

DELAWARE & LEHIGH NATIONAL HERITAGE CORRIDOR STRATEGIC PLAN 2026 - 2033





FROM TONY PIERUCCI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR:

Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor has always been more than a collection of historic sites, trails, and natural areas. It's a living region where heritage, environment, and community life are deeply intertwined — where a towpath built for mule-drawn canal boats now connects communities through recreation, economic activity, and shared identity. It's where the National Canal Museum tells the stories of the region's history and evolution. This is an area where the landscapes shaped by generations of industry and agriculture now anchor the quality of life for the people who call this region home.

Put simply: **this is a distinctive place.**

This strategic plan reflects that understanding. It builds on everything we've been doing — preserving heritage, completing trails, supporting partners, running programs, evolving museum exhibitions — and asks a deeper question: what does all of this add up to for the people and communities of the Corridor?



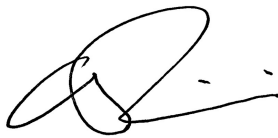
Our emerging answer is that D&LNHC's work creates places — places where people connect with history, with nature, with each other, and with a sense of belonging. The trail isn't just infrastructure; it's the spine of community life across five counties and is the primary means we have of connecting people to their backyards. And when people feel connected to the places they live, there are many downstream impacts:

- Psychological and physical health improves
- Since they now have skin in the game, they are more willing to invest in their communities
- Greater investment means a healthier economy and thriving communities

What I'm describing are all well-documented outcomes of **strong place-attachment**.

This strategic plan leans into this concept to help establish and grow that attachment, to ultimately achieve those downstream impacts. You'll see it in our commitment to researching the connection between natural and built environments and community wellbeing. You'll see it in our investment in the outdoor economy and trail activation. And you'll see it in our growing partnerships with destination marketing organizations and the state Office of Outdoor Recreation.

None of this replaces our trails work over the years — it contextualizes it. The trail was never the end, but a means to it. And our museum education work continues in a different form as well. **History is most powerful when it's not just preserved but activated as part of a living, thriving place. That's what this plan is about.**



Antone (Tony) Pierucci



INTRODUCTION

Over the course of eight months, Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor embarked on a strategic planning process to guide the organization into its next chapter. Engagement with Staff, the Board, and existing and future partners played a vital role in shaping this strategic plan, ensuring that diverse perspectives are integrated into the final framework. A structured engagement process included targeted interviews, listening sessions, interactive brainstorming, and ongoing collaboration to guide strategic decision-making.

The report that follows reflects the updated vision, mission, and values of the organization, and a three-year and seven-year strategic plan. An implementation plan, which reflects this three- and seven-year horizon has also been developed.

DEVELOPING THIS STRATEGIC PLAN

Ensuring this plan incorporates the perspectives of staff, Board members and partners was a top priority for the D&LNHC Board of Directors and Executive Director. As such, as part of the planning process, D&LNHC reached out to the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, municipalities, planning organizations, heritage organizations, tourism organizations, small businesses, educational institutions, corporations and funders, and nonprofits serving our communities. A list of organizations that participated is included in the Appendix. The following summarizes the key inputs into the strategic planning process.

Document Review: A review of prior action plans, finance, board governance, grant proposals and reports and evaluation documents grounded the process in data and documentation.

Staff Perspective: A small group conversation with three staff, two listening sessions with the full staff, working sessions with the leadership team, and bi-weekly conversations with the Executive Director helped to ensure the staff perspective was included from start to finish, as the planning process evolved.





Board Member Input: Four meetings with the Steering Committee, a three-hour long retreat with the full Board (and one-on-one follow-up with Board members who couldn't make it), a focus group with ad-hoc (non-voting) Board committee members, Board conversations at the March and May 2026 Board meetings, and final approval from the Board on May 15, 2026. All these touch points ensured the Board perspective was integrated throughout the process, with the goal of establishing Board buy-in and support for plan launch and implementation.

Partner Input: Listening sessions with 91 current or future partners in the region, spanning all five counties, were critical to the process. Partnership is a core way the D&LNHC carries out its mission in the region, so developing the plan with partner input was essential. The 91 partners engaged included:

- 42 trail owners
- 6 key employees of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
- 12 corporate, funding partners
- 10 economic development, tourism, and planning organizations
- 5 individuals representing local government agencies
- 6 nonprofit organizations
- 10 individuals representing heritage organizations



REFRESHED CORE STATEMENTS

Vision

We envision a vibrant region grounded in the area's unique built and natural landscape, where communities feel connected by a shared past and commitment to a bright future.

Mission

Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor preserves the legacy of our region's industries by transforming historic and natural landscapes into vibrant assets that connect people to place.

