

Visioning and Public Process

A Vision for the 25-Year Action Plan

A critical part of any planning process is establishing a vision, one that clearly describes the desired destination in a manner that is easy to explain to others who might wish to contribute to the cause. Ideally, vision statements succinctly summarize this destination in a single sentence. According to *Making the Grassroots Grow*¹, good vision statements:

- “Are inspiring, compelling and bold, raising our expectations and our actions to a higher purpose;
- Embody our values and gives us courage to express those values to our communities, and;
- Conjure up a similar picture for all parties involved to help coordinate their efforts.”

The TAC reviewed the following “Greenway Vision” used by the Warren County Morris Canal Committee in its informational brochures for a number of years in light of this recommended approach:

“Warren County has become a leader in the protection of the remnants of the Morris Canal by promoting a greenway corridor and preserving the historic remains of the Canal as an important part of the County’s transportation history.

The vision is to have this greenway extend across Warren County with the canal as a link to recreational, cultural, and historic areas including state park trails and municipal and county public open space. This greenway will extend between



Looking down the tailrace at Plane 5W, also known as the Brickyard

¹Making the Grassroots Grow: Building and Maintaining Effective Byway Organizations by Anne Tellett, Kevin Skwira-Brown and Cheryl Newman. America’s Byway Resource Center. 2003

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the proposed New Jersey Transportation Heritage Museum in Phillipsburg and the historic Waterloo Village – a restored canal town.

In some places the towpath will become a recreational trail open to the public for non-motorized activities. In other places pocket parks will be established for the public's enjoyment. When completed, this greenway will be a living reminder of the County's transportation heritage while promoting the economic benefits of cultural and heritage tourism.

Warren County offers a wide range of recreational opportunities and its rural nature and scenic beauty are worthy of long-term preservation."

This "Greenway Vision" acknowledges the accomplishments of the County in preserving significant stretches of the canal and describes some components of the completed canal preservation project. However, this vision is insufficient in that it does not adequately explain how the "Greenway Vision" will be achieved and is missing the framework for action needed to encompass all desired outcomes, in addition to being lengthy. The TAC acknowledged the difficulty in simplifying the vision statement due to the size and complexity of the Morris Canal and recognized that aspects of the statement were outdated, such as the reference to the Transportation Heritage Museum in Phillipsburg that has not materialized. Over the course of two meetings, the TAC developed a vision specifically tailored to the 25-Year Action Plan as noted below:

To preserve and enhance the historic Morris Canal, a national engineering treasure, and the cultural landscape through which it passes in a manner that...

- Highlights its distinctive characteristics and the ingenuity used in its construction to distinguish it from other historic resources and canals;
- Tells the story of life along the canal, its influence on past events and its relevance to today's society to support public education and foster community pride.
- Interconnects communities and links points of interest by serving as a continuous greenway of open space across the county;
- Provides convenient access to a towpath trail for non-motorized passive recreational use as an integral part of a unique educational, travel and fitness experience;
- Stimulates the local economy through heritage tourism;
- Leverages the value of the canal to support sound land use planning decisions; and
- Increases public and private support for and involvement in canal preservation efforts.

In contrast, the new vision statement provides the necessary framework for the 25-Year Action Plan and outlines a number of important concepts. The opening section calls attention to the fact that the canal is valued for its unique engineering design and contribution to our national history. Equal emphasis is placed on preserving the canal and the surrounding landscape that provides context. The TAC firmly believes that preservation should be accompanied by interpretation and enjoyment of the canal resources as outlined in the central section of the vision, which explains how people and their communities will be able to interact with the canal. The final section of the vision expresses the TAC's desire for the 25-Year Action plan to engage new partners in future preservation activities.

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The vision's text is not organized according to importance, although preservation is obviously a pre-requisite for all of the other components of the statement. Instead, the vision allows the County to undertake various elements of the 25-Year Action Plan simultaneously with the understanding that these components are related in many ways and that advancing one component of the vision is likely to benefit other components as symbolized in Figure 4-1.

However, it is unlikely that every aspect of the vision statement will be realized along the entire length of the canal. Each segment of the canal will have different features that are better suited to supporting certain aspects of the vision statement over other components. The goal is to utilize the vision statement to focus efforts on maximizing the potential of the Morris Canal for the public good.

