

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

**Avigail Oren:** It is Friday, May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019. We are at the State College Municipal Building in State College. It's 2:11 p.m. My name is Avigail Oren and I am here interviewing Brett Hollern. Today, we are going to focus on your work, Brett, on the Great Allegheny Passage after you became the Somerset County Trail Coordinator in July of 2004. And, this was just as the work on the Big Savage Tunnel was coming to an end. But there were final sections of the trail that needed to be completed, as well as the Bollman Bridge, the raising of the Keystone Viaduct, and the Garrett Underpass. So we'll also talk about the challenges that you faced with this work. But, hopefully also the rewards and the feeling of seeing the GAP Trail approach completion. And, we'll conclude with some questions about trail sustainability and planning for the ongoing management of the trail. So, my first question for you is – how did you come to get the job as Somerset County's Trail Coordinator in July 2004? Was the job created for you or was it kismet that such an opportunity appeared?

**Brett Hollern:** It was a little bit of both. So, I had taken a job with Somerset County as a planner in 1999 after graduating from Penn State with a recreation and park management degree. I had done my internship with the Somerset County Planning Commission focusing on the work with the then-Allegheny Highlands Trail, which later would become a section of the Great Allegheny Passage. And, about a year after that, an opportunity had arisen because the woman that held my job before hit the lottery and left her position.

**Avigail Oren:** Literally hit the lottery?

**Brett Hollern:** Literally hit the lottery – a thousand dollars a week for life, which is interesting – you can't live on that, but she was making a lot less than that working at the county. So, you know, I applied for the position and I got that job. After about a year of doing that, the Allegheny Trail Alliance and Somerset County partnered on a circuit rider grant application from the DCNR for someone that would start to look at the overall development of the newly-burgeoning Pittsburgh to Cumberland trail system but also to oversee the construction development that was going on in Somerset County with the

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

sort of large structures and amount of work that needed done in Somerset County. So, I luckily was able to take that position. And, right about the time as the circuit rider grant was rolling down and the completion was nearing its end, the county created a position to oversee the continued development but also the maintenance and operation of the trail. First, I was not going to take the job, I was going to take the job that Jack Paulik eventually took to oversee the construction of the trail through the Steel Valley. And, thank goodness I didn't take that job because Jack had a mammoth undertaking to do that and [I] ended up taking and accepting position with Somerset County.

**Avigail Oren:** Well, that's actually really good segue to my next question, which is – what changed when you transitioned from being the circuit rider to this role with the county? Did you have to take on more responsibility? Did your purview expand beyond the trail or was it really still, like...?

**Brett Hollern:** It was predominantly- it was still all trail-focused, but I took on the operation and management to a much broader scale than I had been doing. At that point, the trail was still sort of being managed by the Parks and Recreation Board through a lot of contractual arrangements to get the maintenance done. And, that was sort of the beginning of the county taking it on as a true county recreation facility.

**Avigail Oren:** Got it. So, as I told you earlier, we'll talk about the Bollman bridge project in more detail later. So, I want to skip ahead to the work that had to happen after that massive undertaking was finished. There was no trail leading up to or out of the tunnel. And so, what were you doing then in 2005 to oversee these last connections of the trail in Somerset County?

**Brett Hollern:** We had a considerable amount of funding from the ISTE program and the TEA-21 program that was used basically to connect the end of the trail, [which] at that point was Salisbury Viaduct, down to the state line. And, over the course of 1999-2006 we had the train station to Salisbury Viaduct project, the train station to Sand Patch project and the Sand Patch to State Route 2011 project. All our transportation has been funded projects that were done through PennDOT and I was

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

managing and overseeing those projects while also figuring out how we built this one last little piece that got us connected from the Big Savage to the Mason Dixon and also from the end of the Sand Patch project to the tunnel.

**Avigail Oren:** So, what was a day like when you were doing this work? Were you primarily in the office, making calls, pushing papers or were you out on the trail day-to-day?

**Brett Hollern:** So, we had a full-time inspector on the project. So, there wasn't a need for me to be out there every day. Generally, I probably visited project sites two or three times a week, but more so just because of the logistical end of having to run 20 miles here and there. I, you know, talked to our inspector regularly for the projects. And then, it was pushing papers.

**Avigail Oren:** And, what were these papers for the most part? What was taking up the bulk of your time?

**Brett Hollern:** So, reviewing all the invoicing and then figuring out- because we were pulling from different pots of money and had matching requirements, how to figure out- you know, I just got an invoice for, just hypothetically, \$50,000 – 75% of that has to come out of this- or 80% of this has to come out of this amount of money, 20% has to come out of this part of the money. So, figuring out how to manage those matching requirements and all the invoicing hurdles that we had to go through.

