

Great Allegheny Passage users help local economy, survey finds

By **Chris Foreman**
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Overnight visitors using the Great Allegheny Passage last year spent an average of \$98 a day in trail communities and on lodging in Pennsylvania and Maryland, according to a survey of 1,272 people.

Local users at trailheads like those in West Newton, Connellsville, Ohio, Confluence, Meyersdale and Rockwood also reported spending \$13 for each day they were on the trail, the survey released this week states.

The survey was the second part of a three-phase economic impact study of the trail, which has four miles remaining to complete a 150-mile biking and hiking path from Pittsburgh to Cumberland, Md.

In Cumberland, the passage meets the C&O Canal Towpath, which extends 185 miles to Washington, D.C.

Linda McKenna Boxx, president of the Allegheny Trail Alliance board, said the organization is seeing an increase in the number of trail users who are making trips of multiple days.

Almost 41 percent of those surveyed at six trailheads in Pennsylvania and Maryland between May and October last year were planning an overnight stay as part of their trail visit, according to the study completed for the trail alliance, Laurel Highlands Visitors Bureau and the Greensburg-based Progress Fund.

Last year, people from all 50 states and a half-dozen countries inquired about the trail, Boxx said.

"It's sort of becoming the must-do bike ride," she said Friday. "We know this is on the national radar screen, but it's also on the international tourism radar screen, as well."

People from 670 postal codes completed the survey. The average distance an overnight visitor traveled to arrive at a trailhead was 289 miles.

"It's always humbling to see that people from all over the country and all over the world are using the trail," said Amy Camp, manager of the Progress Fund's Trail Town project.

Other interesting details showed that about 45 percent of respondents used the trail several times a month; 65 percent of respondents were male; and 83 percent of respondents were 35 years or older.

The most frequent suggestion for improving the passage was for better signage on and off the trail.

Camp said the first phase of the study estimated \$12 million in spending at businesses in 2007 directly was attributable to the trail, up from \$7.2 million in 2002.

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