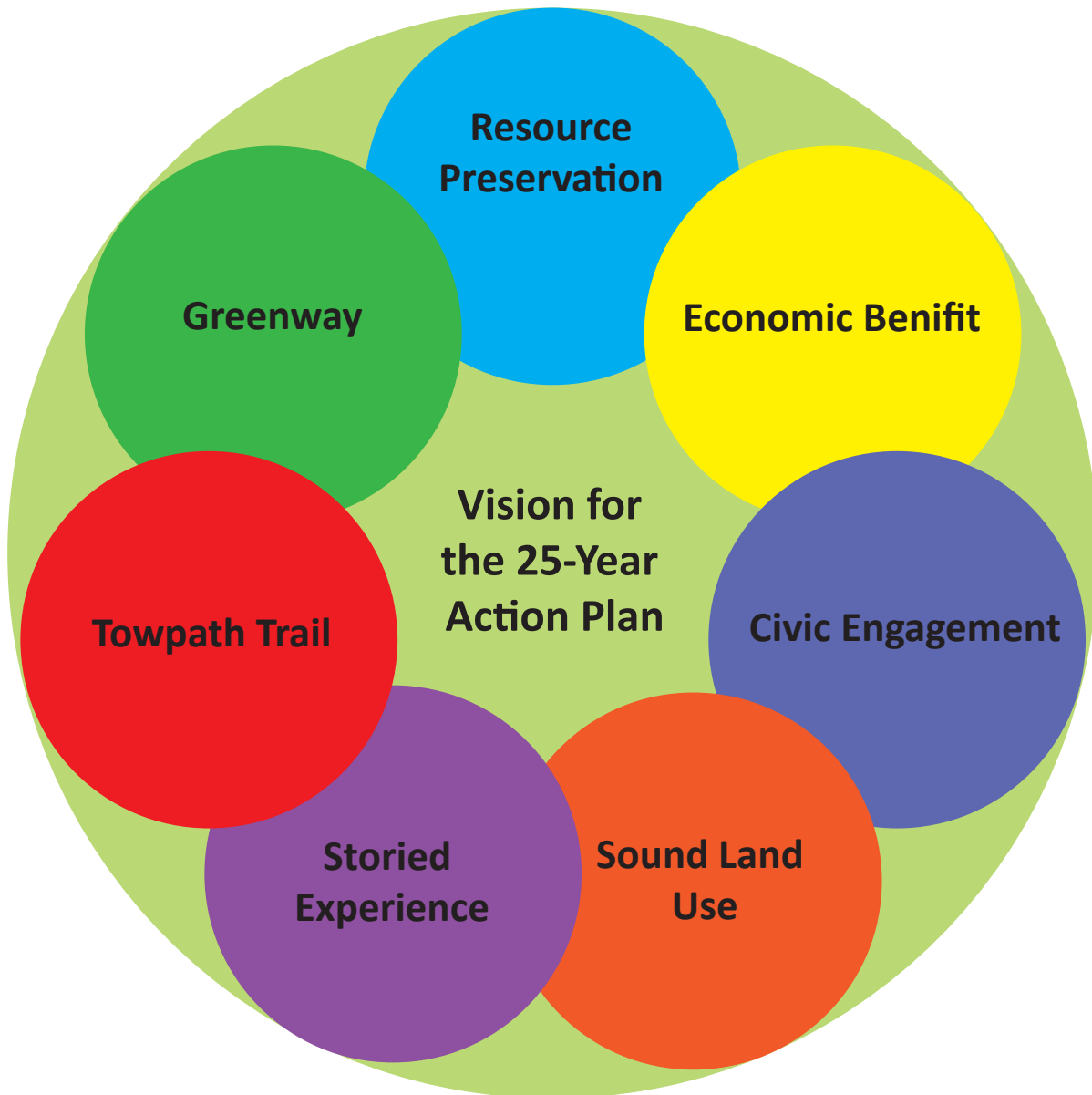


Figure 4-1 - Interrelated Elements of the Vision for the 25-Year Action Plan

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Opportunities and Constraints

Over the course of two meetings, the TAC identified specific opportunities and constraints pertaining to each individual element of the new greenway vision. An opportunity was defined as an existing feature or resource, whether physical, human, regulatory or sociological, that could itself aid or be directly involved in accomplishing part of the greenway vision. A constraint was defined similarly to an opportunity, but it was a feature or resource which in some way impeded the development of the greenway. For example, using the existing historic features along the canal such as the locks and inclined planes to tell the story of the canal is an obvious opportunity for interpretation and an important part of the vision statement, while the current lack of volunteers to aid in interpretation is recognized as a constraint. A complete list of opportunities and constraints corresponding to each segment of the vision statement can be found in Appendix F.

