

ALBERTA'S IRON HORSE TRAIL:

A MASTER PLAN TO UNLOCK OUR POTENTIAL

Executive Summary

July 2021

Acknowledgements

Our successes over the past 20 years have been built on collaboration and partnerships. And so too was this plan. We wish to extend our greatest appreciation and thanks to the Trans Canada Trail and Alberta Snowmobile Association for the gracious funding and support to develop this plan. We would also like to thank everyone who took part in the planning process and shared their ideas and opinions including:

Trail visitors,
Residents of the region,
North East Muni-Corr Ltd.,
Alberta TrailNet,
Government of Alberta,
Travel Alberta,
Travel Lakeland,
Conseil de développement économique de l'Alberta, and of course our
Board members from the Riverland Recreational Trail Society.

Sincerely,

Riverland Recreational Trail Society

Riverland Recreational Trail Society

The Riverland Recreational Trail Society (RRTS) is a not-for-profit organization that champions the development, maintenance, management, and operation of Alberta's Iron Horse Trail through a long-term lease with Northeast Muni-Corr. The society represents the diversity of trail users, recreation groups and community organizations who are dedicated to ensuring the recreation and tourism potential of the trail is realized. For over 20 years, the dedicated volunteers of the society have been the stewards of the trail and, through the development of this plan, will continue to steward the trail for decades to come.

Northeast Muni-Corr Ltd.

Established in 1999, Northeast Muni-Corr Ltd. is a Part 9 registered not-for-profit company that was created to negotiate with, take ownership of, and govern the management of the 99-foot-wide right of way and associated lands from Canadian National (CN) Rail. The organization's board of directors, whose members are appointed from each of the 10 municipalities along the Iron Horse Trail corridor, provide governance and decision making about land use, approvals and development within the trail corridor.

The Riverland Recreational Trail Society has undertaken a 12-month collaborative strategic planning process. Emerging from that planning process is a clear vision and an ambitious framework of priorities and actions that will be taken to unlock the full potential of Alberta's Iron Horse Trail



Executive Summary

Introduction

At 278 km in length, Alberta's Iron Horse Trail (IHT) is the longest developed rail-to-trail conversion, and the province's longest contiguous segment of Canada's The Great Trail (TGT) and the Great Canadian Snowmobile Trail (GCST). Opened to the public in 2003, the IHT has become one of the most well-known trail experiences in Northeastern Alberta and a national illustration of exemplary inter-municipal and stakeholder collaboration for the development and operation of long distance trails. The trail supports the quality of life and recreational opportunities for residents in the region and delivers year-round tourism experiences for motorized and non-motorized visitors alike.

Since opening, we have been focused on the fundamentals - developing essential visitor infrastructure, trail operations, marketing and managing the corridor and land uses within it. These efforts have yielded considerable success at growing visitation on the trail.

However, 20 years has passed and much of our original infrastructure investments have aged. Trail tread conditions have degraded, do not always meet the needs of our target visitors, and require increased investments and maintenance attention from the municipalities along the trail. Visitor expectations and patterns have shifted, new demands on the corridor have emerged, key champions of the trail have aged and volunteerism has declined. The economic situation in the region and the province has also changed, resulting in even greater expectations and need for the trail to play a more significant role in economic development and diversification.

The COVID-19 global pandemic, has created unprecedented challenges for Albertans generally and the tourism industry specifically. Never have the local businesses in our visitor economy been more reliant on domestic travel than they are now. And, similarly, never have local outdoor recreation demands been higher than they are now.

Purpose

Though our efforts over the past 20 years have established an excellent foundation for our future, we recognize that there is much work to do to ensure the trail remains a desirable recreation asset for regional residents and becomes even more relevant and inviting to our target markets. Through the development of this plan, we are signalling where we, and our partner municipalities, will focus our attention and resourcing over the coming decade. Through this plan, we are outlining the priorities and actions that will be taken to:

- Grow visitation to the trail and the economic benefits the trail brings to host communities,
- Enhance and diversify the visitor experiences offered on and along the trail,
- Improve the trail tread in keeping with the needs of residents and target markets,
- Enhance existing and develop new visitor amenities, accommodations, attractions, and access,
- Manage the trail effectively, and
- Entice residents and out of town visitors to choose the Iron Horse Trail for their next outing.