Values

We believe...

- **A sense of place is a prerequisite to a happy and healthy community**
- **We are stronger together**, and collaboration and partnership are core to our work
- **A welcoming, connected, and inclusive Corridor is a thriving Corridor**
- **Vibrant communities** are created through healthy environments and healthy people
- **History is actionable**, guiding and enhancing our future
- **Creativity and innovation are essential** to long-term value, resilience, and success

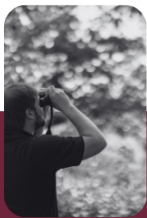




STRATEGIC PLAN OVERVIEW

THREE STRATEGIES, ELEVEN GOALS

- Each strategy addresses a dimension of D&LNHC's work.
- Each goal drives us closer to our shared vision.
- Together, they create the conditions for vibrant, connected places across the Corridor.



Summary of D&LNHC's New Strategic Plan

STRATEGY 1

Enhance Operational Excellence

Continue building the systems, talent, and financial resilience that power D&LNHC's long-term success.

GOAL 1

Build a Stable, Thriving Staff Team

Competitive compensation, professional development, wellness supports, and a culture of innovation.

GOAL 2

Strengthen Board Governance and Effectiveness

Strategic recruitment, meaningful onboarding, and active fundraising and advocacy roles.

GOAL 3

Strengthen Financial Resilience

Diversified revenue, fundraising infrastructure, earned income, and a path toward an endowment.

GOAL 4

Build Evidence of Impact

Measure impact, conduct place-based wellbeing research, and contribute to the broader field of preservation/conservation.

STRATEGY 2

Preserve and Strengthen Our Natural and Historic Assets

Preserve and connect the Corridor's unique assets so residents and visitors experience vibrant, meaningful places that reflect the region's identity.

GOAL 1

Develop Regional Trails as Corridors of Community Life

Complete priority segments of D&L Trail, lead regional networks, explore spur trail advocacy, and support safety and maintenance.

GOAL 2

Strengthen Heritage Across the Corridor

Expand historic collection access, assess heritage assets, explore direct preservation, and support partner efforts.

GOAL 3

Facilitate Environmental Stewardship through Strategic Support

Advance stewardship programming — through Lehigh Valley Greenways and additional partnerships — serving all five counties.

STRATEGY 3

Activate the Corridor

Transform how residents and visitors understand and engage with the places that make this region someplace special rather than any old place.

GOAL 1

Invest in Our Corridor Partners

Strengthen trail partnerships, convene heritage partners, and facilitate conservation collaboration.

GOAL 2

Market and Promote the Corridor

Comprehensive marketing strategy, expanded presence, and revenue-generating experiences.

GOAL 3

Provide Dynamic, Inclusive Programming

Reimagine the museum as a hub for Corridor-wide work, activate trails through events, and enhance canal-related hands-on experiences.

GOAL 4

Champion Heritage Areas as Catalysts of Quality of Life

Original research and storytelling positioning heritage areas as essential to community wellbeing.



OUR ANCHORS: MEASURING SUCCESS

For each strategy, we have thoughtfully selected one measure of success to serve as the “anchor measure,” grounding us in what we ultimately hope to achieve, as well as a “North Star” measure for the strategic plan as a whole. More detailed measures of success have been developed for our implementation plan, but the following metrics anchor our accountability.

Our North Star

Both residents and visitors report a strong sense of place throughout the Corridor.

Strategy 1: Enhance Operational Excellence

Anchor Measure: Increase financial resilience through revenue diversity, by increasing non-state and non-federal funding from a baseline of approximately 33% of the operating budget.

Strategy 2: Preserve & Strengthen Our Regional Assets

Anchor Measure: Miles of priority trail completed and number of heritage projects where D&LNHC played a direct or indirect role.

Strategy 3: Activate the Corridor

Anchor Measure: Total D&LNHC-centered visitation, including trail users, museum visitors, program and event attendees, with out-of-region visitors tracked as a distinct percentage.



Strategy 1: Enhance Operational Excellence

Objective: Continue building the systems, talent, and financial resilience that power D&LNHC’s long-term success.

