



CHAPTER 7

# Marketing and Branding Strategy

The Air Line State Park Trail (ALSPT) runs along a route that was once a fashionable railroad offering fast rail transit from New York to Boston. Its travelers bore witness to striking vistas on their journeys. Even though the railroad is no longer in use, travelers of a different kind are still enjoying the views along this magnificent route.

From Portland to East Hampton, the rail path is an almost continuous 65 miles, attracting walkers, hikers, horseback riders, and bikers from all over Connecticut. They come for solitude or to ride a horse in a natural setting. A meditative walk in the woods surrounded by the beauty of nature. A balm for the soul and a feast for the eyes.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, there has been a renewed interest from residents of all ages in quiet greenspaces – those seeking exercise, a walk in the woods, the desire to be surrounded by nature, near the sights and sounds of water falling, frogs croaking, turtles passing by. The trail passes over streams, state forests, through town parks, and along wildlife management areas, through villages and town centers and one of the last remaining covered bridges in the state. The path is wheelchair-accessible on long stretches of improved trail and dogs are permitted.

The trail, which dates from the early 1870s, has a rich history, filled with excitement, allure, and tragedy, too. It was the site of one of only four



train crashes in U.S. history. Called the Great East Thompson Train Wreck in 1891, it is known as one of the most disastrous train wrecks in American history. Hundreds were injured and two killed in a crash attributed to crew error.

The Air Line Railroad was laid down as part of a direct route between Boston and New York. The tracks ran flat and straight, like a line in the air. The Air Line employed the finest trains of the times, featuring the Pullman Palace car, which featured gleaming white and gold décor. The cars were finished in mahogany and decorated with velvet rugs, silk curtains, and upholstered chairs. Businessmen and prominent people, including President Benjamin Harrison, rode this line.

This unique history, the region and the experience, that is not well known to many, serves as the basis for the following marketing narrative.

---

*Above, Members of the Air Line State Park Trail (Portland Extension) take part in a ribbon cutting in June 2018. The committee is one of four groups to be honored with a Rockfall Foundation environmental award. Source: Middletown Press, October 2018*



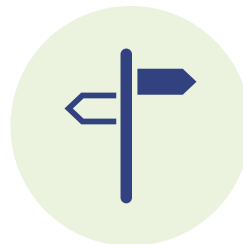
# STAY AND PLAY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

In addition to the history of the trail, the current uses of the trail will influence the marketing and branding strategy for the trail. The Air Line Trail State Park Region Master Plan Count and Survey Analysis Report, from the Center for Land use Education and Research at UConn Extension, was finalized in September 2022. The major findings of the trail survey noted that respondents could identify and had visited trail side businesses. They could also identify many local business in East Hampton and Colchester, where trail connections are easy.

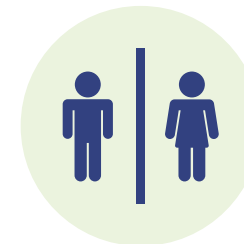
It was noted by survey respondents that the three busiest parking areas and entrance posts are Smith Street in East Hampton, Route 163 in Colchester, and Route 85 in Hebron and there is a need for increased trail user amenities, such as restrooms, mileage markers and signs, and improved maintenance. While future surveys should be conducted to gather information about trail use and amenities sought by trail users, this initial survey, together with the history of the Air Line Railroad, is a great jumping off point for the trail's marketing, branding, and wayfinding strategies.



**Survey respondents pointed to specific needs along the Air Line State Park Trail**



More trail signs and mileage markers



Additional restrooms



Improved maintenance

# BRANDING AND MARKETING THE TRAIL



Through this planning process, the ALSPT Region has started to define itself through several pilot projects. The twelve towns and trail committees have contributed to content to build an ALSPT Region website to define the tourism geography of the region, the relationship to the trail and the activities, events and sightseeing inherent in the region's lexicon. Coordination of signage and branding continues as numerous partner organizations and towns seek grant funding to build information signs. The critical goal defined by this plan is to unite the towns and organizations of the region into one identifiable branding scheme to convey a regional brand that complements the ALSPT logo designed by CT DEEP and messaging from CT VISIT.

