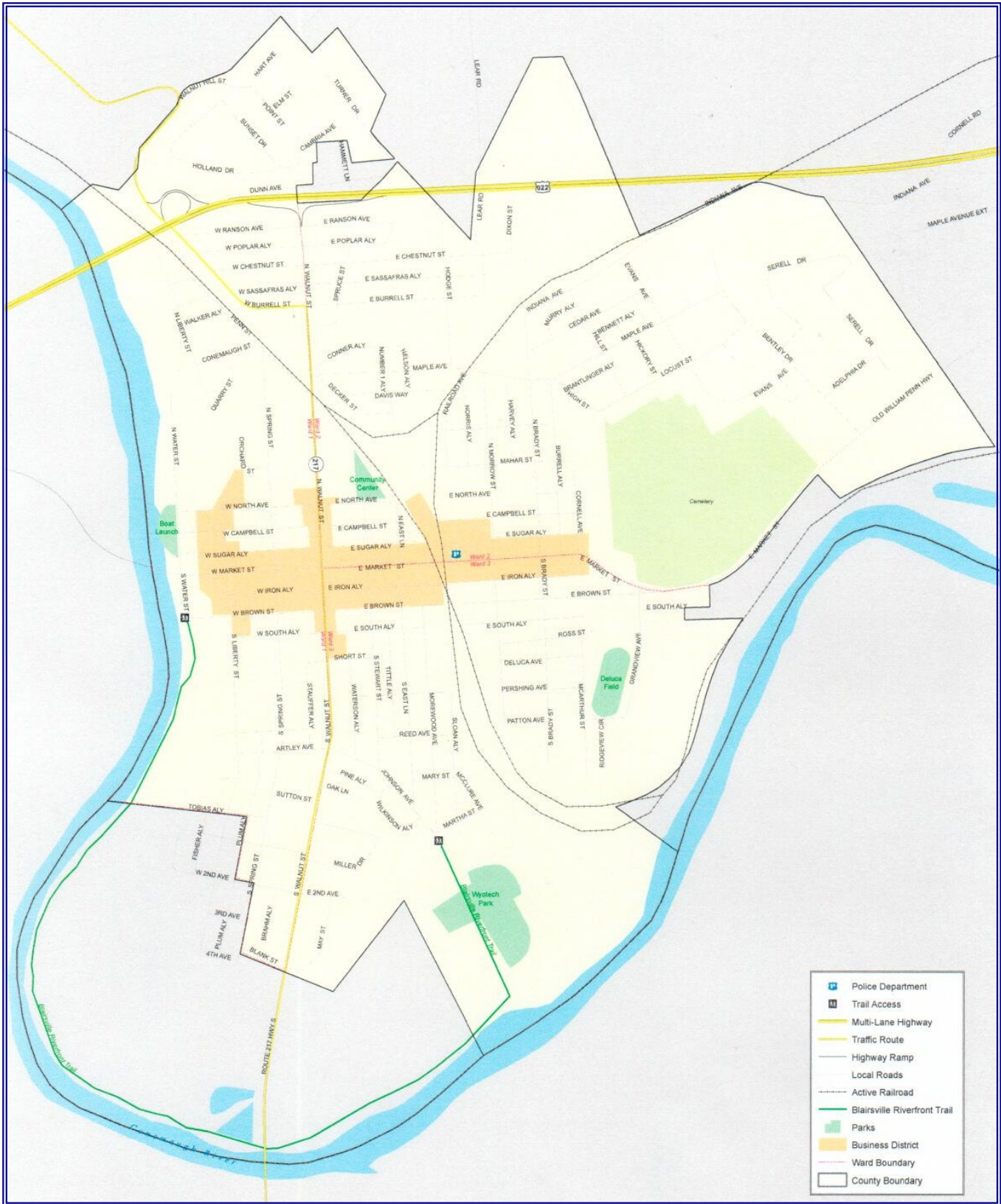


# Blairsville, PA Your Town. . . Six Years Later

April 2013



Prepared by the Allegheny Ridge Corporation and the Blairsville Community Development Authority

## On the river, on the move!

Have you ever been part of an ambitious planning process or event and later wondered, “what, if anything, came of all that?” If you participated in Blairsville’s 2006 Your Town workshop, the news is good. Because the answer to that question is ... quite a lot.

