# MONTOUR TRAIL-LETTER

The Montour Trail Council: 36 years of trail building | November-December 2025, Vol. 37, No. 6


## Meeting Keynote: Keep Trail Investment Strong

The nation's trails have had a transformative effect on the country, built in part with local, state and federal funding, but now that public investment is under serious threat, said Amy Kapp of the national Rails to Trails Conservancy.

Speaking at the annual meeting of the Montour Trail Council on Nov. 2, she said Congress in 2026 will write the next federal surface transportation bill, which affects future funding for trails nationwide.

She noted:

- Since January, the U.S. Department of Transportation has frozen billions in Congressionally approved grants for trails and active transportation, many aimed at boosting regional connectivity. Even where funds are unfrozen, uncertainty persists about project viability and permitted use.
- In July, Congress passed the One Big Beautiful Bill, rescinding all unobligated Neighborhood Access and Equity grant funds, including nearly $750 million for trails, dealing a major setback to nationwide active transportation projects aimed at safer communities.


*Amy Kapp, RTC editorial director*

*continued on page 4*


*The western portal of the National Tunnel (MTC photo)*

## Safety First: National Tunnel Closed

Due to deterioration of the National Tunnel's concrete ceiling, the Montour Trail Council closed the National Tunnel on Nov. 11. The tunnel, in Cecil Township at mile marker 25, is the trail's longest tunnel at 623 feet. The Montour Railroad built the tunnel in the early 20th century.

"The Montour Trail Council understands closing any part of the trail affects trail users and only undertakes this step for the safety of all of us," said MTC President Julian Wolfe. "Rehabilitation of this landmark tunnel will take time and considerable fundraising. We trust trail users will support our efforts."

Initial stabilization work on the ceiling near the western entrance has begun. The trail council, which owns and manages the Montour, envisions reopening the tunnel in early 2026 after the stabilization phase is completed. More extensive renovations will occur at a date still to be determined.

The MTC does not recommend any on-road detour at this time due to narrow lanes and limited sight lines. Trail users wishing to travel west can access the trail at the McConnell Road trailhead (mile marker 24.7); users wishing to head east can access the trail at Kurnick trailhead (mile marker 25.6).

*Please check montourtrail.org for updates about the National Tunnel and plans for its repair and reopening.*

## Annual Meeting: Another Big Year for the Trail

A celebration of the Montour Trail Council's considerable achievements in the last year took center-stage as the nonprofit convened its annual meeting at Southpointe on Nov. 2.

Those milestones included the opening of the Muse branch in Cecil Township in May; the stellar work of the trail's maintenance crew on several large-scale projects; a new locale for the trail's signature annual fundraiser, the Gateway Engineers Tour the Montour; and internal organizational achievements from several of the trail council's committees, noted MTC President Julian Wolfe.

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## Prez Sez

# The National Tunnel: A Closure and a Renovation

*By Julian Wolfe*

I have written in previous columns that my favorite phrase to begin a Prez Sez column or speech I make on behalf of the Montour Trail Council is NEW TRAIL OPENING. It would stand to reason then that the words TRAIL CLOSURE would be the most loathsome phrase I can write or speak.

Let me explain why this does not necessarily come to reason. As you read on page one, the Montour Trail Council made the decision in mid-November to close temporarily the National Tunnel. For background, the tunnel, in Cecil Township at mile marker 25, is more than 600 feet in length, the trail's longest tunnel.

It was constructed in 1913 with a timber lining. This construction occurred during a period of rapid expansion of the railroad from Imperial to West Mifflin. Fifteen years later, and just one year before the onset of the Great Depression, the concrete portal and liner were installed. *Image on left shows train exiting the western portal of the tunnel. (Photo: Gene P. Schaeffer)*

The tunnel has been closed after assessments by experienced engineers who worked on the successful 2023-2024 renovation of another vintage Montour Railroad tunnel, the Greer Tunnel in Peters Township. These engineers compared conditions at the National Tunnel in late October and early November with the tunnel conditions when Greer was under renovation.