**Avigail Oren:** Is there any particular project that you have a recollection of being especially difficult with, like, that paperwork, or were they sort of equally challenging all the time?

**Brett Hollern:** So, most of those projects that I discussed previously were enhancement or transportation enhancement-funded projects. And, that formula for funding was pretty consistent – 80% federal, 20% state or local. And, we were lucky that we had the ability to find those funds where we could pretty much use DCNR funding to match or PennDOT federal funding, so it's pretty straightforward. [Basically, we had a matching 20% grant from the PA DCNR to match the 80% Federal money for the projects. In many cases your matching funds end up coming from a variety of sources which makes managing the

Commented [ASO1]: Could you clarify this statement? Insert any new words or sentences in [brackets like this].

Commented [BH2R1]: Basically, we had a matching 20% grant from the PA DCNR to match the 80% Federal money for the projects. In many cases your matching funds end up coming from a variety of sources which makes managing the financial end of the project a bit more of a challenge

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

financial end of the project a bit more of a challenge]. So, every project was like that. But, there would be occasions where we had to factor in some level of private money or Rails-to-Trails Association would be a partner in some of the projects. They may have come to the table. For instance, I believe when we did a parking lot for the Garrett Underpass, our Rails-to-Trails Association kind of acted as a pass-through and we used money from CSX, donations from CSX to build that. So, there was, you know, just figure that... [Then when you do that, like, you're working with a contractor who is already on site but then it's nonprofit money and they don't have to pay prevailing wages. So, you start to have to juggle that a little bit different. [The project was done more cost-effectively due to the funding coming from a non-profit partner's coffers, which doesn't have the strings attached to meet government bidding and wage requirements.]

**Avigail Oren:**

So, as I was writing questions, it didn't occur to me to ask about how much you were doing in terms of infrastructure accompanying the trail, like a parking lot. Was that also taking up a lot of your time as you were finishing up these last sections of the trail?

**Brett Hollern:**

Certainly. I don't think we did any project that was designed as when it was let. There was always something that came up or additional- something we wanted to add on because it made sense once you saw as the project unfolded. But largely, you know, we had blinders on to building- what it took to be a trail, right, the trail itself and then access area if it required [it] and very little else. But, sort of that secondary thing was starting to happen was, you know, we had people that were interested in benches or pavilions – so we started to develop those sort of travel-related amenities on the side that, we never really included anything like that in one of those projects. It was simply the bones of the project, trail and whatever it took to make it usable from a trail user standpoint.

**Avigail Oren:**

Okay. So, if I understand it correctly – you're saying as you're reaching completion and the need is arising for these amenities – that's not coming out of ISTEAs or any of this

Commented [ASO3]: Again, can you add some explanation here? I want to make sure that this will make sense to someone reading it in 100 years.

Commented [BH4R3]: The project was done more cost effectively due to the funding coming from a non-profit partners coffers, which doesn't have the strings attached to meet government bidding and wage requirements.

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

transportation enhancement. So, it's sort of pushing you to have to do more with private funding or county-level funding?

**Brett Hollern:** Right, right, yeah. So, the funding was tight. So, if we would have had the opportunity to do something with one of those transportation projects, funded projects, we would have. But, it was pretty much, you know, to the dollar. Like, this is how much money we have to build almost to that budget.

**Avigail Oren:** Okay. So, I want to ask you about the Keystone Viaduct. When did you become aware that the structure was going to need to be raised 18 inches to accommodate these double-decker trains that CSX wanted to start running?

**Brett Hollern:** Date-wise – [it was 2009]. But, it was the- National Gateway Project was probably- I'll think about that. Right about the time that we started Pinkerton or that we started thinking about Pinkerton. So...

Commented [AS05]: Are you able to fill this in now?

Commented [BH6R5]: 2009

**Linda Boxx:** Right. It was well before the 13s. So, it might have been a ten-ish.

Commented [AS07]: Linda, can you clarify if you meant 2013 and 2010 here?

**Brett Hollern:** Yeah, that's one of the things that I'll be able to tell you based on computer files.

**Avigail Oren:** Okay.

**Brett Hollern:** But, what had happened was – we had gotten a letter from CSX, actually not a letter. We got about a knuckle-sized pile of paper from CSX saying they were prepared to undertake the National Gateway Project. And, to do that, they were going to have to modify structures, the Keystone Viaduct being one of them. Can we have a meeting to discuss it?