The goal of listing specific opportunities and constraints was to identify the key resources available and the major impediments to fulfilling the greenway vision. Methods to capitalize on existing opportunities or overcome existing constraints served as the basis for the project strategies and recommendations discussed elsewhere in this report.

Public Involvement

The vision statement, in conjunction with the opportunities and constraints, provided the foundation for the public involvement process. This information provided the stakeholders, focus groups and general public with insight into the direction of the 25-year action plan and helped to focus the discussions for each meeting. Following is a brief discussion of the information presented and the general themes of the feedback attained.

Stakeholder Meeting #1

The first meeting of stakeholders, in September 2011, gathered county and municipal elected and appointed officials as well as representatives from key agencies and organizations. A complete list of attendees can be found in the meeting minutes in Appendix C. The meeting began with an overview of the project to date, including: an explanation of the visioning process and recurring themes; discussion of the opportunities and constraints exercise as well as identification of several examples; and an overview of key findings of the fiscal analysis. Utilizing the following four questions for facilitation, discussion was then opened to feedback from those in attendance:

- What benefits to you or your organization/community would you hope to gain from the continued improvements to the Morris Canal Greenway?
- How do you or your organization/community currently interface with the Morris Canal Greenway, and its assets?
- In what ways would you or your organization/community be able to support the goals of the Greenway?
- Are there any items, opportunities or issues surrounding the Greenway which you feel this plan should absolutely address?

The attendees agreed that preservation efforts should result in a canal that not only is protected as a historic resource but is also developed and maintained to serve as an educational resource for schools, a recreational resource for a variety of outdoor activities, an environmental resource as a greenway and water feature, and an economic resource that attracts tourism revenue. The group felt

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that a canal with multiple functions would more likely generate broader public support than if the 25-Year Action Plan only focused on historic preservation. The participants saw considerable potential in the Morris Canal interconnecting communities in Warren County and expressed an interest in working together to preserve the canal in order to link cities and towns across New Jersey and connect with the Delaware and Lehigh Canals in Pennsylvania. Some attendees were anxious to start opening up sections of the canal to public towpath trail access as soon as possible with little or few enhancements, while others suggested a more cautious approach to insure that the canal is not opened prematurely without proper consideration of appropriate design standards and the public's needs and expectations.

The group agreed that the entire canal does not have to be preserved in order for the public to benefit from those sections that can be protected and enhanced. All of the participants felt that steps should be taken to better publicize the canal to improve local knowledge of this important resource. Any educational programs for school students should explore the many facets of the Morris Canal and cover a wide variety of topics in keeping with core curriculum standards. Many participants offered to assist with the 25-Year Action Plan by coordinating their land use planning, canal preservation, natural and historic resource conservation, education, economic development, transportation and fundraising activities with Warren County.

Focus Group Sessions

In December of 2011, representatives of specific focus groups were gathered for a roundtable type discussion to solicit ideas and input about the greenway's impacts or contributions to each representative's organization. The four groups invited to the meeting consisted of representatives from businesses, nonprofit organizations, public schools and local governments. A complete list of those in attendance can be found in the meeting minutes in Appendix C. The discussion began as a single group, providing those in attendance with a general overview of the project and vision developed by the TAC. After this presentation, the attendees separated into smaller groups based on their affiliation. Due to low attendance, the nonprofit and business groups were combined into one. Discussion within each group was then facilitated by one of the members of the planning team, utilizing the same questions provided to the stakeholders, as well as questions pertaining to the interest of each group. Specific questions for each focus group can be found in the minutes from this meeting, located in Appendix C.

Businesses and Nonprofits

Discussion within the business and nonprofit focus group focused on three main topics: cross promotion of cultural and historic assets with other similar attractions; using technology to expand the canal audience; and increasing local awareness and support for the canal and greenway.

Participants indicated that the Morris Canal audience and support could be expanded by utilizing the resources and supporters of other similar historic and cultural resources within the region, such as Shippen Manor and Waterloo Village. These attractions share user groups with similar interests to those to the Morris Canal, but are maybe not informed of its close proximity. Promotional materials and canal publications provided or sold at gift shops could also facilitate this cross promotion. In a similar fashion, promotion of other resources at canal events and locations would provide similar expansion of audience in reciprocation. It was also suggested that targeting local or specialty bookstores and retail outlets along the length of the canal would provide the general public additional opportunities to be exposed to canal-specific literature.

