

## Rail work worries trail enthusiasts



Clear-cutting has already begun at the Pinkerton Horn in Upper Turkeyfoot Township. (Submitted photo)

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A multimillion-dollar freight rail project is bringing major cosmetic changes to a scenic vista of the Great Allegheny Passage.

The Pinkerton Horn bypass in Upper Turkeyfoot Township is part of the 350-mile trail from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C. It includes a pair of tunnels, one of them owned by CSX Transportation as a freight line.

Somerset County owns the second tunnel, which is currently closed and in need of \$5 million in repairs. The county also owns the land directly above the tunnel.

Until recently, the Mount Davis Development Corporation owned the rest of the Pinkerton Horn, including the GAP bypass trail. The county renewed a 10-year right of way lease agreement for use of that trail in 2002.

But Mount Davis has since sold its holdings on the horn to CSX – including the trail itself. CSX is working to day light its tunnel, which means removing the overhead earth and leaving only sidewalls.

While the development is expected to increase efficiency by enabling the passage of double-decker freight cars, it will likely have a long-term impact on the GAP, a regional tourist attraction. According to a 2002 study by Pittsburgh-based Campos Inc., the trail generates more than \$800,000 of annual tourist spending in the Somerset County communities of Confluence, Garrett and Rockwood.

“At a minimum, the county would like to ensure that there’s permanent ownership of the bypass trail around the horn, a

continued ownership of our Pinkerton Tunnel for future purposes and that there are proper environmental controls put in place to deal with excavated materials from the open-cutting project,” county trail manager Brett Hollern said Wednesday.

The company’s plans were initially discussed at public meetings a year ago. At that time CSX officials said they were looking at either day lighting the tunnel or repairing it with liner and sidewall modifications. They chose the day lighting option approximately six months ago.

According to Hollern, the county was told in early March that CSX would need access to county-owned land for the operation. The process of day lighting the CSX tunnel is expected to begin this summer.

In a 60-day property access agreement inked March 16, the county gave CSX permission to begin clear-cutting trees on property above the closed tunnel.

The eventual day lighting of the CSX tunnel is expected to produce more than 1 million cubic yards of rock and other refuse.

Hollern said the two sides have not yet decided where the excavated materials would be placed.

“The county has done nothing other than talk preliminarily,” Hollern added, noting that he anticipates talks to heat up over the next two months. He said the county will seek and gather input from concerned individuals and will consult with environmental agencies about the impact of the CSX efforts.

“It’s a grandiose project,” Hollern said. “They’ve got an aggressive timeframe.”

The work at the Pinkerton Horn is in fact only a small piece of a greater undertaking called the National Gateway. Funded with stimulus dollars, the project aims to improve three primary rail corridors in eastern America.

These include: the I-95/I-81 corridor between North Carolina and Baltimore, Md. via Washington, D.C.; the I-70/I-76 corridor between Washington, D.C. and northwest Ohio via Pittsburgh; and the I-40/Carolina Corridor between Wilmington and Charlotte, N.C.

All told, the National Gateway project is expected to cost \$842 million and the public funds committed to the project are matched by \$395 million in private funding.

According to the National Gateway website, every dollar of public money invested in the National Gateway will create \$22 in public benefits.

This particular piece of the project, however, has prompted the fears of GAP enthusiasts disturbed by the clear-cutting and proposed excavation.

“I’m concerned about it just from the trail user’s perspective,” said Allegheny Trail Alliance President Linda Boxx, whose nonprofit organizes major fundraising and marketing campaigns for the Great Allegheny Passage.

According to Boxx, the primary problem may be the placement of the excavated materials.

“People sort of like going around the horn because it is a change of scenery,” she said.

But Boxx added that the CSX project may also provide an opportunity. She said her hope is that the company can be convinced to completely day light the closed county-owned tunnel as well.

“Likely in the process of day lighting their tunnel, CSX contractors will be taking overburden from the county’s tunnel. It’s much more economical for the county in the long run (to day light the tunnel),” she said.

“I’m actually sort of excited about taking advantage of the work CSX is preparing to do.”

For more information about the entire National Gateway project, visit [nationalgateway.org](http://nationalgateway.org).