ENGAGEMENT BY THE NUMBERS

336 Public surveys

20 Special interest surveys

26 Ideas expressed on Vertisee

21 Stakeholder group interviews

Engagement

Our roots are steeped in, and the trail was born from, a process of extensive stakeholder and public engagement. As we knew when we created the trail, achieving the true potential of the trail and addressing the priorities we have set in this plan will be a team effort. As such, we implemented a robust engagement process that was designed to allow anyone with an interest in the trail the opportunity to help shape its future.

Hundreds of residents, trail visitors, elected officials, tourism industry operators, directors from the RRTS and many other stakeholders shared their vision, ideas and concerns through interviews, surveys, workshops, and our online interactive crowdsourcing tool. All of these ideas helped to shape the priorities and actions that will become our focus into the future.

Please see the What We Heard Report compendium for details on the input received through the engagement process.

Reigniting Municipal Support & Cooperation

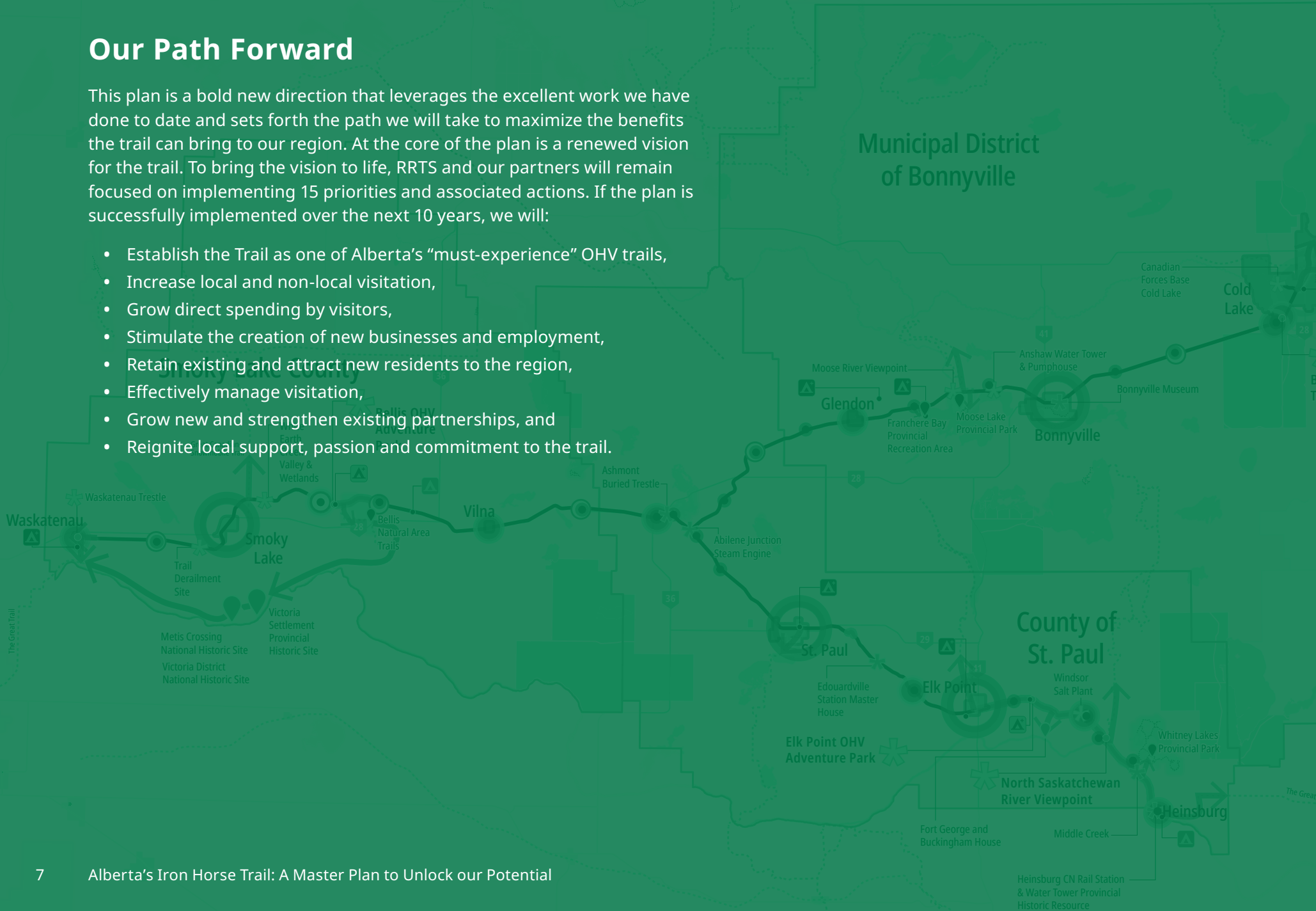
Exceptional local and political support was fundamental to the acquisition and designation of the trail. Since that time, many of the elected officials who were once the visionary champions of the Iron Horse Trail have moved on. The political interest in, understanding of the value of the trail and the commitment to realizing its economic and social potential is not as prominent or strong as it once was. Rebuilding this local understanding of the value, importance and potential of trail and reigniting political support, cooperation and funding from the 10 municipalities along the trail is critical to the trail's future and will be fundamental focus during the implementation of this plan. Through regular reporting on the benefits and positive impacts the trail makes to the region and communities along the trail, we will ensure that the Iron Horse Trail becomes front and centre and regains the focus and prominence it deserves.