In addition to drawing on other attractions to promote the Morris Canal and expand the audience, the business and nonprofit focus group discussed ways in which emerging technologies

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could be leveraged to promote and interpret the canal. Much of this discussion revolved around the capabilities of smart phones and the Geographic Positioning Systems (GPS) many of these devices are equipped with. Two main strategies emerged from this discussion. The first was to use these technologies for self-interpretation of the canal and related resources. It was recommended that this could be accomplished using a quick response code reader, or QR reader. QR reader barcodes could be located on signage around key interpretive locations. A visitor scanning the barcode with their smartphone would be linked to video or text providing the story. The second strategy was to capitalize on the GPS capabilities of smartphones. This could be something simple such as providing GPS locations of historic resources. It was suggested that the GPS capabilities of smartphones may also expand the market of the canal and greenway by attracting other user groups such as those involved in geocaching.

The final topic discussed within this focus group was concentrated on finding ways to increase local awareness and support for the canal and greenway. It was felt that newer residents within Warren County did not know about or appreciate the significance of the Morris Canal. The key theme to this discussion was, if future canal investment – whatever form this may take – is to be embraced by local residents, then a more concerted marketing and education effort needs to take place promoting the benefits of the canal and greenway to local residents and businesses. The suggestion was made that this could be an ongoing campaign starting in the schools and continuing in other public venues. It was also suggested that Warren County Technical School has the capability to engage students to produce a DVD which could help in this information campaign. A short documentary introducing the public to the significance of the Morris Canal would be a good starting point for new residents.

School Educators

The school educators primarily focused on the Morris Canal as a unique local educational resource and ways to better capitalize on it. The group agreed that the most effective ways of communicating the story of the canal were through one-on-one interactions with an interpreter and hands-on experiences. The group then concentrated on how to integrate the Morris Canal into school based educational programs and curriculum.

It was pointed out that few schools utilized the Morris Canal as an educational resource but that there was a direct relationship to a school's proximity to the canal and their awareness and appreciation of it. They felt more should be done to integrate the canal into the overall curriculum for school students and identified two main challenges which must be overcome to improve integration. These concerns revolved around making sure the lessons about the Morris Canal were correlated with state academic standards and getting teachers involved in the curriculum development process.

The educators felt that using the canal as a basis for interdisciplinary lessons could be a very effective way of expanding the learning opportunities. Classroom exercises exploring such topics as people/daily life, physics/math/engineering concepts, utilization of natural resources, local economic impacts, town character, and modes of transportation could be combined with field investigations incorporating hands-on activities.

With regard to field studies, the group felt it was critical to identify and have curriculum linked to key nodes and attractions for field trips, as well as sections of the canal which were easily accessible. The historic Port Colden School and Waterloo Village were both identified as examples of potential interpretive sites. It was also felt that restored features, such as a locktender's house, or working or watered sections of the canal would provide more flexibility in the number and types of lessons that could be presented.

The participants expressed their willingness to serve on a committee to assist the WCMCC in developing educational programs for school use. The group indicated that the participation of the

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Warren County Educational Specialist and County Superintendent of Schools would be critical to the success of this program. They indicated this proposal should be presented at the monthly roundtable meeting of school officials, as this was the most effective location to reach this large audience. The idea was also presented that a tour offered directly for teachers, possibly providing continuing education credits, would be a good method of building interest and excitement within the educational community.

Local Governments

Discussion of the local government focus group circulated around two main topics: the Morris Canal Preservation Ordinance (MCPO) and regional coordination of canal preservation efforts. It was determined that the majority of communities along the length of the canal had not adopted the ordinance and of those that did, many did not enforce it. Members identified reasons they felt not all communities adopted or supported the MCPO. Primary reasoning was that the ordinance was perceived to not be aligned with other municipal priorities and it was perceived in some locations as being ‘anti-development.’ The group discussed ways in which the ordinance could be revised to make it address these concerns. Recommendations focused on creating provisions in the ordinance which made preservation of the canal and provision of public access more beneficial to developers. Density bonuses for preservation of the canal were one item identified to accommodate this. It was also pointed out that the regulations of the Highlands Planning Area may hinder these approaches in some areas.