## Blairsville, PA Your Town Workshop

“The Blairsville, PA Your Town workshop was a joint effort, benefiting from a group of contributing organizations, including...the National Park Service Rivers and Trails Program, the Indiana County Office of Planning & Development, and the PA/Delaware Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects. Ed McMahon, of the Urban Land Institute, and Tom Horsch, Adventure Damascus, Inc., and Sun Dog Outfitters, gave the keynote addresses. Mr. Horsch gave an insightful talk on the economic impacts of recreational trails on local economics. The workshop focused on the design issues associated with community gateways and wayfinding, rediscovering and reconnecting the community with the Conemaugh River, and establishing a trail system.”

-www.rural-design.org

## Creating Connections



Biking across Bairdstown Bridge

The general theme of the workshop was creating connections. How could Blairsville become linked to the economic, transportation, and recreation activity around it, and how could the community become re-connected to the Conemaugh River and all it has to offer?

The main goal of the workshop was to realize the potential for economic and community enhancement by focusing on three main objectives: gateways, the Conemaugh River and Blairsville’s potential to become a canal/trail town.

Other goals included identifying ways that Blairsville would need to change to capitalize on these positive community forces, and how they would need to change to prepare for the activity that would be sure to follow.

**Gateways** –identify and assess opportunities to connect local places and activities with each other.

**River** – identify and assess opportunities to connect the community with the Conemaugh River.

**Canal/Trail Town** – identify and assess opportunities to connect to regional recreation and heritage tourism opportunities.

## Priority Projects

At the end of the workshop participants were asked to “vote” for recommendations from any of the three objectives that they felt were both *most important* and *most doable*. The top voter-getters, which are listed below, were identified as priority projects.

- Riverfront Park – clear a viewshed to the river at Bairdstown Bridge area; construct boulder access area.
- Complete connections to regional trail system – West Penn Trail to the west; Hoodlebug Trail to the east.
- Conduct comprehensive historic and cultural resources survey/assessment.
- Beautify Route 22 landscape and enhance the eastern and western gateways.



*Conemaugh River/Bairdstown Bridge. Source: BCDA*

## River

### What Was Proposed...

#### Riverfront Park

- View clearances
  - Selective clearing of small trees
  - Knotweed control
- Boathouse design/construction

#### Water Trail

- Scope out opportunities for interpretation
- Paddle Packsaddle Gap from Robinson to Blairsville and identify canal remnants
- Add interpretation to water trail
- Review canal/towpath 1950's photos at Historical Society of the Blairsville Area's "Transportation Room"

#### "17 Acre" Park Site

- New Housing- Identify demand for housing
- Conduct RFP for developer proposals

### What Was Accomplished...

#### Riverfront Park

Volunteers cleared select, small trees from the riverfront park area almost immediately after the Your Town workshop, inviting the community to accept the river as an asset for the first time in decades.

#### Water Trail

A new Kiski-Conemaugh Water Trail Map and Guide with a

focus on river towns was financed by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the Colcom Foundation, coordinated by the Pittsburgh-to-Harrisburg Main Line Canal Greenway™.

Developed with support from the Laurel Highlands Conservation Landscape Initiative and a Westmoreland County Tourism Grant, a mobi-site enhances the water trail experience with historic photos, businesses and services, points of interest, and natural features.

An Indiana County Endowment grant was used to fabricate and install interpretive signs in a kiosk along Market Street, illustrating 4 key assets: Blairsville's Underground Railroad history; distinct transportation eras; Packsaddle Gap; and the Trans Allegheny Trails.

With grants totaling \$15.9 million from PennVEST and PennWorks, Blairsville and Burrell Township enhanced stewardship of the Conemaugh River with a massive stormwater separation and plant expansion project. The project eliminated 8 of 13 combined sewer outlets and expanded the sewage treatment plant from a capacity of 360-375,000 gallons per day flow-through to 960-1.3 million gallons per day. The increased capacity of the plant keeps the development occurring along the Route 22 transportation corridor from negatively impacting the Conemaugh River.