Additional support was provided by a matching grant from the Eastern Regional Tourism District to design and print wallet size trail maps which highlight each town in the region. Of the twelve towns, eight ultimately participated in this project and also signed up for a reprint of these popular maps. The brainchild of the Thompson Planner and ERTD board member, Tyra Penn-Geseck initiated emails to each of the municipalities, who committed \$3,000 toward the match fund to a grant of \$25,000 from ERTD. (Tyra recused herself from the grant decision by ERTD) for a total project budget of \$46,000 to design these foldable wallet size brochures and maps (see Figure 7A). This was the first regional marketing project coordinated in the ALSPT Region.



FIGURE 7A

Pocket size map produced in 2021 for eight of the 12 towns

# TARGET AUDIENCE AND TIMING

As the enthusiasm for the trail builds, a need to balance expectations of the target audience with the conditions of the trail is critical to a successful marketing plan going forward. The trail in its current condition does not offer a reliable or easy situation for creating a regional marketing push. The audience of existing users and their reviews on TrailLinks, AllTrails, Trip Advisor, social media outlets provides insight into the potential for the trail and the disappointment of trail users in the lack of consistent conditions for the 64 miles from Portland to Thompson and the Colchester Spur.

Beyond the breaks in trail continuity, the lack of wayfinding signage, section of the trail also vary. Using cycling as an example, some sections of the trail are ideal for most bicycles with a slightly aggressive tire tread. Other sections would require an aggressive tire tread. Some sections are suitable only for mountain bikes and others are unpassable except for hikers. Even in passable areas for cycles, there are sections of unstable gravel piles from run off from steep inclines at gated intersections with local roads.

In marketing the trail, the ALSPT Region will need to stage marketing to match trail conditions as the region and CT DEEP simultaneously work to improve continuity in the trail system for all allowed trail uses. Therefore, the target audience would be staged as shown at right.

## MARKETING THE AIR LINE STATE PARK TRAIL IN STAGES, TO DIFFERENT AUDIENCES



### Local Residents

Initially focus on regional residents who live near the trail and can use it daily or weekly. What are their needs and expectations year round? Work with partner organizations, elected officials, and government agencies to build synergy with constituents and business community through a targeted marketing campaign. Based on interviews, keep the trail system dynamic for all types of visitors.



### Connecticut Residents

As conditions on the trail become more reliable for extended sections of the trail for all uses, extend the existing marketing campaign statewide to residents and visitors to the state. Create trail journey examples for the ALSPT Region website to showcase options for trail use and local visits.



### Out of State Visitors

Coordinate with the Connecticut Office of Tourism, Influence Areas of the ALSPT Region, the East Coast Greenway and neighboring states to promote the connections and the whole journey experience whether it is a larger state loop or an interstate journey. Conditions of the trail and wayfinding would require optimal improvements prior to this type of marketing campaign.





Marketing strategies to reach multi-use trail enthusiasts include digital marketing, partnerships and collaborations, events and promotions, public relations, trail signage and wayfinding, as well as ongoing development of trail-region visitor data evaluation and measurement and shared experience.

To continually evaluate the marketing campaign, website analytics, social media metrics, email open rates, and other key performance indicators could be regularly monitored. Visitor surveys could also be conducted and collected feedback could be reviewed to gather insights and suggestions for improvement.



## Marketing Campaign Would Emphasize Four Key Areas

- 1 Scenic Natural Beauty**  
Focus on the benefits residents and non-residents of Connecticut will receive when they explore the scenic beauty of the Air Line State Park Trail Region.
- 2 A Unique History**  
Highlight natural resource and historic aspects of the trail.
- 3 Activities and Outdoor Adventures**  
Promote ancillary activities for all ages to the public, ones that are available on and along the trail and the ALSPT Region.
- 4 Shared experience**  
The common purpose of enjoying, enhancing and experiencing the Air Line State Park Trail and the region.