After the MCPO, the second topic discussed in the local government focus group was the regional coordination of canal preservation efforts. According to the group, better coordination required two main strategies: better informed local officials and continual coordination of regional efforts. The group identified that fact that many of the local elected or appointed officials have a general lack of knowledge about the canal and its associated resources. Some of this could be alleviated with the provision of a tailored brochure or information package distributed to new officials and possibly canal tours as well. The group also pointed out that one person locally who served as the spokesperson for the canal and related resources would be an effective way of ensuring new members were exposed to the canal in some way.

The second portion of the regional coordination efforts centered on the actual coordination efforts. Municipalities are currently dependent on County Planning staff for promotion and consideration of canal-related topics. A more consistent coordination of these efforts and goals would be helpful to promoting the canal. To foster this, the group suggested that a Morris Canal working group comprised of local planning board representatives and County Planning staff would be good venue to discuss regional and local issues surrounding the canal from a planning and decision maker standpoint. The local planning board representative to this group would also provide a voice for the canal in local decisions and could become the source for canal related information at the local government level. This person could also serve as the voice for local greenway and canal concerns on the regional level. It was felt that although this program could provide a large amount of benefit to the overall goals of the greenway, it did face some hurdles. Primarily success of this program would require a large amount of continued cooperation and involvement by municipal governments. Additionally, this continued cooperation and involvement may have the benefit of increasing canal awareness and fostering ownership.

Public Open House #1

An open house was held in December 2011 to for members of the general public to provide input on the proposed vision for the 25-Year Action Plan, and a follow-up article about this

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event appeared in a local newspaper. Many of those who attended this event had a past or present relationship with the canal as a resident along the canal, a member of the Canal Society of New Jersey or as a person with family members involved in the operation of the Morris Canal or other canals in the region. (See Appendix C for a complete list of attendees). As a result, the open house provided a forum for these individuals, who were genuinely interested in the canal, to share their canal experiences with the county representatives and consultant team members at this event.

In addition to the informal exchange of information described above, participants were asked to review each component of the proposed vision for the 25-Year Action Plan and respond to two questions associated with each component. The results revealed that the attendees felt that many canal features should be preserved, most notably Waterloo Village and the arch in Phillipsburg among others. When asked what features might be the most interesting to others, the participants indicated that a restored inclined plane “would be an awesome educational tool” and that other attractions would be a Canal Day event, boat ride, or tour. They felt that there were many important educational stories that could be told about the canal covering such topics as how the canal was built and maintained through hard work, family life along the canal, the growth and development of local villages and the controversial decommissioning process. To them, the canal is worth visiting because it is a unique engineering achievement and its history is so thoroughly intertwined with the establishment of many communities. The public involvement in canal preservation efforts would increase if these activities were promoted through the schools and through local newspapers, radio and television broadcasts and websites.

The attendees were in favor of the county’s efforts to create a greenway along the canal, as long as the privacy of homeowners along the canal was respected, and felt that the greenway should include those historical elements that contribute to the story of the canal. Participants were in favor of their municipality adopting land use polices to help preserve the canal, such as a model ordinance or conservation incentives.

With regard to recreational opportunities, the participants saw hiking, biking, wildlife observation, ice skating, picnicking, canoeing and kayaking as compatible leisure activities along the canal. Although the attendees would be willing to drive a car to access a trail for recreational purposes, they preferred having a direct pedestrian connection to a trail.

Ideas for heritage tourism attractions included the restoration of an inclined plane, organized trips, and opportunities to hike, mountain bike and visit local lakes. Several suggestions were made to adaptively reuse the deteriorating Port Colden Manor as a bed and breakfast, restaurant, canal office or other use as another feature.

Stakeholder Meeting #2

The second stakeholder meeting was held in March 2012 to update county and municipal elected and appointed officials and representatives from key agencies and organizations on the project activities and to discuss key investigations, findings and recommendations. (See Appendix C for a list of attendees). The participants offered a variety of comments about the plan ranging from probing questions about canal facts that were previously unfamiliar to them to problem solving ideas. A number of suggestions related to finding local “boosters” or “champions” who could help implement the recommendations in their communities and the importance of engaging many potential beneficiaries who may have different but compatible interests in preserving the canal. The group stressed the importance of partnering in leveraging resources to implement the action plan. In discussing the many challenges involved in implementing the 25-Year Action Plan, the attendees agreed that it is easy to overlook the simple steps that can be taken to begin making progress toward achieving the goals of the plan. They felt that there will come a “tipping point” in time when the positive results of implementing the 25-Year Action Plan will overcome any remaining obstacles to its completion.