The community's connection to the river was further improved through a Streetscape and Diamond Square Improvement project. A roundabout at Blairsville's historic bandstand was created, easing traffic flow and re-establishing the riverfront area as a focal point, with \$2.1 million funding from PennDOT's Community Transportation Initiative program.



*Blairsville is the destination when paddling through Packsaddle Gap. Source: Allegheny Ridge Corporation*

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## New Housing

### Grandview Pointe

Conemaugh Terrace was one of the Housing Authority of Indiana County’s (HAIC) most costly public housing sites to operate. The site, which was over 40-years old, was in need of many costly capital improvements and it was not ADA-compliant. To bring the site into compliance would have been cost prohibitive. Replacing it with newly constructed affordable housing was a win-win solution for everyone. The HAIC entered into a partnership with Blairsville Borough and the Blairsville Community Development Authority to provide an alternative location for newly constructed affordable housing that not only benefits low-to-moderate income individuals, but also the entire Blairsville community.



*Grandview Pointe; Blairsville, PA. Source: HAIC*

The Borough provided the HAIC with 7.48 acres of prime developable land at the “17 Acre” Park site in exchange for the Conemaugh Terrace site, which consisted of 1.195 acres on which two aging residential buildings and one small non-residential building were located.



*Demolition of vacant building on North Liberty Street. Blairsville, PA: Source: BCDA*

The Housing Alliance of Indiana County partnered with Trek Development Group, S&T Bank, and First National Bank to develop 24 units of affordable housing through the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program, and other funds obtained through the PHFA PennHomes program and the DCED. Construction of the Grandview Pointe housing development began in spring 2011 and the replacement units were ready for Conemaugh Terrace residents to occupy beginning in April 2012.

### Blairsville Riverfront Village

In 2012, the BCDA demolished nine vacant buildings, including the two vacant residential buildings located on the former Conemaugh Terrace site, to make way for development of the Blairsville Riverfront Village -an opportunity to redevelop the area with new housing at riverfront property now exists. The Blairsville Riverfront Village project was made possible by a \$1.5 million investment from the Commonwealth’s Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program and the former Housing and Redevelopment Assistance program.



*Blairsville Riverfront Village; Conceptual Master Plan. Source: BCDA*

## Canal/Trail Town

### What Was Proposed...

#### Trail Connections

- West Penn, Hoodlebug Trails-conduct feasibility study for three/four route options
- Create trail identity and wayfinding for downtown corridor

#### Historic and Cultural Resources in the Market Street Corridor

- Historic building survey and context
- Develop an interpretive program

#### Neighborhood Resources

- Elm Street Program identification and designation

### What Was Accomplished...

#### Trail Connections

In 2012 Blairsville acquired final design, secured approval from the Army Corps of Engineers and constructed 1.7 miles of trail along the Conemaugh River! The Blairsville Riverfront Trail is part of the Trans Allegheny Trails, a network of 11 trails comprising more than 100 miles from Altoona through Apollo between the Allegheny Ridge and Allegheny River, working together as a regional trail system.

A feasibility study financed by the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources was completed between 2010-2011, designating a preferred 4 mile route from the Hoodlebug/Ghost Town Trails into town. Indiana County is pursuing implementation of the recommended alignment, which includes the construction of a pedestrian/bicycle bridge over Route 22.

#### Historic and Cultural Resources

A Historic Preservation Action Plan was completed in 2011 by T&B Planning, Inc., financed by the Federal Preserve America program administered by Preservation Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission. Several of the plan's interpretive and promotional recommendations are being implemented; see Canal/Trail and Gateway accomplishments.



