

Wallkill Valley Rail Trail Association

Strategic Plan – edited 9-13-2011

Historical Summary

The Wallkill Valley Rail Trail is a 12.2 mile mixed-use trail extending from the southern border of the Town of Gardiner to the northern border of the Town of New Paltz in Ulster County. It opened officially in 1993 as the 17th rail trail in New York State. In 2001 it was recognized as part of the Hudson River Greenway Trail System, and in 2007 it was designated a National Recreation Trail by the National Park Service and the U.S. Department of the Interior. The Town of Gardiner and the Village and Town of New Paltz each own their respective sections of the trail. The Wallkill Valley Land Trust holds a conservation easement on the entire Rail Trail, while the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail Association manages, promotes, and improves the Rail Trail.

The Wallkill Valley Rail Trail Association (WVRTA) was incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 1991 to promote the protection and use of the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail for the benefit of the general public; to promote public awareness of the environmental, historical, and recreational value of the Rail Trail; and to coordinate the management and maintenance of the Rail Trail in cooperation with the municipalities which own the trail and the Wallkill Valley Land Trust which holds a conservation easement on the trail. The WVRTA is the only entity involved on an ongoing daily basis with oversight of the entire trail.

Strategic Planning Overview

In August 2009, the Wallkill Valley Land Trust and the Open Space Institute acquired the privately-owned section of the old Wallkill Valley Railroad right-of-way in the towns of Rosendale and Ulster from Ulster County. The WVRTA was asked to partner with these nonprofits and municipalities in the extension of the trail to the border of the City of Kingston. In reviewing our additional responsibilities, it became clear that our small, all-volunteer organization would need to grow and to develop clear practices and procedures in cooperation with our partners.

The Board's strategic planning work began with a grant to support the contracting of a planning facilitator, Ingrid Kulick, Principal of Forward Solutions, Rhinebeck, NY. Our facilitator met with several focus groups, identified and brought together by the Board Chair to respond to and discuss the following questions:

What three words best describe the Rail Trail itself, and the Association?

What impact do you believe the Rail Trail has on the community, the County, the region?

Why did you become involved in the Rail Trail Association?

Is the actual experience of volunteering what you expected it would be?

What does the Association do best?

In what ways does the Association need to grow or change?

What would you like for the Board to be doing that is not being done now?

What are the most important issues that must be addressed by the Association during the next year?

How do you picture the Rail Trail 10 years from now?

Focus group members included Board members, volunteers, individual trail users (pedestrians, bicyclists, equestrians), land owners along the trail, leadership from groups/clubs that use the trail, and municipality leadership. Response to the focus group discussions was very positive, and appreciation for the WVRTA was noted for involving individuals external to the Board and volunteer base. The WVRTA is viewed as a successful, energetic organization that has made great strides in improving the Rail Trail's condition, usability and value to the community. Landowners expressed their appreciation for the significant improvements (reduction of trash and inappropriate use) to the Trail, and appeared to be enjoying the Trail themselves – the Trail is now seen as a value-add for properties located along its borders.

Our facilitator also met with Karl Beard, Rivers & Trails Program, National Park Service, to secure input and guidance. The Board received a summary of the focus groups feedback from the facilitator. The feedback identified twelve key strategic areas for Board focus in preparation of the strategic plan.

The Board proceeded with a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis discussion (attached to this plan).

With that backdrop, the Board then discussed the following key questions: Where is WVRTA today? Where do we want it to go? And how do we get there? These discussions resulted in the drafting of a vision and mission statement, and the identification of nine primary goals, related

objectives and achievement timelines contained in this strategic plan. Several facts were of note throughout the entire planning process:

The WVRTA is governed and operated entirely by volunteers.

The level of commitment and passion for the organization's vision and mission is extraordinarily high.

Representatives of the National Park Service Rivers & Trails Program view the WVRTA as an excellent model of rail trail management, and are available to guide and assist the organization as it grows.

Volunteer capacity, as it currently stands, is at its maximum output.

The President of the Board is functioning as both a Board Chair and Executive Director.

Additional growth and responsibility within the WVRTA will require the organization to hire staff in the near future.

The relationship with the Wallkill Valley Land Trust is collegial and cooperative, however, some responsibilities need clarification.

