

Trail System in Southwest Virginia Would Spearhead Growth

BY LARRY E. SMITH

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Thanks in part to actions by the Virginia legislature, areas of economically depressed Southwest Virginia may receive an influx of visitors, along with their vacation budgets, in the not-too-distant future.

Legislation that took effect in July created the Southwest Regional Recreation Authority (SRRA) to develop a system of multiple-use trails in several southwest counties. SRRA has chosen the name Spearhead Trails, since a map of Southwest Virginia resembles the head of a spear.

Spearhead Trails is envisioned as a system of managed, sustainable trails for all-terrain vehicles and off-highway motorcycle riders, hikers, bikers, and equestrians that will ultimately link to the popular Hatfield-McCoy Trail System in West Virginia. The trails will provide a wealth of recreation opportunities close to all Virginians and will likely attract visitors from all over the Eastern U.S. and beyond.

Further, if the success of the Hatfield-McCoy Trail is any indicator, Spearhead Trails will be an economic boon for Southwest Virginia.

A 2006 Marshall University economic impact study of Hatfield-McCoy found that in just the second year the trails were open (2002), retail sales of area businesses had grown by 12 percent, sales per establishment by 25 percent, and payrolls by \$104 million, or 9.5 percent. The study noted that the gains were seen in all related sectors, including gas stations, accommodations, food service, and real estate sales and rentals. The real estate sector experienced the greatest growth due to the improving property values adjacent to the area.

In addition, Hatfield-McCoy was shown to benefit the entire state of West Virginia. The study found \$623,000 in additional tax revenue was produced as a result of Hatfield-McCoy -- and the total statewide economic impact was an increase in output of \$7.7 million, an increase in income of \$2.8 million, and the generation of 146 new jobs.

Similar growth could be expected in Southwest Virginia and throughout the state as a result of Spearhead Trails.

The less tangible benefits of establishing a premier trail system in a beautiful corner of the commonwealth are equally important. Spearhead Trails will provide all Virginians with more opportunities to experience the outdoors and the chance "to get away from it all."

There is still much work for the SRRA to accomplish before the trails are a reality. The next step is a feasibility study to prove the likely economic impact that Spearhead Trails will bring to the region.

The effort has broad-based support. Local partners in the authority include Lee, Wise, Scott, Buchanan, Russell, Dickenson, and Tazewell counties and the City of Norton. The Lenowisco and Cumberland Plateau Planning District commissions, the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, and the Virginia Department of Forestry have also provided assistance as partners in various capacities.

The Virginia Tobacco Indemnification and Revitalization Commission as well as the Motorcycle Industry Council and the Specialty Vehicle Institute of America -- national motorcycle and ATV industry trade associations -- have provided financial support for the feasibility study. Finally, the Tourism Development Division of the Virginia Tourism Corp. has been at the forefront of coordinating the effort from the start and getting it to where it is today.

Although not as far along as Virginia, planning for a trail system in Eastern Kentucky -- sKYward Trails -- is also underway. And in Eastern Tennessee, the Southern Appalachian Greenways Alliance is promoting development of non-motorized multi-use trails. These groups will be significant partners in SRRA's efforts to establish and link trails throughout the entire region.

While trails on the ground may still be a couple of years off, now's the time to get behind the Spearhead Trails project. It will provide economic development for a depressed area of the commonwealth and offer new recreation opportunities within a one-day drive for all Virginians. I applaud the efforts of SRRA and encourage you to support the effort as it moves forward.

Larry E. Smith is executive director of Americans for Responsible Recreational Access. For more information, please contact SRRA Chairman Jack McClanahan at jrmccclanahan@comcast.net