Blairsville Riverfront Trail (BRT). Source: Anthony Frazier

#### Neighborhood Resources

The Blairsville Community Development Authority secured \$550,000 in Elm Street Program grants to administer a neighborhood revitalization program, implement a residential façade improvement program and help construct the Blairsville Riverfront Trail. To date, 70 façade improvement program grants have been awarded to local residents and/or property owners. Grant recipients provided matching funds, totaling over \$300,000. These efforts resulted in improving the appearance of the Elm Street neighborhood, preserving historic building stock, increasing property values, and fostering community pride. Other projects launched through the Elm Street Program include an annual Community Clean-Up Day, an Adopt-a-Street program, a community garden and a Neighborhood Crime Watch program.

Blairsville's Armory, once abandoned and derelict, is now a great example of adaptive reuse as a multi-functional recreation center.



Blairsville Armory. Source: BCDA

## Gateways

### What Was Proposed...

#### Enhance Gateways

- Rationalize signage / standards
- Provide advance notice on Route 22
- Identify trailhead / river access
- Gateway gardens

#### Develop Branding Strategy

Strategy should consider range and types of visitors, including:

- River users – paddlers, fishing, river sojourners
- People interested in unique businesses and experiences
- Bicycle and trail users

Branding options

- Gateway to Indiana County
- Recreational Trail Town
- Historic Blairsville

#### Develop Signage Strategy

Need to consider how branding strategy translates to content of specific signs. What signs should say – i.e. Historic Blairsville Market Street Business District; Old Market Street

At river access points, develop improved parking and new “Welcome to Blairsville” signage with information on restrooms, places to stay, places to eat

### What Was Accomplished...

#### Branding

*Blairsville Downtown* had been selected as a branding identity some years ago. This format put the town’s name first, but also emphasized the downtown area for those who might not be aware of the traditional, historic town center located just off of Route 22.

#### Signage

In 2012 a Signage Committee formed by the Blairsville Community Development Authority developed a gateway signage work plan. The Committee selected “Blairsville

Downtown, A Greenway Community” as a descriptive brand for gateway signs. The Greenway concept brought together several components of Blairsville’s revitalization strategy. A Greenway Community is a town that embraces nearby natural resources and outdoor recreation opportunities like rivers and trails, and focuses on clean and green practices. Blairsville has its own Greenway – the 330 wooded acres that surround the borough with trails and river access. Blairsville is also part of a larger Greenway, the Pittsburgh-to-Harrisburg Main Line Canal Greenway, a 320 mile corridor of historic sites and hub communities linked by land and water trails.

In 2012 the Signage Committee designed, fabricated and installed a new gateway sign on Route 22 eastbound. Gateway signage work continues.

Indiana County Parks and Trails built and installed an information kiosk along the Blairsville Riverfront Trail. A Trail Town map with businesses, services, and points of interest is being created.



Installing new gateway signage along Route 22. Source: [www.triblive.com](http://www.triblive.com)



Kiosk at Blairsville Riverfront Trail. Source: BCDA

## Community Visioning

The Blairsville Community Development Authority conducted two community visioning sessions in November 2012 to gather input from residents, business owners, municipal officials and other stakeholders to establish a vision to guide local development decisions and help shape Blairsville's future. Dr. Dey W. Watts, from Indiana University of Pennsylvania's Geography and Regional Planning Department, assisted with this effort. Nearly 40 residents and students participated in the sessions and their vision for Blairsville's future is stated below.

### The Vision

Blairsville Downtown...on the river, on the move! A place where outdoor enjoyment is a way of life. People regularly fish or kayak on the Conemaugh River. Outdoor enthusiasts hike or bike on the Blairsville Riverfront Trail or can travel for miles on a number of regional trails that converge in Blairsville Downtown. A pedestrian bridge over US Route 22 connects the community to the Hoodlebug and Ghost Town Trails to the east and a link to the West Penn Trail connects the community to the growing regional trail network.

The town has many locally-owned restaurants, taverns/pubs and coffee shops that have little care for closing time. Street festivals, including the town's annual Diamond Day celebration and Knotweed Festival, are centered on the community's historic Diamond Square. Well-appointed streetscapes and public art add to our vibrant street life. Late-night walks are made safe by the number of people who remain outside at all hours.