Our Path Forward

This plan is a bold new direction that leverages the excellent work we have done to date and sets forth the path we will take to maximize the benefits the trail can bring to our region. At the core of the plan is a renewed vision for the trail. To bring the vision to life, RRTS and our partners will remain focused on implementing 15 priorities and associated actions. If the plan is successfully implemented over the next 10 years, we will:

- Establish the Trail as one of Alberta’s “must-experience” OHV trails,
- Increase local and non-local visitation,
- Grow direct spending by visitors,
- Stimulate the creation of new businesses and employment,
- Retain existing and attract new residents to the region,
- Effectively manage visitation,
- Grow new and strengthen existing partnerships, and
- Reignite local support, passion and commitment to the trail.



Plan at a Glance

DESIRED OUTCOMES

- ▶ Establish the Trail as one of Alberta's "must-experience" OHV trails
- ▶ Increase local and non-local visitation
- ▶ Grow direct spending by visitors
- ▶ Stimulate the creation of new businesses and employment
- ▶ Retain existing and attract new residents
- ▶ Effectively manage visitation
- ▶ Grow new and strengthen existing partnerships
- ▶ Reignite local support, passion and commitment to the trail

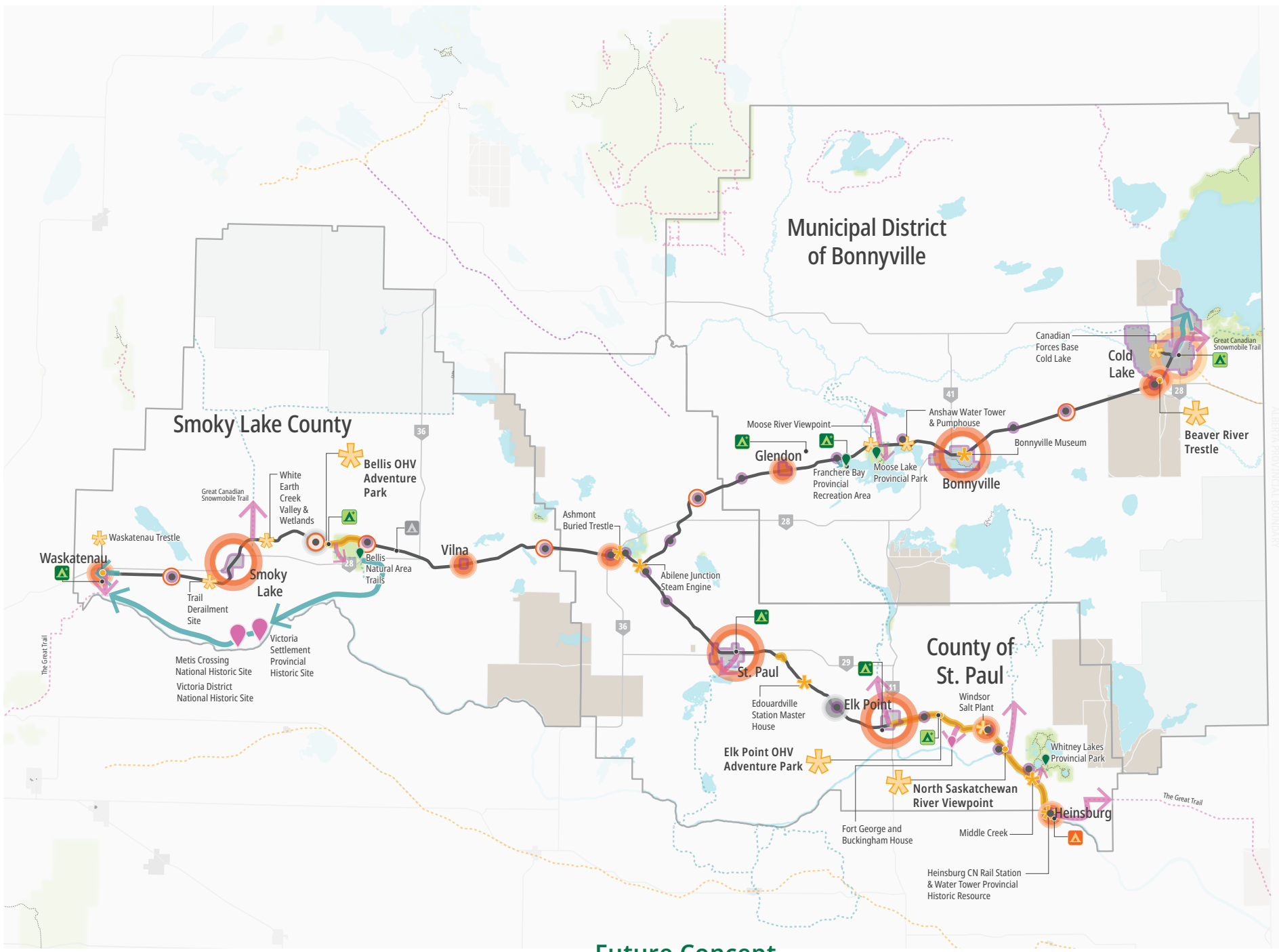
VISION

The Iron Horse Trail has become Alberta's, and one of western Canada's, signature all season long-distance motorized recreation destinations and a regional corridor that provides connectivity for local recreational trail systems in ways that maintain the integrity and quality of our long-distance signature trail experience. Whether in the peak season or shoulder season, the trail delivers an outstanding experience to every resident and visitor from near and far who travels it. Our residents and visitors are seamlessly connected to our unique communities and enjoy engaging and authentic opportunities to experience, learn about and celebrate our modern way of life, our history, Indigenous peoples and our environment. With strong community support, host communities are active champions for the trail, support and celebrate the trail and create a welcoming and inviting atmosphere for all trail visitors. With significantly increased visitation, the trail is a catalyst on which new businesses are being created and existing businesses are being strengthened. And the Trail has become a model of cooperation and sustainable trail management in Canada, is well resourced and municipalities and landowners along the trail continue to coordinate and collaborate to bring our vision for the trail to life.

