

SHEEPSKIN TRAIL – An Historical Perspective

This line was built in the 1890's as the Fairmont, Morgantown, and Pittsburgh branch of the B&O Railroad. It was constructed in response to the coal and coke boom and opened the southern end of the Connellsville Coke Region. Coke ovens still exist along the route, including: Cheat River Coke Works, Ada's Bottom Coke Works, Atchison Coke Works, and Shoaf.

About the name:

According to railroad buffs, the old railroaders called this rail The Sheepskin Line. Trains scattered sheep for miles when it first opened. The disgruntled herders were heard to exclaim: "Darn Sheepskinners!" and the name was secured in the region.

Through a planning grant from the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), Fayette County hired a Pittsburgh firm, Mackin Engineering, to conduct a feasibility study of the trail. A major goal of the study was to define and assess the route of the Sheepskin Trail. In the end, the study produced evidence that the Sheepskin Trail was a doable project, and the county initiated steps to design the trail at the northern end where a connection could be made with the Youghiogheny River Trail (YRT). The county hired Widmer Engineering to design the first 10.4 miles of trail. Concurrently, planning and design measures have been implemented at the southern end of the trail to facilitate a connection with the Mon River Trail coming from West Virginia. Also, in recent weeks, as part of the Purchase / Sale Agreement with CSX Realty, the county initiated a soil sampling test on property owned by CSX Railroad.

WHAT IS A RAIL-TRAIL?

In recent years there has been a move to establish a network of recreational trails that link people—where they live and work—to parks and the countryside.

With a decline in railroad usage, numerous industrial rail lines have been abandoned. It is with these deserted corridors that walk-able, bicycle rideable, and equestrian-oriented trails have been created.

According to the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, "Rail-trails are multi-purpose public paths created from abandoned railroad corridors. Flat or following a gentle grade, they traverse urban, suburban and rural America." This network currently consists of more than 10,000 miles of rail-trails across the country.

WHAT IS THE SHEEPSKIN?

The Sheepskin is a rail-trail project that cuts through the heart of central Fayette County, Pennsylvania. Still in the early stages of development, it is a missing link to a nationally significant trail system.

To the north, it will link with the Pittsburgh-to-Washington DC Rail-Trail Network, the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail, and the American Discovery Trail. To the south, it will link with the West Virginia Rail-Trail System, and the American Discovery Trail.

As a recreational greenway, the Sheepskin will link the Youghiogheny, Monongahela, and Cheat River watersheds—making it a significant greenway.

THE SHEEPSKIN ROUTE

The Sheepskin is entirely in Fayette County, Pennsylvania, and will run approximately 33 miles from Dunbar Township (at the Youghiogheny River Trail connection) to Point Marion Borough (at the Mon River Trail connection).

The trail will likely alternate between a “rail-trail” and a “rail-with-trail,” following the old Penn Central line, the old B&O / CSX line, and the active Southwest Pennsylvania Railroad.

The Sheepskin will also connect directly to the proposed Browns Run Rail-Trail, which will run from Smithfield to Shoaf, and then to Ronco at the Monongahela River.

Specifically, it links the historic resource areas such as: the Allegheny Heritage Development Corporation’s “Path of Progress”, the “Mountains of Fire Journey” of the Steel Industry Heritage Area and, the National Road Heritage Park. It runs adjacent to Laurel Highlands, and Uniontown High Schools and Penn State’s Fayette Campus. It connects recreational resources such as: Cheat Lake Trail, Fairchance Park, Hutchinson Park, Bailey Park, Uniontown Rotary Walk, Shady Grove Park, and many sportsman clubs. It follows the Fayette County Enterprise Zone corridor from Connellsville to Smithfield. It provides fishing access to: Dunbar Creek, Redstone Creek, and Grassy Run.

Dunbar to Uniontown:

An opportunity exists to run trail over the Right-of-Way now owned by the Pennsylvania American Water Company which the county has engaged in an agreement for Phase-I project development. Also, there is an opportunity for visitors to combine the trail with the scenic train ride that is running between Dunbar and Uniontown. The Sheepskin Trail runs past Uniontown’s Senior Citizens Action Center. Additionally, it runs through the historic Gist Plantation and behind the Meason House National Register Site. It is adjacent to Route 119 from Dunbar Township to Uniontown.

Uniontown to Smithfield:

It could cross under the Uniontown Bi-Pass using the existing road near Hutchinson Park, joining the right-of-way at the other side. It provides a recreational facility for the Fayette County Industrial Park. It will link Fairchance and Smithfield for bikers and pedestrians when the Mon-Fayette Expressway divides the two communities.

Smithfield to Point Marion:

The Mon-Fayette Expressway will run adjacent to the trail from Uniontown to the Pennsylvania line.

Possible Connections to Other Trails / Resources:

The opportunity exists to tie the Sheepskin to Shoaf using a recently abandoned railroad corridor. Shoaf is a possible future coal and coke heritage interpretive site. Also, an opportunity exists to tie the Sheepskin to Brownsville and Monongahela River using the abandoned Redstone Railroad corridor.

BENEFITS OF THE SHEEPSKIN

- Non-polluting economic development opportunities
- Regional business attractiveness
- Improved quality of life
- Health & physical fitness
- Linkage of close-to-home recreational opportunities
- Linkage with schools, towns, historic sites, and national trails
- Meeting the national goal of “a trail within 15 minutes”
- Heritage & recreational tourism

- Enhancement of property values
- Community involvement
- Realization of community visioning

WHO USES TRAILS?

- Hikers
- Walkers
- Strollers
- Bicyclists
- Equestrians
- History buffs
- Nature lovers
- Photographers
- Cross-country skiers
- Environmental educators
- All ages and physical abilities
- Outdoor enthusiasts visiting the region

PARTNERS AND ALLIES

- Fayette County Office of Planning, Zoning and Community Development
- Pennsylvania Department of Transportation
- Pennsylvania Department of Conservation & Natural Resources
- Fay-Penn Economic Development Council
- Fay-Penn Industrial Development Corporation
- Pennsylvania American Water Company
- Penn's Corner Resource Conservation & Development
- Allegheny Heritage Development Corporation
- Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, PA Chapter
- National Park Service: Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program
- National Road Heritage Corridor
- Regional Trail Corporation
- Municipalities along trail route
- Fayette Chamber of Commerce