The engineers reported substantial deterioration in that short time frame to the ceiling near the west entrance to the National Tunnel (as depicted in the photo on the right), which included sections of railroad repair lining work completed after 1928. Shortly thereafter, the trail council's Engineering Committee decided to temporarily close the tunnel. The MTC will always place the safety of our trail users as priority number one.

*(photo: William Armstrong, WEC Engineers)*

The trail council has a two-stage plan to rehabilitate the tunnel. As a first step in a stabilization phase, shoring columns will be installed inside the tunnel near the western portal. When complete and pending another engineering assessment, the trail council will reopen a pathway within the tunnel along the southern wall. Cyclists must dismount and walk their bikes along what we expect to be a narrow 240-foot corridor after which the barricades would end and the trail to the eastern portal would be completely open. We are optimistic that this restricted opening would be available to our trail users within the next few months.

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## Trail Friends' Meetings and Work Parties

**MTC Board Meeting**
Every third Monday of the month at 6:30 p.m. at 2589 Boyce Plaza Rd., Suite 4, Upper St. Clair. Turn at the traffic signal on Boyce Road between the railroad and the creek. Call the Montour Trail Office for more information or to get on the agenda.

**Airport Area Friends (MM 0 to 12.6 and the 6.3 mile Airport Connector)**
Friends of the Trail meeting, every second Wednesday of the month at 7:00 p.m. at the MTC Western Corridor Garage, 450 Cliff Mine Rd., North Fayette Township 15108. New volunteers are always welcome. For more information, call Mark Modispacher at 412-266-1544. Work parties are scheduled as needed. For more information call 412-262-3748.

**Fort Cherry Friends (MM 12.6 to 20.7)**
Friends of the Trail meeting, every second Wednesday of the month at 6:30 p.m. at the McDonald Trail Station, 160 S. McDonald St., McDonald 15057 (adjacent to the Panhandle Trail). Work parties are scheduled as needed. For more information, contact Tim Thomassy at 724-926-4617 or Chuck Hughey at 724-926-9436.

**Cecil Friends (MM 22.0 to 28.5)**
Friends of the Trail meeting, every fourth Wednesday of the month at 6:30 p.m. at the Kurnick Access area along the trail off Cecil Henderson Road. Work parties are scheduled as needed. For more information, contact Bob Mihalco at 786-910-5575 or ramihalco@icloud.com.

**The Montour Railroad Historical Society**
For more information, email mrhs@montourrr.com.

**Peters Township Friends (MM 28.5 to 30.4, Library Jct to near MM 35 and part of the Bethel Branch)**
Friends of the Trail meeting, the first non-holiday Monday of each month at 7:00 p.m. at various locations depending on weather and time of year. Work parties on the first Friday and third Saturday of every month at 8:30 a.m. For more information on meetings or work parties, please email us at petersfriends@montourtrail.org.

**Bethel Park Friends (The 2.75 mile Bethel Branch and a short piece of main line trail around MM 35)**.
Friends of the Trail meeting, every first Tuesday of the month at 7:30 p.m. in the Bethel Park Municipal Building Caucus Room behind the Council Chambers. Anyone interested in the Bethel Park Trail segment is encouraged to come. Work parties, every second and fourth Saturday of the month at 8:30 a.m. For more information, call Bill Capp at 412-833-5928.

**South Hills Friends (MM 35.4 to 46.6)**
Friends of the Trail meeting, every second Tuesday of the month at 6:30 p.m. at South Park Township Community Room or the Township Library located in the Township Building at 2675 Brownsville Rd., South Park 15129. Work parties on the second Saturday of the month. For more information, contact David Oyler at 412-831-9288, davidoyler1950@gmail.com or Paul McKeown at 412-835-6692, mckeownp@comcast.net.

**Westland Friends (MM 21.0 to 21.9, and Westland Branch)**
Friends of the Trail meeting, every first Wednesday of the month. For more information, contact Deb Thompson at intrepidscout@theneonweb.com.

*continued from page 2 -* **Prez Sez**

The second and final phase would be installing a liner along the length of the deteriorating western third of the tunnel. Like Greer Tunnel, we are fortunate that only a section of the National Tunnel needs urgent attention. Unlike Greer, the time frame to renovate the National Tunnel will be dependent on the success of a capital campaign. Needed repairs at the National Tunnel are twice the length of repairs completed at Greer.

