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The Great Allegheny Passage: A profit for the region

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An 18-month economic impact study found that the Great Allegheny Passage generated over \$40 million in annual spending and another \$7.5 million in wages in 2008.

"The Great Allegheny Passage is clearly a significant economic engine," said Trail Town Program Director Cathy McCollom. "It is apparently recession proof."

The study was conducted by Campos Market Research as a project of The Progress Fund's Trail Town Program, Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau and the Allegheny Trail Alliance. The study analyzed gross revenues attributed to the trail, business decisions influenced by the trail and trail user demographics.

"This study is a great validation of what we expected of the trail," said Linda McKenna Boxx, president of the Allegheny Trail Alliance. "It was built with recreation-based community development in mind, and the numbers are showing the success of the trail."

The trail, which now connects the Pittsburgh region to Washington, D.C., has become a national and international destination that hosts an estimated 750,000 trips annually, she said.

The study shows that small businesses along the trail are on the rise.

"It is not surprising that the numbers keep increasing," said Hank Parke, spokesman for the Somerset County Rails to Trails Association. The association is one of the seven groups that comprise the Allegheny Trail Alliance.

"There are so many small businesses that support the trail. The number of trail users increases and the number of small businesses supporting the trail is going to increase," he said.

Research was conducted in three phases from February 2008 to August 2009. First, 117 trail businesses were surveyed on the trail's economic impact in March 2008. A year later, 120 trail businesses were surveyed to compare revenue and wage information. Previous studies were conducted in 1998, 2001 and 2006.

The report findings "is a testament to the amazing potential the Great Allegheny Passage has to generate significant investment into the region," said U.S. Rep. Bill Shuster. "The passage is a well-tuned engine of economic activity and this report will only help speed along future growth, opportunity and investment to benefit our communities."

U.S. Rep. Tim Murphy agreed. He said that the trail also promotes the



Jackie Bowman sits on the front porch of her and her husband's, Craig, newest venture — Gram Gram's Place. The business is a bed and breakfast as well as a bike rental and repair shop along the Great Allegheny Passage in Meyersdale. The home was previously owned by Craig's grandmother, Olive Darrah, who died in July at the age of 98, but not before she saw the transformation of her home in June. (Staff photo by Judy D.J. Ellich)

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natural beauty of the region along with a positive economic impact.

Jackie and Craig Bowman opened their bed and breakfast and bicycle rental and parts in June. The business is called Gram Gram's Place and is located on Main Street in Meyersdale. The Bowmans said they are pleasantly surprised at the number of bikers who have already used their business.

The house was previously owned by Craig's grandmother, Olive Darrah, who died in July, but not before she told them how pleased she was with their new business.

"We would sit on the porch and watch bikers going past back and forth to the bike trail. Some would stop and we'd give them water," Jackie Bowman said.

Last September the couple, with the blessing of Darrah, began working on making a home into a bed and breakfast and bike rental and parts business. They named the overnight lodging rooms after family generations of women. They named the new business after what their children called Darrah — Gram Gram.

"It was a hard nine months but worth it," Jackie said.

"The recreational and economic impact that biking and hiking trails have on our region is overlooked and understated," U.S. Rep. John P. Murtha said in a news release. "When we started converting former rail lines into trail networks more than 30 years ago, none of us had any idea how successful they would be."

Donna Gambol, executive director of the Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau, said the trail has experienced a revival.

"Our trail towns have experienced a renaissance as new businesses, homeowners and visitors have contributed to their revival," she said in a news release.

As part of that revival there has been a shift in focus of the trail blazers from building it to promoting it.

"The study is invaluable," said Somerset County Trail Coordinator Brett Hollern. "It shows founders that the development is real; and it helps prospective businesses with their business plans."

It is the small details that count, according to officials.

About 1,272 trail users were surveyed throughout the 2008 trail season, according to McCollom.

"We found that more people use the trail on Monday than on Friday. There are a lot of businesses along the trail that are closed on Monday," she said.

The full study is available at www.trailtowns.org and www.GAPtrail.org.

(Judy D.J. Ellich can be contacted at judy@daillyamerican.com. Comment on the online story at daillyamerican.com.)

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