PRIORITIES

- Improve the Trail Tread & Maintenance
- Optimize & Enhance Trail Access Points
- Improve Signage & Wayfinding
- Optimize & Enhance Comfort & Convenience Amenities
- Animate the Trail
- Develop New & Enhance Existing Visitor Attractions
- Enhance & Diversify the Supply of Accommodations
- Connect the Trail
- Create Trail Friendly Communities
- Motivate Visitors to Choose the IHT & the Region to Support It
- Manage Non-Recreation Use of the Trail & Minimize Impact on Adjacent Landowners
- Understand our Visitors & Visitation
- Actively Manage Visitation & Visitor Impacts
- Understand & Celebrate Our Success
- Ensure Long-Term Sustainable Resourcing & Capacity

See section 8.0 for further detail on each of the priorities and associated actions.



Future Concept

LEGEND



Gateway – Enhance



Gateway – New



Staging Area – Enhance



Staging Area – Decommission



Trailhead



Major Attraction – New



Minor Attraction – New



Minor Attraction – Enhance



Trail Friendly Community



Trail Tread Upgrade



Trail Connection – Existing



Trail Connection – Future



Campground – Serviced Enhance



Campground – Serviced New



Campground – Unserviced Enhance



Campground – Unserviced Decommission



National & Provincial Historic Site



Natural Attraction

Non-motorized Snow Trail

Mixed-use Snowmobile Trail

Non-motorized Trail

Mixed-use Trail

Non-motorized Abandoned Rail Line

Mixed-use Abandoned Rail Line



Hamlet

Implementation Plan

The actions outlined in this implementation plan have been abbreviated. Please review the plan for full descriptions of each priority and action.

Action	Timeline
IMPROVE TRAIL TREAD & CORRIDOR MAINTENANCE	
Trail Tread & Corridor Maintenance	
1. Work with municipalities to develop and apply a common maintenance standard.	Catalyst
2. Enter into a council approved maintenance agreement with each municipality along the trail to ensure the annual maintenance standard is incorporating into municipal staff work plans and municipal budgeting.	Catalyst
3. Work with municipalities to narrow the summer trail tread width to approximately 3m.	Short-term
4. Work with municipalities to actively restore the trail prism and remove tread cupping.	Short-term
5. Review the grading equipment being used for maintenance with the respective municipalities and ensure the equipment is appropriate to maintaining a 3m tread width and to enabling the restoration of the trail prism.	Catalyst
6. Work with Municipalities to ensure trail maintenance crews and equipment operators are actively trained.	Catalyst
7. Work with municipalities along the trail to prepare a trail-side vegetation management plan	Short-term
Trail Tread & Corridor Improvements	
1. Implement trail tread upgrades in priority areas (e.g. deep sand, wet clay) to improve the experience for visitors and to reduce maintenance.	Short-term
2. Carefully review and assess proposed changes to the trail tread surfacing within communities to ensure the integrity and appeal of the IHT as a long-distance OHV trail is not compromised.	Ongoing
3. Engage a Civil Engineer to undertake a detailed drainage review to assess grades and determine the most cost-effective method to prevent trail flooding near St. Paul.	Catalyst
4. Engage a Qualified Professional (e.g., Structural Engineer) to undertake a safety and conditions review of all trestles on the trail to confirm their ability to support the TMO, determine any required structural repairs and maintenance, their remaining useful life, and capital replacement timing.	Short-term
5. Over time, remove the soils / aggregates from surfaces of the wood-decked trestles.	Short-term