So I return to my opening statement. How can we rationalize this significant trail closure as anything other than highly regrettable? A short answer would be the construction of a new liner will provide safety and security for decades to come. It is also an opportunity – similar to the Greer renovation – to demonstrate to the community that the volunteer nonprofit model works.

Finally, the fundraising challenge will be enormous. The capital campaign we intend to organize will take us throughout the region offering us a singular chance to share our remarkable 36-year story to build the longest suburban rail-trail in the United States.

**Concluding Kudos:** The Montour Trail Council held its annual meeting in Southpointe on Nov. 2. Among the awards bestowed were lifetime achievement awards to maintenance crew chief and equipment manager Bill Capp, trail chief engineer David Wright, and former trail council President Debora Thompson. All three have spent decades in trail leadership positions. I extend my appreciation also to the gala's executive producer Dave Borrebach. Dave has produced many annual banquets and his diligence and organization were on display again this year. Huzzah.

## New Doc: The Origin Story of Rails Trails

"From Rails to Trails" is a new documentary by filmmaker Dan Protess that aired on PBS.org and local networks nationwide beginning in mid-October. It is available online at:
*pbs.org/video/from-rails-to-trails-Qj9S1f/*

The 57-minute documentary explores the origins of America's trails movement, a political movement that emerged from the enthusiasm and passion of citizen activists who sought to protect unused rail corridors to create safe spaces for people to walk, bike and be active outside.

Rails to Trails Conservancy's co-founder and executive producer of the film, Peter Harnik, shares insights into the origins of America's rail-trails, while RTC vice presidents, Liz Thorstensen and Kevin Mills, expand on the complex issues and current realities that the organization and the movement face, including protecting railbanking and addressing the interests of land owners and local residents, as communities nationwide work to create, connect and maintain the country's trail system.

Harnik said he hopes it's eye-opening for viewers who don't know about the effort that goes into trail development. "There's a whole group of people that love trails, use them and have no idea about the backstory," he said.

*These notes are excerpted from: tinyurl.com/mv59dxf8*

*continued from page 1* - **Trail Investment**

- Recently, the Department of Transportation canceled some RAISE/BUILD grants for active transportation projects, citing inconsistency with its motor-vehicle priorities.
- Meanwhile, an "anti-railbanking" bill in the House threatens the core law behind rail trails, endangering both existing and future projects. (Railbanking, established in 1983, is a legal process that preserves unused railroad corridors by converting them into trails while keeping them available for possible future rail service.)

Ms. Kapp, RTC's editorial director, said that the Washington, D.C.-based conservancy, as the nation's largest trails organization, is "pragmatic about what's possible, but we're also focused on the future. We're leveraging the momentum and pro-trail culture shift that's taken hold, and we're pursuing a range of policy strategies to maximize impact."

The RTC continues to pursue federal, state, and local opportunities — such as state ballot measures and the federal Transportation Alternatives Program — to maintain and grow programs and funding opportunities for trails, she said.

The benefits of trails, such as the Montour, are clear, said Ms. Kapp. They provide safe, car-free connections to key destinations; drive local spending, tourism and community growth; preserve green space and can reduce greenhouse gas emissions; offer accessible, low-cost opportunities for daily exercise and recreation; and create inclusive, community-led spaces that foster identity, pride and opportunity.

Trail organizations and trail users can play an important role in speaking up for trails in this public debate, said Ms. Kapp, who grew up in Butler County and earned an advanced degree at the University of Pittsburgh.

"We need to be uplifting trail networks, the vision and the impact, every chance we get … in conversations with friends and family, in meetings with our local, state and federal leaders, with the press; on the internet … everywhere we can."

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*continued from page 1* - **Annual Meeting**

The maintenance crew, led by Bill Capp, received recognition for a host of accomplishments over the past year, including resurfacing trail in Bethel Park and the Westland branch.

