

**Project Name:** Improving the Sideling Hill Rest Area through Showcasing MD's Appalachian Mountains, Valleys and Waterways

**Project Manager:** Heather Ersts

**Purpose: What is the purpose of the project?** The purpose of the project is to develop and implement a plan to transform the Sideling Hill Rest Area (SHRA)\* into a gateway attraction to MD's Appalachian Mountains, valleys and waterways through story-telling exhibits, programming and on-site transactional opportunities that differentiate the region from our competitors.

\*SHRA includes the grounds and facilities, including the interior of the welcome center

**How does this project encourage someone from outside of Maryland to visit?** Upon completion, it will encourage travelers from outside of Maryland to visit it because it will be a fun and exciting "one-stop-shop" attraction unto itself while simultaneously inspiring visitors to stay longer and spend more money through enhanced storytelling and if allowed, on-site sales of Maryland products.

**How does this differentiate Maryland in the marketplace?** As the only rest area on the East Coast that is "cut" into one of the Appalachian Mountains, it is a one-of-a kind attraction for inspiring and selling overnight travel and other products/experiences to the region's mountains, valleys and waterways. It is well-positioned as "hub" for the following differentiators identified by the staff - Civil War (John Brown, Antietam), C & O Canal NHP, GAP Trail, App Trail, Religious History (Seton Shrine), Delfest (Music), Whitewater and the Historic National Road.

**Background: Describe how the project came about and how it will proceed.** The project came about because of the opportunity this uniquely-located rest area provides to create linkages and connections to inspire customers to stay overnight and spend more in the four-county region while simultaneously improving a unique asset.

This is multi-year project has multiple smaller projects within it that include stakeholder engagement activities, product development, consumer marketing and seeking outside funds through grants and strategic partnerships. See delivery dates section for more details.

**Situational Analysis: Why is the project important?** The project is important because it will:

- Attract more customers to a physical platform that will inspire them to stay longer and spend more.
- Improve an attraction that is in dire need of physical improvements including the eastbound side which is an under-utilized platform for customer acquisition.
- Amplify DMO and private sector efforts by linking together things to see and do throughout the entire "mountain region" **for the very first time.**
- Increase the value of strategic partnerships thus generating more private sector investment in the project.

**What need does it fill?** It fills the following Market Expansion, Transactional Opportunities, Leveraging Partnership and Maximizing Opportunities needs:

- Enhancing customer service by improving the visitor experience and expanding operations;

- Presenting the state as a fun and exciting overnight destination by providing a physical platform to market MD's mountain, valleys and waterways as one region; and,
- Differentiating the state by attracting more customers to a unique attraction that will act as a gateway to the region and beyond.

**Who benefits from the project?** Customers benefit through increased awareness of high quality experiences and a better understanding of the region as an overnight destination. Businesses benefit because of increased marketing.

**Goals of the project:**

- Improve the rest area through physical improvements that make it a “must-see-and-do” for the region and the state;
- Increase awareness of the region as an overnight destination both onsite and through marketing; and,
- Increase private sector investment that will help to offset operational costs.

**Partners on the project:** MSAC, Frostburg State University, DMOs, Heritage Areas, County Arts Councils, Main Streets, State and National Parks/Trails, Tourism Industry Businesses

**Success measurement(s):**

Through 2021: On-time delivery of projects, increased engagement with SHRA customers, effective engagement with stakeholders, increased private sector investment.

Beyond 2021: Increased number of Customers to rest area; Sustained private sector investment; increased customer satisfaction at the rest area and positive influences on customer behavior (more visitors, staying longer, spending more); Recognized as a “model” project by outside organizations.

**Delivery Dates (Pending Available Funds):**

- Jan 2019 - Conduct a “storytelling” workshop with stakeholders (Heather)
- Feb 2019 - Apply for Appalachian Regional Commission funds to develop the SHRA walking trail (Anne) and develop production log for new content on VM.org and exhibits for the Eastbound side (Heather)
- March - Release RFP for interpretive planning services for SHRA Welcome Center (Anne)
- May 2019 - Open Eastbound mini-Welcome Center on weekends (Casey)
- Sept 2019 - Launch new regional content on VM.org in time for fall foliage (Anne)
- Oct 2019 - Close eastbound side (Casey) install year-round literature distribution kiosk (Casey), hire interpretive planning firm (Anne)
- March 2020 - Interpretive plan delivered to OTD (Anne)
- April 2020 - Apply for Appalachian Regional Commission funds to implement interpretive plan (Anne)
- Fall 2020 - Open SHRA Walking Trail (Heather)
- June 2020 - Release RFP for Exhibit design, construction and installation (Anne)
- Summer 2021 - Exhibits complete, celebration event at SHRA (TBD)