The increase in the length of the trail from 12.2 to approximately 24 miles will dramatically increase the WVRTA's maintenance requirements and increase the number of municipalities (from three to five) with whom the WVRTA must coordinate trail management.

The WVRTA must:

- create an overall trail maintenance and management framework for the entire trail
- expand its Board and volunteer base to increase its capacity and depth in governance, accountability, trail management and maintenance, fund raising, and public relations

- define roles and responsibilities of partner municipalities and organizations

- document and improve organizational policies and procedures

- seek a higher level of philanthropic support

Vision & Mission Statements

Our **vision** is to actively participate in an expanded rail trail as part of a regional trail system and share our knowledge and experiences with other people interested in creating rail trails.

Our **mission** is to maintain, promote and improve the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail for the benefit of the public, and to actively promote a wellness-focused lifestyle that includes regular physical exercise coupled with enjoyable recreational pursuits.

Primary Goals

Goal 1: Improve Board structure and function

Objective 1.1: Create a Board Manual.

Achieve by: December 2011

Objective 1.2: Create a roster of committees and draft descriptions of their roles and functions:

Nominating & Governance

Communications & Public Relations

Finance

Fund Raising

Achieve by: December 2011

Objective 1.3: Encourage board members to take on the roles of committee chairs and recruit their own committee members and other volunteers to accomplish the work of the committee.

Achieve by: March 2012; ongoing

Objective 1.4: Annually review the Board and committee structure to accomplish and evaluate the organizational goals consistently.

Achieve by: March 2012; annually thereafter

Objective 1.5: Create an annual board agenda based on the strategies and operational requirements of the organization.

Achieve by: March 2012; annually thereafter

Objective 1.6: Detail job descriptions/expectations for Board members, Officers, Committee Chairs, and other volunteer positions.

Achieve by: June 2012

Objective 1.7: Conduct teambuilding within the Board – clarify the board role, function definitions, board member responsibilities, and board processes.

Achieve by: September 2012

Goal 2: Strengthen Board recruitment

Objective 2.1: Develop a strategy for outreach to the membership and supporters which includes connecting volunteer effort to successful completion of the organization's goals.

Achieve by: December 2011

Objective 2.2: Develop a recruitment, training and cultivation plan for leadership to mentor new leaders and prevent burnout.

Achieve by: June 2012

Objective 2.3: Formalize and expand volunteer recruitment, training and recognition.

Achieve by: December 2012

Goal 3: Cultivate future leadership

Objective 3.1: Focus on recruitment and mentoring of Board members who have capacity for leadership in order to spread the work and be better prepared for transitions.

Achieve by: June 2012

Objective 3.2: Develop a plan to encompass exit strategies for those Board members and volunteers in key leadership positions, particularly those who have served in the position for multiple years.

Achieve by: December 2012

Goal 4: Develop a maintenance and management plan for the Trail

Objective 4.1: Create an overall maintenance and management framework for the entire trail to provide a consistent experience for trail users. Inventory and assess trail conditions and improvement needs, determine environmentally responsible best practices, and ensure that dangerous conditions are attended to in a timely manner.

Achieve by: TBD

Objective 4.2: Ensure that the responsibilities and lines of communication between the WVRTA, the individual municipal governments and the land trust are clearly established. Prepare an operations manual and annual calendar.

Achieve by: TBD

Objective 4.3: Establish effective procedures and practices for recruitment, training, and management of the volunteer base necessary for monitoring, maintenance, and improvement of the trail.

Achieve by: TBD

Objective 4.4: Engage new groups and communities in stewardship and advocacy as linkages with other trails are developed.

Achieve by: TBD

Goal 5: Develop a plan for maintenance/expansion of local relationships

Objective 5.1: Clarify with the Wallkill Valley Land Trust the expectations, responsibility and accountability boundaries, and stewardship issues.

Achieve by: Fall 2012

Objective 5.2: Prepare an events policy and management manual for WVRTA-sponsored events and for events scheduled by other organizations

Achieve by: Spring 2013

Objective 5.3: Identify and prioritize the relationships of value to the WVRTA during the next two years - consider municipalities, local businesses, clubs and associations (users of the trail

like equestrians and bicyclists, as well as art and culture groups to host joint events, running groups, bicycle groups), landowners along the trail, and other trails.

