



CHAPTER 1

Introduction



The Air Line State Park Trail experience coincides with a freshness of immersion into nature, celebration of unique small towns and small compact small urban centers.

The Air Line State Park Trail Region is comprised of the twelve towns that host the Air Line State Park Trail corridor and spans the width of eastern Connecticut, from Portland to Thompson.

Connecticut, which is a roughly rectangular shape, extends approximately 90 miles, east to west and 55 miles, north to south. With a 2022 population of 3,626,205, Connecticut ranks 29th nationally in total population and 4th in population density. This high-density ranking reflects population densities in western Connecticut and also its urbanized areas. Eastern Connecticut is distinctive for its acreage dedicated to rural landscapes, agriculture, small villages, compact urbanized areas, and a cultural heritage that still typifies the characteristics described by Robert Thorson as those areas in Connecticut where “the physical landscape lies at the taproot of our historic statehood and invigorates culture today.”

The estimated total population of the Air Line State Park Trail Region’s twelve towns is 110,413 with an average population density of 250 people per square mile. By comparison, the region surrounding the Farmington Canal Heritage Trail, a multi-use trail that travels north-south from Granby to New Haven, CT, has an average population density of 1,375 people per square mile, discounting the urban center of New Haven. With a significant landscape absent of large-scale development, vast acreage of forests and streams, small villages, rural landscapes define the Air Line State Park Trail Region. The Air Line State Park Trail experience coincides with a freshness of immersion into nature, celebration of unique small towns and small compact urban centers.

Within the 408 square mile Air Line State Park Trail Region, the 64-mile-long multi-use Air Line State Park Trail winds through hills and valleys of Connecticut’s rural scenic landscape. The existing trail and the proposed trail section from Portland to East Hampton traverse this eastern landscape from the Arrigoni Bridge



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on the Connecticut River to the northeastern corner of Thompson, where it intersects with the Tri-State Marker of the border of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. A portion of the trail is designated as a National Recreation Trail and a large portion of the region is overlaid by "The Last Green Valley," a nationally designated region where conservation management efforts continue to positively impact eastern Connecticut's unique identity as a conservation region in New England. The Region also encompasses influence areas such as the East Coast Greenway, the Hop River State Park Trail, the Storrs Campus of the University of

Connecticut, and the Eightmile River Watershed (see Figure 1).

In November 2018, a group of forty-five enthusiastic Air Line State Park Trail stakeholders and supporters from each of the twelve towns in the Region, influence areas and representatives of the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (CT DEEP) convened a roundtable discussion at the library meeting room in Hebron, Connecticut. Over the course of two hours, a group conversation developed on the merits, issues and concerns associated with the Air Line State Park Trail and its future. Discussion and questions, some without clear answers, focused on the questions below.

At the end of the roundtable session, the group unanimously agreed to move forward with a proposal to begin a master plan process that would optimally coordinate trail stewardship between the twelve towns of the Air Line State Park Trail and CT DEEP to answer the questions outlined at the meeting. So began an expansive partnership to explore these questions and find methods or solutions to improve and grow the Air Line State Park Trail and unite the towns/stakeholders of the Air Line State Park Trail Region. The planning and research process has been insightful and dynamic, involving a working team of consultants, town officials, trail committees, educators, land use and conservation planners, scientists, trail



EARLY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE ALSPT TRAIL AND ITS FUTURE



How could towns work collaboratively with the CT DEEP for continuity of maintenance and conditions on the trail?

How does CT DEEP successfully manage a linear state park for increased use by trail users? What type of CT DEEP staffing is available to support ongoing maintenance & infrastructure, emergency management, signage & wayfinding and amenity services for trail users?



How can towns of the Air Line State Park Trail Region, as well as numerous passionate trail focused stakeholders, work together to advocate and improve the trail infrastructure as well as the safe and reliable experience for the trail user?



Are municipal and regional land use/economic growth/conservation policies supporting the trail services and the Air Line State Park Trail Region?



What are the strengths and weaknesses of the trail's infrastructure system and connections to the town centers?



