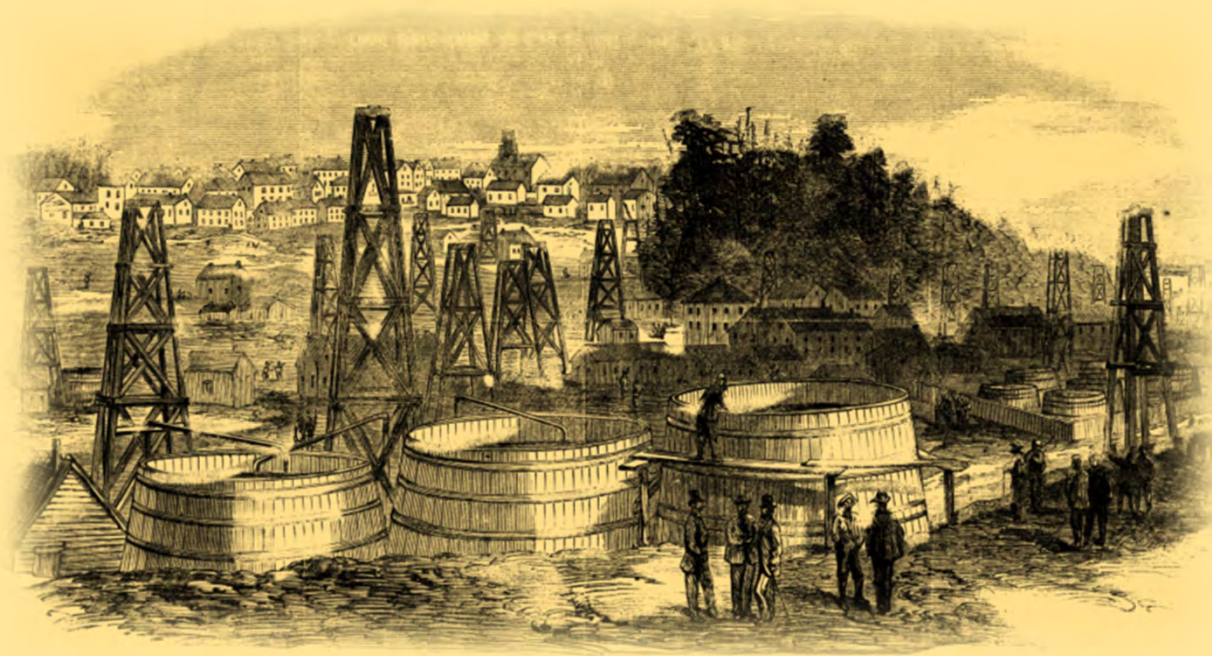


STRATEGIC PLAN

for the

Oil Region National Heritage Area



Prepared for the:

OIL REGION ALLIANCE
for Business, Industry and Tourism

Final: February 26, 2021



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Photo Source: Wikipedia

Executive Summary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



PROJECT INTENT & APPROACH

The Oil Region National Heritage Area (ORNHA) can trace its roots to 1989 when the State established the Pennsylvania Heritage Area Program (PHAP). In 1990, the Oil Region Heritage Park Council was created, and in 1994 their *Management Action Plan* was approved by the State, which then formally designated the “Oil Region Heritage Park.” The Council evolved into the Oil Heritage Region, Inc. (OHR) in 1996. The 1994 plan was updated in 2004, the region achieved National Heritage Area (NHA) status the same year, and in 2005 the OHR merged with other entities to form the Oil Region Alliance (ORA). As stated by ORA, the purpose of this current Strategy is to “refresh the existing ORNHA Management Action Plan ... so that the resulting plan can be readily available for project, policy, and other decision-making over the next five-to-ten-year period.” Based on extensive public input, including a public opinion survey, the following four steps were taken:

- Task 1.0: Project Start-Up & Research
- Task 2.0: Workshop & Concept Plan
- Task 3.0: Draft Strategic Plan Preparation
- Task 4.0: Strategic Plan Presentation & Revisions

The balance of this Executive Summary focuses on the “strategy” portion of the overall document, as opposed to the background information.

VISION, MISSION & FOCUS AREAS

Vision

The intent of this new vision statement is to be concise by utilizing a single sentence, yet to also be comprehensive by including all of the key areas of focus for the ORNHA.

RECOMMENDED VISION STATEMENT

“The ORNHA is a scenic and environmentally rich landscape boasting varied outdoor recreation opportunities, preserved historic resources tied to oil and gas history and interpreted in a compelling way, all resulting in a strong, diverse economy rooted in a robust heritage tourism program.”

