

Great Allegheny Passage trail investment pays off

By [Jennifer Reeger](#), TRIBUNE-REVIEW
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About the writer

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A recently completed study gauging the economic impact of the Great Allegheny Passage quantifies the bike trail's value to the region in terms of hard numbers -- \$40 million, to be exact.

The 18-month study of trail-related spending along the 132-mile pathway showed that more than \$40 million was spent directly by users in 2008. Another \$7.5 million in wages can be attributed to the trail, the study concludes.

In 2001, direct spending by trail users was \$7.26 million, and officials associated with the trail said the numbers will continue to rise.

"We endeavored to raise the money to build the trail because we thought it was not only going to be a wonderful recreation experience but also return benefit to the communities in terms of tourism and community and economic development," said Linda McKenna Boxx, president of the Allegheny Trail Alliance.

"That was part of the promise when we went to our local foundations, to our local corporations, to the volunteers and mom-and-pop businesses and to state and federal government sources ... so it's great that the economic impact studies validate our assumptions," she said. "The economic data says we are getting return on that investment."

The study was a project of the Trail Alliance, The Progress Fund's Trail Town Program and the Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau.

Officials hope to use the study, which was conducted by Campos Market Research from February 2008 to August 2009, to attract investors and entrepreneurs to open trail-related businesses.

The study enables Cathy McCollom, director of the Trail Town Program, to show investors hard numbers when convincing them to open shops and bed-and-breakfasts in small towns along the trail.

"Now we can tell them not only is (the impact) significant, but it shows no signs of abating because this was happening during an economic crisis. These small businesses are doing quite well, and the market has shown no sign of letting up," McCollom said.

The study analyzed gross revenues attributed to the trail, the ways it influenced business decisions and trail user demographics. The research consisted of surveys of trail businesses as well as trail users.

The study found that:

• Business owners attributed 25 percent of their sales to the Great Allegheny Passage. More than a quarter of businesses reported expansions or plans to expand within the next year.

• Overnight trail visitors spent an average of \$98 per day, while local users spent about \$13.

â€¢ Overnight visitors tend to be more affluent, with 35 percent earning more than \$100,000 a year.

Donna Gambol, executive director of the Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau, said the study shows that efforts to market the trail have paid off.

"It just helps the whole region," Gambol said. "This is a corridor every bit as much a corridor as Route 22 or the turnpike in terms of bringing people to the area that might have not come to the area otherwise."

The Great Allegheny Passage runs from Duquesne to Cumberland, Md. In Cumberland, the trail connects to the C&O Canal Towpath, creating a 320-mile corridor between Duquesne and Washington.

But there is more work to do. The Trail Alliance has set Nov. 11, 2011, as the goal to complete the trail to Pittsburgh.

Boxx said \$65 million has been invested in building the trail so far -- meaning 60 cents was returned on every dollar of that investment in 2008 alone.

"When it's connected into Pittsburgh, I imagine that \$40 million is going to grow into \$60 million," she said.

McCollom and Boxx said the hope is to add even more diverse businesses in trail towns.

"We're finding that the trail user is interested in exploring the towns and purchasing local arts and local crafts," McCollom said. "They want some memento of their journey in addition to the food and drink and sleep they obviously need."

And there's a need for unique restaurants and establishments that offer craft beers and fine wines. Coffee shops are a must.

Trail visitors, who tend to be older and wealthier, are looking for an experience.

"They're meandering and enjoying and tasting and experiencing the towns," McCollom said