

Executive Summary

The Ghost Town Trail is a multi-use pathway in Pennsylvania traversing 36 miles from Ebensburg in Cambria County to Saylor Park in Black Lick, Indiana County. Along its route, the trail passes through land originally developed by mining companies—first iron ore and later coal. The crushed-limestone trail follows the former right-of-way of the Ebensburg and Black Lick Railroad, running parallel to Blacklick Creek. Designated a National Recreation Trail in 2003, the Ghost Town Trail has brought life back to an area once abandoned and neglected.

In 2009, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) conducted this study of the users of the Ghost Town Trail under a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Designed to monitor trail user characteristics and economic impact, the survey utilized a methodology previously tested on Pennsylvania trails and documented in RTC's Trail User Survey Workbook (www.railstotrails.org/resources/documents/resource_docs/UserSurveyMethodology.pdf)



Data collected from four infrared counters positioned along the trail from the beginning of April through October of 2009 was analyzed and determined to represent an estimated 75,557 annual user visits.

Spending on soft goods (meals, beverages, ice cream) and overnight accommodations in conjunction with a trail visit was estimated at close to \$1.7 million. These represent annually recurring expenditures that will add to the economic vitality of the communities along the Ghost Town Trail.

Survey forms were available at eight trailhead locations along the Ghost Town Trail. Completed responses were mailed back to RTC's Northeast Regional Office. In all, 441 completed survey forms are included in this analysis.

ZIP codes indicate visitors to the Ghost Town Trail come from a wide variety of locations throughout Pennsylvania, with a concentration from the southwest corner of the state. The majority of survey respondents reside in the two counties the trail passes through; 38.5 percent in Cambria County, and 26.8 percent in Indiana County. Based upon the survey respondents' ZIP codes, another 26.2 percent reside in the regional southwest area of the state represented by visitors from these counties: Allegheny, Armstrong, Beaver, Blair, Butler, Fayette, Huntington, Somerset and Washington. More than seven percent of respondents were traveling to the Ghost Town Trail from areas beyond the southwest Pennsylvania region, including other states.

Nearly 46 percent of respondents indicated they use the Ghost Town trail on at least a weekly basis; 22.2 percent are using the trail on a monthly basis; another 22.9 percent make an annual visit to the Ghost Town Trail; and nine percent indicated this was their first visit.



The age profile of the Ghost Town Trail survey respondents indicates a slightly higher percentage of users older than 46 years of age (74.0 percent) than that found from other trail studies in Pennsylvania and nationally, which trend toward 55 to 60 percent of trail users being over 50 years of age. The higher percentage among Ghost Town Trail users does coincide with regional demographics. The usage of the trail by men (53.9 percent) and women (46.1 percent) is somewhat typical of what has been found during the course of other trail user studies, though trending closer to a 50/50 split than most. Respondents to the survey indicated children under the age of 15 accompanied them 19.5 percent of the time.

The Ghost Town Trail is used primarily for walking and bicycling. Biking (60.1 percent) is the predominant activity, while walkers account for 26.4 percent, and runners 7.4 percent. In the winter, the snow-covered trail is used for cross-country skiing by 4.6 percent of the respondents. Horseback riding was indicated as a primary activity by 1.4 percent, and less than one percent indicated they used the trail to walk their pet.

Respondents were asked if they would participate in these activities if the Ghost Town Trail did not exist, and 74.9 percent indicated they would continue the activity.

The largest percentage of respondents (43.9 percent) indicated they spent more than two hours on a typical trail outing, while 39.1 percent spent between one and two hours on the trail. Visual observations made by the survey team concluded that a number of people use the trail daily for an afternoon or lunchtime walk, particularly at Nanty Glo and Ebensburg. This group of users is likely represented in the 17 percent of survey respondents who indicated they spent one hour or less on the trail.