Action	Timeline
6. Undertake a review of alternate fencing / barrier materials that are capable of meeting safety requirements while improving the visitor experience and visual character.	Mid-term
7. Create curved turns around Abilene junction to improve traffic flow and safety.	Long-term
OPTIMIZE & ENHANCE TRAIL ACCESS POINTS	
1. Work with respective municipalities to establish, or enhance, gateways, staging areas and trailheads in accordance with the future typology designations. Existing sites will be reviewed, and where necessary, redeveloped to ensure that sites provide a quality visitor experience, a logical site organization and circulation, and adhere to the design direction in the plan.	Short-term
IMPROVE SIGNAGE & WAYFINDING	
1. Work with municipalities to develop a signage manual and sign plan with clear sign typology, design, installation and location standards, style, and visual identity built on the revised IHT brand.	Catalyst
2. Develop and implement a sign approval process.	Short-term
3. Work with AB Transportation and local road authorities to install highway signage.	Mid-term
4. Clearly identify and communicate to cyclists which segments of the trail are unsuitable for cycling at all times of the year and those that are unsuitable during inclement weather. Proactively identify, sign, and communicate alternative routes to bypass unsuitable segments of the IHT.	Catalyst
OPTIMIZE AND ENHANCE COMFORT AND CONVENIENCE AMENITIES	
1. Develop a comfort and convenience amenities standard.	Catalyst
2. Work with municipalities to upgrade or replace amenities along the trail to the new standard as existing amenities reach the end of their lifecycle.	Ongoing
3. Provide, or support the provision, of a network of appropriately spaced, quality warming huts to support snowmobile usership of the trail.	Mid-term
4. Actively work to attract, encourage, and support local food trucks/vendors and other temporary pop-up service enterprises (e.g., rentals) to attend gateways, attractions etc. during peak periods, seasons and during events on the trail.	Ongoing

Action	Timeline
ANIMATE THE TRAIL	
1. Develop and promote multiple fully independent single and multi-day themed visitor experience itineraries and packages for both summer and winter seasons.	Short-term
2. Develop and promote self-guided and themed itineraries in each community to encourage visitors to “stay longer, play longer and spend more” in the communities along the trail.	Short-term
3. Engage biologists, historians, and indigenous communities to identify sites and help develop self-guided and themed digital interpretive “tours” of the trail.	Short-term
4. Work with partners to stimulate the development of and/or attract and promote a coordinated calendar of diverse events, competitions, and celebrations on, or featuring, the trail.	Ongoing
5. Implement an Iron Horse Trail Public Art competition to stimulate the creation of unique public art installations at gateways, staging areas and destinations along the trail.	Long-term
DEVELOP NEW AND ENHANCE EXISTING VISITOR ATTRACTIONS	
1. Engage professional recreation and tourism planners, designers and qualified professionals (e.g., biologists, archaeologists, engineers) to undertake feasibility studies and master plans for the development of the following three major attraction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Beaver River Trestle » Bellis & County of St. Paul OHV & Snowmobile Adventure Play Parks » North Saskatchewan River Viewpoint & Rest Area 	Short-term
2. Engage professional recreation and tourism planners, designers, and qualified professionals (e.g., biologists, archaeologists, engineers) to develop or enhance the following minor attractions.	Short-term – Mid-term

Action	Timeline
ENHANCE AND DIVERSIFY THE SUPPLY OF ACCOMMODATIONS	
1. Evaluate the feasibility and prepare master plans for the development of new serviced campgrounds at both proposed OHV Adventure Play Parks.	Short-term
2. Evaluate the feasibility of providing rental-based comfort camping units at either or both the OHV Adventure Parks and the St. Paul campground.	Short-term
3. Develop a serviced campground at the Cold Lake Gateway.	Mid-term
4. Undertake a master planning process to update the design of the Heinsburg campground.	Long-term
5. Work with Alberta Parks to explore potential solutions to accommodate OHV overnight visitors at the Franchere Bay Provincial Recreation Area.	Ongoing
6. Work with the M.D. of Bonnyville to explore potential solutions to accommodate OHV overnight visitors at Minnie Lake Campground.	Ongoing
7. Recognizing the sustainability challenges, explore options to re-purpose or reclaim the Belvil unserviced campground.	Mid-term
8. Given the limited distribution of accommodations, permit non-motorized trail users to temporarily camp within specific designated areas at staging areas located between established campgrounds or communities with fixed roof accommodations.	Catalyst

