



VISITOR CENTER

COMING TO TRAIL TOWN USA *By Catherine Van Noy*

THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL'S ROLES ARE AS DIVERSE AS THE many hikers who venture out: a walk in the woods, a lab for 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 facility, when completed, is also likely to assist the work of known recreational and conservation partners in the region along with adding new collaborators to the mix.

"This Center will be in a gateway community to the Mount Rogers high country, one of the most popular hiking destinations in Virginia," says Laura Belleville, vice president of Conservation and Trail Management Programs for the ATC. Damascus, often referred to as "Trail Town, USA," was a natu-

ral fit for various reasons. Proximity to the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area, over 200,000 acres of national forest bisected by hiking and horse trails and scenic byways, is one. In addition, the Virginia Creeper Trail, the Trans-America National Bicycle Trail, the Iron Mountain Trail, the Daniel Boone Heritage Trail, the Crooked Road: Virginia's Musical Heritage Trail, and Virginia's Birding and Wildlife Trail all pass through or connect to Damascus.

"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 ATC 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 the 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.

Blevins 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. ▲



Left: The A.T. runs through Mount Rogers and directly through Damascus — which is surrounded by many other outdoor recreational trails and spaces. Photo by Stephen Outten; Below: Visitors gather for Trail Days and participate in the annual hiker parade. Photos by Dan Innamorato

A native Ohioan entering her 20th year in Virginia, Catherine Van Noy runs a strategic communications firm located near Blacksburg. She wrote a biweekly column for the *Roanoke Times* from 2003 until July of this year.

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