

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background and Context In 2004, the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor Commission (Commission) initiated the Blackstone Sustainability Study to evaluate the past 18 years of work in the National Heritage Corridor (Corridor) and use this as a foundation for a dialogue about future management of the Corridor. The Commission and its Futures Committee, desiring external review and a transparent evaluation process, asked the National Park Service Conservation Study Institute (Institute) to provide technical assistance by conducting the Sustainability Study and providing opportunities for input from partners and the general public. The Commission asked the Institute to examine four aspects of the Commission's work:

1. Evaluate the accomplishments of the Commission and the progress in achieving the strategies and goals set forth in the Commission's 1989 Cultural Heritage and Land Management Plan, as amended;
2. Analyze the National Park Service (NPS) investment and determine how these funds have leveraged additional funds;
3. Identify further actions and commitments that are needed to protect, enhance, and interpret the Corridor; and
4. Evaluate the Commission form of management, and identify and evaluate options for a permanent National Park Service designation and other management alternatives for achieving the national interest in the Blackstone Valley.

For the purposes of the study, the Institute's project team defined sustainability as the strategy, framework, and resources necessary for continuing and expanding the efforts to successfully achieve the stated goals of the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor.

The Institute's project team gathered information in three key areas:

- Heritage conservation and development within the Corridor, documenting accomplishments and financial investment and leverage, and assessing further actions and commitments needed to fulfill the Corridor's purpose;
- The partnership process in the Corridor, evaluating how the Commission, staff, and partners work together toward Corridor goals, and examining the impact of this collaboration on the various organizations and individuals; and
- The management framework for the Corridor, analyzing the existing management framework, and identifying and analyzing a range of options for future management.

The project team obtained information from a variety of sources, including Corridor management plans, annual reports, and other project documentation of accomplishments and leverage. The team engaged members of the Commission, the Futures Committee, Corridor partners, and the public through interviews and meetings. To examine a range of management frameworks and gather insights and ideas for future conservation of the Corridor, the team convened a joint meeting of leaders from the Blackstone Valley and experts with diverse national and international experience in heritage areas and partnerships. After analyzing information from all the various components of the study, the team identified key ingredients of a successful partnership system in the Blackstone Valley, and provided advice for enhancing and sustaining this system.

Transforming the Blackstone National Heritage Corridor: The Commission's Accomplishments and Leverage

Congress created a Commission to assist the two states, the municipalities, and other partners to develop cultural, historical, and land resource management programs to retain, enhance, and interpret

the Corridor's resource values. The Commission, a bi-state, 19-member federally appointed body, serves as the Corridor's managing entity and works through partnerships to implement the Corridor's vision and management plan. In 1986, the Commission was originally authorized for five years with a five-year renewal. In 1996, after the first ten years, the Commission received a ten-year extension from Congress and a Corridor boundary expansion to the current 24 municipalities. At the Commission's request, the National Park Service has provided staff to the Commission since soon after the Corridor was established.

The Commission's initial planning process invited valley residents to share their priorities and values, and to collaborate in drawing up a unified vision for the Corridor's future. The Commission fostered a vision of the valley as a cohesive region—an interdependent place linked by cultural heritage and a common set of economic, natural, and cultural resources. The Commission then set an ambitious agenda for the Corridor that encompasses heritage education, recreation development, ethnic and cultural conservation, environmental conservation, historic preservation, land use planning, and heritage-based economic development.

To date, the Commission has directly sponsored or participated in more than 400 projects within the Corridor. Much of this work is managed through cooperative agreements that identify needs, common objectives, legal mandates, estimated time frames, and budget. The Commission has entered into 284 agreements with 87 Corridor partners to carry out the management plan. The Commission staff also provides technical assistance to other projects. Combined, the Commission has leveraged considerable public and private contributions, making it possible to support many more projects than could be supported by individual organizations or the National Park Service working alone.

The Corridor's authorizing legislation requires that the Commission's financial and technical assistance will be matched with private and public investments. Since 1987 the Commission has received a total of \$23,638,600 from National Park Service funding programs to implement its management plan, of which \$20 million has required a 1:1 match. Financial and in-house commitments from the two states, other federal agencies, communities, the private sector, and nonprofit organizations have leveraged the Commission's funds by an estimated 22 times—a public and private investment exceeding \$500 million that contributes to the Corridor's goals and is either directly or indirectly attributable to Commission action.