Mission

It is recommended that this current mission statement for the ORNHA not change.

“The mission of the Oil Region Alliance of Business, Industry & Tourism is to manage the Oil Region National Heritage Area and to increase the prosperity of the Oil Region by enticing all people to live, work, learn and play in “the Valley that Changed the World” through the preservation, promotion, development, and support of historical, educational, natural, recreational, residential, commercial and industrial destinations.”

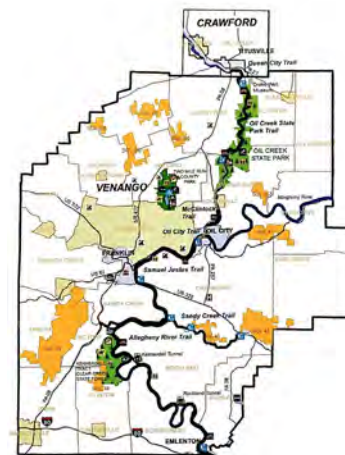
Focus Areas

It is recommended that the current three primary areas of focus for the ORNHA not change:

- Heritage Development
- Tourism
- Economic Development

ORNHA BOUNDARIES

It is proposed that the current boundaries of the ORNHA remain the same, which includes all of Venango County and the southeast part of Crawford County.



INTERPRETATION

It is recommended that an Interpretation Plan be prepared in the near future. In the meantime, suggestions for interpretive themes, stories, sites, and methods build on past efforts. In addition to new stories, such as those of the common worker and minority groups, below are proposed themes.

Themes

- *Interpretive Theme #1:* The United States' oil and gas industry traces its roots to the Oil Region of Pennsylvania.
- *Interpretive Theme #2:* The various booms and busts associated with the oil and gas industry had a significant impact upon the social, cultural and economic facets of the region.
- *Interpretive Theme #3:* Many people associated with the region had a significant impact upon the area, state and country.
- *Interpretive Theme #4:* The natural landscape that served as the setting for the region's oil and gas industry has largely recovered from the industry's negative impacts to now offer a region rich with scenic beauty and outdoor recreational opportunities.

Interpretation Methods

Digital Media

- Create more GPS-based tours focusing on the interpretive themes outlined above.
- Post the WQED 20-minute documentary video on the region's oil and gas heritage on the ORNHA website and show it at regional institutions and museums, including the Venango Museum of Art, Science & Industry.

Of those surveyed, 84% believe that web-based information (videos, tours using GPS, etc.) should be utilized more frequently or more effectively.

Printed Materials

- Continue to utilize brochures and rack cards, and fill the void where some key themes are not addressed.
- Improve the graphic quality of the digital brochures and rack cards on the ORNHA website.

Interpretive Panels

- *Priority #1:* Conduct an inventory of existing interpretive panels throughout the region.
- *Priority #2:* Repair or replace the existing interpretive panels that are too weathered.
- *Priority #3:* Supplement PA State Historic Markers with interpretive panels, where feasible.
- *Priority #4:* Develop videos linked to the exhibits through GPS for the most significant stories.



GPS-based tours can instantly bring life to historic sites. Photo: Gettysburg Heritage Center

Programming

Continue current programs sponsored by ORA, and prioritize events and experiential activities.

RESOURCE PRESERVATION & ENHANCEMENT**Natural Resources**

Incentives and voluntary programs are suggested for addressing this topic, as opposed to the potential regulatory tools of the local governments.

- Promote existing federal and state level tax incentives for land conservation to major land owners.
- Promote conservation easement programs of area land trusts.

**Cultural Resources**Primary Objectives

- Preserve and enhance resources tied directly to oil and gas heritage in order to better tell the story.
- Improve the appearance of key corridors by encouraging the rehabilitation of deteriorated buildings.

Historic District & Design Guideline Strategies

- Provide education on the pros and cons of designating local historic districts for places such as Oil City, Titusville and Emlenton, which lack protections.
- Encourage local governments to adopt design guidelines even where local historic districts are not proposed, as Titusville has done.

Zoning & Codes Enforcement Strategies

- Educate the ORNHA's communities on customizing zoning for historic districts and corridors so that uses and development are compatible.
- Encourage local governments to apply code enforcement along the ORNHA's most visible corridors.

Existing Incentive-Based Strategies

- Vigorously promote existing financial incentives for historic building rehabilitation.
- Educate communities on the benefits of adopting a property tax abatement program for historic building rehabilitation projects.

Pro-Active ORA-Driven Strategies

- Continue the ORA's annual Historic Preservation Awards program.
- Continue ORA's history of acquiring and rehabilitating historic buildings with oil and gas heritage connections.