**Avigail Oren:** And so, that knuckle-sized stack of papers came directly to you?

**Brett Hollern:** Came to the county.

**Avigail Oren:** To the county.

**Brett Hollern:** County commissioners, yeah, because we owned the structure, we're the owner of the structure.

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And so, you get this paperwork and you schedule a meeting?
- Brett Hollern:** Yeah. Well, we worked with CSX, they came in and told us why they were doing what they did. And, we said things like lower the tracks, you know, they said “no” because- and it's interesting because they kind of went through, like, if we had to stop a train long enough to do this, how it would, like, confuse train traffic on the whole eastern seaboard.
- Avigail Oren:** Oh, interesting.
- Brett Hollern:** Rerouting trains and things and that was, you know, part of why we have to raise your structure and not modify ours. So, you know, when we thought about it, you know, a primary concern was the aesthetics of it and the use of it. How is it going to impact trail users? And, we don't want it to look like it doesn't belong or that something was changed. So, that was something that we thought, you know, kind of said, “If you're going to do this, you're going to do it. So, it's minimal impact to trail traffic.” Closures will have to happen either, you know, between certain hours if they're doing trail, whatever, daylight hours, they can only be for this long. If we said 10- or 15-minute breaks unless preapproved. And, that's how we also got the \$25,000 donation from them.
- Avigail Oren:** For that parking lot?
- Brett Hollern:** For the parking lot at Garrett. We ended up using the money to develop the parking lot at Garrett, yeah.
- Avigail Oren:** So, the Keystone Viaduct was only finished a few years earlier.
- Brett Hollern:** '06.
- Avigail Oren:** Was there a sense of frustration about that, too, that you're having to double-back to something that had already been checked off the list?
- Brett Hollern:** Well, one, the burden was on them for the most part because they were funding it, they were overseeing it. We, being the county, hired an inspector, they had to pay for that. But, it certainly was not something we wanted to see happen. But,

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

we all have been working with the railroad long enough to know they were going to do it whether we said they could or not. Right?

**Avigail Oren:** So, you wanted to maintain what leverage you did have to make sure it met the specifications you wanted—the aesthetic and use specifications.

**Brett Hollern:** Yes.

**Avigail Oren:** And, how long did that end up taking? Was this a today, lifted up or...?

**Brett Hollern:** No, it was a six-month [long] project, but I could be completely wrong on that. I mean, I don't think it carried over. It was during a trail-use season. They started early in spring and, I think, they had finished it up within, like, fall.

Commented [BHS]: I checked, it was about a 6 month long effort

**Linda Boxx:** The lift happened overnight.

**Brett Hollern:** Yeah, the lift was pretty quick.

**Avigail Oren:** Interesting. So, what about the area near the Pinkerton Horn? As I understand it, CSX wanted to cross that land in order to daylight one of their tunnels, which I'm assuming means remove the top of it?

[Chuckle]

**Brett Hollern:** Yes. Remove the earth above it.

**Avigail Oren:** Yes, okay. And, wanted to then truck [the dirt] somewhere else which required crossing land that was an easement that they had given for the Pinkerton Horn section. And, what are your recollections of that part of the CSX Gateway project?

**Brett Hollern:** Again, I think we realized early on they were going to dig their tunnel regardless of what we said or did so we tried to figure out the best way to take advantage of that situation. But, the biggest, you know, the monkey wrench in that was we had an abandoned tunnel that we had kind of given up hope of ever redoing because we had a bypass on it. And, thanks to leadership with the Allegheny Trail Alliance of Linda Boxx who wanted to see the trail restored to the original right-of-way –

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

we worked with the railroad to figure out a way to go in there and they didn't really fund- gave us much- they didn't give us funding, I don't believe. But, it was sort of like them doing that was a catalyst for our Pinkerton Tunnel being restored in a lot of ways.

**Avigail Oren:** Oh, was it?

**Brett Hollern:** Because that raised a heightened awareness that the tunnel was there and it might not ever be- it might get to the point where it was beyond repair. And, that project may have been what could cause it to be beyond repair. I mean, they were running Euclid Trucks [massive dump trucks] over top of it with daily, like, hundreds of trucks taking fill to the other side. But, one of the byproducts was they had to buy all the land that was the Pinkerton Horn and they immediately gave us ownership up to the 35-foot Horn bypass that had previously been under easement from the prior landowner. So, there was that benefit from the project even if we never did the tunnel, we now owned the bypass.

**Avigail Oren:** Right. Am I misunderstanding – I thought the tunnel was never done or is the bypass is still being used or...?

