



Senate Democratic Policy Committee
Policy Hearing: Outdoor Recreation
Friends of the Riverfront
September 15, 2020

Good morning. I am Kelsey Ripper, Executive Director at Friends of the Riverfront. Thank you to the Senate Democratic Policy Committee, Senator Boscola, and Senator Williams for inviting us here today to testify about outdoor recreation and its impact on the lives of Pennsylvanians, especially those within Allegheny County. Access to outdoor recreation is vital for healthy communities and economies.

Friends of the Riverfront has been promoting outdoor recreation and the health of our environment for 30 years. What started as a planning committee within the City of Pittsburgh has grown into a nonprofit that currently works in 28 municipalities across Allegheny County to develop and maintain riverfront trails. We are the managers and stewards of the Three Rivers Heritage Trail and Water Trail, both of which are National Recreation Trails and economic drivers in our region.

For three decades our organization has led efforts to revitalize our riverfronts. For more than a century, the public could not access Pittsburgh's riverfronts due to heavy industry, including steel mills and railroads, until their decline in the 1970s. The riverfronts that were for so long seen as industry's backyard, were ripe with opportunity for economic development by reconnecting communities to the rivers. Friends of the Riverfront was part of the vanguard calling for riverfront revitalization that included public access, recreational opportunities, and environmental restoration. The Three Rivers Heritage Trail was envisioned to achieve those goals.

Today the Three Rivers Heritage Trail encompasses 33 miles of riverfront trail throughout Allegheny County, with development still ongoing. The Trail's success can not only be measured by the positive economic impact following the decline of the steel industry, but also by their impact on quality of life for those who live and visit our riverfront communities. They are a place for exercise, for respite, for transportation, and for communities to gather.

The Three Rivers Heritage Trail has also become a regional asset and destination that already generates nearly \$9 million dollars in yearly economic impact. The Trail is the center of major regional and national trail projects and is a gateway to thousands of miles of existing and developing trails. Access to these long-distances trails will only further that positive impact. This past year, Friends of the Riverfront completed a baseline economic study for the north shore of the Allegheny Valley where we are currently working to extend the Three Rivers Heritage Trail from Millvale, PA to Freeport, PA. The extension would add an additional 26 miles and connect to the Erie to Pittsburgh Trail. 88% of survey respondents said they did not



attribute their location to the Trail or River, but 42% would consider trail expansion as a factor in future business expansions. Trails are a beneficial asset which is especially important for river towns whose economies continue to decline and can benefit from a shift to a recreation economy. Community assets like trails attract new residents and visitors alike.

The world and our region are experiencing a stressful and frightening time, but the trails have become a community lifeline. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy recently released data from trail counters across the country, showing almost a 200% increase in trail usership over last year. Friends of the Riverfront has observed a similar increase on the Three Rivers Heritage Trail. During this pandemic, people are turning to trails for recreation, exercise, transportation, and comfort. Trails also make people healthier which is especially important in these extraordinary times. Studies out of West Virginia have shown that those who live near a trail exercise three times more than the recommended CDC amount. We are only beginning to scratch the surface of all the positive health impacts of trails.

With all the economic, health, and environmental benefits that trails bring, many communities are still disconnected from their riverfronts and do not have access to trails. Friends of the Riverfront seeks to address those disparities by providing trail development and maintenance support to under-resourced municipalities. We assist through the entire process from gathering community input, conducting feasibility studies, fundraising, designing and constructing trail, and maintaining. In the past year, Friends helped communities apply for over \$1 million dollars in grants for trail development projects. We hear repeatedly that without Friends' assistance and without state funding, many communities would not have the capacity or resources to complete trail projects. If we were to see a decrease in state funding for trail and recreation projects, many of the communities that have begun the trail development process would not be able to continue with these projects and many would be delayed for years. Small communities don't have the same opportunities that some urban areas have to help them with their projects. They don't have large developers that are willing to build these assets for them, they rely on public funds and organizations like us to help them develop and maintain trails.

Trail building is not easy. It takes support from a multitude of stakeholders and obtaining access to necessary land can be a complicated process, especially considering the history and geology of our region. While the region has seen a significant decline in heavy industry, industrial businesses and railroads along our riverfronts continue to provide vital jobs and transportation, but present challenges to trail development. We need to work together to develop collaborative and innovative solutions that meet the needs of industry, as well as communities' need to access their rivers, recreational opportunities, and alternative transportation. We know that win-win solutions are possible, but to get there, we need support from state lawmakers and agencies. Government plays a critical role as a convener and we call upon you to help us find and implement solutions that work for everyone.



Maintenance is also a struggle for many trails across the state. Everyone wants to cut the ribbon, but afterward there is trash to be collected and asphalt to be repaved. Funding for maintenance is limited and much of it relies on volunteer labor. Friends of the Riverfront is out along our trails every day stewarding them so that the trail remains clean and safe. In the last year, Friends of the Riverfront hosted 84 volunteer and outreach events, with 650+ volunteers picking up seven tons of trash, planting 75 trees, and managing invasive vegetation along the riverfronts. Our volunteers and trail stewards contribute over 6,000 hours of work along the Three Rivers Heritage Trail each year. While some work can be done through volunteers, larger infrastructure repairs and maintenance needs a reliable source of funding. Volunteers can cut back vegetation, plant trees, and pick up litter, but they cannot lay asphalt and repair bridges.

As Pittsburgh's "Trail Mayor," Tom Murphy, put it best, "Building a trail is never about the money, but about the will to make happen. Some government or group has to be the do-er—has got to acquire the land, and put down the stake for a trail, however ugly the first path might be. Before the trail is built, the public seems indifferent; but after it is done, thousands will proclaim their love for it. A consistency has formed." –Mayor Thomas Murphy, 2005

In this instance, we have the will and determination to makes these projects happen, but access to consistent and reliable funding for development and maintenance is a critical factor. We look to our local and state government as our partners to make these projects happen and keep trails available for future generations. We cannot do it alone and without your support.

Thank you.