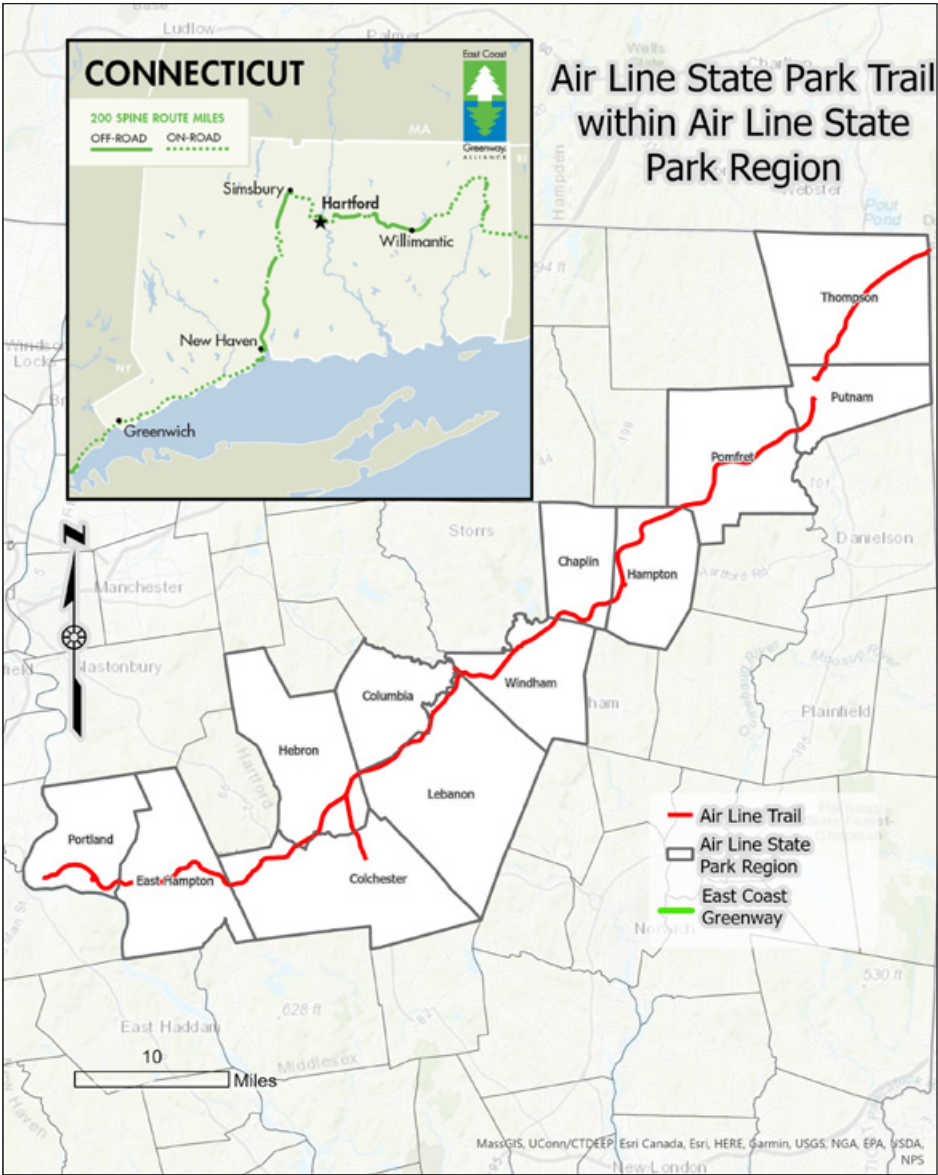
What is the value of the Air Line State Park Trail to the twelve towns as an economic driver for tourism and tourist-based business as well as a potential commuting route?