Achieve by: December 2013

Goal 6: Strengthen fund raising capacity

Objective 6.1: Develop a ‘case for support’ specifying the fund raising needs of the WVRTA over the next three-five years

Project operational and capital financial needs for growth and management of the WVRTA.

Achieve by: December 2012

Objective 6.2: Create a development plan and annual calendar to guide the fund raising and events activities. Include other rail trails and groups in the planning work, as well as the cultivation of local businesses and individual supporters.

Specifically expand local business relationships

Achieve by: December 2012

Goal 7: Build constituency (i.e. members, trail users, volunteers, supporters) via frequent small-scale focused outreach events and programs.

Objective 7.1: Discuss and implement appropriate options, such as:

informal counts of and questionnaires for trail users

informational (meet and greet) tables at various trail locations and community events

Achieve by: Fall 2011; ongoing

Goal 8: Strengthen public and community relations capacity and continue to promote the protection and use of the Rail Trail.

Objective 8.1: Gather economic impact data and publicize the economic value of the Rail Trail.

Investigate the cost and potential locations for trail counters to determine actual usage and note variations in usage of the trail.

Use economic data information for public relations, fund raising, relationship building, municipality cooperation, and business support.

Achieve by: Fall 2012

Objective 8.2: Use social media and the website for both promotion and feedback.

Investigate potential involvement of college students for social media guidance and interaction.

Determine action plan for management of the accounts

Make the accounts interactive to foster relationships, provide information and receive feedback.

Achieve by: Fall 2012

Goal 9: Develop a long-term system for recording and storing organizational history.

Objective 9.1: Determine the historical material (photos, governance and financial records, media coverage, publications, membership records, landowner agreements, etc.) that should be archived.

Achieve by: Spring 2013

Objective 9.2: Select location and format for archiving, retrieving, and updating material; assign responsibility for maintenance, retrieval and updating material.

Achieve by: Spring 2013

SWOT Analysis

<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>
<p>Park System uses WVRTA as a model</p> <p>Highly committed leadership and volunteers</p> <p>Strong president</p> <p>Excellent signage, maps, information available</p> <p>Good trail maintenance</p> <p>Mixed usage of the trail (pedestrian, equestrian, bicyclist) makes the trail accessible to many</p> <p>Ability to partner with local government</p> <p>Trail is well maintained, easy to use</p> <p>Cooperative with landowners and municipalities</p> <p>Good landowner relationships</p> <p>Community asset</p> <p>Positive economic impact</p> <p>Professional image</p> <p>Board members knowledgeable about the trail</p> <p>Attractive to people outside the immediate community</p> <p>Good communication within the organization</p>	<p>Mixed usage of the trail (pedestrian, equestrian, bicyclist) results in usage conflict</p> <p>Volunteer overload/intense volunteer dependence</p> <p>Lack of a clearly identified vision</p> <p>Dependency on a strong president with no backup</p> <p>Lack of board structure – good volunteers who function solo</p> <p>No paid staff</p> <p>The office location within the Land Trust building may create some confusion for the public as to the separation between the two organizations</p> <p>Policies for events and usage of the trail by other organizations need further clarification</p> <p>Coordination of events on the trail</p> <p>Outreach and coordination with the local businesses</p> <p>Youth involvement</p> <p>Limited public knowledge of trail and association</p> <p>Policing the trail (motorized vehicles)</p> <p>Safety at crossings</p>

<i>Opportunities</i>	<i>Threats</i>
<p>Increased exposure for membership, volunteers and donations due to connection to additional communities through expanded trail</p> <p>Society has become more interested in recreational opportunities that showcase community history and involvement, and natural, green options</p> <p>Community pride in the rail trail is growing</p> <p>Volunteer recruitment, particularly among youth</p> <p>20th Anniversary of the Rail Trail Association (2011)</p> <p>140th anniversary of the Rosendale trestle (2012) which is tied to the Statue of Liberty establishment</p> <p>People will travel for recreation if it is attractive</p>	<p>Burnout due to increased trail size, complexity and maintenance</p> <p>Impact of current economy on fund raising</p> <p>Competition with other nonprofits for charitable funds</p> <p>The impact of increased traffic on the trail</p> <p>Potential for inconsistency between municipalities as the trails connect and the linear park fully develops</p>