### MARKETING STRATEGIES WOULD FEATURE THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES

- Creating an ongoing updated calendar and dataset of events and promotions on the ALSPT Region website.
- Organizing events and promotions that include guided hikes and nature walks to attract visitors to the trail and generate word-of-mouth referrals. Seasonal festivals could be part of the plan to attract families, students, and other groups.
- Advertising activities on kiosks at trailheads, or by posting and distributing multilingual flyers at recreation centers, senior centers, faith centers, libraries, and other communal spaces to engage people who may prefer paper to phones or who may not have consistent access to the internet.
- Developing relationships with media outlets, bloggers, and influencers to generate positive coverage and reviews of the Air Line State Park Trail. Representatives from the ALSPT Region should participate in relevant events, fairs, or trade shows to showcase the trail, distribute trail maps, and network with potential visitors.
- Working with local economic development commissions, center business district leaders, regional and state tourism districts, create monthly content for the ALSPT Region website, Facebook, Instagram and other social media sites.
- Developing sponsorships and partnerships with local businesses, tourism organizations, and other relevant stakeholders to offset costs and support the marketing of the trail.

# LOGO DESIGN AND BRANDING

Differentiation and commonality of the Air Line State Park, the CT DEEP State Park and the more expansive Air Line State Park Region requires careful marketing, logo design and branding to both unite the trail and the region while also promoting clarity to the trail user and target audience.

CT DEEP is focused on the tasks of maintenance, park safety, improvements, management, rule enforcement and year to year staffing and financial planning. The ALSPT Region focuses on economic growth, coordination, communication, and tourism marketing. There are numerous logos that connect visitors to the Air Line State Park Trail and there will be logos that promote the ALPST Region (see Figure 7B).

The goal will be to create a branding and wayfinding manual for the region similar to the manual created for the Naugatuck River Greenway.

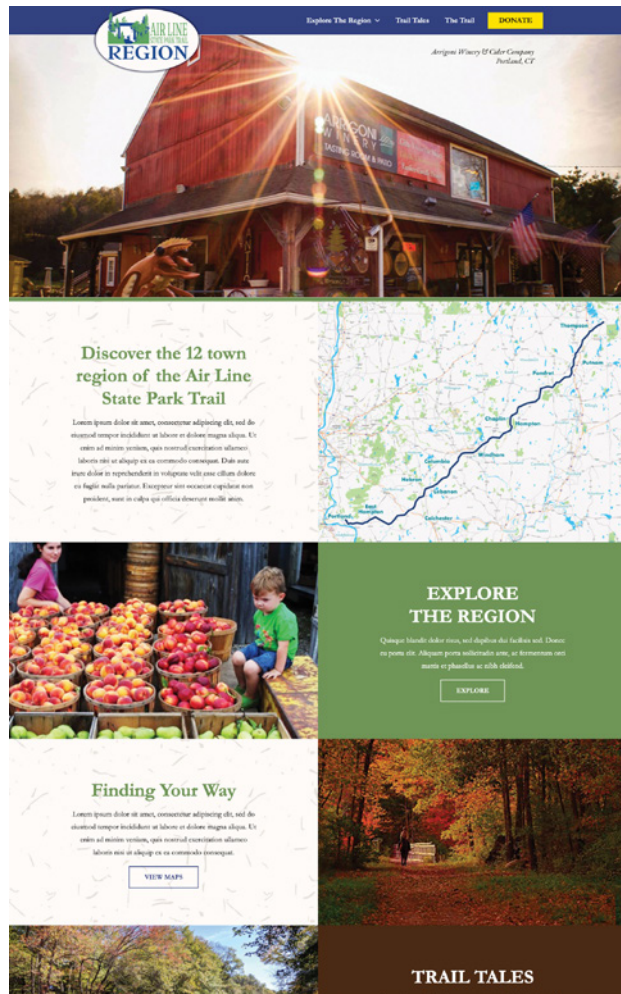
FIGURE 7B

Sample of Logos Used for the Air Line State Park Trail, Past and Current





# WEBSITE VIDEO AND SOCIAL MEDIA



The new website for the Air Line Trail State Park Region launched in June 2023.

To provide a solid base of knowledge about the ALSPT Region, we would continue to expand the current user-friendly website to create a features information section about the trail's charming history and include photographs, videos and text detailing the many activities available, for young and old, athletic, or non-athletic, biker, walker, or horseback rider. Ultimately the website should offer a bi-lingual option, initially in Spanish given the large percentage of Windham's Hispanic/Latino populations and trail users near Willimantic center.