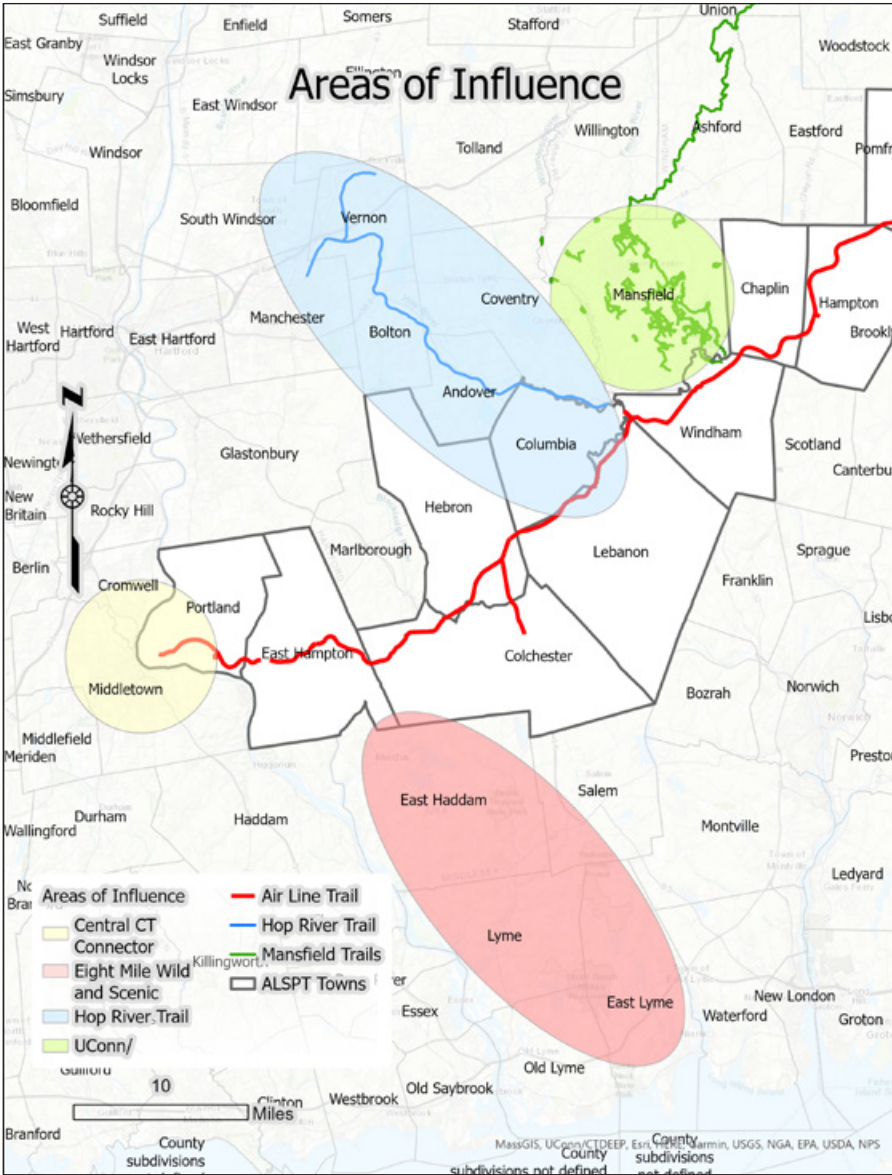
Overall, how can the twelve towns that adjoin the trail work together and leverage economic benefit from this amazing 63-mile recreational trail and promote it as a tourism asset in eastern Connecticut?

FIGURE 1

Map A: Master Plan Area Overview



Map B – ALSPT Region Influence Areas



enthusiasts, neighboring trails, towns, and regional partners.

This Air Line State Park Trail Region Master Plan, inspired by that first meeting, is the product of three years of surveys, research, mapping, site visits, professional evaluation of economics, land use, infrastructure, and marketing analysis.

Interviews with numerous stakeholders and public meetings provided input during the planning process at each stage. The process also included analysis and surveys of natural resources of the trail and acreage adjacent to the trail which are an important and defining characteristic of the Air Line State Park Trail experience.

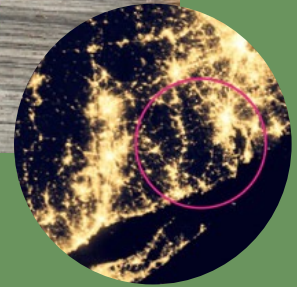
The planning process sought to engage town residents, businesses, partner organizations, tourism groups and CT DEEP in a synergistic exploration of the issues, concerns, and possibilities for improved and continued positive experiences for the trail user and the towns that host the Air Line State Park Trail. However, there were stalls and starts in the public engagement process as the Covid-19 pandemic coincided

Local residents' enthusiasm for the trail has been integral to the success of several initiatives by the Town of Thompson and the Last Green Valley.

with three years of research and writing of the plan. Youth engagement and participation by universities in trail planning were put on hold and are reflected as a next step recommendation.

The planning process relied on the large number of Air Line State Park Trail Region Task Force participants and their support in feeding information back to the communities. Local residents' enthusiasm for the trail, including youth, has been integral to the success of several initiatives by the Town of Thompson and The Last Green Valley. The "Tackle the Trail" race sponsored as a fundraiser by Quinebaug Valley Community College is a great example of an educational institution leveraging the trail system for a good cause. Additionally, the Eastern Regional Tourism District of the Connecticut Tourism Office monetarily supported a regional cooperative pocket map/tourism guide for eight of the towns in the region.

As the process for improving conditions, continuity and reliability of the Air Line State Park Trail unfolds, there are numerous tasks and steps required to build the expansive potential and vision of the Air Line State Park Trail Region. This plan aspires to encourage and support leadership from the Air Line State Park Trail Region Stakeholder Committee, the twelve towns, partner organizations and CT DEEP to make the region a dynamic, safe, and culturally enriching experience to residents and visitors.