**Brett Hollern:** It still exists.

**Avigail Oren:** Right, but it has not been rehabilitated?

**Brett Hollern:** The bypass or the tunnel?

**Avigail Oren:** The tunnel.

**Brett Hollern:** The tunnel is done. No, it was done.

**Avigail Oren:** It was done. Okay. So, tell me about how you rolled from the Gateway Project, the daylighting, to then doing the Pinkerton Tunnel.

**Brett Hollern:** There was some private funding left over from building this section of the trail from the Steel Valley into the city.

**Avigail Oren:** Okay.

**Brett Hollern:** Right, and Linda's idea was to challenge to see if...



## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

**Linda Boxx:** Well, let me...

**Brett Hollern:** Go ahead.

**Linda Boxx:** Okay. This is Linda Boxx here. So, when CSX was daylighting their Pinkerton Tunnel, we first had to wait to make sure it wasn't- didn't collapse

**Brett Hollern:** Right.

**Linda Boxx:** Because that was a big fear because they were dynamiting at, like, no- basically 100 feet away from our tunnel. Our tunnel goes straight, theirs curved and theirs curved towards our tunnel. So, all of a sudden, last day of dynamiting and running those big trucks overhead – no material damage done to the tunnel. So, the intent was doing the Steel Valley Trail section – we had to- we were using state capital budget funding as well as county capital budget funding. And, the state capital budget funding was a reimbursement. So, we had to come up with this, you know, a lot of money. I forget whatever the money is, I'll tell you what those numbers are. Knowing that we would be reimbursed \$1.75 million back. So, our foundation, actually was our money put forward. And, other funding. We raised this money – the Sandcastle section was what it turned out to be. And, then when we got the reimbursement money, like, about 2014 – then we said, “Okay, let's spend it on the Pinkerton Tunnel.” You know, because it's still sitting there. It didn't collapse. We're good.

**Avigail Oren:** Okay. And, Brett, were you overseeing that project or managing that project?

**Brett Hollern:** Myself and Jack Paulik...

**Avigail Oren:** Okay.

**Brett Hollern:** ...were the project managers.

**Avigail Oren:** Okay. And, what was that process like? Was it a big undertaking or, after a Big Savage, was this old hat?

**Brett Hollern:** It was a little bit of both. One of the challenging aspects was that we had this money, but it was a county structure. And, we wanted to do a design build, we didn't want to do a design

Commented [ASO9]: Linda: fill in specifics

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

package and put it out to bid because it would have driven the cost through the roof, [and] the timing. We thought we're good to go and sort of at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour our county solicitor said, "Wait, this probably doesn't jive with county code. And, I'm not sure I can defend this if anybody would challenge us on not going through the proper bidding procedures." We were able to make the case that it was emergency repair because the crown of the tunnel had a crack running its entire length. The county engineer went to bat and said, "No, this could fail if we don't get to it now. The time it would take to build this project that jeopardizes the structure." So, we got over that hurdle. And then, what was interesting is we took an approach – we worked with the engineer that we used on Big Savage Tunnel, Gannett Flemming. And, we took an approach that this gentleman, I believe, had sort of masterminded, Rhody Rhodomeyer, and mastermind was to instead of rock bolting, the entire thing was to insert a tunnel liner and then backfill all the voids with cellufoam grout. And, we took that, our engineer went and took that, basically came up with the design and we were able to basically insert- what they call them- whistle, tin whistle. Basically, like the corrugated steel liner and then backfilled all the voids, pretty sizable voids, with what's, for lack of a better term, Great Stuff. It comes in a can you use to put around your windows, same material, but on a much larger scale and they pump them out full of that and it finds its way into all the cracks and crevices and seals the tunnel up.

**Avigail Oren:** I'm going to ask this question and then come back to something. Am I to understand that they poked a hole in the liner and then...

[Chuckle]

**Brett Hollern:** So, there were ports in the liner and they were dammed so they would fill it to a point where if it started to come back out – somewhere else – they knew that it was full and they'd go on to the next section and do the same thing.

**Avigail Oren:** Okay. So, what I want to quickly get back to for posterity and also [for] future historians who don't have an engineering background is – what is the difference between a design build and putting something out for bid?

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

**Brett Hollern:** So, what a design build is is basically taking a concept and going and doing the project based on the concept, loosely speaking, whereas traditional projects got a full set of plans, engineering plans, and you put it out and contractors look at it and they give you a bid back on all these big bid items that are in the project. And, it's just- it's flexible, it's a much more flexible approach. Can be more cost effective to do it that way but isn't traditionally used in in the public domain because you're bound to bid things when you're using public money – you almost have to always do that.