In addition, the website should include detailed, but easy-to-read and accessible maps as well as information about nearby available amenities. As noted above, the website would also offer an event calendar, be optimized for search engines and be mobile responsive.

Social media sites could be leveraged to showcase all that this greenspace gem has to offer. Striking photos and videos, content generated by users of the trail, as well as trail information could be shared on popular social platforms, like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube. Targeted ads could be run to reach potential visitors and posts will be boosted if the budget allows. Events on the trail could be promoted using event websites such as MeetUp.com and Eventbrite.com.

CT DEEP sponsored a tourism video that provides an eighteen minute education of the trail experience. There are also numerous videos produced by YouTube Trail Visitors about the experience of the trail. As the attention span of cell and social media viewers contracts, it is worth exploring an edited version of the current CT DEEP video toward a three - five minute version that can be quickly and easily accessed for a consumable video view of the trail. The ALSPT Region could produce a video, collaborating with CT DEEP, CT VISIT, the East Coast Greenway and The Last Green Valley.

Finally, to expand website marketing of the trail, the towns and the ALSPT Region can refine the new ALSPT Region website to increase daily cross correlations with social media and monthly email marketing to share highlights from tourism based organizations and businesses near the trail, stories of trail users, samples trail journeys, activities, and special updates. The new ALSPT Region can also build an email list of enthusiasts and potential enthusiasts for notifications, newsletters and events. Content marketing could also be used through the creation of compelling blogs, articles and videos that feature the trail's unique features, history, and activities. Content can also be shared with local influencers and bloggers to promote the trail to their audiences.

# MAPPING AND CELLPHONE APPLICATIONS

Beyond coordination with CT DEEP's ALSPT website, CT Trail Finder, the East Coast Greenway, the Eastern CT Tourism District and CT VISIT, the ALSPT Region should advocate for and imprint mapping into the trail system marketing through QR code for cell phones and websites. Information about the trail could be shared with users and potential users through online mapping services like CT Trail Finder as well as the East Coast Greenway, TrailLink and Alltrails. Special attention to trail users can enhance physical and mental health privately and confidentially.

CT Trail Finder is a new system coordinated by the CT DEEP, the University of Connecticut Extension and other partners. This geospatial mapping system is designed to convey information to trail users for time on the trail planning. Once on the trail, the mapping system within CT Trail Finder is not cell phone friendly at the time of this printing. Additionally, cell service on the trail at the time of this printing is sporadic and unreliable.

This is where TrailLink, a free service based app web system produced by the Rails to Trails Conservancy can provide support with downloaded maps of the trail to a visitor's cellphone. The website and app provide a search-

able database of more than 40,000 miles of trail around the country, including the ALSPT. Registration on TrailLink.com and downloading the app is free and allows people to view interactive maps online, save favorite trails to an account, share trail photographs & reviews and submit new trails to the website or edit existing trail descriptions.

AllTrails is a fitness and travel mobile app used in outdoor recreational activities and the service allows users to access a database of trail maps, which includes crowdsourced reviews and images, and the app is based on satellite tracking, so a cellphone's GPS will work to follow a person on the trail once you've downloaded the map.

Hiking Project by REI is an app driven by the hiking community and the downloaded maps are free. There are many others, but the general recommendation is for the ALSPT to align its efforts with organizations who can also promote the region (see Figure 7C).

Other unique cellphone applications tied to the ALSPT can promote unique connections from the trail. For instance, on trail systems in Derbyshire U.K., a trail traveler will find a unique sign and instructions to connect to a website via a QR code (see Figure 7D).