LAST GREEN VALLEY

The Last Green Valley is a 35-town National Heritage Corridor in eastern Connecticut and south-central Massachusetts. At night, the region appears distinctively dark amid the urban and suburban glow when viewed from satellites or aircraft. The Last Green Valley is half the size of Grand Canyon National Park and more than ten times that of Acadia National Park, the largest national park in the northeast. Forest and farmland make up 84% of its almost 707,000 acres, yet it lies only an hour from three of New England's four largest urban areas.

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AIR LINE STATE PARK TRAIL REGION MASTER PLAN

Planning for regional and local coordination for economic growth, conservation, cost savings, maintenance, infrastructure, tourism and marketing

Air Line State Park Trail Region Stakeholder Committee

Contributes to oversight and final recommendations for 12 town ALSPT Region Master Plan. Assists with project outreach, participates on project committees, works with consultants, advocates for plan. Membership includes: CT DEEP representatives, elected officials, conservation commissions, bike-trail organizations, land trusts, horse councils, winter sports clubs, outdoor clubs, public works, tourism organizations, land use and economic development staff, chambers of commerce, trail-oriented business owners, influence corridor organizations. Staffed by CTC&D and sub-consultants.

Conservation Committee

Team of regional environmental volunteer experts to provide support and recommendations:

- Evaluate system of natural resource protection in the trail region: coordination, wildlife habitat, forestry, watersheds, buffers
- Best practices for public amenities
- Coordination with CT DEEP, CT Land Trusts, & Town Conservation Commissions
- Support sustainability of viewsheds and ecotourism

Infrastructure and Municipal Leadership Committees

Representatives from town government (elected officials, planners, public works officials, park supervisors, & engineers) to inform and support:

- Manage costs of maintenance and improvements
- Advocate for municipal concerns, regional and town solutions, and contributions for trail conditions
- Collaborate with CT DEEP on communication network for public alerts, managing stakeholder involvement

Sustainable Economics, Marketing and Land Use Committees

Team of local and regional economic expert volunteers and stakeholders who can provide project support and recommendations:

- Articulate why people should visit the ALSPT Region
- Initiate a regional marketing campaign, logos, website development, business support, and land use innovation for growth and preservation
- Determine impact of local and regional influence corridors

MASTER PLAN EVALUATION OF COORDINATION

CT DEEP

- Owner oversight of Air Line State Park Trail
- Ongoing property maintenance
- Infrastructure funding and planning
- Permitting, construction and coordination with municipal projects (streamlined)
- Coordinate with ALSPT Regional Organization for infrastructure, funding, fundraising, marketing, and public communication protocols - rules - regulations

ALSPT Regional Organization

Nonprofit organization of resident stakeholders

- ALSPT event coordination, fundraising and marketing
- Coordinate with CT DEEP, 12 town local governments, local trail committees and partner organizations
- Maintain ALSPT Region website
- Support towns toward regional ALSPT land use and economic policies
- Work with partners and stakeholders to promote conservation objectives and infrastructure maintenance and new improvements

Local and Regional Government

- Appoint and support members of ALSPT Regional Organization
- Support local trail committees and contribute to regional ALSPT organizations
- Foster initiatives and Master Plan recommendations
- Support regional cost savings for ALSPT improvements
- Coordinate with CT DEEP and ALSPT Regional Organization on public alerts and communications

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



PARTNERS IN ALSPT REGION MASTER PLAN



12 towns in Air Line State Park Trail Region



17 scientists specializing in natural resources and wildlife



11 professional consultants with a range of environmental & professional specialties

This master plan is the product of a request from the twelve towns of the Air Line State Park Trail Region to the Environmental Review Team (ERT) Program of the Connecticut Resource Conservation and Development Area (CT RC&D). CT RC&D provided matching funds and applied on behalf of this twelve-town collective for a Recreation Trails Grant from the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (CT DEEP). A grant was awarded to CT RC&D in 2019 to produce an Air Line State Park Trail Region Master Plan. Without the generous support of CT DEEP, this plan would not have been possible.

CT RC&D also supported the plan development process with a dedicated project manager/professional planner to coordinate a team of

consultants and support the Air Line State Park Trail Region Stakeholder Committee with the development of the final master plan.

Additionally, the twelve towns were able to engage an ERT program through CT R&CD comprised of seventeen professional natural resource and wildlife scientists and eleven professional consultants specializing in landscape architecture, engineering, land use planning, economic research and analysis, trail surveys, marketing, website design, governance, and watershed analysis. The ERT program is a free land use support and planning service funded by CT DEEP's Passport to the Parks Program and CT RC&D for Connecticut municipalities and land trusts with a goal to map and analyze baseline natural resources and land use data

toward best management land use policy and site preservation or park development.

