

## Chapter 4: Existing Conditions

### 4.1 Current Trail Systems

#### **Luzerne County Levee Trail System**

This eight foot wide paved trail runs along the top of the Susquehanna River Levee. There are approximately 12 miles of trail in total, in four different “reaches” on both the east and west sides of the river. This trail is open to walkers, joggers, bikers, dog-walkers, and roller-bladers. In winter, it is used by cross-country skiers and sled-riders. Benches and kiosks along the trail offer a place to rest and learn about the Wyoming Valley. This trail also includes connections to key bridges: the Market Street, and Pierce Street bridges in Wilkes-Barre and the Carey Avenue Bridge in Hanover Township and Plymouth Borough, allowing bicyclists and pedestrians to cross the river.

The Susquehanna River Levee trail system includes engineering and heritage kiosks designed by the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor. The four reaches of the Levee Trail are: the First Resident’s Path/Forty Fort Reach, the Anthracite Heritage Walk/Kingston Reach, the Riverside Ramble/Wilkes-Barre and Hanover Reach, and the Plymouth Passage/Plymouth Reach.

#### **Riverside Ramble/Wilkes-Barre and Hanover Reach**

This is a 4 mile stretch of trail on the East side of the Susquehanna, going through the City of Wilkes-Barre and Hanover Township. Between the County Courthouse and Wilkes University the trail will run through Wilkes-Barre’s River Common, then go on-street connection before connecting with the east side Levee trail system in south Wilkes-Barre. The trail provides connections to the Market Street, Pierce Street and Carey Avenue bridges. The Market Street and Pierce Street bridges access the Kingston Reach of the Levee trail. The Carey Avenue bridge provides access to the Borough of Plymouth and the Plymouth Reach of the Levee trail.

#### **Luzerne County National Recreation Trail**

Phase 1 of the Luzerne County National Recreation Trail is open, running 1.8 miles from Pittston’s Riverfront Park to Port Griffith. The trail is packed gravel, and can be used by bikers, walkers, joggers, and dog-walkers, and cross-country skiers in winter. When complete, the Luzerne County National Recreation Trail will be 16 miles long, running along an active freight line on the east side of the Susquehanna River. In Wilkes-Barre, the trail will end at the Train Station where trail users can continue on the Black Diamond Trail or one of the local trails. Phase III of the Luzerne County National Recreation Trail will go north from Pittston to Old Forge.

#### **Black Diamond Trail (D&L Heritage Corridor)**

Once complete, the Delaware and Lehigh Trail will be a 165-mile linear trail from Wilkes Barre to Bristol, PA. The trail follows the route that anthracite coal took from mine to market. It winds through northern mountains and along the banks of the Lehigh and Delaware Rivers through northeast Pennsylvania, the Lehigh Valley and through Bucks County. It is the spine of the Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor, a State Heritage Park and National Heritage Corridor.

The 16 mile unimproved “rail-trail” between Wilkes-Barre and White Haven is known as the Black Diamond Trail. The Black Diamond trail is owned by Anthracite Scenic Trails Association, and will be developed in partnership with the Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor. The Wilkes-Barre Train Station will be the starting point of this regional trail.

### **Ridge to River Trail**

A Feasibility Plan was completed in 2004 to provide a trail within Wilkes-Barre City and Wilkes-Barre Township which will create an on street, on sidewalk linkage between the Black Diamond Trail and the existing Luzerne County Levee Trail System. As shown in Figure 4-1, the trail will use South Street to pass through much of the City.

### **West Side Trail**

The West Side Trail is a 19 mile trail system through the boroughs of Exeter, Wyoming, West Wyoming and West Pittston. This diverse trail includes urban sections of sidewalks and other sections which are off-road in natural settings. Along this section residents can shop or enjoy the eateries and this section provides a safe route to school. The more natural section runs along the river front, Hicks Creek and the railroad tracks. The West Side Trail connects to the Luzerne County Levee Trail and will connect to the Luzerne County National Recreation Trail.