FIGURE 7C

## Connecticut Trail Finder Website

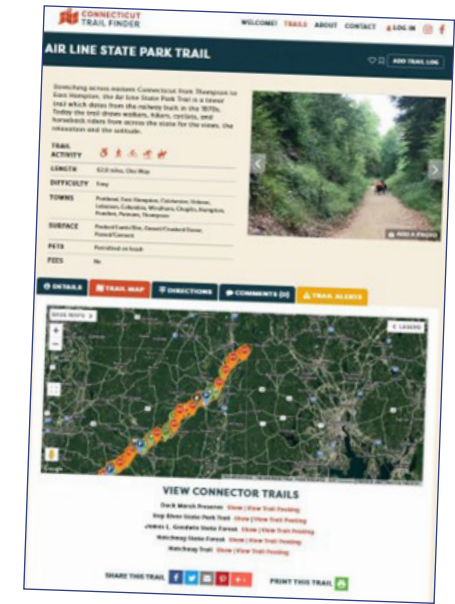
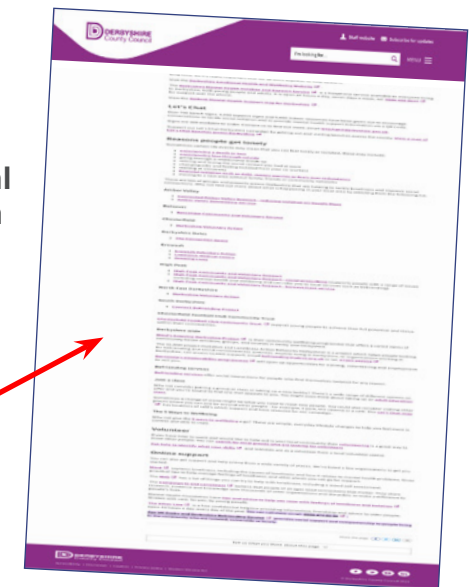


FIGURE 7D

## QR code on UK Trailside Bench Promotes Mental Health Outreach



# CT VISIT TOURISM COORDINATION

Tourism websites and new web based geography and regional tourism boundaries/communications defined by the State Office of Tourism are generally firmly established. CT VISIT managed by the State Office of Tourism is the managing entity for Connecticut tourism and promotion.

Funding is periodically available for tourism planning, brochures, events, and promotion through grant funding, most often through regional tourism districts. Marketing Challenge Grants, once offered by CT, were described as providing nonprofit tourism entities in their efforts to promote attractions and host events. The grant guidelines offer a blueprint for the ALSPT Region toward working with CT VISIT.

A key future action of the newly created ALSPT Region is to create a partnership between Connecticut Office of Tourism with ongoing coordination toward marketing the region. The ALSPT Region should work and advocate with CT VISIT and Eastern Regional Tourism District to clarify visitors' understanding of the geography and the places, journeys, and amenities available in the ALSPT Region.

There are several events and activities highlighted on the state tourism website within the towns of the ALSPT region. Ongoing coordination and advocacy on the part of the ALSPT Region to keep CT VISIT current of activities and events in the region is vital to the economic growth of the region's tourism industry.

## COLLABORATING WITH CONNECTICUT STATE OFFICE OF TOURISM

The ALTSP marketing efforts will work in synergy with the State's Strategic Marketing Plan for Tourism toward the following

- Media Advertising
- Direct Marketing
- Promotional Pieces
- Production Projects
- Direct Sales
- Public Relations
- Social Media
- Strategic Marketing Planning
- Web Design



↑ [Click to view the plan.](#)



## Website Coordination to Promote the ALSPT Region

Another important step is to coordinate website flow from CT VISIT to Eastern Regional Tourism District (ERTD) to the ALSPT Region. Currently, the site for Eastern Regional Tourism District “Visit Our Website” takes the viewer to Mystic Country attractions. The ALSPT Region and its towns transect both the “Scenic Northeast Region” and the “River Valley Region”. Future conversations with CT VISIT and ERTD would work to describe the ALSPT Region on the CT VISIT website and improve routing to the ALSPT Region’s website through inserted hyperlinks. CT VISIT website highlights and connects the bigger geographic view of Connecticut.

Ideally, the CT VISIT website, similar to “The Last Green Valley” will describe and link to the ALSPT Region by January 2025. There are clear economic advantages for all tourism leaders, state, regional, the ALSPT Region and their towns to build Eastern Connecticut’s tourism experience through coordination and partnerships.