The twelve towns of the Air Line State Park Trail Region and CT RC&D would like to acknowledge and express appreciation for the important work of the Air Line State Park Trail Region Stakeholder Committee as well as the following individuals and organizations who contributed their knowledge, insights, professional expertise, and time to the Air Line State Park Trail Region Master Plan. Their professional contributions and dedication to the process were critical to the full analysis of the Air Line State Park Trail Region to ensure this trail system is built, promoted, and maintained through a collaborative process.

Air Line State Park Trail Region Stakeholder Committee



The members of the twelve-town Air Line State Park Trail Region Stakeholder Committee provided invaluable synergy to the collective knowledge that supports the trail system as well as collaboration between the twelve trail towns, the numerous trail committees, and the partner stakeholders of the trail. Numerous members already knew each other and had worked together in the past, but new relationships and introductions were also created.



We would like to thank all of the committee members who contributed to the content of this Master Plan, including an acknowledgement of extra time and support provided by Ann and Frank Zitkus, Stan Malcolm, Dick Symonds, Monique Wolanin, Charlie Obert, Jennifer Kaufman, Laurie Giannotti, Kim Bradley, Sam Gold, Jeremy Hall, Craig Bryant, John Hankins, Phil Chester, Sal Rizzo, Louis Pear, Maureen Nicholson, Tyra Penn, Karen Durlach, Janet Booth, Steve Solokowski, and John Bolduc for their extensive volunteer hours to hike, bike, walk, study, write, research, photograph and contribute to the content of this plan and the Air Line State Park Trail Region website.



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- Representatives of neighboring influence areas near the ALSPT who supplied energy and synergy to build support for the plan.
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- Columbia/Beth Lunt
- Columbia/Ann Dunnack
- Columbia/Tom McGrath
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- CT DEEP/Joe Cassone
- CT DEEP/Brian Hess
- CT DEEP/Ann Kilpatrick
- CT DEEP/Michael Lambert
- CT DEEP/Nate Piche
- CT DEEP/Matthew Quinn
- CT DEEP/Tom Tyler
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- Putnam/Carly De Luca
- Putnam/Bruce Fitzback
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- Putnam/Barney Seney
- Putnam/Travis Serrine
- Putnam/Elaine Sistare
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- RiverCOG/Janice Ehlemeyer
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- RiverCOG/Rob Haramut
- SCCOG/Sam Alexander, AICP
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- SECCOG/Kate Rattan, AICP
- QVCollege/Monique Wolanin
- Thompson/Ken Beausoleil
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- Rob Lloyd: TechNet Computing
- Hannah Hurwitz: Logo Design/Social Media Coordination



Environmental Review Consulting Team

The Environmental Review Team provided a team approach to analysis of the natural resources of the Air Line State Park Trail, which are outlined in Appendix A. CT DEEP generously provided staff with senior expertise in specific subject areas as noted below and worked closely with the other professional team members. Professional team members provided insights and expertise in their specific subject knowledge area and worked well as a team to provide an overall integrated overview of the natural resources and wildlife of the Air Line State Park Trail Region.

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- Kip Kolesinkas, Soil Scientist
- Todd Mervosh, Invasive Species
- CT Audubon/ Andy Rzeznikiewicz
- CT DEEP/ Kim Bradley, Rec Trails
- CT DEEP/ Matthew Quinn – Park Management
- CT DEEP/ Tom Tyler – Park Management
- CT DEEP/ Laurie Giannotti, Rec Trails
- CT DEEP/ Matthew Goclowski - Fisheries
- CT DEEP/ Nathan Piche - Forestry
- CT DEEP/ David Buckley – Parks Management
- CT DEEP/Joe Cassone - Fisheries
- CT DEEP/Brian Hess - Wildlife
- CT DEEP/Ann Kilpatrick- Wildlife
- Eastern CT Conservation District/ Dan Mullins
- Eastern CT Conservation District/ Jean Pillo
- CT River Coast Conservation District/Kelly Starr

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Air Line State Park Trail Region Master Plan Consultant Team

At the outset, the 12 Town ALSPT Region Stakeholder Committee could have hired one consulting engineering, planning or landscape architecture firm to complete this master plan. Instead, it decided to endorse a more complex, holistic process that involved numerous voices and partners to ensure the planning process was fully vetted by varied opinions and insights. Toward that end, the committee was able to secure the services of a team of talented firms

and individuals who contributed to the research and writing of this master plan. Through their combined contributions, the plan transcends municipal, regional, ideological, and governmental boundaries to reflect recommendations that support the Air Line State Park Trail Region and the collaboration required by numerous entities to fully realize the vision of the completed Air Line State Park Trail Corridor.



LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE, ENGINEERING, INFRASTRUCTURE

- Kevin Grindle, ASLA, PLA – Barton & Loguidice
- Mark Zessin, P.E. – Barton & Loguidice

WEBSITE – WAYFINDING – MARKETING

- Pete Hary – Quinn and Hary Marketing
- David Quinn – Quinn and Hary Marketing

ECONOMIC RESEARCH – DEMOGRAPHICS – ANALYSIS

- Kevin Hively – Ninigret Partners

TRAIL USER COUNTS AND TRAIL USER SURVEYS

- Kim Bradley - UConn Extension – Trail Coordination
- Emily Wilson – UConn Extension – CLEAR – GIS
- Laura Brown – UConn Extension – Economics
- Aaron Budris – Naugatuck Valley Council of Governments

LAND USE ANALYSIS AND ZONING

- Amy Petrone, AICP, CZEO

REGIONAL HERITAGE TOURISM AND TRAIL ACCESSIBILITY

- Lois Bruinooge - The Last Green Valley
- Fran Kefalas – The Last Green Valley

VISION AND GOALS

Thirteen Connecticut bridges and two seasonal ferries cross the Connecticut River unifying the eastern and western halves of Connecticut. The Connecticut River creates a geologic, physical, and cultural divide between eastern and western Connecticut. Affinity toward the New York metropolitan region infuses the regional culture and land use patterns west of the river. To the east, the influence of Boston and New England and the mostly rural landscape create an entirely different atmosphere.

Travelling across the river into eastern Connecticut, life takes on a slightly altered outlook from Connecticut's fast-paced region to the west. While the western half of the state focuses on urbanized issues of sustainable growth, development density, shortage of housing and the ever-changing pace of a highly populated region, eastern Connecticut maintains a reputation as an escape to open spaces, rural landscapes, lower population density and under optimized historical nooks and crannies of small village centers.

From the historic resorts of East Haddam, Lebanon, and East Hampton, where city dwellers travelled by riverboat to vacation in the early 1900s to the back roads and ghost towns of the early settlers where evidence of old settlement

patterns are still found in the landscape, stone walls still delineate boundaries and farms provide the breadbasket of locally grown produce, livestock, and milk. It's a quiet part of the state, practicing smart growth yet seeking innovation and supporting higher education and technology centers. The residents are dynamic, diverse, and grounded in confidence that their protected landscapes and housing opportunities can sustainably support a slow growing, diverse population.

The Air Line State Park Trail (ALSPT) is the region's recreational gateway corridor, traversing the breadth of eastern Connecticut. Along with its partner, the Hop River Trail that links Manchester to the junction with the ALSPT in Willimantic center, the ALSPT epitomizes the eastern Connecticut regional experience, especially for the trail user. It winds through the region's villages with their small businesses and coffee shops, the vineyards, the farms, the diverse and dynamic Willimantic center, the country backroads, state forests and parks, and the hospitable low-key residences of eastern Connecticut.

It is an unrealized and emerging asset to the state with its opportunity to showcase the quieter side of Connecticut.



Travelling across the river into eastern Connecticut, life takes on a slightly altered outlook from Connecticut's fast-paced region to the west.



The importance of this linear state park to the state and the region was the incentive for the ALSPT Region Master Plan. The plan is distinct from ongoing work of the park's owner, CT DEEP, which maintains and monitors the park property. This master plan is designed to gather the most current information and insights from numerous sources and organizations that influence the trail's future as a functioning well maintained multi-use trail of over sixty-four miles and recommend actions to coordinate with CT DEEP to quickly build out the trail and optimize amenities and maintenance.

THE PLAN IDENTIFIES THESE OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE TWELVE TOWNS OF THE AIR LINE STATE PARK TRAIL REGION AND CT DEEP

- Recommendations toward systematic maintenance coordination with CT DEEP
- Collaboration on maintenance, safety systems, service amenities, a schedule of infrastructure improvements to complete the trail, and
- Recommendations for how to build economic and tourism growth through a sustainable conservation based trail corridor in collaboration with the state, local wayfinding, website and social media marketing and land use policy that supports the viewshed and conservation resources of the trail.

Colchester Historic Rail Station: Terminus of ALSPT Colchester Spur originally serviced rail travel and freight for nearly 80 years thru Willimantic and Middletown.

