

State trail systems benefit from ARC grants

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Funds to promote the premiere pedaling and paddling trails in 15 northern counties and connect Elk River Rail and Water Trail users with nearby amenities were included in more than \$12 million in grants the Appalachian Regional Commission awarded to projects across West Virginia.

A \$1.1 million grant to Friends of the Cheat will help the Preston County-based nonprofit

launch the Mountaineer Trail Network, billed as a collection of “the best non-motorized trails in the eastern United States for bikes and boats.”

Friends of the Cheat is coordinating the effort in behalf of the Mountaineer Trail Network Recreation Authority, an entity created by the Legislature in 2019 to promote economic development by creating and operating a network of non-motorized trails.

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Courtesy photo

A pair of cyclists pedal the Mon River Trail South in Marion County — one of 15 counties from which the first Mountaineer Trail Network trail areas will be selected.

TRAIL

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The new authority, patterned after the organization created to build and operate the motorized Hatfield-McCoy Trails in Southern West Virginia, can offer limited liability protection to private landowners allowing network trails to cross their property. It can also apply for and receive grants to improve trails and assist trail-related businesses.

During the next three years, the new authority, through Friends of the Cheat and its partners, will identify four to eight top-flight trail areas from an inventory of hundreds of existing trails within the

15-county region, stretching from Wood to Mineral County, excluding the Northern Panhandle.

“We’ll be looking at existing single track mountain bike trails, rail trails and water trails,” said Owen Mulkeen, associate director of Friends of the Cheat.

Areas with bike trails traversing a blend of terrain types, appealing to riders of varying skill levels, in areas offering a variety of additional outdoor recreation activities are expected to be among contenders for inclusion.

Paddling routes to be included in the network should have, among other criteria, enough access sites to accommodate a variety of trip lengths and skill levels, Mulkeen said.

Some money from the

grant will help cover the costs of improvements at trails selected for inclusion in the network, including trailhead enhancements like map kiosks and devices to count trail users.

“We will be working with county commissions and convention and visitor bureaus in the trail network area to inventory existing businesses and points of interest, and help identify and plan new amenities,” Mulkeen said.

Other funds from the grant will be used to market the selected trail areas and nearby tourism businesses “as a nationally and world-renowned destination for biking and boating,” according to Friends of the Cheat.

The Appalachian Regional Commission’s Power Ini-

tiative, which provided funding for the \$11 million grant to launch the Mountaineer Trail Network, also provided a \$50,000 grant in 2019 to begin the planning process for the new trail system.

Among other trail-related grants announced during the latest round of commission funding was a \$50,000 award to the Braxton County Development Authority to complete a “Trail Town Plan” to support business growth and development in communities along the Elk River Rail Trail.

The authority will partner with the Elk River Rail Trail Foundation to inventory existing businesses providing goods or services of interest to those using the trail — the newest unit in West Virginia’s state park

system — and the state-designated Elk River Water Trail.

The two organizations also will identify opportunities for new businesses and resources available to potential entrepreneurs along the length of the trail, which extends from Sutton and Gassaway south to Clay and Clendenin.

Due mainly to damage from 2016 flooding, only 28 miles of the rail trail are currently open. Even so, “we get inquiries every week from people who are interested in the possibility of opening businesses along it,” said Ken Tawney of the Elk River Rail Trail Foundation.

Tawney said a nine-mile section of rail trail between Duck and Frametown in Braxton County is expected

to open this fall, as is a four-mile section between Clendenin and Queen Shoals. That leaves a missing link of more than 20 miles between Queen Shoals and Hartland in Clay County, expected to be addressed next year.

A third trail-related grant of \$40,680 was awarded to the Lewis County Commission to pay for a feasibility study for creating a non-motorized pathway connecting historic and recreational sites with the downtown districts of towns in Lewis, Harrison and Braxton counties.

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