes \$290,950 for installing two 100 foot long prefabricated fiberglass bridges, one to replace the missing bridge across Sinking Creek Road on Myers Farm and one to cross Sinking Creek across from the ballfields.

The cost to construct 9,065 feet (1.72 mile) of 6 foot wide gravel trail with 2 foot wide grass shoulders between Smith Lane and Gregg Station is \$214,066, or \$124,685/mile, including hard costs of \$178,388, and soft costs (engineering and inspection fees estimated at 20% of hard costs) of \$35,678. Both estimates assume landowners would donate the land.

DCNR and Federal Highway funds are the most common source of funds for most rail trail projects. DCNR C2P2 grants fund 50% of project costs, while Federal PA Recreational Trail Grants fund 100% of costs, allocated 80% Federal/20% State. A study of 100 trails surveyed in 2007 by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) found that the cost to maintain trails run by government agencies averages \$2,000 per mile, while trails run by volunteers average \$700 per mile.



We recommend that trail advocates Google the Hudson River Valleys' booklet, *Getting Involved, A Community Trail Handbook for Landowners*.

Who would manage and maintain the trail?

The options for managing and maintaining the trail were simplified after it became clear that a single 27 mile long destination type trail was not feasible at this time, avoiding many of the issues that must be worked out when a regional trail corporation is necessary to allocate tasks and assign responsibilities across many municipal and county boundaries. Gregg Township already has established a process for landowners to donate trail easements, and in fact has several easements in place at this time. The township would more than likely want to use its own maintenance staff and equipment to perform heavy maintenance tasks, such as removing dying or downed trees, cleaning out culverts, repairing or replacing damaged signage, and repairing sections of railbed washed out by major storm events. The trail at Rhoneymeade crosses two municipal boundaries, Harris and Potter Township, on Bergenblick Farm. We recommend that trail advocates for this section use the privately owned Lower Trail as a model for their organization, and Google the Hudson River Valleys' booklet, *Getting Involved, A Community Trail Handbook for Landowners*. They should also consider DCNR's suggestion of securing a PEER or Circuit Rider grant to explore how Rhoneymeade's non-profit corporation could work with other property owners and the two municipalities to allocate tasks among them, including the Tri-Municipal Park west of Centre Hall, a regional organization dedicated to promoting outdoor recreation opportunities in Potter Township, Centre Hall and Gregg Township. Both trail organizations should seek help from existing trail organizations to perform routine maintenance tasks like mowing, trash pick-up and cleanup after minor storms. Many organizations that are already active in promoting a cycling culture and cycling events in the community in Penns Valley offered to lend their support to help establish and/or maintain rail trails in the area, including the Bicycle Co-op in Millheim, which sponsors a gravel road bike ride each year, and the organizers of PASA's Bike Fresh Bike Local annual trail ride. Bald Eagle State Forest's 2015 Management Plan also includes continued support for trail and cycling events, including the Wilderness 101 ride in July. Many local bike shops, outfitters and outdoor recreation businesses also offered to support the establishment of more trails in this area.



The western end of the 27 mile corridor--between Lemont and Centre Hall--is situated between Upper Brush Valley Road and Route 45, renowned for its iconic red round barn.