HISTORY OF THE TRAIL AND THE TOWNS

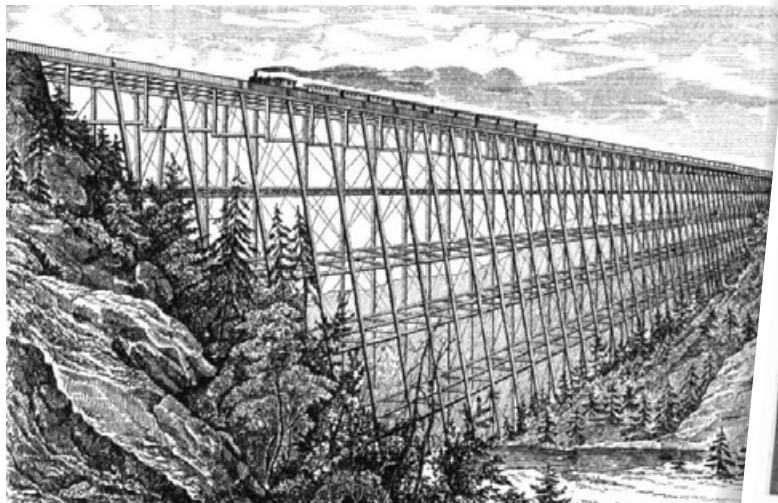
As the twelve towns and the CT DEEP look toward the future for the Air Line State Park Trail, the trail experience is inspired by its history as a railroad. The name of the rail line and the trail is derived from drawing a straight line through the air between Boston and New York City, hence Air Line Railroad or Air Line Trail. Similar to the effort to build out this multi-use trail, the rail line construction from the 1840s to the 1870s involved challenging terrain, bridges, voluminous cuts and fills to ensure a flat grade for a train's journey from Boston to New York City. The first attempt began in 1846, with the chartering of the New York and Boston Railroad Company, but progress

stalled as the company failed during the Panic of 1857. In 1867, a group of investors decided to try again, chartering the New Haven, Middletown and Willimantic Railroad Company. Ultimately, the Air Line Railroad was leased by the rapidly growing New York, New Haven and Hartford (NYNH&H or NH) Railroad, in 1882.

Specific challenges for the new railroad involved construction east of Middletown, CT, and further into the terrain of eastern Connecticut. This region was an especially challenging run for the Air Line Railroad as the landscape demanded a serpentine rail bed. Despite the limited technology of the day, expansive cuts through the hillsides

were accomplished in combination with equally massive "fills" in the valleys to keep the rail bed at grade. Nowhere was this more apparent than at the expansive bridges, or viaducts, over Flat Brook and Dickenson Creek in East Hampton and Colchester respectively. Only 1.2 miles from each other, these stream valleys were first crossed by lengthy bridges. The Rapallo viaduct needed 800 feet of length to cross Flat Brook, and the Lyman Viaduct, just to the east, needed 1,000 feet to span Dickenson Creek. Today, trail users benefit from the broad scenic trail views from these bridges that were filled for safety reasons. Further east, construction challenges continued for this new rail

The name of the rail line and the trail is derived from drawing a straight line through the air between Boston and New York City, hence Air Line Railroad or Air Line Trail.



line from the Town of Windham to the Connecticut border toward the connection with Boston. A major obstacle for the Air Line Railroad in this section was the crossing of the Quinebaug River in Putnam, CT. Engineering and fortitude prevailed, and construction was complete in August of 1872. Within a year, the reality of the direct rail line link with a time of less than six hours was complete.

Intermittent rail traffic for passengers built up until 1876 when the first dedicated passenger run was scheduled. The new railroad could only be effective if it offered time savings from the pre-existing shoreline route. By 1885, with an

Ultimately, time, new technology and cost conspired toward the demise of the Air Line Railroad. This winding bucolic engineered train route required continued upgrades. The cost for new infrastructure was prohibitive.

hour savings on the six-hour coastal run from New York to Boston, the New England Limited on the Air Line Railroad was established. The era of the Ghost Train was a particular highlight of the Air Line Railroad (see next page). But ultimately, time, new technology and cost conspired toward the demise of the Air Line Railroad. This winding



bucolic engineered train route required continued upgrades. The cost for new infrastructure was prohibitive. In 1898, the NH Railroad system that operated the shoreline rail system purchased the line which hasten the downfall of the Air Line Railroad. Passenger service of the Ghost Train era concluded on May 17, 1902, when service defaulted to the Boston to New York City shoreline rail system.

By this point, most trains used the Shore Line Railroad, with the Air Line Railroad being used mainly for a few oversized and heavy freight trains. In 1955, the bridge over the Quinebaug River was washed out, severing the line just west

of Putnam. The financially strapped NH Railroad, could not justify the cost to repair the bridge, and thus abandoned the line from Pomfret to Putnam in 1959. Intermittent sections of rail from Portland to Thompson remained in use until the early 2000s, when they were removed to make way for the Air Line State Park Trail. The only portion of the original rail line still in use in Connecticut runs periodic freight from New Haven to Portland with the Providence and Worcester Railroad short line.

