

Media Release

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For Immediate Release:

**Coalition Backing Repair of Maryland's Largest and Most-Visited National Park; Repair of the Big Slackwater Section is "Highest Priority"
Economic Stimulus Package Assistance is Being Sought; Project to Save Lives and Bring Visitor Spending
US Senator Benjamin Cardin and Congressman Roscoe Bartlett Join With Other Elected Officials in Making Announcement**

(Hagerstown, MD) -- The "Highest Priority Shovel-Ready" economic stimulus project in Maryland's largest and most-visited national park is the repair of the washed-out Big Slackwater section, located in Washington County, Maryland.

A coalition of organizations, community leaders, and elected officials, suggests that the proposed economic stimulus package include funding to move the construction project to the front-burner (from more than twelve years of inaction).

Kevin Brandt is the Superintendent of the Chesapeake and Ohio National Historical Park (C&O Canal NHP). "Repairing the Big Slackwater towpath is our highest priority at the C&O Canal National Historical Park." Brandt said that this section of the towpath was first damaged in 1972 following Hurricane Agnes, and fully washed out following the two floods of 1996. Cyclists and hikers have to manage a 6-mile detour on narrow back roads. "Repairing the towpath will eliminate a hazardous detour, increase visitation and restore the historic relationship between the towpath and the Potomac River," Brandt said.

The coalition of many interested groups and organizations is working towards repairing the broken section of the park, which is the largest national park (184-5-miles long) and most-visited (over 3-million visitors during 2008). The coalition has been working with state and federal governments for several years, trying to move the project forward. Maryland passed a state bond bill in 2006 to help pay for part of the repair work's engineering. Now, the Big Slackwater Coalition is taking the opportunity to formally request assistance through the proposed Economic Stimulus Package.

"I'm optimistic that by working with so many energetic and creative partners we will soon be able to make the repairs necessary to eliminate the hazardous detour around the washed out towpath and allow visitors to enjoy the full experience of hiking and biking the towpath along the Potomac River," Superintendent Brandt said.

The National Park Service has reported annually that funding is not available for this high priority project, according to recent reports, the C&O Canal NHP only receives 36-cents for every 1-dollar needed to operate and make the most basic of repairs.

Hagerstown-Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau President Tom Riford has been helping raise funds and awareness about the project. Riford has testified to various legislative committees in Annapolis several times regarding the Big Slackwater section, and also presented to the Washington County Commissioners. Riford attended several inspection trips with local, state, and federal elected officials. "Independent studies have reported that once repaired, the park would attract an additional 58,000 visitors annually to Washington County - bringing a minimum of \$1.8-million in new visitor spending every year."

Riford said that while new visitor spending is important, especially during challenging economic times, safety is a huge concern. "The six-mile detour has winding county roads, no shoulders, blind corners, and a steep and curving descent. Everyone agrees that the detour is not safe for vehicles and also bike traffic." During the past few years the park service has documented more than 35 people who were injured and transported to local hospitals who were on the detour. Some of these people have been reported to have very serious injuries. Most were bike riders on the detour, and most were hit by cars or crashed because of the road or traffic.

The coalition feels that the proposed economic stimulus package would be perfectly suited for targeted the repair of the Slackwater section of the canal, since it would not only provide jobs on the front-end with the construction project, but also bring jobs and through increased visitor spending when completed. "This is important, and this opportunity while helping our local economy will also help save lives," Riford said.

The management and staff of the C&O Canal National Historical Park along, with the coalition, have identified the repair project for the Big Slackwater section is the park's top priority for repair. The C&O Canal Association, the C&O Canal Trust, the Washington County Commissioners, and the Hagerstown-Washington County Convention and Visitors Bureau have joined with several state and federal elected officials working to move the project forward.

United States Senator Benjamin Cardin supports the priority project. "The C&O Canal National Historical Park is a national treasure that serves as a very important recreational amenity for residents of Maryland and a significant attraction for visitors from across the nation. For far too long, Maryland's most-visited national park has endured the damaged section at Big Slackwater. Restoring the canal and towpath is critical to ensuring the safety of visitors and fully developing this historic asset as a tool for economic development." The senator and the senator's staff have toured the entire length of the closed section, and are working closely with the park service to move the repair project forward.

Congressman Roscoe Bartlett said, "The C&O Canal National Historical Park is the largest and most visited national park in Maryland. I am very proud that most of it is located within the Sixth District. I am glad there is widespread agreement that the highest priority is repair of the gap and multi-mile detour at Big Slackwater near Williamsport. The continuing active involvement and support of so many people donating both their time as well as money to the C&O Canal National Historical Park demonstrates it is an economic, recreational and cultural jewel in our region."

Maryland Delegate LeRoy Myers, Jr. is the Chairman of the Washington County Delegation to Annapolis. "Washington County has more of the C&O Canal National Historical Park than any other single jurisdiction in Maryland. Hundreds of thousands of visitors utilize the park locally, and we're proud that the park is headquartered in our county. With the new connection to the Great Allegheny Passage to Pittsburgh, visitation has greatly increased, yet the ONLY section of the entire towpath that is broken is in Washington County, and it presents park users with a dangerous 6-mile detour. The Delegation agrees that the repair of the Big Slackwater section of Maryland's largest and most visited national park is of critical importance. It's the right thing to do economically, and the right thing to do for public safety."

According to John Barr, the President of the Washington County Board of County Commissioners, "This is a high priority project in Washington County, and we're pleased to work in partnership with the State of Maryland and the Federal Government, in moving towards repairing the multi-mile gap in Maryland's largest and most-visited park. The economic impact locally is in the tens of millions, and would be increased when the repairs are completed. The safety concerns are significant, also. Washington County needs to get the towpath repaired, so cyclists and hikers can get off the miles of dangerous detour. Having the economic stimulus package help this project would bring both economic dividends, but also help prevent potential death or serious injuries."