The Commission's integrated approach and its ongoing role as facilitator and “keeper of the vision” encourage people to think and act across disciplinary and jurisdictional boundaries. A growing partnership base over time influences the breadth, scope, and complexity of the Corridor initiatives, often leading to a more ambitious, integrated vision.

Examining the Blackstone Model for Heritage Conservation and Development

To explore how the Blackstone Corridor programs work, the project team conducted an evaluation that asked the following questions: How do the programs deliver the Corridor's accomplishments? In what ways do programs impact organizations and communities in the valley? Are there ways the programs might be strengthened or improved in the future? This type of “process evaluation” is a well-developed, systematic research method for understanding how complex programs operate while documenting their impacts.

The evaluation is based on a “program model” that explains the way that programs in the Corridor achieve their goals. Interviews with 30 partners, conducted confidentially, were used to test and refine

the model. The results of the evaluation suggest that the Commission is a central, integrating hub and a key partner in a complex and dynamic, multi-interest network. The Commission is able to connect widely differing interests in the Corridor while engaging both state and local governments. The Commission also adds significant credibility to the work and goals of partner organizations because of its federal stature and the connection to the National Park Service. Federal designation underscores the importance of the Corridor, while further reinforcing the regional focus of the programs.

Sustaining the Engines of Change

A. Exploring Management Options for the Future

Building on an analysis of the existing framework, the project team examined a series of management options for the future. The options emerged from discussions with commissioners, partners, and outside experts; an examination of relevant models from other places; and considerations identified in evaluating the existing framework. Many of these options are not mutually exclusive and could be combined to best suit the valley's unique needs and circumstances.

1. Extend the existing framework in its current form. The Commission and its partners are comfortable with the framework and strongly support continuing it for at least another ten years to provide more time to sustain the momentum, strengthen the partner network, and further evaluate long-term options for Corridor management.

2. Adjust the existing framework which could include: (a) modifying or expanding the Commission's composition; (b) establishing an advisory council; (c) narrowing or shifting the staff's focus; (d) establishing a bi-state compact; and (e) cultivating a bi-state nonprofit organization to complement the Commission. More representation on the Commission from local governments and nongovernmental partners would be desirable, and partners, commissioners, and staff generally agree that the Commission's size could be increased without adversely influencing its effectiveness. Establishing an advisory council would also provide for broader stakeholder involvement. Regarding staff responsibilities, the Commission, through administrative action, could shift staff involvement to work more deeply in fewer disciplines rather than being spread across a wider array of initiatives. Lead responsibility for certain priorities could be transferred to other willing and able entities. A bi-state compact established by the two governors would formalize the states' ongoing commitment to the Corridor and identify priority areas for cooperation and mechanisms for continued coordination and communication. A Corridor-wide nonprofit organization, cultivated to complement the Commission, could be more entrepreneurial in generating revenues and work toward a more diverse and secure funding base for Corridor initiatives.

3. Establish a new management entity to replace the Commission as the central hub by shifting to (a) a Corridor-wide nonprofit management entity or (b) a bi-state coordinating entity created by the two states. Either of these entities could receive federal standing and funding and NPS staff support if congressionally authorized. A new Corridor-wide nonprofit could be created for this purpose, or an existing nonprofit could expand its mission, structure, and capacity to play such a role. A coordinating entity created by the states would need formal joint action, such as a bi-state compact or parallel legislation in both states.

4. Establish a permanent NPS presence in the Corridor which could take several forms: (a) designate the Corridor as a permanent program of the National Park System; (b) designate a particular site or sites within the Corridor as a new unit of the National Park System; or (c) designate the entire Corridor as a new National Park System unit. The case for a permanent NPS presence is grounded in the valley's national significance, as reflected by congressional establishment of the Corridor. Any option involving a permanent NPS presence would require

further evaluation by the NPS through a “new area” or “special resource” study, which would be conducted through an open, public process and conclude with a recommendation to Congress.

5. Move forward with a management framework established by the states as a replacement for a federally supported framework. The states could establish a new management framework through an interstate compact or similar mechanism, with coordination provided by a Corridor-wide nonprofit organization or a bi-state entity. Since the national heritage corridor designation is permanent, individual organizations and partner networks could continue to pursue Corridor goals under the umbrella of the designation.