**A:** Scenic Northeast Banner found via regions (see D)

**B:** Eastern Regional Tourism District website banner

**C:** River Valley website banner

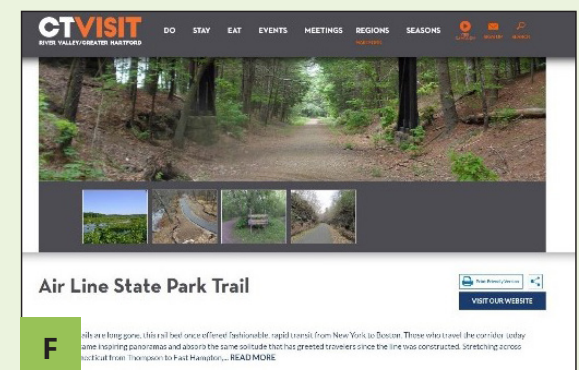
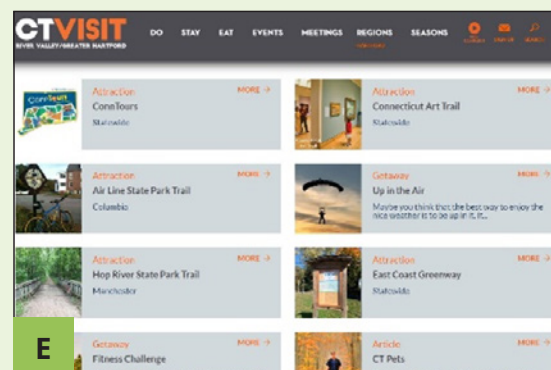
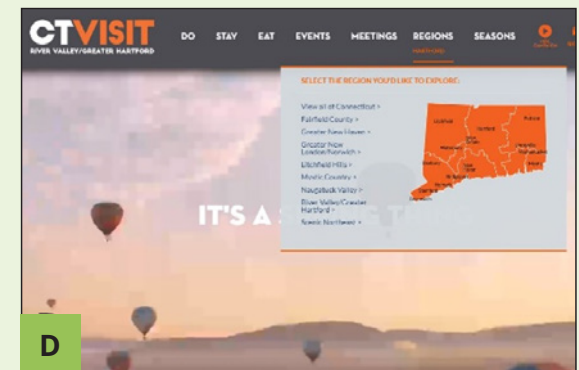
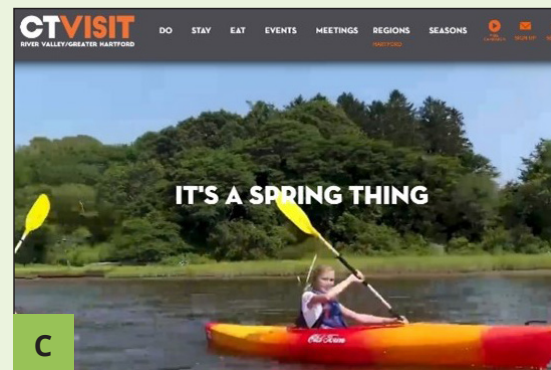
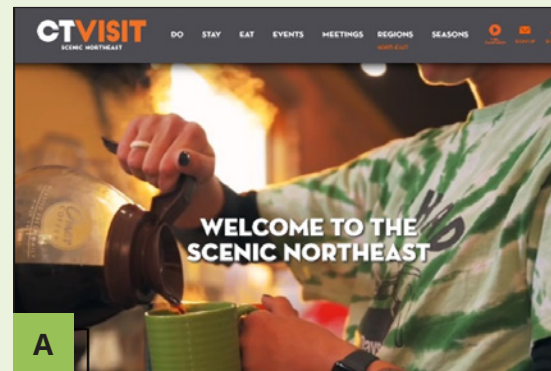
**D:** CT VISIT Region search map for AB&C

**E:** Required search for ALSPT

**F:** ALSPT Overview based in Columbia, CT with link to website

FIGURE 7E

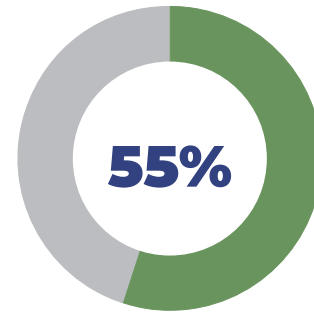
Connecting Tourism Website Flow to ALSPT Region



# COGNITIVE GEOGRAPHY



**More mapping connections in branding, websites and signage will help build trust in the trail system and new trail visitors.**



In interviews with ALSPT trail users, **55% of the respondents didn't know where they were** on the trail, town, or region.