Goal 1: Build a Stable, Thriving Staff Team

- 1.1.1 Invest systematically in staff professional growth and development
- 1.1.2 Implement comprehensive wellness and retention supports, including equitable compensation
- 1.1.3 Foster a culture of transparency, collaboration, innovation, and continuous improvement

Goal 2: Strengthen Board Governance and Effectiveness

- 1.2.1 Establish structured board recruitment and composition strategy
- 1.2.2 Implement comprehensive board onboarding and ongoing training
- 1.2.3 Clarify and activate board roles in fundraising and advocacy
- 1.2.4 Strengthen board governance practices and accountability

Goal 3: Strengthen Financial Resilience

- 1.3.1 Build fundraising infrastructure and capacity
- 1.3.2 Grow and diversify individual donor support (including endowment development)
- 1.3.3 Expand corporate and foundation partnerships
- 1.3.4 Develop sustainable earned revenue streams
- 1.3.5 Establish strong and transparent fiscal documentation practices

Goal 4: Build Evidence of Impact

- 1.4.1 Develop systems to track and measure D&LNHC’s impact
- 1.4.2 Publish and disseminate annual impact report



Strategy 2: Preserve and Strengthen Our Natural and Historic Assets

Objective: Preserve and connect the Corridor's unique assets so residents and visitors experience vibrant, meaningful places that reflect the region's identity.

Goal 1: Develop Regional Trails as Corridors of Community Life

2.1.1 Complete priority segments of the D&L Trail

2.1.2 Continue to serve as a leader in regional trail networks

2.1.3 Investigate and implement D&LNHC's role in community-led spur trail development through advocacy

2.1.4 Support trail maintenance, safety improvements, and amenity enhancement through coordination, assessment, and advocacy

Goal 2: Strengthen Heritage Across the Corridor

2.2.1 Preserve and enhance access to the museum collection

2.2.2 Explore and assess D&LNHC's role in direct preservation of heritage resources across the Corridor, including conducting an inventory and assessment of heritage assets

2.2.3 Support partner heritage preservation and access efforts, focusing on the preservation of critical canal infrastructure

Goal 3: Facilitate Environmental Stewardship Through Strategic Support

2.3.1 Advance the Lehigh Valley Greenways (LVG) program based on its strategic plan

2.3.2 Explore and develop environmental stewardship approach for other counties



Strategy 3: Activate the Corridor

Objective: Transform how residents and visitors understand and engage with the places that make this region someplace special rather than any old place.

Goal 1: Invest in Our Corridor Partners

3.1.1 Strengthen trail partnerships (Trail Towns and Trail Ownership Council)

3.1.2 Convene and support heritage partners to advance preservation work and support advocacy efforts

3.1.3 Facilitate environmental conservation partnerships

Goal 2: Market and Promote the Corridor

3.2.1 Develop and execute a comprehensive marketing strategy

3.2.2 Expand physical presence and visibility of D&LNHC throughout the Corridor

3.2.3 Develop and market revenue-generating products and experiences

Goal 3: Provide Dynamic, Inclusive Programming

3.3.1 Reimagine the museum as a community and sector resource hub for the entire Corridor

3.3.2 Develop and deliver dynamic programming for diverse audiences

3.3.3 Activate trails through programming, events, and fee-based experiences

3.3.4 Preserve and creatively enhance boat ride concession, including mule care, canal boat, and the preservation of Abbott Street Lock

Goal 4: Champion Heritage Areas as Catalyzers of Quality of Life

3.4.1 Conduct or commission research on heritage areas' value for quality of life and community wellbeing

3.4.2 Support and activate the heritage area sector through research and storytelling



Acknowledgements

We are so grateful to the members of the Steering Committee who volunteered their time, energy, and expertise to guide this strategic planning process.

Andrea Smith

Dick Hughes

Rick Stringer

Andy Hamilton

Emily Connors Henry

Scott Butler

David Maher

Jake Warfel

Tony Pierucci

We are also grateful to the organizations that participated in our strategic planning process! Your perspectives are invaluable to us as we chart this next chapter.

- St. Luke's University Health Network
- Crayola
- Pocono Mountains Visitors Bureau
- Visit Luzerne County
- Visit Bucks County
- Discover Lehigh Valley
- Wildlands Conservancy
- PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
 - Bureau of Recreation and Conservation
 - Bureau of State Parks
 - Bureau of Forestry
- North Branch Land Trust
- Luzerne Foundation
- Discover NEPA
- City of Easton
- All the municipalities who participate in our D&L ownership council
- Carbon County Economic Development
- White Haven Chamber
- Diamond City Partnership
- Bucks County Economic Development
- Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission
- Friends of the Delaware Canal
- East Coast Greenway Alliance
- Cycle Forward
- Rails to Trails Conservancy
- Durham Historical Society
- Doylestown Historical Society
- Historic Bethlehem Museum and Sites
- Luzerne County Historical Society

And finally, thank you to our funders who made this planning process possible.

This project is financed in part with funding from the National Park Service's National Heritage Areas Program, and a grant from the Community Conservation Partnerships Program, the Heritage Areas Program Fund, under the administration of the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Bureau of Recreation and Conservation. We are thankful for the support of these and many other partners