The Downs Building in Oil City.

TOURISM & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**Outdoor Recreation**Trail System

- Complete the existing gaps in the Erie-to-Pittsburgh trail system.
- Provide partner support for grants, improvements and administration.

“More needs to be developed around our river. Restaurants, places to stay, rentals, kayak rentals, etc. The Allegheny is beautiful and there are a lot of people that come... and access the river.”

- Opinion Survey Respondent

Water Trails

- Complete a comprehensive Water Trails Plan.
- Facilitate access to the Allegheny River, including the adaptation of trailheads for water trail access points.
- ORA should take a management role for water trails.
- Pursue water trail funding through a range of potential sources.
- Facilitate guided water trail tour operations.



Photo: Leonardo DaSilva - Flickr/Creative

Experience-Based AttractionsExisting Sites

- Install exhibits that are interactive and incorporate new technologies, where possible.
- Consider developing a replica oil gusher based on other models.
- Create more special exhibitions.
- Facilitate guided and unguided architectural tours.

New Concepts

- Provide more living history experiences.
- Develop one or more oil and gas-themed play areas.
- Investigate the potential for private sector interest in establishing an oil and gas-themed riverboat restaurant and bar.
- Explore interest in establishing an oil and gas-themed seasonal play.



Photo: Beaumont (TX) CVB

Services & AmenitiesLodging

- The Caboose Motel in Titusville warrants strong publicity in light of its unique format.
- Identify entrepreneurs and sites for B&Bs and boutique hotels that appeal to heritage tourists.
- Facilitate the upgrading of existing hotels through grants, technical support, and partnerships.
- Prepare a lodging market analysis, a request for proposals, and target potential developers/operators.

“We need more small businesses in closer proximity to the areas of interest to both locals and tourists... Oil City needs a good hotel again.” - Opinion Survey Respondent

Retail & Dining Businesses

- Create opportunities for and recruit restaurants, brewpubs, coffee shops and similar dining and entertainment businesses.
- Create opportunities for and recruit outfitters and sporting goods.

Professional Services

- Help facilitate entrepreneurial development of tour operators and transportation companies.
- Strengthen availability and marketing of angling, hunting lessons/experiences.

Amenities

- Recruit a vehicle rental franchise.
- Advertise free WiFi hubs to tourists.
- Encourage indoor recreation/YMCA partnerships with hotels and recreation organizations.
- Examine opportunities for the development of a meeting venue.



Photo: Blue Ridge Mountain Outfitters

“We should work on better marketing of the heritage area to people who already live here - people in general have no idea what heritage areas are, that we are one, what the boundaries are, what that means, etc.” - Opinion Survey Respondent

Marketing & Promotion

Wayfinding

- Implement a directional signage program to better brand and coordinate ORNHA sites.
- Incorporate ORNHA and National Park Service (NPS) branding into the signage system.
- Seek funding for the wayfinding program from the NPS and corporate sponsors.

Branding & Promotions

- Facilitate corporate sponsorships, including global brands, as well as local franchises and independent businesses.
- Leverage meetings oriented to oil and energy industries, environmental restoration, and community heritage.
- Enhance use of user-generated content and applications.

Additional Concepts

- Form a Tourism Ambassador Program in partnership with local businesses and franchises.
- Utilize social media more to promote ORNHA attractions/programs.



Grant Programs

- The ORNHA should establish a grant program, to the extent that funding is available, tied to the ORNHA's mission (heritage development, interpretation, outdoor recreation, and marketing).
- Consider asset-related uses of grant funds, in addition to some of the uses noted above.
- Explore the following potential sources to fund an ORNHA grant program: lodging tax, special assessments, National Endowment for Humanities, National Park Service (Historic Preservation Fund), corporate sponsorships, Environmental Protection Agency and other brownfield programs.

ORGANIZATION & MANAGEMENT

ORA Leadership

- Ensure that board representation reflects ORA's and ORNHA's business and partner constituency and geographic region.
- Provide for transitions of board members to avoid the loss of "institutional knowledge."
- Revisit the relationship of the ORA Board, councils, and committees to improve efficiencies of staff relationships and implementation of projects.
- Restructure committee meetings to improve staff and partner involvement in the direction of the ORNHA and its projects.
- Recognize that the most effective committees provide direction, advice, and counsel, while ORA staff members are responsible for the implementation of projects and programs.
- Establish succession plans for executive staff positions and heritage management staff.

ORA Staffing

- Hire additional staffing to implement heritage and recreation projects.
- Consider hiring a fund development staffer to oversee all ORA and ORNHA fund development, grant writing, donor solicitations, corporate sponsorships, and similar duties.

