

**CENTENNIAL CAMPAIGN HIGH-IMPACT INITIATIVE**

# A.T. Community™ Program

## THE VISION

Irreplaceable landscapes are protected while the trailside communities that steward them thrive through sustainable, locally driven economic development, community-based conservation, and stewardship through volunteering.



## THE NEED

Appalachian communities are resilient, proud places with deep knowledge of their landscapes and cultures, yet they are navigating rapid change and mounting pressures with limited capacity to tackle challenges that extend far beyond their borders.

The Appalachian Trail is widely known as an iconic hiking destination, but it is also a unifying thread—physically and economically—connecting hundreds of communities across a diverse region. Many of these rural, forest- and water-rich communities lie within the Trail's viewshed and depend on outdoor recreation to sustain local economies and quality of life. As large-scale and incompatible development and shifting economies accelerate, these communities have the most to lose—and the most to gain from coordinated support to help navigate emerging challenges united by a shared vision for the Appalachian Trail landscape.

## THE SOLUTION

Strategic investment in Appalachian Trail communities aligns conservation, recreation access, and economic vitality—ensuring that irreplaceable landscapes are protected while the people who steward them can thrive.

Established by the Appalachian Trail Conservancy in 2009, the A.T. Community™ Program translates decades of on-the-ground experience into practical support for trailside communities pursuing sustainable, locally driven economic development through conservation, tourism and outdoor recreation. Participating communities make a shared commitment to protect the Trail through environmental stewardship and conservation planning led at the local level. Today, 56 designated communities across 13 states form a growing network, with many more seeking to join.

These communities are asking for what they cannot build alone: stronger regional collaboration, access to funding and capacity, and planning tools that turn conservation and economic development priorities into lasting, community-defined outcomes.



## THE APPROACH

A fully funded A.T. Community™ Program would include a full-time outreach manager to lead community planning and outreach efforts and strengthen connections across local leaders, community members, land trusts, state and regional planning offices, and federal funding agencies such as the Appalachian Regional Commission. The program is set to expand and provide regional technical assistance and support through small grants, workshops, and data sharing. ATC, serving as a convener and bridge builder, can leverage resources from our extensive network of partners to meet communities where the greatest needs are going unmet.

The program will also house the Community Conservation Fellowship. Successfully piloted in 2024, this fellowship would be offered into future years for young professionals. This program aims to cultivate the next generation of collaborative conservation leaders, focused on the practice of community-led conservation, providing the time and resources for fellows to implement innovative conservation and natural resource stewardship research and initiatives with communities throughout the Trail landscape.

“The A.T. builds community in an important way. It brings people to Damascus who are committed to exploring and preserving our natural assets, and it connects Damascus to a bigger region and a broader network of people along the entire Trail.” —IDALINA WALKER, Friends of Southwest Virginia

## THE INVESTMENT

# \$2.8 Million

This funding would support staffing for the program, stipends for the fellows, and more technical assistance and small grants for designated A.T. Communities. The investment would establish dynamic collaborative partnerships among local leaders from Georgia to Maine and enable the ATC to serve as a hub for comprehensive resources to propel success.

### Outcomes

- Annual Regional Community & Conservation Engagement Workshops
- Biannual A.T. Community Summit
- Fellowship Program
- Full time Program Manager
- Regional Community & Conservation Engagement Specialists



### CASE STUDY: Damascus, Virginia

This railroad town in the lumber boom of the early 20th century has reinvented itself through outdoor recreation. It became a designated A.T. Community in 2011. Now known as “Trail Town USA,” Damascus thrives on outdoor recreation and tourism. It has leveraged over \$3.8 million in grant funding to revitalize the community into not only a destination to visit, but also an inviting place to live and work. A symbol of the town's support for the A.T. is the Damascus Trail Center, which opened in 2022 and is operated in partnership with the ATC.



To learn more about how your gift can help the ATC achieve its vision for the A.T. Community program, contact [philanthropy@appalachiantrail.org](mailto:philanthropy@appalachiantrail.org) or 304.535.6331.

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