The crew also took on a huge job halfway up Westland when they deployed an excavator to fill in an embankment where run-off had caused wash-outs on the branch every spring, Wolfe said. A contractor could have charged the trail council upwards of $30,000 for the work, he said, adding the crew "saved the trail a lot of money, and it looks beautiful."

More recently, Wolfe said, the crew took out an extremely ancient 50-foot pipe that was almost completely clogged, which contributed to flooding on the trail near mile marker 1.5 in Moon Township. They then installed a new pipe.

Much of the work of managing the Montour falls on the trail council's committees. Wolfe said the Information Technology/Geographic Information System Committee has had a busy year, which included expanding its membership. The committee is near completion of a project to inventory every trail asset or landmark – such as bridges, tunnels, culverts and trash receptacles – that's important for planning and stewardship.

Wolfe said the Real Estate Committee has had its hands full with a reforestation subcommittee that has planted trees in two patches on the trail, while completing acquisition of a new 24-acre parcel near the Enlow Tunnel in Findlay Township.

The trail's seven Friends Groups have continued to take care of their respective section of the Montour, while maintaining good relations with their neighbors and township officials, Wolfe said. With trailside events, the Friends Groups promote the trail, answer trail users' questions and offer MTC merchandise while also working with local companies and corporations who bring out their employees to the trail for volunteer work parties.

"Most importantly, telling our trail users that this is not a public government-run trail … we are a private land trust," said Wolfe.

In concluding his remarks, Wolfe said, "I am pleased to tell you that the financial health of the trail is strong."

In opening remarks at the meeting, MTC Treasurer Bill Orr recognized an important organizational milestone in 2025, the adoption of the Vision 2050 strategic plan. It's a roadmap detailing the landmarks that need to be reached because "the trail doesn't just need to exist in 2050. It needs to thrive," he said.

The plan addresses "the challenges we know are coming: maintaining an aging trail system, navigating rising costs, and ensuring the next generation of leaders and volunteers step forward. It also builds on our strengths: a culture of volunteerism, a strong base of support, and a trail already loved by half a million people each year."

**The results of the board election were announced during the meeting. Terry Bimle, current vice president, was elected to a first three-year term (he had been appointed to the board earlier this year to fill an unexpired term); Dennis Pfeiffer was elected to his second term; and Donna Click, Joe McKitrick and Phillip Torrez were each elected to their first terms. According to MTC bylaws, board members are eligible to serve two successive terms and then must sit out at least one year before they can seek re-election to the board.**

*President Wolfe and Bill Capp*

*President Wolfe and David Wright*

*L to R: Maintenance crew members Dave Mikula, Mike Dailey, Andy Smith, Pete Merther*

## Volunteers Honored with Awards at Annual Meeting

Lifetime Achievement Awards were presented to **Bill Capp**, for his decades of service to the Montour Trail including as maintenance crew chief and equipment manager and to **David Wright** for decades of service as the trail's chief engineer. Both men have given invaluable service to the trail.

Other awards included: **Terry Bimle**, for managing a streambank protection project in the trail's Airport Area; **John Dorman**, for organizational leadership and directing the collection of trail statistics; **Fran Hensler**, for organizational leadership and managing online content; **Joe McKitrick**, for his leadership on several financial matters including chairing the trail's Finance Committee; **Bill Orr**, for his leadership of the 2025 Tour the Montour; **Jim Richter**, for his organizational leadership; **Bryan Seip**, for his work leading the Montour Railroad Historical Society; **Ned Williams**, for project management of the trail's Muse Branch; and **Tina Zottola**, for financial and organizational leadership.

Additionally, two MTC teams were honored: the Vision 2050 steering committee: **Dave Borrebach, John Dorman, Fran Hensler, Shawn McClintock, and Ned Williams**; and the trail maintenance crew: **Terry Bimle, Bill Capp, Larry Castner, Mike Dailey, Andy Garrett, Dennis Keith, Pete Merther, Dave Mikula, Andy Smith, and Bob Sutton**.

## Our Vision for 2050

*By Fran Hensler*

*This article is the third, and last, in a series about Vision 2050 and the considerations, processes and milestones behind the plan.*

As Montour Trail Council volunteers began their journey to plan, one of the first things we were challenged to think about was "What will the trail and organization look like 25 years from now?" People closest to the work shared bold ideas about what Montour Trail could become. Their excitement and big ideas set a positive and aspirational tone for the months ahead.

