

May 21, 2020

To: Members of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives

Re: Opposition to House Bill 2004 (P.N. 2809)

Dear Representatives:

On behalf of the Friends of the Riverfront, I urge you to protect Pennsylvania's dedicated funds for recreation and conservation by opposing House Bill 2004. This legislation removes the automatic allocation of funds from the realty transfer tax to the Keystone Recreation, Park and Conservation Fund.

In 1993, the Pennsylvania General Assembly and the general public, in an overwhelming referendum vote, established the Keystone, Recreation and Conservation Fund. Since the Keystone, Recreation, and Conservation Fund was created 26 years ago, there has been over \$6 million in investment from the fund toward revitalizing the riverfronts in Allegheny County and toward the development of the Three Rivers Heritage Trail and Three Rivers Water Trail. Regional projects that received funding include the rehabilitation of iconic Point State Park, the Route 28 trail bridge, Millvale Riverfront Park, South Side Riverfront Park, and Etna Riverfront Park.

HB 2004 threatens the vitality of our outdoor recreation culture and economy by creating greater ambiguity regarding the availability of funds. According to a 2014 study, the Three Rivers Heritage Trail sees over 820,000 trips per year and generates over \$8.2 million dollars in economic impact for the region. In a time where there is economic uncertainty, trails have proven their value to the communities and the region. The Great Allegheny Passage, a regional trail in southwestern PA whose terminus is at Point State Park, sees almost a million trips per year, with \$50 million dollars in economic impact to the region.

HB 2004 creates insecurity for our communities and trails across the state. Many communities are currently in the process of developing these assets. Many are working towards the development of the region's next long-distance trail, the Erie to Pittsburgh Trail, spanning 270 miles in western PA. Creating uncertainty around funding for these projects, especially for communities who rely on it, jeopardizes these projects and the economic revitalization opportunities they provide. These are exactly the infrastructure projects that our economy needs to recover from the pandemic. New trail construction creates jobs and revenue for the municipalities who typically build the trails and parks. Trails are an economic engine for communities: Main Streets are reborn, tourism arrives, health and fitness opportunities transform towns. Pennsylvania's economy cannot afford the economic contraction that this Bill necessitates.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our trails are playing an important role for communities. Across the country and in Allegheny County, our trails are seeing record usage, some with over 200% increase over last year. People are discovering and using these public assets to find peace and comfort during times of stress. These trails are not only providing economic benefits to our communities, but also providing much needed physical, mental, and emotional health benefits as well. Studies show that people who live near trails exceed the CDC recommended time for physical activity per week. Healthier people leads to lower healthcare costs for our region.

Friends of the Riverfront needs your leadership to protect the Keystone Fund so that Allegheny County and Pennsylvania can continue to be a leader in outdoor recreation and quality of life. Please oppose House Bill 2004. Our members, your constituents are relying on you to stand up against a bill that hurts our economy and communities. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Stacey Vernallis
President, Board of Directors

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Executive Director

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