Action	Timeline
CONNECT THE TRAIL	
1. Work with the City of Cold Lake to establish a formalized mixed-use trail connection between the Cold Lake Gateway and the Cold Lake waterfront and downtown.	Mid-term
2. In keeping with the Victoria District Economic Development Strategy, work with Smoky Lake County, Victoria Settlement and Metis Crossing to establish both an eastern and western mixed use (OHV and non-motorized) trail loop connection to the IHT.	Long-term
3. Continue working with the Village of Waskatenau to extend the trail from its current terminus at Range Road 193 into the Village and current staging area.	Mid-term
4. Develop formalized and signed mixed-use trails and on-road routes to connect trail visitors to Whitney Lakes Provincial Park and Franchere Bay Provincial Recreation Area. Work with Alberta Parks to provide legal parking areas and access points for OHV and snowmobile visitors at these sites.	Mid-term
5. Building on existing snowmobile trails, work with partners to plan a snowmobile route between Heinsburg and Cold Lake to provide a large circle route for snowmobiling.	Mid-term
6. Create or improve formal trailheads and trail connections to ensure all rural neighbourhoods adjacent to the trail can access the trail through formalized and intentional routes.	Short-term
7. Continue to build relationships with 4 Wing Cold Lake to explore the potential for trail connections through the base.	Long-term

Action	Timeline
CREATE TRAIL FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES	
1. Develop a “Trail Friendly Community” program and work to confirm which communities along the trail wish to be identified as and promoted as such. Prepare guidelines for being a welcoming trail friendly community, which addresses topics such as how to provide a welcoming atmosphere, beautification, theming / banners / signage, welcoming storefronts program, business hours. Apply jointly for grants to help offset costs for the trail friendly community initiatives.	Catalyst
2. Work with municipalities to ensure convenient access routes are maintained within each trail friendly community, and incorporated into local trail master plans and MDP’s, to enable visitors to travel from the trail legally and conveniently to access accommodations, attractions and visitor amenities and services such as fuel, restaurants, supplies and repair businesses.	Catalyst
3. Support and actively encourage municipalities to create a welcoming trail-friendly atmosphere where the trail travels through the community by using on-trail welcome signage, trail themed banners, beautification and plants, and trail-based branding along storefronts and services near the trail etc.	Short-term
4. Work with local businesses to develop and market sales and promotions to entice trail visitors to leave the trail and get into the trail-friendly communities.	Ongoing
5. Work with accommodation providers to develop secure overnight lockups / storage for OHVs and snowmobiles.	Short-term
MOTIVATE VISITORS TO CHOOSE THE IHT & REGION TO SUPPORT IT	
1. Develop a new, modern, and refreshed brand and identifiers for the Iron Horse Trail that moves beyond the trail’s railway history and features what truly makes the trail unique.	Short-term
2. Develop and implement an internal marketing plan to educate elected officials and residents about the trail, the value it brings to the region, the previous successes the trail has experienced and what is needed to optimize the potential of the trail. Integrate the key messages into the NE Muni-Corr Ltd. Directors Handbook.	Catalyst
3. Using leading marketing approaches, develop a comprehensive external marketing plan to entice target markets to choose the Iron Horse Trail.	Short-term
4. Upgrade the website to match the revised branding, share visitor testimonials, feature videos, entice visitors to choose the IHT, provide a blog, provide a comprehensive user-friendly trip planning tool, provides packages and itineraries, sell merchandise and advertisement, and connect visitors with local guides, service providers, accommodations, and businesses.	Short-term

