

For Immediate Release

Patrick County group Celebrates Completion of Phase 1 Enhancements to the Mayo River Rail Trail

Stuart, VA — Patrick County and community partners are celebrating the successful completion of Phase 1 improvements to the Mayo River Rail Trail, made possible through a Seed Grant from the Appalachian Gateway Communities Initiative (AGCI). The Appalachian Gateway Communities Initiative (AGCI) is a program launched in 2007 by The Conservation Fund to help towns bordering public lands develop their economic potential while preserving their natural and cultural assets. It provides communities with technical assistance, workshops, and seed grants to create tourism and other economic strategies. In Spring 2024 a group of local public officials and community leaders attended a multi-day technical assistance workshop to help devise their project plan, soon after the team successfully secured a \$5,000 Seed grant.

Over the past year, a cross-sector group of county leaders, artists, naturalists, nonprofit partners, and volunteers collaborated to bring new recreational, cultural, and educational amenities to one of Stuart's most cherished outdoor assets. These enhancements strengthen the trail as both a community gathering place and a catalyst for economic development, supporting local goals around heritage tourism, recreation, and downtown revitalization.

"Reynolds Homestead was honored to help coordinate the group's work and support progress throughout the year," said Sarah Wray, Reynolds Homestead. "Our team brought together local talent, creativity, and commitment to make these improvements possible, and it's exciting to see how each new feature strengthens pride of place and enhances the trail experience for residents and visitors."

Ribbon Cutting Held During Apple Dumpling Festival

On October 18, 2025, the community gathered during the annual Apple Dumpling Festival to celebrate a ribbon cutting marking several key Phase 1 improvements along the trail. The event showcased the new pollinator garden and certified Monarch Waystation, as well as a vibrant trail mural created by artist and Bull Mountain Arts member Lisa Garrett. Attendees also celebrated the launch of the River Rangers youth science program at the trailhead kiosk and the installation of a Little Free Library along the trail. The ribbon cutting highlighted the volunteer energy, artistic talent, and cross-sector partnerships that made these enhancements possible, and since then, new solar lights have been installed to further brighten and improve the trail experience.

Pollinator Garden and Monarch Waystation Thriving

In partnership with the Virginia Master Naturalists, Patrick County established a native pollinator garden and Monarch Waystation earlier this year. The garden was prepared with mulch donated by the Town of Stuart and planted in spring 2025 with native species sourced locally and through a DRBA grant. A hand-painted bluebird house created by a local artist adds a creative, place-based touch. The thriving garden now attracts butterflies, birds, and beneficial insects, supporting both habitat creation and environmental education.

River Rangers Youth Science Program Expands

The Patrick County Chamber of Commerce launched the River Rangers program in April 2025, equipping young explorers with lending “ecology buckets” filled with tools for studying stream health.

Three buckets were installed at the Mayo River Rail Trail kiosk and have been used throughout the year by local families. Additional buckets are now available at the Patrick County Public Library and Fairy Stone State Park, with continued expansion planned. The program also received national recognition from the Stroud Water Research Center. “This program empowers kids to play in the river and learn about the aquatic macroinvertebrates that are indicators of water quality, thereby encouraging the next generation of citizen scientists and conservation advocates to work for better water quality for our communities.” says Rebecca Adock, director of Patrick County Chamber of Commerce. “Water quality is vital to a healthy community not only for our local residents but also as an economic driver through outdoor recreation and tourism.”

Public Art & Lighting Enhancements Completed

Two major artistic components of the Seed Grant project have now been completed:

Trail Mural:

Created through a Bull Mountain Arts facilitated call for proposals, the new trail mural invites viewers to reflect on the question, “What does being Appalachian or living in an Appalachian Gateway Community mean to you?” The selected design brings that theme to life with vivid imagery and local symbolism, offering a creative welcome to trail visitors. “Stop and smell the flowers” by Lisa Garrett, was installed on the rear side of the Bull Mountain Tower lookout kiosk. The mural was formally unveiled during the October ribbon cutting, adding a vibrant artistic landmark to the site and celebrating the region’s cultural identity.

Solar-Powered Lighting (Now Installed):

Upcycled propane tanks that have been plasma-cut with images of native flora and fauna have been transformed into sculptural solar-powered lamps and installed along the trail. These installations merge the site’s industrial rail history with contemporary public art, while improving visibility and safety during evening hours.

Momentum Toward Future Trail Expansion

With Phase 1 now complete, Patrick County is preparing for the next stage: exploring potential expansion of the Mayo River Rail Trail. A technical assistance grant from the Virginia Department of Forestry will support a partnership with Virginia Tech’s Community Design Assistance Center beginning in summer 2026. The planning process will feature extensive community engagement and consider connections to additional parks, neighborhoods, and regional trail systems.

Strength in Partnership

The AGCI enhancement team meets monthly and includes leaders from Dan River Basin Association, Patrick County Tourism, Patrick County Chamber of Commerce, Master Naturalists, Bull Mountain Arts, Reynolds Homestead, Town of Stuart, Patrick County Historical Society, Parks & Recreation, and dedicated community volunteers.

“The completion of these enhancements represents a true community effort,” said James Houchins, Director of Economic Development & Tourism for Patrick County. “Every new feature, from the gardens to the artwork to the lighting, strengthens the trail as a welcoming space that celebrates our local history, natural beauty, and community spirit.”

Bryce Simmons, Town Manager, stated, "The Town of Stuart is proud to stand alongside our community partners in celebrating these enhancements to the Mayo River Rail Trail. From donating mulch for the new pollinator garden to providing the labor needed to install the artistic solar lighting, it is inspiring to see how our collective efforts, supported by the AGCI Seed Grant, have transformed this trail into a safer, more vibrant, and educational asset for all our citizens to enjoy."

About the Appalachian Gateway Communities Initiative (AGCI)

Launched in 2007 by The Conservation Fund, the Appalachian Gateway Communities Initiative helps towns bordering public lands build local economies while preserving natural and cultural assets. The program provides technical assistance, workshops, and seed grants that help communities develop tourism and economic strategies. Patrick County received a \$5,000 Seed Grant from AGCI to support Phase 1 improvements to the Mayo River Rail Trail.

Solar Trail lights:



Mural installation on kiosk



River Rangers kits:



Pollinator Garden

