The Appalachian Trail’s roles are as diverse as the many hikers who venture out: a walk in the woods for a discovery, a vehicle for conservation, a connecting thread for communities. The new Appalachian Trail Center in Damascus, Virginia, will likewise meet many needs.

The approximately 2,500-square-foot building slated for completion in 2019 is a collaborative project with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), the Town of Damascus, and the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation. The project represents a significant investment in an ongoing effort to expand economic opportunities through outdoor recreation across Southwest Virginia.

The center will support visitor information, exhibits, details about neighboring trails and assets, and training seminars for a range of groups including volunteers who help maintain the A.T. Programming and design will commence this fall. The center plays a key role in Damascus as the center-point for our downtown — a gravitational core,” noted Gavin Blevins, town manager of Damascus and senior planner for the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission. “It will build upon long-standing partnerships with the ATC, U.S. Forest Service, and many other regional entities and partners who have either shown support already or with whom we are currently and continuing to work.”

Collaboration is a fundamental part of any successful project and the ATC has integrated this best practice for decades with its legions of volunteer stewards. In another grade of partners, Damascus is among the 40 official A.T. Trail Communities. The program, launched in 2010, recognizes communities that promote and protect the A.T.

“The Trail Center is an exciting partnership with Damascus, one of our first A.T. Communities. The center is located literally right across the street from the actual Trail as it passes through town,” says Rob Hutchinson who is on the Board for ATC and chair of the Facilities Task Force, which meant working closely with staff on getting the project off the ground. Hutchinson was the primary liaison with the board in the approval process. “We will have the ability to introduce new hikers to the Trail and an opportunity to offer programs and education to experienced hikers,” says Hutchinson. “Damascus has a lot of outdoor-oriented tourism, such as Trail Days, the Virginia Creeper Trail, and visitors to the Grayson Highlands. And it is not too far off of Interstate 81, which makes it an easy stop for casual tourists as well. We’re anticipating a huge success for both the Town of Damascus and for ATC.”

Colin Beasley, an ATC Board member also played a role in getting the center to come to fruition by doing some economic analysis to understand the financial impact of the endeavor and assisted in drafting terms of the lease as well as the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which was designed to outline the strategic partnership between the ATC and the Town of Damascus. But Beasley praises Hutchinson for what he says was most of the hard work. “Rob provided a clear-headed approach to evaluating the Damascus opportunity and a steady hand through all of the discussions, both internally and externally, with all of the stakeholders and individuals who were helpful along the way,” says Beasley.

Damascus also hosts the largest annual gathering of Appalachian Trail hikers — Trail Days. The multi-day festival in May attracts about 20,000 hikers and other visitors to Damascus. Hiker workshops and services, food and gear vendors, and concerts highlighting local and regional talents create a festival atmosphere and contribute to the event’s growing popularity. The 32nd Appalachian Trail Days Festival is already slated for May 18 through 20, 2018.

Beasley and others are aiming for the center’s ground-breaking ceremony that same weekend. Completion will be another spark in a comprehensive economic revitalization associated with cultural heritage and destination tourism across the 19 counties of Southwest Virginia.

Chris Cannon, executive director for Friends of Southwest Virginia, the operational arm of the Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation, calls the new facility a game-changer. “By itself, the center would do incredible things by attracting new visitors and building the profile of our trails,” he says. “But the complementary development on both the community and regional level will create many more opportunities for growth.”

Friends of Southwest Virginia, along with a multitude of citizen groups, localities, and nonprofits has served as a coordinating organization for Appalachian Spring, a five-year initiative to expand economic opportunity through outdoor recreation. The organization has done similar regional work through development of the Crooked Road, Round the Mountain: Southwest Virginia’s Artisan Network, and their newest trail: The Southwest Virginia Mountain Brew Trail. From mountains to music to a welcoming town, this dynamic synergy continues with the Appalachian Trail Center in Damascus.

For more information about Damascus and Trail Days visit: visitdamascus.org
Southwest Virginia Cultural Heritage Foundation: myswva.org
ATC Trail Communities: appalachiantrail.org/atcommunities