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Public Open House #2

The second open house for the general public was held in March 2012 and attracted an entirely different group of residents from the first open house, many of whom lived along or near the canal and had been asked to provide input on the 25-Year Action Plan through a survey of land owners. (The complete list of attendees can be found in Appendix C). The participants were asked to review and provide their opinion on a sample of the proposed recommendations associated with the various elements of the vision statement. Unlike the first open house, very few written comments were provided by the attendees. Instead, the participants spent most of the time engaged in friendly conversation with the county representatives and consultant team members about specific questions related to canal preservation activities. Many were interested in finding out about proposed plans for preserving the canal near their home or neighborhood, especially due to their concerns about security, liability, trespass and privacy. Several individuals expressed an interest in allowing the county to purchase their land to preserve a section of the canal, while others volunteered to help implement the 25-Year Action Plan and were anxious to utilize a towpath trail for recreational purposes. As a result, the event opened new lines of communication between the county and residents in a very constructive way that illustrated growing public support for the project. Media representatives from local newspapers, radio and television covered the meeting.

Land Owner Survey

To solicit input from land owners along the greenway in an anonymous and convenient fashion the planning team and County Planning staff prepared a web based survey. Information on the survey was provided to land owners, as identified by tax information possessed by the county, whose property contained or was directly adjacent to the Morris Canal. A total of 340 land owners were contacted and 59 responded via the internet or by provision of a hard copy for representation of 17.3%.

Questions on the survey were broken down into several main categories: familiarity with the canal; canal preservation efforts; effect of the canal on property; concerns about greenway creation; greenway benefits; and general demographic questions. Respondents were also provided several opportunities for open-ended input on specific items, as well as an open forum for comment at the end of the survey. Respondents interested in pursuing preservation or access agreements with the county were also provided the opportunity to include contact information. Results of the full survey can be found at the end of this report in Appendix I.

More than 91% of the respondents indicated they were at least somewhat familiar with the history of the Morris Canal and 76% knew the canal was present on or adjacent to their property at the time of purchase. 63% of respondents indicated they rarely used the canal on or adjacent to their property for recreational purposes. 55% of respondents felt that the canal or related resources on their property possessed historic value, 30% did not feel this was the case and 15% were unsure. When asked the question about how the presence of the canal affects land values, 30% felt the canal increased the value of their land, 21% felt it detracted and the remaining 48% felt it had no impact.

Of the total respondents, six indicated interest in pursuing preservation of the canal or provision of public access through their property through the sale of land or easements. The remaining respondents were asked to identify the primary concerns they would have with preservation or access rights to the canal on their property. The top five reasons for not allowing preservation or public access were: loss of privacy (77.1%); security concerns (70.8%); liability concerns (64.6%); effects on property value (60.4%); and inconvenience. Loss of privacy, security, and liability were also themes echoed by land owners attending other public forums as primary concerns about

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implementation of a greenway trail. Respondents were also asked if there were specific measures that could be implemented to address their concerns regarding these topics. 68% indicated that there was nothing which could be done. Many of the comments in the open ended response to this question identified specific concerns about the proximity of the canal to the residence located on the property as a critical part of this stance.

Questions also focused on preservation of the canal and its related resources as a county wide effort. 62% of respondents felt the Morris Canal was worth preserving and promoting as an educational resource used to reach local history to students and 58% felt it was a valuable symbol of Warren County's heritage.

The survey ended with a section to determine general characteristics and demographic information of the respondents. 77% of those who completed the survey have lived in Warren County for greater than 10 years, with 69% in the same location for this duration. The greatest number of respondents resided in Washington Township (32%), Mansfield Township (32%) and Greenwich Township (19%) and 90% of the total indicated the use of their property as single-family detached residence.

Based on the results of the survey, considering the information discussed above and input to the open ended questions, land owners along the canal are polarized in their support for or against establishment of a greenway and associated trail. One respondent pointed out that canal preservation and greenway/trail creation are two very different goals and the results seem to support this. More land owners supported preservation of historic resources than the creation of a trail. Of those residents that did respond favorably to creation of a trail or preservation of historic resources on their property, almost all indicated a desire to be involved in the shape of the greenway on their property.