This is the narrative that developed: In 2050, Montour Trail is western Pennsylvania's most beloved recreation and transportation greenway. It is entirely off-road and connects riders to other trails, parks, transit, work, communities, and adventures beyond the region. Every former at-grade crossing diverts to a calm lane or rises above traffic, making the Montour a continuous path that is safe and accessible for all — riders, walkers, runners, and families.

Careful planning and forward-thinking keep the scenery and natural beauty intact, and trail use remains free. Conservation easements, land gifts and native plantings safeguard creek views, farms and wooded hillsides, making the trek feel remote even when suburbs sit only yards away. Local users rate it as their favorite outdoor destination. A capital maintenance and repair schedule mitigates or solves issues before they escalate. Major trailheads provide restrooms, water, parking, and e-bike charging, all built to provide broad accessibility and usability for the community.

Montour Trail Council powers this progress through a healthy blend of volunteer leadership and professional skill. Board and committee members are active and engaged leaders doing hands-on and minds-on work. A clear mentoring and succession program prepares volunteers for key leadership roles. Friends Groups, the primary entry point for most volunteers, continue to provide the connectivity for area residents to the trail and support each other through regular meet-ups for resources and ideas that strengthen the entire system. This volunteer energy and commitment are supported by seasoned, executive leadership staff.

Financial stability sustains the vision. A substantial endowment — built through disciplined fundraising and planned giving — covers core expenses and annual maintenance. Membership dues, individual gifts, shale-gas royalties, and right-of-way leases add reliable operating income. Municipalities, counties and PennDOT treat trail maintenance with the same seriousness they give to trail building. Strong ties to key agencies and elected officials keep the Montour aware of and in contention for grants and other funding.

*continued on page 7*

# Mifflin Junction

*by Bryan Seip, Montour Railroad Historical Society*

*The second station building to be erected at Mifflin Junction. The weighmaster's position was in the bay window at the left end. (Photo: Gene P. Schaeffer)*

Although not on the Montour Trail, Mifflin Junction was an important location on the Montour Railroad. It was the eastern terminus of the railroad using an interchange point with the Union Railroad to also connect with several other major railroads.

Much of the information about the Montour Railroad's presence at Mifflin Junction came from Gene P. Schaeffer's book *The Montour Railroad.*

When the extension of the Montour Railroad east from Imperial was constructed in 1913, a new terminal was needed at the east end to interchange freight and to provide servicing and holding areas for locomotives, cars and crews.

An agreement with the Union Railroad was reached to lease 13 acres of land at Mifflin Junction for an annual fee of $401.64.

The Montour Railroad was responsible for maintaining all its own facilities, including the single-track girder bridge over Delwar Road built by the Union Railroad.

Support facilities included a coaling station for steam locomotives, a two-story station with a scale built in 1917, plus storage and repair tracks and employees' dwellings.

Five homes near the Union Railroad at the Rischer Mine were dismantled and relocated to Mifflin Junction for Montour employee lodgings. Two of those houses were later moved to Southview for coal miners and railroad employees. In 1930, the three remaining houses and the two-story station were retired. A new white brick station was erected beside the 200-ton scale used for weighing coal trains. In later years, part of this station building was leased to the Pittsburgh & West Virginia Railway (P&WV) for use by their Mifflin Junction agent.

The scale was equipped with a three-position semaphore signal indicating required car movements over the scale to the train engineers. The semaphore was later replaced with a three-position, color-lighted signal that was easier to see during night operations. In the early 1970s, radios came into use on the Montour and verbal instructions were used, replacing the lighted signal system.

In 1936, Montour passenger coach #60 was placed, without its trucks, to serve as a bunk car for employees to use between runs. The rebuilt houses were no longer needed as employees could travel to their homes on new highways being built in the area.

Crews ending their shift at Mifflin Junction and assigned to start the next day there would stay overnight by using the bunk car provided by the railroad. Later, some trainmen would keep a "beater" automobile at Mifflin so they could drive home for a more comfortable night with their family and report back to Mifflin the next day.

