



# Trails Start With Us

## *York County Rail Trail Authority Strategic Plan 2025–2029*

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*Project Consultant: Recreation & Parks Solutions*



*photo Credit Tim Senft*





*Photo Credit Tim Senft*

## **About Us**

The York County Rail Trail Authority is a ten-member volunteer board formed in 1990 by the York County Commissioners. We have two part-time staff members, committee volunteers, and many individuals, groups, businesses, government agencies, municipalities, and foundations who support our trail-building work. We've built over 32 miles of trails, an impressive record of success that has spurred the economic growth of York County communities and the health and wellness of our residents and visitors.

## **Our Motivation**

Our Strategic Plan builds momentum to advance our essential work – bringing trails to life.

Connected trails create opportunities for recreation, alternative transportation, tourism, economic development, historic preservation, active lifestyles, improved health, and environmental conservation that help our York County communities thrive.



We spend countless hours researching, planning, and fundraising because we realize the value trails bring to York County. Investing time and effort in trail building returns a reward we can enjoy and share. Even more important to us is that our efforts will benefit future generations.

Building trails requires constant effort. Although we have an excellent track record of achievement, there are still many miles to go. Our Strategic Plan will enable us to put those miles of trails on the ground.

Connecting our communities with trails – safe ways for everyone to walk, bike, and be active outdoors – is an opportunity and challenge we are up for, with your help.

Our success is measured by more than miles of trails. The quality and strength of our partnerships also measure it.

Trails start with us but are built by many. Together, we will continue to create these wonderful recreational resources.



Photo Credit Marianne Harbold



## Our Planning Process

The essence of strategic planning addresses three questions: *Where are we now? Where do we want to go? How will we get there?*

To determine what we're doing well, what we could do better, what we should do in the future, and how we'll make that happen, each board, committee, and staff member completed a questionnaire. In addition, key partners were interviewed to provide their perspectives on us, and executive directors of benchmark agencies like ours were interviewed to obtain detailed information on their work.

We identified our strengths and the challenges facing us, utilized feedback from our board, committees, staff, and partners to focus our work; confirmed our mission, unified us around a shared vision, and set our direction for the next five years.

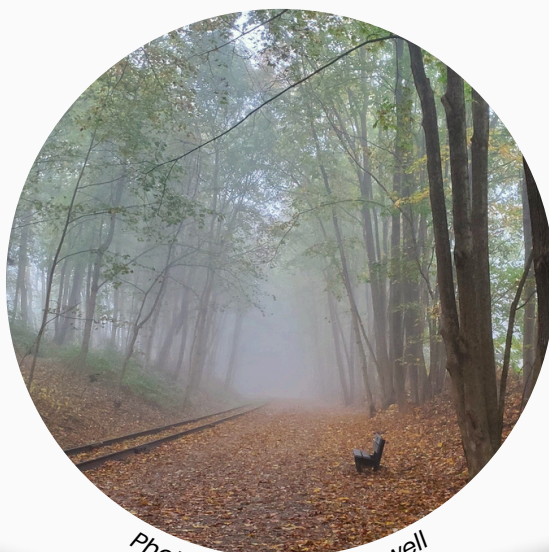


Photo Credit Amy Criswell





## Our Mission and Vision

We refined our mission to focus on our core purpose, defined our vision of what we want to ultimately achieve, and chose a motto to promote our work.

**Our Mission** Building multi-use trails to connect our communities.

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**Our Vision** Creating a premier trail system to improve community health and strengthen our economy.

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**Our Motto** Trails Start With Us

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# Our Strengths and Challenges

We identified our organizational strengths and the challenges facing us to establish the foundation for our Strategic Plan.

## Strengths:

- A solid history of successful trail building.
- A well-established network of key stakeholders and partners.
- Long-tenured, committed staff and board with in-depth expertise.
- Skill in obtaining trail project funding.
- A highly-valued organization with an excellent reputation.
- Everyone loves trails.