- Consider hiring property and/or events manager(s) to oversee buildings and land owned or managed by the ORA and ORA-sponsored programming.

“I would like to see ORNHA continue to enhance their relationships with other local organized groups...” - Opinion Survey Respondent

Partnerships

- Establish a partnership database for ORA to share with partners identifying contact information, partner's capabilities, and interest categories.
- Continue to work with partners to strengthen and build relationships for the benefit of the ORNHA communities and ORA.
- Create programs and projects that highlight the NPS National Heritage Area program so that partners become more aware of the NHA designation and its benefits to the region.

“I am available to volunteer. I would love to be a part of the education and preservation of our beautiful lands and neighborhoods.” - Opinion Survey Respondent



Leveraging Volunteers

- Work to build a more age-diverse group of volunteers to help with events and projects.
- Create a "volunteer bank" database to share names of volunteers with other partner non-profits.

Funding

- Continue to work to diversify funding so as not to be overly-dependent on a singular source.
- Continue to advocate for a greater amount of NPS federal funding and PA DCNR funding so ORNHA's allocation can grow to meet the organization's programming, projects, and administrative needs.
- Continue to work with state and federal legislators to identify other funding opportunities within governmental budgets.
- Establish more revenue-generating programs and re-examine existing programs and projects for "return-on-investment" benefits.
- Establish an ORNHA membership program.
- Target "Day-of-Giving" dates on the calendar for solicitation of donations.

EVALUATION METHODS

This section of the Strategy lists numerous metrics for tracking, monitoring and measuring the success of the ORNHA. The associated goals have been established as ongoing tasks rather than as final targets. The metrics are too lengthy and detailed to be summarized within this Executive Summary, but they are organized into the following four categories: Organizational Capacity, Education & Interpretation, Preservation & Enhancement, and Marketing & Promotion.

IMPLEMENTATION: PRIORITIES, BUDGET & SCHEDULE

Priorities

This section recognizes that resources, particularly financial resources, are limited. It highlights the relative importance of the recommendations, but only the top three are listed here for each topic.

Organization & Management

- Revisit the relationship of the ORA Board, councils, and committees to improve efficiencies of staff relationships and implementation of projects.
- Consider hiring a fund development staffer to oversee all ORA and ORNHA fund development, grant writing, donor solicitations, corporate sponsorships, and similar duties.
- Continue working on diversify funding to not be overly-dependent on a single source of funding.

Interpretation

- Improve the use of digital media by developing a series of GPS-based tours and showing the documentary video created in 2009 by WQED on the ORNHA website and at regional museums.
- Fill the void in existing brochures and rack cards, and improve the graphic quality of the digital brochures and rack cards on the ORNHA website.
- Conduct an inventory of existing interpretive panels throughout the region, and repair or replace those that are too weathered looking.

Resource Preservation & Enhancement

- Provide communities with education on the pros and cons of designating local historic districts.
- Encourage local governments to apply code enforcement along the ORNHA's most visible corridors.
- Continue ORA's history of acquiring and rehabilitating historic buildings with oil and gas heritage.

Tourism & Economic Development

- Complete the Erie-to-Pittsburgh trail system gaps, and facilitate access to the Allegheny River.
- Facilitate the upgrading of existing hotels through grants, technical support, and partnerships.
- Implement wayfinding through a directional signage program that incorporates ORNHA and NPS branding into the signage system.

Budget

- As already planned by ORA, eliminate the roughly \$2,000 of the larger publications program line item allocated for books and DVDs related to the 150th anniversary given its lack of profitability.
- Take the amount noted above and redirect it to help fund marketing and a regular e-newsletter.
- Consider hiring a fundraiser, which would hopefully bring in more revenues than it would generate in new expenses for the salary and benefits.

Implementation Schedule

It is recommended that ORA not attempt to pin down every recommendation in this Strategy to a timetable, but to instead remain flexible so that the availability of funding, staffing and other opportunities (or constraints) can be maximized. However, because there should still be at least a general game plan for sequencing some of the key recommendations, three phases of Strategy implementation are proposed over a five-year period, as follows:

- *Phase One: Year 1* - Many of the “low-hanging fruit” ideas that are relatively low-cost and/or easy to achieve can occur during this initial phase.
- *Phase Two: Years 2-3* - Some of the “heavier lifting” will occur here, such as design work for trail extensions and the design, fabrication and installation of new interpretive panels.
- *Phase Three: Years 4-5* - This phase will include strategies that take more time and money to initiate, such as construction of missing trail sections and acquisition of important historic buildings.