Nearly 64 percent of the respondents said health is their main reason to use the trail, while 33.1 percent use it for recreation. Other activities on the trail included wildlife viewing (36.1 percent), visiting a historical site (20.1 percent) and bird watching (17.3 percent). Survey respondents did not show a strong preference for weekdays or weekend visits to the trail, with 58.8 percent coming at either part of the week.

Respondents' knowledge of the trail came primarily from "word of mouth" (32.1 percent), with another 17.3 percent citing roadside signage and driving-by as how they discovered the trail. Information from county park departments (5.5 percent), a tourist bureau (3.6 percent) and bike shops (4.5 percent) accounted for 13 percent of the respondents' knowledge of the trail. Newspapers, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and other websites together accounted for 30 percent.

In terms of economic impact, 88.4 percent of respondents indicated they had purchased "hard goods" (bikes, bike accessories, clothing, etc.) in the past year in conjunction with their use of the trail. The majority of these purchases were bicycles and bike supplies that resulted in an average expenditure of \$357.63. This amount is close to the average dollar amount spent by users on other trails in Pennsylvania.

Roughly 72 percent of respondents indicated they had purchased some form of "soft goods" (water, soda, candy, ice cream, lunches, etc.) while visiting the trail, with an average dollar amount of \$13.62 spent per visit. This figure is also very typical of the average found from surveys on other Pennsylvania trails over the past several years.

Survey respondents traveled to the Ghost Town Trail from the statewide region, indicating there is



potential for increased economic impact from overnight stays in the trail vicinity. Twelve percent of respondents indicated they had stayed overnight in conjunction with their visit; they spent an average of \$78.04 per night on their lodging.

The majority (89.12 percent) of trail visitors felt maintenance of the trail was good to excellent, and 86.5 percent felt the safety along the trail was also good to excellent. More than 90 percent of respondents felt the cleanliness of the trail environment was good to excellent.

When asked if they would be willing to pay an annual “user fee” to help maintain the Ghost Town Trail, more than 63.7 percent responded they would—a similar percentage to what we have seen reported at other areas of the state. More than 60 percent felt they would be willing to pay a \$10 annual fee.

A question was included at the end of the survey asking if trail users would be interested in using a short extension to the trail (called the C&I Trail) above the Rexas trailhead, if it remained unimproved; 63.8 percent replied they would not want to use this section in an unimproved state.

The sections of the trail that were used the most by the survey respondents were, in descending order: Dilltown to Vintondale (24.8 percent), Nanty Glo to Ebensburg (20.0 percent), Vintondale to Nanty Glo (13.4 percent), and Black Lick to Heshbon (11.6 percent). The most popular trailhead access

points are Dilltown (31 percent), Black Lick (17 percent), Ebensburg (13.6 percent) and Rexas (13.1 percent), followed by Nanty Glo, Heshbon and Wehrum in descending order.

Trail development in the region continues to lead toward connections with Pittsburgh, the Great Allegheny Passage, the Armstrong Trail and eventually Erie. Comparison of the current findings with an Economic Impact Study of the Ghost Town Trail that was completed in 1996* shows a small change in the number of people traveling to the area and a slight increase in the amount of money the users are spending. With the extensive reconstruction of Route 22 nearly complete, access to many trailheads is easy and lends itself to promotion of the now complete 36-mile Ghost Town Trail as a destination. There are additional trails to be explored in the area and a promotional package, which would include lodging at either end of the trail or in the middle, could attract trail users from a wide geographic area.

Note: During the course of the survey process, the Ghost Town Trail was transformed from two completely separate sections of trail (between Saylor Park and Heshbon, and between Dilltown and Ebensburg) into one continuous, 36-mile length of trail. The bridges that permitted this seamless connection were constructed and opened just at the end of the survey period. Approximately one quarter of the surveys were received after the bridges had opened.

*Strauss, C.H., and B.E. Lord. (1996). *Economic Impact of Ghost Town Trail in the Indiana and Cambria Counties Region*. State College: Pennsylvania State University.