## Challenges:

- Limited awareness of our work among the public.
- Lack of sustainable operational funding to adequately staff our organization.
- Lack of plans to ensure leadership succession for our staff and board.
- Difficulty in managing our workload efficiently.
- Limited public understanding of our role within the County government structure.
- Constantly educating the public and municipalities about the benefits of trails.
- Dealing with uncooperative property owners.
- Lack of enough active, engaged volunteers and ability to manage them effectively.
- Dealing with large and complex grant projects.
- Continual fundraising for trail construction.



photo Credit Katie Winemiller





## Our Strategic Goals

These six strategic goals are the overarching themes for building on our strengths, addressing our challenges, excelling in our mission, and fulfilling our vision. They form the key pillars of our Strategic Plan.

### **1. Continue Trail Building**

Our focus is on constructing the Hanover Trolley Trail and connecting it to the Heritage Rail Trail. However, we also have an underutilized potential to provide municipalities with resource support to plan and build local trails and connections to these two trails.

### **2. Achieve Financial Sustainability**

Although we successfully get trail project grants, we lack sustainable operational funding to adequately staff our organization. This means our long-term ability to build trails is in jeopardy. Obtaining consistent, stable, dedicated operational funding is imperative.

### **3. Increase Public Awareness**

To make people aware of our work, we must better establish and implement our brand. This is more than our name or our logo. It's what people perceive, experience, think, feel, or share with others about the York County Rail Trail Authority. It's who we are, what we do, and why it matters. Better branding will mean the community understands the value we bring. Better branding will elevate awareness of our mission, build key partnerships, attract loyal supporters, advocates, and donors; and ultimately, build more miles of trails.



#### 4. Strengthen Partnerships

We must create partnerships with organizations with common interests in trails, outdoor recreation, tourism, healthy living, and sustainable community development.

Strengthening our relationships with the York County Commissioners, York County Planning Commission, York County Parks and Recreation Department, Explore York, York County Economic Alliance, the healthcare sector, and the individuals, municipalities, businesses, clubs, civic groups, and foundations that support our work is vital.



#### 5. Expand People Resources

Dedicated, high-quality board and committee members are critical to our success. We must expand our committee membership and find more individuals with community-based relationships, funding connections, and expertise who are willing and able to be actively involved. Organizational functions take significant time, and with only part-time staffing, not everything can be accomplished to advance our trail-building work. Outsourcing some tasks will help us use our staff and volunteer time more efficiently. We must also begin the process of hiring a full-time executive director to address the reduction in staff work hours.



*Photo Credit Tim Senft*

#### 6. Implement Technology Efficiencies

We deal with large and complex trail project budgets. With so many grants open simultaneously, it's difficult for staff to track them. As we expand fundraising efforts, monitoring and acknowledging donations becomes more difficult. Technology applications will help us manage our grants, volunteers, and fundraising work more effectively.





# Our Strategic Initiatives

Strategic initiatives describe the elements we must complete to support our goals.

## Strategic Goal 1: Continue Trail Building

- 1.1** Build the Hanover Trolley Trail.
- 1.2** Obtain County commitment to assume ownership, management, and maintenance of the Hanover Trolley Trail.
- 1.3** Undertake a feasibility study to connect the Heritage Rail Trail to the Hanover Trolley Trail.
- 1.4** Broaden our role in helping municipalities develop local trails and connector trails to the Heritage Rail Trail and Hanover Trolley Trail.

## Strategic Goal 2: Achieve Financial Sustainability

- 2.1** Form a fundraising development committee.
- 2.2** Establish a permanent endowment fund for operational funding.
- 2.3** Redesign the annual individual and corporate donor campaign to increase the amount of funds raised.
- 2.4** Secure long-term tax-supported funding from the County.
- 2.5** Ask municipalities to contribute funds annually per capita to fund operations.
- 2.6** Work with municipal, state, and federal legislators to develop a dedicated operational funding stream for trail-building organizations.
- 2.7** Apply to the Warehime Foundation for an operational grant.
- 2.8** Revamp the Friends of the York County Rail Trail Authority membership program.
- 2.9** Investigate alternative funding sources.
- 2.10** Research and implement on-the-spot fundraisers.