**Avigail Oren:** Okay.

**Linda Boxx:** People make more money.

**Brett Hollern:** Yeah.

[Chuckle]

**Avigail Oren:** Just in case the mic didn't pick that up – Linda said, "People make more money..."

**Linda Boxx:** More people...

**Avigail Oren:** "More people make money" when you do a bid process. Okay. Great. So, let's talk about the Garrett Underpass. What was the story with that project?

**Brett Hollern:** That was a situation where, when the railroad was active, the railroad crossed below State Route 2037 – there was a wooden timber bridge that carried vehicular traffic over the railroad. And, when the railroad ceased operations, PennDOT was very quick to yank that bridge out and fill the cut because it's no longer active. The bridge was Timber Bridge – the railroad built. They were suspect. We dealt with numerous other situations like that on other sections of the trail. So, when the second section of the GAP was built, I want to say from Rockwood to Garrett, that was an endpoint, right, at the fill area – they put in a small parking area. And then, when the next section- when the section on the western side of State Route 2037 was built, it started on the other side of the cut and trail users were forced to use a bypass. And, at the time through funding constraints, that was the route that was

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

chosen. I think that was always on. We wanted to eliminate at-grade crossings as much as possible. But, that was a pretty considerable, expensive project. So, it was bypassed in favor, you know, hey, if we go back and do this later, that's great. We're going to do that, but people can get around it now. So, we're going to forge on and get the whole thing built. And, I think what's interesting about that is the way we ended up getting the funding was from Congressman Murtha. And, I'm probably not specific on this but Brad Clemenson – who was one Murtha's aides at the time – had gotten a phone call from the congressman who was on the House floor and was talking to the chairman of the House Transportation Committee from Minnesota.

**Linda Boxx:**

Oberstar

**Brett Hollern:**

There you go. She remembered the name.

**Avigail Oren:**

Can you repeat the...

**Linda Boxx:**

Oberstar. Jim Oberstar.

**Avigail Oren:**

Jim Oberstar.

**Brett Hollern:**

Jim Oberstar. And, I guess he had asked Jack Murtha, "How's that bike trail in your district doing? Is there anything that you need funding for?" And, Brad called Linda and Linda said, "The Garrett Underpass." Either Brad or Linda called me and said, "How much does it cost?" And, we had done two similar concrete arch culverts at other sections in the trail. So, I said, "About \$1.2 million just because that's what the other ones cost." And, sure enough, I think we ended up with \$875,000 and was that an earmark, a federal earmark?"

**Linda Boxx:**

Mm-hmm. And, that's also how the last section in Maryland got funded. And, when I was putting a list together for Brad, I put the Maryland section as number one, the Garrett Underpass pass as number two. You know, he wanted something in his district and I put something in West Newton and so forth. But, I kept saying, "We've got to get the Maryland piece done because if we don't get Maryland funded," you know, we're not [inaudible 0:27:23.8]. So, it came through two line items – one for Maryland and one for Somerset County.

**Commented [ASO10]:** To the best I can tell, you said "done" or "dumping." I recommend [using brackets to state your intended meaning].

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

- Avigail Oren:** So, if I go to the section with the Garrett Underpass today, what do I see?
- Brett Hollern:** We eliminated the bypass by adding 1800' of trail on the original right-of-way and now where the fill area is, you see a concrete arch culvert that at some point, we decided if we were going to put culverts in and we wanted it to look like a railroad tunnel. So, instead of going with traditional box culvert designs, we found a design called the BEBO arches. And, we have three of those arches in Somerset County – that same style that mimic the traditional railroad style.
- Avigail Oren:** So, if I understand it correctly, the trail is going over this concrete...
- Brett Hollern:** It goes through, yeah. The road goes over top—where the bridge used to be is now, you know, you wouldn't know you're on it if you're not paying attention. You don't realize you're crossing...
- Avigail Oren:** The bike trail.
- Brett Hollern:** The bike trail.
- Linda Boxx:** Sort of like that [shows Avigail photograph on iPhone], but that's the Eastern Continental Divide.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay, so it's similar to the culvert at the Eastern Continental Divide?
- Brett Hollern:** Yes.
- Avigail Oren:** Okay. And, how intensive of a project was that? Are these projects getting easier...?
- Brett Hollern:** So, they'll each have their own set of problems so to speak. For instance, that project, because we were going to have to close the road in some way, shape, or form – as a PennDOT project, they looked at what- so they'll come in and do a scoping field view, they looked at what the detours would be for the local traffic. Well, to get anywhere from where you would use that normally is that road was, like, a seven-mile plus detour in either direction. So, they said we couldn't close the road – we had to do half-width construction. So, we had to

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

maintain one lane of traffic which added more cost to the project logistically so we had to build half of it – fill that over the road on the other side and then move to the other side and replicate the procedure on the other side. So, that added time and cost to the project. Now for instance, when we did the Eastern Continental Divide, we were able to close the road completely and cars used, you know, a separate detour.

