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LOCAL NEWS

# Great American Rail-Trail bike tour rolls into Steubenville

By **LINDA HARRIS** September 19, 2026 5 min read

STEUBENVILLE -- Locals are rolling out the welcome mat this week for the Great American Rail-Trail's fifth annual bike tour, which this year will bring about 40 cyclists from Pittsburgh to Weirton and points beyond via the Panhandle Trail.

Kevin Belle, project director for the Great American Rail-Trail at Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, has said riders will have a chance to experience the trail for themselves in hopes of getting people talking about it "in ways that will highlight its economic development potential as well as tourism, outdoor recreation and public health possibilities."

This year, the cyclists will spend three days on the trail between Pittsburgh and Columbus so they can see for themselves the challenges as well as the rewards it will bring. They'll be joined by non-biking policymakers at various events along the way.

The goal, he said, is to "highlight important pieces of the trail, see local businesses who are benefitting from the trail, and share stories about what is happening along the way to complete it."

"We're excited to share some of the local color that makes the trail so interesting and talk about how we are working with our partners along the route to finish the trail and get people using it and excited," he said.

When it's done, the Great American Rail-Trail will span 3,700 miles across 12 states and the District of Columbia, connecting Washington, D.C., to Washington state. So far, roughly 60% of the trail is complete, though the bike tour will stop in Wayne County to cut the ribbon on a new section of its Heartland Trail. Belle said they've had several other ribbon cuttings over the past few months, and new funding has been awarded for various trails along the route "so progress is definitely being made every year on this trail."

But that leaves somewhere around 40% of the route to be done, including the all-important 4.1-mile gap between the Panhandle Trail in Weirton and the existing -- but closed -- Market Street Bridge, as well as the nearly 10-mile gap from Steubenville to Hellbender Preserve trail near Bloomingdale and the seven-mile gap from Hellbender to Conotton Trail in Jewett. Jefferson County Commissioners and the Soil & Water Conservation District are in talks with landowners in hopes of plugging four miles of that gap next year.

Getting bikers across the Ohio River and through Steubenville remains an obstacle, however.

"On this tour we will be shuttling people from the end of the Panhandle Trail in Weirton to Steubenville because there is no safe, protected (biking) opportunity right now," Belle said. "People are finding creative ways to fill this gap currently, including a shuttle service for long-distance cyclists (provided by Brooke-Hancock-Jefferson Metropolitan Planning Authority). We'll be highlighting the importance of adding a dedicated trail connection along the Market Street Bridge when it is rebuilt. The Market Street Bridge provides the best opportunity to provide a safe trail crossing of the Ohio River directly into downtown Steubenville, contributing to the development of Steubenville's downtown economy."

An independent economic impact analysis by Headwaters Economics and the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy estimates visitor spending could top $229 million annually when it's all done.

"It's an amazing opportunity," Steubenville Mayor Ralph Petrella said. "The more people (who come) the more dollars spent. But more importantly to me is the opportunity for our citizens to have another opportunity for 'experience.' More experiences correlates to better citizen retention. We need to focus on steady growth for our citizenry. Also, as our identity changes from mill town to a town of higher education, we will be having more visitors and the added development will strengthen our case for hotel and restaurant development which we are in dire need of."

Petrella said a healthy active community is a strong community. "We have a chance to show off our beautiful landscape and help our citizens find more activities to do here," he said. "This opportunity also shows that we are making national progress and becoming a national hub for development. It's extremely valuable for economic development and a great chance for true collaboration on a national level."

Soil & Water Conservation District Project Manager Aaron Dodds points out the Weirton-Steubenville area is the first major gap, "as the trail east is connected all the way to Washington, D.C."

"The Market Street Bridge is an extremely important piece of infrastructure -- not only for the Great American Rail-Trail, but for our entire region," he said, adding the Great American Rail-Trail's visit "gives us an opportunity to showcase the importance of that connection to a national audience while also showing the tremendous strides Jefferson Soil and Water Conservation District has been making to develop trails and outdoor recreation opportunities throughout the county with the strong support of the Jefferson County Commissioners."

"We're especially excited to take them to Hellbender Preserve and show firsthand what we've been able to accomplish," he said. "Projects like Hellbender Preserve demonstrate how trails can connect conservation, recreation, history and economic development. Ultimately, we want Jefferson County to be more than a pass through on the Great American Rail-Trail -- we want it to become a destination along it."

Belle pointed out the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy has weighed in with its opinion about the West Virginia Division of Highways' plans for the Market Street Bridge replacement, saying they're "following it closely and look forward to remaining engaged."

"This tour (will help) people feel and experience the trail," he added. "We know that people tell better stories about the trail and make better decisions when they've experienced it firsthand. The tour also brings attention to our local partners and the important work they are doing to complete the trail."