

By Mark Compton, CEO, The Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission



## The PA Turnpike's Sideling Hill Trailhead Provides Gateway to Nature and Community Growth



The Pennsylvania Turnpike is more than just a road – it's a journey through some of the most beautiful parts of our state. Stretching over 565 miles, it connects visitors and residents to the Commonwealth's natural heritage, winding through state parks, game lands, scenic waterways and trails. When it first opened, the PA Turnpike was famous for its breathtaking views, charming small towns and quirky attractions. More than 80 years later, we're still working to connect communities, people and opportunities for adventure.

This fall, we will officially unveil an exciting project demonstrating our commitment to supporting and encouraging outdoor recreation in our neighboring communities. The Sideling Hill Trailhead, located at our Sideling Hill Service Plaza, offers outdoor enthusiasts, especially cyclists, easy access to a vast network of trails and historic sites.

The Sideling Hill Service Plaza is near the Sideling Hill and Rays Hill abandoned tunnels, which have a fascinating history. Part of the original 160-mile PA Turnpike mainline, they were originally built for the unfinished South Pennsylvania Railroad. During the 1940s and 1950s, they carried traffic through Bedford and Fulton counties. But by the 1960s, ridership increased, prompting the PA Turnpike to bypass the tunnels to accommodate higher traffic volume.

In 2001, the PA Turnpike sold the tunnels to the Bedford/Fulton Joint Recreation Authority (BFJRA) for \$1. Since then, the organization has focused on turning the area, known as the Old PA Pike (TOPP) Trail, into a unique adventure for cyclists, both serious riders and those just out for a leisurely spin.

This first-of-its-kind project represented an opportunity to demonstrate the value of intergovernmental cooperation. The Pennsylvania Turnpike collaborated with the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Bedford County Development Association and other agencies to support the BFJRA's efforts to obtain improvement grants. While still in transition, ongoing and future upgrades are in the works that will make the TOPP trail a must-do for outdoor enthusiasts statewide.

That collaborative spirit extended to local school districts. Through our Art Sparks initiative, students designed and constructed a nature-inspired bike wash station and built pavilion picnic tables.

Located outside the service plaza's restricted gates, the trailhead connects to the Sideling Hill Service Plaza, allowing easy access to all the plaza's amenities, whether you arrive via the Turnpike or from another location. A secure, ADA-compliant walkway also allows all visitors to make seamless use of the service plaza and trailhead amenities.

Here's what you can expect from the trailhead project:

- Expanded parking areas provide plenty of room for visitors of all types
- A pavilion with seating offering a great spot to relax
- Added green space allowing travelers to relax away from the Plaza's hustle and bustle
- Bike repair stations to keep your rides in top shape
- A bike wash station to clean up after long rides
- Bike racks to secure bikes while you explore
- Wayfinding signage to navigate the trail network
- Landscaping/planters that create a welcoming environment
- Additional lighting for safety and security
- Future plans call for EV Bike charging stations to power electric bikes

We envision the Sideling Hill Trailhead becoming a top destination for outdoor lovers. Whether you're biking, hiking or taking a casual stroll through this fascinating slice of Turnpike history, we and our partners strive to create enjoyable experiences. By integrating service plaza amenities and recreational opportunities, we'll demonstrate that no matter how you arrive, you'll find a reliable welcome.

What started as a \$28.1 million truck, bus and personal vehicle parking expansion project at Sideling Hill Service Plaza, evolved into partnering with state, local and recreation officials on something special – a jumping-off point for exploring one of the state's large trail networks.



The Sideling Hill Trailhead will provide access to over 600 miles of trails within a 25-mile radius, including destinations like Buchanan State Forest, Raystown Lake, and Bicycle PA Route S.

The Sideling Hill Trailhead project highlights how the PA Turnpike is dedicated to supporting environmental tourism and boosting the outdoor economy in rural areas. By creating access to a vast network of trails and offering thoughtful amenities, we're positioning the Pennsylvania Turnpike as a key partner in driving economic growth through sustainable outdoor recreation. This project not only honors the history of the Sideling Hill and Rays Hill tunnels but also looks forward to a future where nature and tourism work hand in hand. **B**

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mark P. Compton, from Manheim, Pa., became CEO of the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission on Feb. 1, 2013. With over 20 years of experience in transportation and government affairs, he holds a Bachelor of Science degree from Penn State University. Mark previously served as PennDOT's deputy secretary of administration and was director of government affairs for American Infrastructure. He has also been active in the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association (IBBTA), serving on its board of directors and as president. Mark also makes time to enjoy the outdoors with running, cycling, and skiing being his recreation of choice, allowing him to stay active, connect with nature and spend valuable time with his family.