**Avigail Oren:** That does sound complicated and frustrating. And, what about political issues? Were there, with any of these projects, political issues you had to be sensitive to or county commissioners that you were keeping in mind as you were working on these?

**Brett Hollern:** Well, I'm giving credit to my dad. When I got hired to county, my dad said, "There's two things you need to remember: have someone wake you up when it's time to retire and always thank the county commissioners."

[Chuckle]

My dad sort of liked to bust stones a little bit. But, the second piece of advice was to always thank the county commissioners. Every board of county commissioners that I worked under was always supportive of the trail, but it was unique to see the evolution of how they went from, "Yeah, we'll own it, but we're not going to spend any money on it," to, "Hey, we're going to use the hotel tax to help pay for it and buy equipment." And, you know, it really was an evolution from paying somebody with our nonprofit trail group \$15,000 a year to mow the trail to owning the piece of equipment that it takes to mow the trail and then paying staff to do it. So, the value was in sort of like, "Hey, it's going to help rejuvenate these towns," and the commissioner see that and recognized it – some more than others. But, there's always been at least the majority of the county commissioners in Somerset County have been super supportive of the trail. So, that was really neat to see because it was this, you know, everybody was touting the economic development end of it, but also quality of life stuff and what it was going to mean to these communities. But, when you see it recognized at the county commissioner level, politically, it was very rewarding.

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

- Avigail Oren:** Excellent. And, I want to ask you about – there were seven crossings that you had to negotiate with the Public Utilities Commission, the State Public Utilities Commission. Where do these projects fall in the timeline? Were they done all at once? Were they scattered?
- Brett Hollern:** They were all pretty much done concurrently as we were able to fund and let those projects for construction. They all fell within the same- about seven miles of each other. So, from the Salisbury Viaduct, I believe, Keystone was the last one. So actually, they were all within about four miles of each other. And, I don't know if the Bollman was lumped in. The Bollman Bridge was lumped in with...
- Linda Boxx:** Scratch Hill.
- Brett Hollern:** ...because they were owned by CSX but it was off the trail.
- Avigail Oren:** Right.
- Linda Boxx:** Oh, I thought you meant the Scratch Hill.
- Brett Hollern:** The Scratch Hill was, but the Bollman had its PUC issue. I think it was separate. It was separate, but where the Bollman ended up at was another one of the PUC process. We had to go back after the order was established, what would happen with that crossing – we had to go back to them and say, "Oh, by the way, we want to put a bridge back here," which is different from what we had actually gone and designed and bid for the project. We were going to cross Scratch Hill Road at-grade – bring the level of the road up, take out the existing structure that was there. And, now that I think about that, that actually was a pretty complicated process to go through all that, change the plans, sort of get PennDOT to forget that we were doing that section because that was, from their standpoint, not how we would have approached the project. I don't want to get too much into the bones.
- Avigail Oren:** Yeah, we'll loop back to that. What was your relationship with the PUC? Did you have a good working relationship with them?

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

**Brett Hollern:** So, I didn't really ever do anything with the PUC. It was largely our solicitor and our county planning director that dealt with that. So, I was lucky to not to have to do much with them.

**Avigail Oren:** I mean, I think that raises the question for me of, you know, how many layers are you going through if you need something? Did you feel like you were in a liaison role or that you were working in a team?

**Brett Hollern:** It really was situationally dependent.

**Avigail Oren:** Okay.

**Brett Hollern:** With a lot of the projects that were enhancement-funded, because a lot of the funding was funding that the Allegheny Trail Alliance had gotten, that they were, you know, keeping that organization apprised of things. And, having the support of that organization was really important particularly when we would hit roadblocks because we would strike the numbers. We weren't just building a trail in Somerset County. We were building a trail that was connecting Pittsburgh to D.C. And certainly, there was a ton of value in that. But, every project was a little bit different. I think at the county level I was probably sort of a one-man show in a lot of ways. But, we had such great support from the nonprofit group, from the Allegheny Trail Alliance, and from project partners: DCNR, and PennDOT who was, much as you know, something like, "Oh, it's a PennDOT project. It's a pain in the butt." They were all so very valuable and we had some good allies there, too.