There is also a necessary action going forward in partnership with CT DEEP, UConn and the CT Office of Tourism to mapping and geo-locating while branding and marketing. Interviews with trail users found that 80% of the respondents didn't know where they were on the trail, town, or region. This can be both a safety concern and impact the experience for current and future trail visitors.

The geographic focus of the ALSPT Region website through CT TrailFinder and the EZ Pocket Maps are the first steps to bring cognitive awareness of where a visitor is on the trail. More mapping connections in branding, websites and signage will help build

trust in the trail system and new trail visitors.

As noted above, mapping through cell phone apps can also promote the ALSPT towns and the partner influencing regions near the trail in conjunction with a detailed ongoing calendar, trail conditions, event information updates for planning and informing people of their relative location once they're on the trail. Where are the places to visit, where can they find overnight accommodations, campsites, campgrounds, types of restaurants and locations, bathroom breaks, drinking water sources, and more.



# EVENTS

Whether events are coordinated and hosted by other organizations, towns or the new ALSPT Region, the goal is to unite calendar events together with the Air Line State Park Trail as the centerpiece attraction. Tackle the Trail, Willimantic Street Fest, Thread City Brew Fest, the Chatham Historical District's Ghost Run, Air Line Cycles Thursday Evening Group Rides, the Willimantic Whitewater Partnership Riverfest, The Last Green Valley's

Walktober and more, the ALSPT Region can advocate and promote the region to residents and visitors to the region by cross-marketing. Beyond cross-marketing, the ALSPT Region and member towns can begin to promote the trail and even fundraise through events of their own showcasing the region's character. For those trail visitors who don't participate in marathons or races, event examples might include the examples shown below.



## MARKET-TO-MARKET RIDE

Celebrate the Agriculture Heritage of the region with a day of trail side farmers markets collaborating with local agriculture producers and existing farm market organizers on the trail at major parking areas or publicly owned land or lots near the trail.



## VIEWS FROM THE TRAIL

Coordinate with local galleries, art schools and artists to hold day long painting public workshops or demonstrations on sections of the trail. Coordinate with ALSPT Region galleries to host gallery exhibition of trail art for one month each year. This would be particularly beneficial to village or town centers where the ALSPT travels through the center business district.



## TRUCKING THE TRAIL

Celebrate the culinary diversity of the region with a food truck day on the trail in partnership with CLICK in Windham and merchant groups to help local food businesses grow within the region.



## RECOMMENDATIONS: Marketing and Branding Strategy

- 01** Hire an experienced outdoor/trail oriented consultant to create a marketing plan to implement a multi-year staged approach to attract new trail users balanced with continuing improvements on the ALSPT.
- 02** Continue to conduct surveys to gather information about the people traveling the trail, trail use and amenities that trail users seek.
- 03** Initiate a meeting with staff at the State Office of Tourism to connect as a future partner for advancing marketing of the ALSPT Region.
- 04** Share data and information about ALSPT amongst all twelve towns in the ALSPT Region, the Eastern Regional Tourism District, The Last Green Valley, and the State Office of Tourism.
- 05** Coordinate funding between the twelve towns and possibly a neighboring influence region such as the Hop River Trail Alliance towns to hire a either a part-time or full-time regional marketing/economics coordinator to staff the ALSPT Region and possibly the Hop River Trail Alliance. The specific job duties would include generating website and social media stories and managing updates to the ALSPT Region website with website host. This person would coordinate the calendar of events with ongoing and daily outreach to ALSPT Region organizations and would feed information to CT VISIT.
- 06** Plan for organizing special events, workshops, and volunteer activities along the trail.
- 07** Continue to expand the website promoting the ALSPT Region as a day or short-long stay visit and what to expect on the trail.
- 08** Advertise ALSPT activities online on websites, social media, and apps, via email marketing and offline by posting flyers at trailheads or at public locations in towns.
- 09** Develop relationships with media outlets, bloggers, and influencers to generate positive coverage and reviews of the Air Line State Park Trail.
- 10** Participate in events, fairs, or trade shows to showcase the trail, distribute trail maps, and network with potential visitors.
- 11** Ask local businesses, tourism organizations and relevant stakeholders to sponsor activities along the trail.
- 12** Re-evaluate the marketing campaign yearly.