### **Back Mountain Trail**

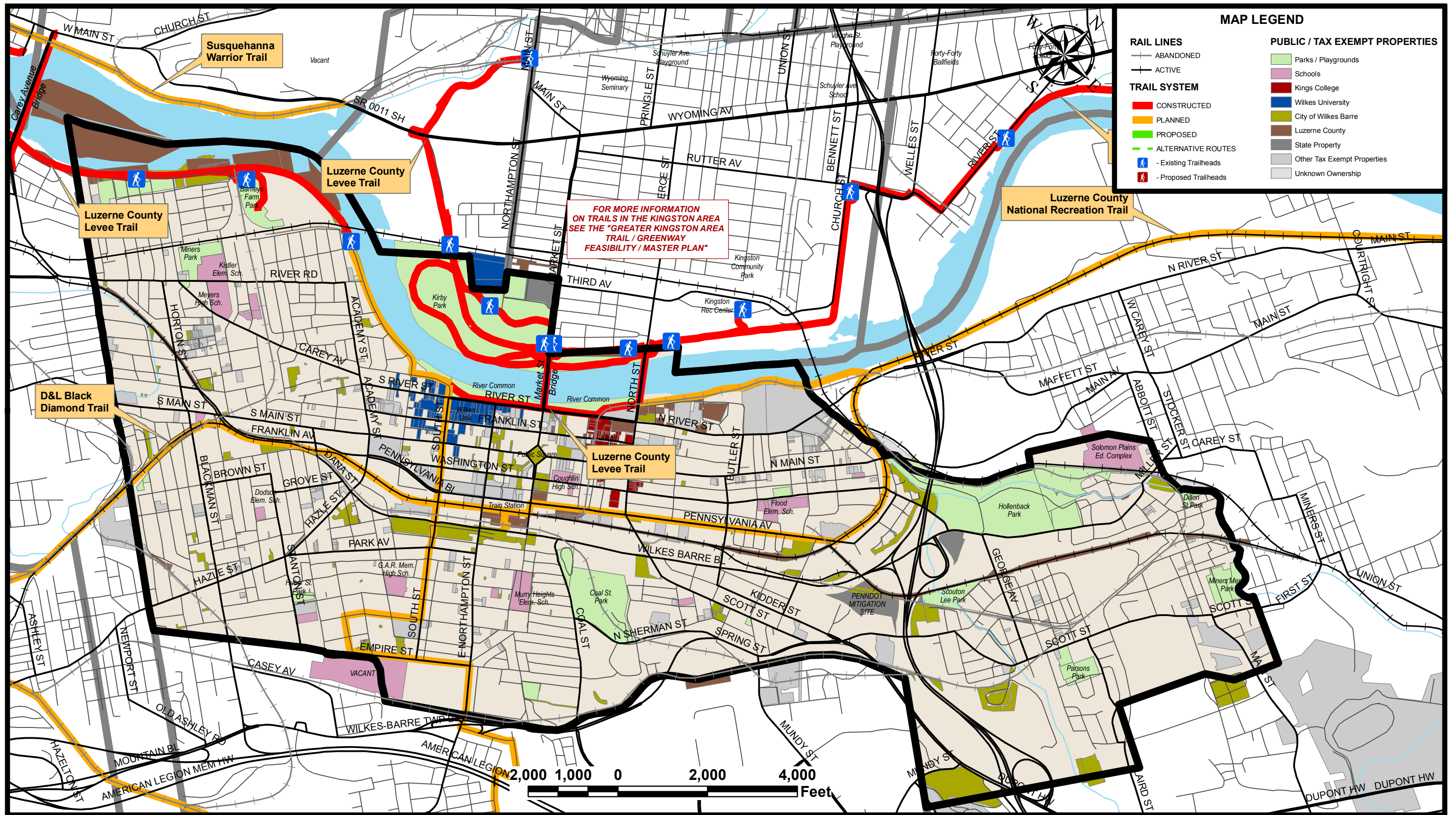
When complete, the Back Mountain Trail will feature 13 miles of winding scenic routes running parallel to Toby’s Creek from Harvey’s Lake to the Borough of Luzerne. The trail will mainly follow the route of a Lehigh Valley Rail line that was originally developed by an ice merchant in the 1880’s. This trail is in the scenic and rapidly developing Back Mountain community.