**Avigail Oren:** So, I want to ask you about the adoption of the Great Allegheny Passage as a name for the trail. In Somerset County, was the name readily adopted? Did people like the transition to that name or did you notice any pushback?

**Brett Hollern:** Very little pushback. I kind of didn't know what to expect because there were a lot of people that had a lot of sweat equity in the early days of the Allegheny Highlands Trail project. But, when we came back to the Rails-to-Trails Association's board and said, "Hey, this is where we want to go..." [Each trail group was asked to formally adopt the GAP name and drop their individual moniker]. In fact, I don't think

Commented [ASO11]: Clarify?

Commented [BH12R11]: Each trail group was asked to formally adopt the GAP name and drop their individual moniker



## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

anybody objected when it was put to a vote. Went back into our county commissioners and said, "Hey, we're dropping the Allegheny Highlands Trail, we're going to become the Great Allegheny Passage." And, the Board of Commissioners at the time were like, "Well, you guys are a public voice," and they all supported it as well. So, there was no pushback at all. I think because for so long, the vision was – it wasn't just a local project, it was going to connect us to Pittsburgh. So, the idea that it wasn't a series of trails anymore, it was one system, resonated.

**Avigail Oren:** Yeah.

**Linda Boxx:** Maynard Sembower was the lone holdout.

**Brett Hollern:** Right, right. Maynard didn't have a vote on our board either though.

[Chuckle]

**Avigail Oren:** Yeah, that matters. I want to conclude by asking you about, you know, the last years of the trail construction into the post-construction phase. How were you preparing for the trail to be sustainable? Did you do work to implement maintenance plans or, you know, was there an aspect of your job becoming actually more about stewardship than construction?

**Brett Hollern:** Yeah, absolutely. So, once we, I guess, the last major capital improvement project was the Pinkerton Tunnel. But, up until then, I mean, we were operating the 42-mile Linear Park. What I always focused on was, like, ensuring that there was going to be a plan in place to care for this and funding in place to care for it in perpetuity in that it was operated more like a municipal park than sort of a trail through the woods. We had the equipment, a place to store the equipment, the manpower, and the resources needed to maintain it properly versus, you know, piecemeal, and trying to do preventive maintenance versus cleaning things up. But, we're always going to have to do unforeseen maintenance because of the nature of trees falling and hillside sliding and things of that ilk. But, you know, right up until this year, we bought a mini excavator, which, cleaning ditches is as utilitarian as it is – it's such a hugely

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

important thing. And, if you don't have the right piece of equipment, you can't do it. And, it was a tough sell. But, you know, our county commissioners have budgeted this year and they- I'm not there anymore, but just found out that they actually have had it now for about a month and we're getting to a backlog of some maintenance issues. Because my tagline is, "If it's growing or flowing, it's going to be a problem for you on your trail because neither of them ever stop," right? Water is always a problem and vegetation is always a problem.

**Avigail Oren:** That's a good motto.

**Rhody Rhodomeyer:** Oh, your final thing was the door.

**Brett Hollern:** Oh, yes. And, we did put doors in the tunnel. We're going to talk about the tunnel.

**Rhody Rhodomeyer:** Oh, okay.

**Brett Hollern:** Yeah.

**Avigail Oren:** So, you worked on this project...

**Brett Hollern:** Opening the doors in the tunnel. Yeah, so that's probably more tunnel stuff and then operations and maintenance. But, we do keep the tunnel closed every year. And so, opening the tunnels is a big event. And now, like, our county commissioner now comes out, brings his grandson out, and opens... Yeah. So, it's pretty fun.

**Avigail Oren:** So, you worked on this trail for pretty much the entire beginning of your career.

**Brett Hollern:** Twenty years.

**Avigail Oren:** Twenty years. I mean, that's a significant amount of time. What kept you getting up every morning and working on the trail?

**Brett Hollern:** I think it's, well, you know, I came from the recreation and park management education, personal interest level, but more so just the idea that it's a legacy project, right, it's going to be here hopefully forever, right? And, the amount of people- and something that I probably regret for my 20 years is I didn't get

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

to go out more and just talk to people using it. Because that was like, you know, you just standing around and someone comes through like, "Where you from?" "We're from Washington State, we're from Hawaii." Or, people like riding their bike across the country and they make a point to jump on the trail in Pittsburgh and continue to, you know, they knew they could get from Pittsburgh to D.C. off road. And, like, sort of as it fits in, into the bigger thing of, like, the ongoing development of trails in the country, like, will always be looked at as, like, a pioneer in a lot of ways for what was able to be done. It's kind of easy to build rail trail, it's not easy to build the Great Allegheny Passage because of the terrain and landscape it went through. So, no matter how many trails are built, done – the GAP will always be unique because of the landscape and the towns and everything that it goes through. So, I think it's just overall the intrinsic value of being part of that project for me was super rewarding.