"Restoring the towpath in the Big Slackwater area is the top priority for the C&O Canal Association and the C&O Canal National Historical Park," said Rachel Stewart, President of the C&O Canal Association. "Big Slackwater is the only gap in the towpath between Georgetown and Cumberland, Maryland, and it forces hikers and bikers to make an unsafe detour along public roads. The members of the C&O Canal Association want to do their part to restore the continuity of the historic route and make the journey a safe one for the many visitors who enjoy the national park." The C&O Canal Association is a citizens' association concerned with the conservation of the natural and historical environment of the C&O Canal and the Potomac River Basin. The Association supports the National Park Service in its efforts to preserve and promote the 184.5-mile towpath and the open spaces within the C&O Canal NHP.

Matt Logan is the President of the C&O Canal Trust, an organization which helps raise funds and awareness for the national park. "The national park identified a significant list of 'shovel-ready and high-priority economic stimulus projects' which when started and also when completed, would create positive investment in our communities and bring needed jobs. The C&O Canal Trust is in agreement that the repair of the towpath break at the Big Slackwater section is the most important of the needed projects and, interestingly, has the potential for the greatest positive economic impact."

Logan said that all along the park's 184.5-mile length that users appreciate and support the unique C&O Canal National Historical Park. "The C&O Canal Trust has helped bring awareness about this issue. The Trust joins with the coalition of elected officials and organizations pushing for this priority project." The C&O Canal Trust was founded to protect, restore, and promote the C&O Canal National Historical Park, one of America's most popular and distinctive national parks. "Over 3-million people each year come to stroll, hike, bicycle, bird-watch, paddle, camp, ski, skate, or otherwise enjoy the historic canal and towpath. This is a historical place that you can touch, within its 20,000 acres, the park tells the story of 19th and 20th century America. Nowhere else can you see the history of the Canal Era so close at hand and learn about Native Americans, the Civil War and slavery, westward expansion, immigration, and industrialization. The repair of the Big Slackwater section will restore history, and also create significant recreational opportunities," Logan said.

What is the Big Slackwater project?

Reconstruct and stabilize the C&O Canal towpath and Big Slackwater historic stone wall, the only break in the continuity of the 184.5-mile long C&O Canal towpath and 318 miles of the new Great Allegheny Passage Trail connecting Washington with Pittsburgh. Repeated floods washed away about 4,200 linear feet of the stone wall supporting the towpath forcing visitors to go elsewhere to recreate or take a 6 mile detour onto a narrow county road where blind curves, steep grades and heavy weekend traffic have injured numerous unsuspecting families of visitors.

Why is this project so important?

It will repair a very important cultural resource and eliminate a very dangerous detour around the Big Slackwater section of the C&O Canal towpath, which is the only break in the continuity of the 184.5 miles of C&O Canal towpath and 316 miles of the Great Allegheny Passage Trail connecting Washington with Pittsburgh. In the last few years more than 35 people have been taken to area hospitals for treatment of various injuries.

Where is the project?

It is located in the Big Slackwater section of the C&O Canal located in Washington County, MD just east of Williamsport. It is an area where the bluffs meet the river and the original canal builders used the slack water behind a dam in the Potomac River as the canal and chiseled out a narrow towpath at the base of the stone bluffs.

How much will it cost?

Current estimates are around \$15,000,000, but that may be much less utilizing a smaller design

for a towpath. A six-foot design could be used, instead of ten or twelve feet of width. Already, the State of Maryland has stepped forward with an approved \$100,000 bond bill, to help partially fund the beginning of engineering studies for the towpath repairs. The bond bill was proposed by the Washington County Delegation.

Who are the park partners involved in the project?

State of Maryland Transportation Enhancement Program, C&O Canal Trust, Hagerstown Convention and Visitor Bureau, C&O Canal Association and Washington County, MD. State and federal officials are also supporting the project. The National Park Service has targeted the Big Slackwater as the highest priority project.

How long has it been out of service?

For more then three decades the Big Slackwater section of the C&O Canal towpath has suffered the ravages of flooding and for the most part has been closed since the mid seventies, and closed for good following flooding in 1996.

Sustainability

Any repairs will be made using sustainable techniques so that once completed, the maintenance of Big Slackwater will be able to be handled by park staff and will be resistant to future flooding.

What is the benefit to the local community?

When this project is completed, 58,000 additional visitors will enjoy this area of the C&O Canal creating an additional economic benefit from heritage and recreational tourism of nearly \$2 million per year. This is in addition to the more than \$30-million that the park already contributes to the Maryland economy.

Paint this Picture

Imagine that you and your family have decided to cycle the entire length of the 318 mile Great Allegheny Passage connecting Pittsburgh to Washington DC. You start in Pittsburgh and are able to cycle on a non-vehicular pathway for 192 miles until you suddenly reach Big Slackwater and are forced to take a 6 mile pedestrian detour on to narrow county roads with steep grades and blind curves where you are exposed to heavy vehicular traffic many of which are pulling trailers. This is the same detour where over the last six years more than 35 people have been taken to area hospitals for treatment of various injuries.

For more information about the C&O Canal National Historical Park, see: www.nps.gov/choh. For more information about the C&O Canal NHP, contact: Kevin Brandt, Superintendent C&O Canal National Historical Park, 301-714-2201.

For information about the C&O Canal Association, see: www.candocanal.org. For information about the C&O canal Trust, see: www.canaltrust.org.

For more information about Washington County, Maryland, see: www.marylandmemories.com.

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