Vintage storefronts, ornate windows, and elaborate doors significantly contribute to the architectural character of our downtown. Historic block and brown stone buildings have been readapted for modern use and unique shops and businesses line the town's busy Main Street. Upper floor living attracts retiring baby boomers, empty-nesters, young professionals and families that desire the cultural activities offered in a walkable, downtown setting. Victorian and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Revival style homes with front porches and tree-lined streets help make our town a friendly place where neighbors care about one another and community pride prevails.



*Diamond, Square, Blairsville, PA Source: BCDA*

Residents and visitors can shop at a local grocery store or pick up fresh produce, local meats and homemade goods at our seasonal farmers' market. Our compact town is easily travelled by foot or on bike. Public transit provides a reasonable alternative to driving and offers a wide range of services for those who want to commute to work, school, or social activities located in surrounding areas. It is also readily available for shopping and traveling to and from medical appointments.

Educational, recreational, and cultural activities offer something for everyone -young or old! Visit the Blairsville Underground Railroad History Center, the Blairsville Museum or the Mid-Atlantic Karst Conservancy's library and education center. Experience history or join an organized caving group and explore the area's caves and natural preserves. Catch air at the local skate park, go birding along the 330-acre greenway that borders the Conemaugh River, or seek out paranormal activity at local "hot spots" or in several nearby towns and villages, including Torrance and Livermore.

## Summary

The accomplishments discussed here demonstrate how Blairsville has changed in the last six years. Another testament to Blairsville's progress is a recent Community Transportation Excellence Award from 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania for the Diamond Square Reconstruction Project – "Recognizing Leadership, Demonstrating Value of Community Transportation Solutions in Creating Healthy Communities." Blairsville's success has been a motivator, and there is more to do...complete the trail links, complete the riverfront village, realize the vision of a healthy, stable community.

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<p>Your Town Workshop</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Riverfront improvements</li> <li>Regional trail connections</li> <li>Heritage interpretation</li> <li>Gateway improvements</li> </ul>	<p><b>DESIGN</b> Physical improvements to the built and natural environment; restore and enhance environment; enhance recreational and heritage resources</p>
<p>Engaged local citizenry</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implementation/revitalization plan in conjunction with State Funding Team</li> </ul>	<p><b>ORGANIZATION</b> Effective use of resources -borough management and supporting organizations</p>
<p>Improved quality of life; raised community perception as a good place to visit, work and live</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comprehensive trail town assessment re: business, visitor amenities</li> <li>Business plan development</li> <li>Building reuse; 2nd/3rd floor use</li> <li>Wayfinding signage</li> <li>Connection to regional heritage and eco-tourism enterprises via CVBs</li> </ul>	<p><b>ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING</b> Foster sustainable businesses; concentrated development; plan regionally, implement locally</p> <p><b>PROMOTIONS</b> Civic pride; visitor ready; expand housing opportunities</p>

The table above was created after the Your Town workshop to illustrate how good planning, professional support, funding and an engaged local citizenry could orchestrate a sustainable future.

## For more information about the Blairsville area please visit the following websites

<b>Blairsville Community Development Authority</b>	<a href="http://www.blairsville-pa.net">www.blairsville-pa.net</a>
<b>Historical Society of the Blairsville Area</b>	<a href="http://www.blairvillehistoric.com">www.blairvillehistoric.com</a>
<b>Blairsville Underground Railroad</b>	<a href="http://www.undergroundrailroadblairvillepa.com">www.undergroundrailroadblairvillepa.com</a>
<b>Indiana County Tourist Bureau</b>	<a href="http://www.visitindianacountypa.org">www.visitindianacountypa.org</a>
<b>Indiana County Parks &amp; Trails</b>	<a href="http://www.indianacountyparks.org">www.indianacountyparks.org</a>
<b>Trans Allegheny Trails</b>	<a href="http://www.transalleghenytrails.com">www.transalleghenytrails.com</a>
<b>Kiski-Conemaugh Water Trail App</b>	<a href="http://www.kcwatertrail.com">www.kcwatertrail.com</a>
<b>Pittsburgh-To-Harrisburg Mainline Canal Greenway</b>	<a href="http://www.mainlinecanalgreenway.org">www.mainlinecanalgreenway.org</a>