The Famous Ghost Train of the New York and New England Railroad

On March 16, 1891, the opulent White Train, a luxury passenger train of the New York and New England Railroad, pulled out of Summer Street station in Boston on its first run, set to arrive in Grand Central Station in New York City in six hours. The Boston Herald reported that people lined the route through the city and suburbs “and gazed with mingled curiosity and delight at its handsome appearance.”

The train was pure Gilded Age splendor – its parlor cars were fitted with velvet carpets, silk draperies, and white silk curtains. The chairs were upholstered in gold plush; full-length glass mirrors were installed at each end of the cars. The coaches were heated with steam piped directly from the locomotive, an improvement over the fat-bellied stoves used in ordinary coaches. Pintsch gas lights brightly illuminated the coaches, replacing oil burning lights normally in use.

The dining car’s menu included baked striped bass with Italian sauce, roasted spring lamb, ribs of beef, sauté of chicken with mushrooms, and a wide array of vegetables, salads and desserts, with every fine wine and liquor available. There is no question that this luxury train was meant to serve the exquisite tastes of the robber barons and financial kings of the time.

The White Train’s name was literal – all of the cars were painted white. On its first run the crew, which included the famous locomotive engineer

Gene Potter, wore white coats or overalls, white caps and white gloves. As time passed, when the white cars traveled through the countryside, particularly at dusk or in the evening, observers came to refer to it as an “eerie apparition.” Thus, the White Train was soon better known as the Ghost Train.

Prior to the 1880s travel between the financial centers of New York City and Boston usually involved steamships along Long Island Sound, connecting with trains in New London, Connecticut, or Fall River, Massachusetts. The NY&NE’s New England Limited was initially successful but by the late 1880s began to lose ridership to the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad’s Shore Line trains, which included the Gilt Edge and the Shore Line Flyer.

To bring back customers to its inland route the NY&NE transitioned the New England Limited into the White Train, which was touted as the height of luxurious travel. The White Train was actually two trains, each leaving New York or Boston at 3 p.m., arriving at the other city at 9 p.m. The NY&NE found the cost of keeping the white cars clean to be exorbitant, and the Ghost Train lasted just four

and a half years. Its last run was on October 20, 1895, and was succeeded by the Air Line Limited. That same year the NY&NE was taken over by the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad. The



The Ghost Train lives on in legend as one of the Gilded Age’s most opulent and noteworthy trains.

Air Line Limited ran until 1902, and passenger service ended on the old Air Line route by 1937.

The Ghost Train lives on in legend as one of the Gilded Age’s most opulent and noteworthy trains.

by Laura Smith, [UConn Archives](#)

Revisiting the Great East Thompson Train Wreck of December 1891



Hundreds of passengers were injured. All four engines were destroyed, as were the sleeper and a baggage car...

by Laura Smith, UConn Archives

The Town of Thompson has created an historic monument and information station on the Air Line Trail near another notable historic event of the Air Line Railroad. Known as “The Great East Thompson Train Wreck,” it involved four trains of the New York & New England Railroad: the Long Island and Eastern States Express from New York to Boston; the Norwich Steamboat Express from New London to Boston; the Southbridge Freight, a local train to Southbridge, Massachusetts; and freight train no. 212.

It started with the eastbound 212. To keep it from delaying the eastbound Long Island and Eastern States Express and the Steamboat Express, conductor William Dorman got orders in Putnam, Connecticut, to shift to westbound track no. 1, pass East Thompson and switch back to the eastbound track no. 2 in East Douglas, Massachusetts, 19 miles away. But no one notified the East Thompson station that an eastbound train was on the westbound track. As the train crew was coupling cars to the

Southbridge freight train on the westbound track, Dorman’s freight train slammed into the engine. Several cars jackknifed and one was thrown across both tracks.

Moments later, the Long Island and Eastern States Express rounded the curve at about 50 mph and crashed into the thrown car on track no. 2. The engine spun around, vaulted off the embankment, struck a telegraph pole and crashed. Steam plowed the soft gravel for about 150 feet and destroyed a home.

That crash killed Express engineer Harry Tabor and fireman Jeremiah Fitzgerald of Boston. Dazed trainmen tried to send a flagman to signal the Norwich Steamboat Express, but it was too late. That train barreled around the curve and drove nearly 8 feet into the rear Pullman sleeper of the Long Island and Eastern States Express, setting the sleeper and engine cab on fire. All this occurred in the space of 5 minutes.

Hundreds of passengers were injured. All four engines were destroyed, as were the sleeper and a baggage car, and the track was torn up for about 500 yards east of the passenger station.