B. Identifying Critical Ingredients for Sustained Success of the Corridor’s Partnership System

The sustainability study identified a set of critical ingredients acting in concert as a “partnership system.” The critical ingredients of the Corridor’s partnership system include (1) heritage as a “platform” for civic engagement; (2) a management framework that inspires trust and collaboration; and (3) a commitment to partnerships and a participatory process. In addition, the Corridor vision is central to the partnership system, anchoring it and serving as a guiding, sustaining force. Time is also an essential factor since it takes time to build a complex partnership system over a large, diverse region and to develop the effective partner relationships needed to successfully carry out joint projects. A strategic sequencing of projects over time is important as well, with early projects setting the stage for later work. Finally, time is required to build the partner capacity and secure the needed funding that will lead to sustainability.

Although most of the critical ingredients have been part of the Commission’s work to date, not all are fully realized. Future investments can be directed to support this partnership system over the long term and enhance its capacity for success.

Looking to the Future

Thinking of the Blackstone National Heritage Corridor as a partnership system has implications for a future heritage conservation and development strategy within the Corridor. As the Commission deliberates on the future of the Corridor, it will need to consider how best to build upon past success to create a framework for the future. In order to complete valley-wide projects that relate to Corridor goals (e.g., the 2015 Fishable-Swimmable Campaign, the bikeway, addressing the challenges of land use and growth) and support and sustain success over the long term, two primary areas deserve consideration:

A. Sustaining and Building the Partnership Capacity to Meet Future Challenges

Many initiatives and opportunities for engagement have created a strong sense of ownership among partners throughout the Corridor. The Commission’s careful attention to building partnerships has created a diverse network of enthusiastic partners, but some organizations and the network as a whole are still fragile. In addition, many valley residents are still unaware of the Corridor and its purpose.

Partnerships have always been at the center of the Commission’s strategy, with the idea that partners would assume increasingly greater responsibility over time. The following commitments are needed to meet the long-term challenges of protecting the valley’s heritage resources and character: (1) expand the partner network through ongoing education and public engagement; (2) build partner and network capacity; (3) encourage new leaders; and (4) foster stewardship by promoting the Corridor vision. These activities represent essential commitments that are needed to create a stable, sustainable partnership system. Because the Blackstone Valley is a living landscape, this work is ongoing. There will always be ebb and flow in the partnership system, and a need for sustaining existing members and cultivating new ones.

B. Management Considerations That Support the Partnership System

As the Corridor's management entity, the Commission has been a critical driver behind the partner network's accomplishments. Key aspects of the Commission's effectiveness include (1) excellent partnership-building by commissioners and staff, (2) a clear articulation of the Corridor vision, (3) a sincere commitment to public engagement, and (4) funding that leverages other investments. The Commission's federal stature has enabled it to bridge effectively the political divides of a bi-state Corridor.

One of the most important roles played to date by the Commission and its NPS staff, and very important for the growth and maturation of the partner network, is the role of central hub. Perhaps the most critical aspect of being an effective central hub is the collective ability of the Commission and staff to play a multitude of roles in interacting with partners. Every individual partnership is unique, and part of the sophistication needed to sustain the Corridor's partnership system is the ability to provide different assistance and levels of support to different partners. This surfaced strongly in the partner interviews as important to building partner capacity and strengthening the network. In the future, as partner capacity increases and stronger partners emerge as network leaders, the roles and responsibilities of network management may shift also. It will be important for the Commission to monitor these changes and adapt accordingly.

At this critical point in the evolution of the Corridor's partnership system, there is a clear need to sustain an effective coordinating framework for the Corridor that bridges the 2 states and 24 municipalities and supports the partnership system. This includes (1) a strong management entity to carry forward the vision, provide effective collaborative leadership, and serve as the central network hub; (2) an ongoing relationship with the NPS, given the Corridor's well-documented national significance; and (3) secure, sustainable funding from diverse sources.

Final Thoughts

The national heritage area "experiment" in the Blackstone Valley is all about conservation at the landscape scale. The Commission, its staff, and the network of partners are helping to build an understanding of how to conserve important natural and cultural heritage in lived-in landscapes. They are fostering a partnership culture in the Blackstone Valley that is leading to conservation of an important story and unique resources. At its core, their efforts revolve around connecting people to heritage and place, thereby kindling a sense of stewardship. In this process, shared heritage becomes a bridge between past, present, and future.