Action	Timeline
5. Develop, or acquire a commercial mobile device app (e.g., Outerspatial), for the IHT that will improve trip planning, enhance the visitor experience and visitor communications, and provide for revenue generation.	Catalyst
6. Develop and implement an “Iron Horse Trail Host” training program and promotional materials to deliver / distribute to educate all visitor information centers, accommodations, businesses, and services near the trail about the IHT.	Short-term
7. Acquire and maintain a library of high impact, lawful, and eye-catching professional photography and videography to support marketing.	Short-term
MANAGE NON-RECREATION USE OF THE TRAIL & MINIMIZE IMPACT ON ADJACENT LANDOWNERS	
1. Develop, approve, and apply a clear policy and set of conditions for the non-recreational use of the trail corridor and staging areas.	Short-term
2. Develop a “Good Neighbour” education program.	Short-term
3. Improve education of visitors, through trip planning and on-trail information, about staying off private land, respecting gates and cattle and adjacent property owners.	Short-term
4. Develop an official Iron Horse Trail branded private property sign and install where necessary along the trail to indicate that public should not access the properties.	Short-term
5. In areas where trespassing, theft and / or vandalism from trail users is a regular concern, we will work with adjacent landowners to develop and install effective access controls.	Ongoing
UNDERSTAND OUR VISITORS & VISITATION	
1. Design and implement a visitor counting program to understand total visitation and visitation patterns to the trail.	Short-term
2. Design and regularly implement a visitor study.	Short-term
3. Monitor and analyse online visitor feedback (e.g., Trip Advisor, Social Media) to understand visitor sentiments and manage the brand. Actively respond to online visitor feedback.	Ongoing

Action	Timeline
ACTIVELY MANAGE VISITATION & VISITOR IMPACTS	
1. Modernize and update the trail bylaws to provide the regulatory tools needed to enable sound management.	Catalyst
2. Prepare a visitor use management framework for the trail.	Short-term
3. Adopt and promote the Leave No Trace skills and ethics program to all visitors. Leave	Short-term
4. Actively coordinate with municipal bylaw officers and the RCMP to undertake coordinated and targeted compliance assurance campaigns to promote the safe and respectful recreational use of the trail and to respond to recurring non-compliance issues.	Ongoing
Visitor Safety & Risk Management	
1. To ensure ongoing maintenance and good risk management, develop and apply a trail inspection, maintenance, and documentation procedure.	Catalyst
2. Provide and promote a means for visitors to report trail conditions, maintenance problems and accidents or injuries sustained on the trail.	Mid-term
3. Provide adequate trip planning information as well as on-trail signage, warnings, and notices to make visitors aware of the information, equipment and skills required to travel the trail safely, risks and potential for injuries, and the trail conditions.	Short-term
4. Prepare and maintain an up-to-date emergency response plan especially for isolated and remote areas on the trail where emergency services access may be challenging.	Mid-term

Action	Timeline
UNDERSTAND & CELEBRATE OUR SUCCESS	
1. Regularly commission an economic impact study of the trail and monitor changes.	Short-term
2. Prepare and distribute a “State of the Iron Horse Trail Report” annually.	Short-term
ENSURE LONG-TERM SUSTAINABLE RESOURCING & CAPACITY	
1. Work with member municipalities to develop and contribute annually to a capital asset replacement fund to ensure funds are available to enable timely response to both emergent repairs and regular infrastructure life cycle replacements.	Short-term
2. Establish new revenue streams to support the development, maintenance, and management of the trail.	Mid-term
3. Develop a Corporate Trail Partner Program to enable and increase corporate in-kind and volunteer contributions to the development, maintenance, and management of the trail.	Mid-term
4. Undertake a board succession planning to ensure depth in organizational knowledge and capacity to continue to support the operations of the trail.	Catalyst
5. Develop and implement a comprehensive and modern volunteer steward program to attract, excite and motivate a new generation of volunteers and volunteering on the trail.	Short-term



