

Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail

2024 Loudoun County Feasibility Study

Project Summary | January 2025



Background

The Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail (PHNST) is a 900-mile, congressionally designated, locally managed trail network that is administered by the National Park Service. The trail runs from the mouth of the Potomac River in Maryland and Virginia to the Alleghany Highlands in western Pennsylvania. Spanning over 140 miles across a braided network in Northern Virginia, the PHNST serves as an important historic, cultural, recreational, and natural resource for the region's residents and visitors to explore and enjoy.

Loudoun County's Linear Parks and Trails System Plan (LPAT), adopted July 6, 2021 and revised October 29, 2021, is a comprehensive plan for the development of an interconnected, countywide linear parks and trail system. The LPAT as well as capital funding of a series of trail and active transportation improvements represent recent initiatives to complete trail infrastructure in the County. The LPAT's framework plan is a planned network of broad corridors within which future phases of work, such as this PHNST feasibility study, will pursue detailed trail alignments.

Project Objectives

The 2024 Loudoun County Feasibility Study sought to determine the most feasible route options for completing a significant network gap in the PHNST in Loudoun County, Virginia from the Town of Leesburg westward. Overall, the project identified, assessed, and presented the feasibility of potential routes within the study corridor, including considerations for the cost of trail construction, maintenance, land ownership, accessibility, park connections, and scenic views.



Project Partners and Roles



Northern Virginia Regional Commission (NVRC): The lead agency and manager of the study; provides planning and management for the Northern Virginia section of the PHNST through a cooperative agreement with the National Park Service.

National Park Service (NPS): Administers the federal interest in the Trail; enters into General Agreements (GA) with states, local governments, private organizations, and individuals for the use of lands for National Scenic Trail (NST) designations.

Loudoun County: Local government partner (Department of Parks, Recreation, and Community Services); coordinates public access to trail facilities.

Lardner/Klein Landscape Architects: The design and planning firm that conducted the study.

Project Timeline

January 2024: Project kick off with primary stakeholders and Lardner/Klein.

Spring 2024: Methodology developed for analysis of potential trail routes and initial information meetings with relevant PHNST stakeholders.

May 2024: Public Meeting #1

Summer/Fall 2024: Analysis conducted by Lardner/Klein to identify the feasibility of different route options for completing the network gap.

October 2024: Public Meeting #2

October-December 2024: Compilation of study results and final report

January 2025: Project Completion

Methodology

The evaluation criteria used to determine the feasibility of various routes under consideration for designation were organized into a multi-level flow chart that accounts for NST designation eligibility, land ownership, costs and benefits of trail completion, safety, environmental, cultural, and several other factors. Potential routes were then evaluated using a link and node system to compare the feasibility of route segments (links) between established and identified nodes (control points) at fixed locations that the overall trail route must pass through (e.g., an existing bridge, a common intersection, or a desired destination). Three levels of feasibility were identified for all evaluated segments:

Limited Feasibility: Segments with issues that must be addressed prior to moving forward

Feasible But With Condition(s): Segments with issues that can be resolved through more creative design, engineering and management efforts

Feasible: Segments with issues that can be resolved with standard trail design practices – whether an on-road route or an overland route

Key Findings

The study identified public lands and river access points that could be linked together utilizing LPAT corridors and additional low volume and gravel roads forming a route as close as possible to the Potomac River – identified as the “blue route” on study maps. In some cases, alternative, more inland routes were needed to make further connections where gaps were found between the low volume/unpaved roads and public parkland – identified as the “yellow-orange route” on study maps.

Findings indicated that a westward extension of the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail along identified link segments is feasible, but with varying degrees of feasibility. The feasibility study evaluated trail corridors on public land and for a limited number of overland routes that were included as part of the LPAT plan. Overland routes included in the LPAT Plan will continue to require further collaboration with private landowners or other agency land managers.

Potential overland routes not included in the LPAT plan, but connecting Potomac River access points were not considered directly as part of the feasibility study, but were shown generally on feasibility summary maps. Pending future discussions and agreements with private landowners, overland route segments could be considered as a means of overcoming routes having limited feasibility.



Map of Eligible Route Segments Considered as Part of the Feasibility Study

PHNST_RouteCriteriaFeasibility_11212024

- Blue Route
- Yellow-Orange Route
- US-15 Widening/Leesburg
- Leesburg/South of Leesburg
- VDOT Unpaved Roads
- VDOT Traffic Volume -
- Parks
- LPAT Corridors

Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail - Northern Virginia

- Existing PHNST
- Planned PHNST - Potential Route
- Planned PHNST - Confirmed Route

Next Steps

Following completion of the study, NVRC and the primary project partners will coordinate on additional outreach and engagement around the study's findings. Results of the study present the feasibility of potential routes within the PHNST corridor, including considerations for routes that have limited feasibility or are unfeasible, but these findings primarily represent a starting point for future planning efforts for trail designation.

NVRC will continue to coordinate with Loudoun County and the National Park Service to determine a connected trail route for the region. However, the timeline will vary depending on a number of factors such as funding availability and landowner participation. In particular, while some sections can be completed as ongoing Loudoun LPAT capital improvement projects, other sections could take many years for development due to the lengthy process of acquiring land and designing and engineering.

Resources



- Final Report
- Study Maps
- Additional information for the study can be found on the [Loudoun County Feasibility Study page](#) on the [PHNST Dashboard](#)

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