

Trails are changing the face of western Maryland. Towns such as Hancock, Cumberland, McHenry and Oakland are part of a trail expansion initiative that is pumping revenue into local coffers and making the area a world-class destination for hikers and bikers alike.

This has not happened by accident or overnight. It is the result of visionary advocates and organizations, such as Garrett Trails, that steadily push state and local governments to help build and promote a network of trails connecting natural wonders of western Maryland.

Created in 1999, Garrett Trails is a non-profit, volunteer organization dedicated to the development of a well-used

network of high-quality trails that provide access to Garrett County's historic, municipal and environmental treasures, and link to trails outside the county.

Garrett County is home to some of the finest outdoor activities around, and features trails that come in all shapes and sizes. Take the Youghiogheny River water trail, which has the wildest white water rafting on the East Coast.

The area also offers more than 80 miles of snowmobile trails on frozen Deep Creek Lake as well as a 22-mile long western Maryland Rail Trail (with another 4.5 miles opening in 2017).

There is something for everyone.



Garrett Trails board treasurer Steve Green explains the beauty and challenges of building the completed phase 1 section of Meadow Mountain Trail to Natural Resources leadership and Garrett Trails staff.



Swallow Falls State Park

and then the rail line to Meyersdale that connects to the Passage.

As Mike Dreisbach, the president of Garrett Trails, showcased the projects, he stressed the importance of partnerships. "It was a great pleasure for Garrett Trails to host the secretary and his staff and give them a taste of what this area has to offer to hikers, bikers, paddlers and outdoor enthusiasts. It will take a lot of effort and cooperation on everyone's part to bring this exciting eco-tourism destination to Garrett County and Maryland."

Day two

The following day we began with a hike through the state's largest hemlock forest to Swallow Falls, a breathtaking waterfall that flows into the Youghiogheny River (affectionately referred to as the Yock, like rock), the state's only designated scenic and wild river.

Under Maryland's Scenic and Wild Rivers program, which was enacted more than 20 years ago, the entire Maryland portion of the Youghiogheny River has been declared "scenic." A 21-mile segment is also the state's only "wild" river, meaning it is protected from development to remain in near-natural condition.

We next explored the Fishermen's Trail that runs through the spectacular Yock Gorge, ending at a magnificent vista overlooking Muddy Creek Falls, the largest single-drop waterfall in Maryland.

Later on, we hiked some of the rocky single-track mountain bike trails in the Fork Run area being built by Garrett Trails. When completed, there will be more than 10 miles of trail, running from the top of Wisp Mountain all the way to Sang Run.

Day three

Sang Run is the place where the Youghiogheny River trips begin. It's 10 miles of incredible chills and thrills to the little town of Friendsville. Rafting or kayaking through each of the "Class V" rapids is a pinball ride as you drop and bounce your way through a maze of snaggletooth rocks. Several professional white water rafting companies operate out of Friendsville and will guide enthusiasts through a land virtually untouched.

In Friendsville, we walked up the Kendall Trail, along the edge of the Youghiogheny River where float trips went zooming by. We hiked through a world of giant ferns and granite walls that most people would never imagine existed in Maryland.



Herrington Manor State Park

After three days in western Maryland, Secretary Belton went home with a few blisters and a firm resolve to help make Garrett County the "Trail Capital" of the state.

Belton called the trip an eye-opening experience. "Together with Garrett Trails, we are providing exceptional recreational opportunities for Maryland citizens on our public lands," Belton says. "We are connecting with and engaging our citizens on the importance of natural resource conservation, and enabling economic expansion—a focus of the Hogan administration—by creating and enhancing tourism destinations." ■

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Steve Carr is the state Land Trails Planner.

TRAILBLAZING

Expanding paths of Garrett County

By Steve Carr

A route to economic growth

Governor Larry Hogan has made investing in parks and trails a major part of his plan to expand sustainable business opportunities in rural areas, such as western Maryland, where tourism offers year-round economic benefits while also showcasing the beauty of the state.

Chairman Paul Clayton Edwards, a Garrett County commissioner, is a strong supporter of trails. "Areas such as Garrett County have to use the resources available to grow economically," he explains. "The natural beauty is already here and if we can capture just 10 percent of that economic impact, it is a game changer for our county, and ultimately the state."

The Department of Natural Resources is heavily involved in the investment and strategy behind a trail network. As an outdoor enthusiast and the department's land trails planner, I was asked to help lead Secretary Mark Belton and the Governor's Chief of Staff, Craig Williams, for a three-day trail tour arranged by Garrett Trails.

The weather was perfect and the fall colors were in all of their glory as we hiked through the rugged trail.

Day one

We spent our first day learning about the new Meadow Mountain trail on Savage River State Forest. The department made the land available for the trail, which is

currently under construction. This 14-mile long (one-way) biker/hiker trail is the linchpin of the proposed Eastern Continental Divide Loop Trail. Supporters envision it as a 150-mile, multi-surface trail, connecting state forest and parks with population centers, such as Grantsville and Deep Creek Lake, and the Great Allegheny Passage.

Our first day ended at the historic Casselman River Bridge, where Garrett Trails is devising a route that will follow an abandoned rail line beside the rainbow trout-stocked Casselman River, just south of the Meadow Mountain Trail. The trail will run north through "Amish Country," following old Route 219 to Salisbury,