Montour train operations into and out of the Mifflin Yards were quite simple. Eastbound crews would stop at the end of the Montour main line at Salida and request permission from the Pittsburgh & West Virginia train dispatcher before entering the shared Mifflin Branch. Prior to their departure, Montour crews headed westbound out of Mifflin Yard would also contact the P&WV dispatcher. This method lasted until the end of Montour operations at Mifflin in 1975.

The P&WV installed Centralized Traffic Control throughout their railroad in 1949, including the Mifflin Branch. Montour trainmen were instructed on CTC operations and needed to remain qualified by the P&WV to operate trains over the shared rails into Mifflin Junction.

The last coal train delivered to the Union Railroad interchange at Mifflin Junction occurred on April 29, 1975. On November 29, 1975, a final Montour Railroad crew arrived at Mifflin Junction with no cars. They departed with two gondolas of scrap steel and one empty, ending Montour operations at Mifflin Junction after 60 years.

On April 29, 1976, the Montour's parent company, the Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad, gave the required one-year notification to the Union Railroad of the planned abandonment of the leased land and facilities at Mifflin Junction. By the mid 1980s, all remains of the Montour Railroad at Mifflin Junction had been erased when the brick station and scale were demolished for an expansion of a local lumberyard.


*Montour #21 shoves a string of coal hoppers over the Mifflin Junction scale in 1952. (Photo: Willard Harvey)*

***You can contact the Montour Railroad Historical Society through Facebook by searching for the Montour Railroad Historical Society. There are currently 425 members from across the country. There you'll find a wealth of information about the Montour Railroad and you can pose questions of its membership. You can also check out montourrr.com***

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**Please remember the Montour Trail as the year ends. Help us roll into 2026 strong — your gift keeps the trail on track. Thanks!**

*continued from page 5 -* **Vision 2050**

Connectivity is key to the trail's reputation and value. Safe spurs link nearly every community, park and employment hub along the mainline. Most residents live no more than a short walk or ride from an entrance or trailhead. Branches and connectors integrate the Montour into a network that gives residents and visitors seamless, car-free passage from airport baggage claim to cafés in trail communities in Western PA and beyond. Businesses cluster at access points, and clear signage makes it simple for all users to roll or stroll off for a meal, a meet-up or an overnight stay.

Montour Trail Council is a national model of trail development and stewardship recognized for its blend of hands-on service, professional management and community partnerships. Growth in the local population swells daily traffic, yet the corridor feels safe, welcoming and spacious — proof that when vision, stewardship, community engagement, and volunteer dedication combine, a community asset thrives for generations.

*Ms. Hensler, board secretary, was a member of the Vision 2050 leadership team.*

## Welcome New Trail Members and Donors

The Montour Trail Council welcomes these new members and donors and thanks them for their support. We would also like to thank all our members and donors who have recently renewed their annual contributions. Please note that foundations and other grant-making agencies often look at a strong membership as a criteria in their consideration of our funding requests. Not all new members have been entered as of our print deadline and will be listed in the next edition of the *Trail-Letter*.

### Trail Blazer

Stephen & Stephanie Colodny
Timothy Knavish

### Leader's Circle

David Edmunds
Jeff & Cathy Finch
Michael Jones
Larry Laude
David & Veronica Mattson
Keith McMillen
Ronald Piroli
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Michelle Talarico
John Wasco
Jason Zafarana

### In Memory

**Lucy & Ella Baldasare**
Kevin Baldasare

**Marge Fleming**
The Ahwesh, Palka, Thompson, and Wasco Families

**Thomas A., Freda I., Thomas H. & Margaret V. Higgins**
Anonymous

**Bob Walker**
Patricia Baron
Jason Zafarana

**Jerome "Jerry" Heinz**
Christine Heinz

### New Members

Richard Amrhein
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Joe Baker
Patricia Baron
Nicholas Biondi
Scott Carnivale
Donald Costello
Steven Crandell
Edward Dulavitch
David Edmunds
Mitchell Feldman
Trevor Fetch
Thomas Ficarri
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