## Strategic Goal 3: Increase Public Awareness

- 3.1** Obtain funding to hire a marketing consultant.
- 3.2** Review and reconsider all elements of our branding.
- 3.3** Add an operating budget line item for marketing.
- 3.4** Identify and hold a signature special event that doubles as a fundraiser.
- 3.5** Engage in partnership marketing with non-traditional organizations.
- 3.6** Determine how to streamline the production and distribution of newsletters.





## **Strategic Goal 4: Strengthen Partnerships**

- 4.1** Appoint County Parks and Recreation and Planning Commission representatives as board members.
- 4.2** Explore County Planning Commission staff assisting with work.
- 4.3** Engage the healthcare sector in support of trail building.
- 4.4** Strengthen relationships with foundations.
- 4.5** Strengthen partnerships with civic groups, community groups, and businesses.

## **Strategic Goal 5: Expand People Resources**

- 5.1** Develop a framework for board member recruitment, progression, and term limits.
- 5.2** Hire a full-time Executive Director.
- 5.3** Redesign the Ambassador program.
- 5.4** Outsource labor-intensive work.
- 5.5** Expand committee membership and add new committees.

## **Strategic Goal 6: Implement Technology Efficiencies**

- 6.1** Purchase grant management software.
- 6.2** Purchase donor/volunteer relationship management software.



# Timeframes and Responsibilities

Our strategic initiatives have clearly defined deadlines and assigned individuals responsible for leading their implementation.

The timeframes for completion of our strategic initiatives are divided into three categories:

- Short-Term: 2025-2026
- Mid-Term: 2027-2028
- Long-Term: 2029+

Many initiatives fall into more than one timeframe category.

## Our Short-Term Strategic Initiative Tactics

Tactics are the detailed work activities and actions necessary to complete our strategic initiatives. A beginning list of tactics to accomplish the short-term strategic initiatives has been prepared. If additional tactics are required to implement each short-term initiative, the leader and team members responsible for each strategic initiative's implementation will develop them.

Our Strategic Plan includes only the tactics for short-term strategic initiatives. The approach to achieving each mid- or long-term initiative will be developed closer to the time the work on the initiative begins. For example, tactics for mid-term initiatives (2027-28) will be created during the later months of 2026. This sequence will allow flexibility in how future initiatives will be accomplished.





# Accomplishing Our Strategic Plan

The York County Rail Trail Authority is primarily a volunteer organization. Our board and committee members' active involvement in implementing our Strategic Plan is essential to advancing our trail-building work.

These implementation guidelines make the Strategic Plan a living, working document:

- Our Strategic Plan and annual updates on our progress will be shared with our supporters, donors, and partners.
- The Strategic Plan will become the guidepost for our work. When decisions are needed, it is the reference point for whether or not new issues are of higher importance than what's been established as our existing direction.
- A board member will be appointed to chair the Strategic Planning Committee.
- A leader will be assigned the responsibility for implementing each strategic initiative. The leader will form a team to work on completing the initiative. The leader and team members will prepare an annual list of tactics to implement each strategic initiative.
- An Excel spreadsheet will track our progress and measure success.
- The Strategic Plan will be a standing agenda item for board and committee meetings, and strategic initiative leaders will report on progress.
- As new board and committee members join us, we will review the Strategic Plan with them.
- The Strategic Plan will be tied into the annual budget process.
- A summary of our Strategic Plan will be posted on our website. Implementation results will be included on the website and in newsletters and communications to inform the community about our strategic direction and commitment to results.
- We will perform an annual review of the Strategic Plan and document any changes to initiatives to reflect changes in priorities.