**Avigail Oren:** That's awesome. So, I'm going to stop this part of the conversation here and we'll resume in a minute talking about the tunnel and Bollman Bridge.

**Linda Boxx:** Avigail, I have follow-up questions, Brett? If I could?

**Avigail Oren:** Yes, absolutely. Can you come a little closer to the mic?

**Linda Boxx:** And, these might be covered in the prior interviews. But, talk about Linc [Lincoln Van Sickle]. Did he provide you with early supervision or mentorship or tutoring?

**Brett Hollern:** Definitely mentorship and, you know, there was a period where he and I both sort of were working hand-in-hand. He was sort of transitioning away. He was still involved and I was taking on responsibilities – certainly guided me through the early part of, like, the PennDOT process which was really confusing at first to understand. But, he did a lot of yeoman's work. I think his last project was probably the Salisbury Viaduct. And, I came in and, you know, I got to do, like, the final inspection on the Salisbury Viaduct – really nothing to do with it. But, yeah, he was huge. He was a catalyst for getting the project done because at the time Somerset County didn't have anybody and loosely, you know, planning director got

## BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW

---

assigned stuff, he pushed papers for the project and stuff. So, I learned a lot from Linc in a very short amount of time.

**Linda Boxx:** Did you talk earlier about the Keystone Viaduct project, you know, PennDOT requiring the three spans, two piers to be removed and DCNR's involvement in that? Was it part of any of the conversations?

**Avigail Oren:** I do not believe it was in any great detail.

**Brett Hollern:** That was PUC orders well, right, because it was the State Route 2006. The Glade City Road, yeah, 2006, was what I would call a horn underpass because you had to beep your horn to make sure that a car wasn't coming the other way.

**Rhody Rhodomeyer:** Was that a subway?

[Crosstalk]

**Brett Hollern:** Yeah, it's the subway, too.

[Chuckle]

So, as part of that, PennDOT, the PUC – PennDOT said, "Well, you got to straighten our road if you're going to do this bridge. You have to take out one of these piers or both of these piers." And, the challenge was because the structure was curved, had a slight curvature to it, that the beams that were going to replace it had to mimic that curve. And then, I think we had to go with, like, COR-TEN Weathering Steel so it matched and didn't look out of place and would weather and look like that's how the structure always looked.

**Linda Boxx:** If I remember the number – I think the spans were about 80-foot long each. And so, you created this 240-foot-wide span now, where before was, you know, whatever the distance between two offset piers were. And, with Ed Deaton and Dick Sprenkle from DCNR – we were arguing with PennDOT that we didn't need to take out three spans, that one pier and two spans would do it, and argued with them for probably a good year until we finally gave up the argument and went with the two piers, three spans, because they were not going to budge.

**Brett Hollern:** Right.

## **BRETT HOLLERN INTERVIEW**

---

**Linda Boxx:** And, it's this huge thing over this little country road...

**Brett Hollern:** And a creek.

**Linda Boxx:** And a creek. And, the other question – besides the maintenance money, was there ever county money put into acquisition or development that you know of? The doors at the tunnel...

**Brett Hollern:** That was the first one. I'll have to think about that. When Jim Marker was commissioner, there was a willingness to be flexible with how we did things and that there was some county money here and there. No large sums of county money. I'd have to think about if we ever actually spent any.

**Linda Boxx:** And, probably once your circuit rider position terminated and you became a county employee paid by the county – they were picking up your salary for that anyhow.

**Brett Hollern:** Right.

**Linda Boxx:** So, that was their contribution, certainly.

**Brett Hollern:** Yeah, yeah.

**Linda Boxx:** Because did you work under Dave Mankameyer? Was he there when you...?

**Brett Hollern:** Yes, yeah. Dave was commissioner, I think, probably whatever that term was and then one other term when I was employed there. I'd have to go back and really think about that one.

**Avigail Oren:** All right. Thank you so much, Brett.

**Brett Hollern:** You're welcome.

[End 0:47:22.7]

cr-t/p

**www.AroundTheClockTranscription.com**  
**412-853-3299**