### **Susquehanna Warrior Trail**

As currently proposed, the Susquehanna Warrior Trail is an 18.5 mile route located parallel to State Route 11 and the Susquehanna River. The trail runs from the Pennsylvania Power and Light (PPL) Riverlands Park in Salem Township north to Larksville Borough. This nearly flat trail will have a packed gravel surface for cyclists, walkers and nature lovers and six (6) trail heads. Phase 1, approximately 10 miles in length, between the PPL Riverlands Park to three miles north of Shickshinny is currently open.

## **4.2 Land Use**

The City of Wilkes-Barre is an industrial city located along the Susquehanna River within the Greater Wyoming Valley of Luzerne County. The City consists of a total land area of 6.85 square miles. Like many downtowns throughout the country, the City of Wilkes-Barre suffered from the decentralization of its commercial districts, as well as, suburban sprawl. However, the City has a strategic advantage because it includes the county seat, as well as, several major universities and colleges, an active citizenry and an active Chamber of Commerce and downtown associations, all working toward revitalizing the urban center, as well as, the communities within the city boundaries. Figure 3.1 is a 2005 aerial photograph of the Study Area.



### 4.3 Topography

The Study Area is located in the Wyoming Valley between the Susquehanna River and Wilkes-Barre Mountain (*See Fig. 2-2*). Much of the City has been protected from flooding by a series of flood control dikes constructed by the US Corps of Engineers. As is typical of a river valley, the topography rises from the river in a series of steps until it reaches the foot of the Wilkes Barre Mountain. Many of the trails proposed by this study are located on railroad right of ways and are therefore relatively level.

### 4.4 Natural Features

During the past 150 years, coal mining and industry has reshaped the Wyoming Valley. Over the years, this area has been extensively developed. In viewing the aerial photo of the study site (*Figure 3.1*), the most notable natural feature is the Susquehanna River. This River has been significantly altered in the past. In an attempt to overcome flooding issues, the US Corp of Engineering has built an extensive system of flood levees, basins, and tunnels, thus changing the waterways throughout the region. However, scatted pockets of natural areas remain along the river's shoreline.

Although few truly “natural areas” remain in this region, some small “green areas” have reemerged from the urban landscape. In addition, small parks and playgrounds are scattered throughout the region.

### 4.5 Wildlife Habitat

As previously discussed, the region has been significantly disturbed in the past and is currently densely developed. Therefore, high quality wildlife habitat is limited small areas of floodplain along the Susquehanna River. Since all of the proposed trails are located on railroad right of ways or in urban areas, the proposed trail system will have no significant impact upon wildlife habitat.

### 4.6 Key Destinations

Based upon discussions with the Steering Committee, Public Meetings, Opinion Surveys and Key Person Interviews key destinations were identified throughout the Study Area. An emphasis was placed upon existing parks, schools, churches, community centers, business districts and trail systems. *Figure 4.1* shows the location of Public and Tax Exempt Properties within the Study Area.

### 4.7 Property Ownership

As shown in *Figure 4.1*, the majority of the property within the Study Area is privately owned. Along with the various municipal parks and schools, a significant amount of land along the Susquehanna River is publicly owned. In addition, the Redevelopment Authority of Luzerne County has acquired many of the railroad right of ways and several individual properties. Much of the proposed trail system will be located on properties owned by the Redevelopment Authority.

#### **4.8 Environmental Contamination**

Residual contamination from railroad operations is the most common contamination found along rail corridors. Commonly reported contaminants along rail corridors include arsenic, which was used as a herbicide to control weeds, metals and petroleum products which dripped from engines and rail cars. Other contaminants may include creosote from the wood ties and coal ash from engines.

Industrial activities within railyards and adjoining the rail may have also contributed contaminants. Due to the heavy industrial development of this region during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries, numerous potential sources of environmental contamination are possible. Additional environmental investigations are recommended prior to any significant grading for the proposed trail system.