

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)
Cuyahoga Valley National Park
Rockside Boarding Area Parking Expansion and Trail Bridge Over the Cuyahoga River

The Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail and Valley Railway are the most significant linear recreational and cultural features within Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP). The Valley Railway is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and forms the Valley Railway Historic District. The Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad (CVSR) is a not-for-profit organization that operates passenger excursion trains on the Valley Railway through a cooperative agreement. Along with its associated infrastructure (parking and trail linkages), the CVSR is also considered to be part of the CVNP Alternative Transportation System (ATS). Annual ridership has steadily increased since 1990 and is expected to continue to expand with the recent connection to Canton, Ohio and the planned connection to downtown Cleveland, Ohio.

Among other locations, CVSR has a boarding site just inside the CVNP northern park boundary off Old Rockside Road and along the west side of the Cuyahoga River in Independence, Ohio. This boarding site, known as the Rockside Boarding Area, includes a gravel parking area that accommodates 149 vehicles. With the growth of the Valley Railway and in the services provided by CVSR, the parking area has experienced increased use resulting in increased demands on capacity, on operations, and on the quality of the user experience. In addition to the increasing use of Rockside Boarding Area, longer trains are being used than those envisioned when the platform was originally conceived in the mid-1990's. An unintended consequence of the current location of the platform and the longer trains is that trains that are boarding passengers at Rockside Station occasionally block the existing vehicular crossing at Old Rockside Road (just north of the Rockside Station). Local access east and west on Old Rockside Road is thus impeded, causing a safety hazard and inconvenience for local businesses. The NPS also has a parking facility that accommodates 42 vehicles at the Lock 39 trailhead on the east side of the Cuyahoga River, across from the Rockside Boarding Area, which has also experienced increased use resulting in increased demands on capacity. The NPS, with ATS funding from the Federal Highway Administration/Federal Transit Administration, seeks to accommodate the demand for additional parking, update the facilities for current and projected operations as part of the CVNP ATS, and improve the visitor experience at these facilities.

A build alternative has been developed through the planning process to improve the Rockside Boarding area facility and expand the capacity by 70 spaces. It includes construction of asphalt parking with lighting at the Rockside Boarding Area outside of the Cuyahoga River floodway, which would connect to the Rockside Station with additional parking to the south of this facility on stabilized turf. It also includes extension of the loading platform at the Rockside Station 120 feet to the south to prevent loading trains from blocking Old Rockside Road and local businesses. The build alternative also includes construction of a Class I trail bridge over the Cuyahoga River to connect the two parking facilities so that the Rockside Boarding Area facility could be better used as parking overflow for the Lock 39 Trailhead parking facility.

An Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared to analyze the potential effects of this build alternative and the "no action" alternative in accordance with the requirements of the

National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations of 1978, NPS Management Policies (NPS, 2001a) and NPS Director's Order #12. Concerns identified during scoping and subsequently evaluated in the EA include:

- Cuyahoga River and its associated flood plain and riparian zone
- A number of small wetland areas.
- The location lies within the range of the Indiana bat (*Myotis sodalis*), a federally listed endangered species, the bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), a federally listed threatened species, and the eastern massasauga (*Sistrurus catenatus catenatus*), Federal Candidate species.
- The addition of paved impervious surface area and the potential to increase runoff for the site.
- The potential for the presence of historic and archaeological resources in the area that could be impacted.
- The addition of lighting could impact the nightscape in the area.

The Preferred Alternative was selected after a careful review of impacts to resources, employees and visitors as well as public comments.

PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

Based on the analysis in the EA, the NPS has selected Alternative 2, the build alternative, as the Preferred Alternative. The Preferred Alternative will replace the existing gravel parking facility with a facility paved with asphalt to the north and covered with stabilized turf to the south. The asphalt portion will cover 1.3 acres and have a capacity of 99 nine foot wide parking spaces and four 16 foot wide handicap parking spaces for a total of 103 parking spaces. The stabilized turf portion will cover 1.0 acre and have a capacity of 116 nine foot wide parking spaces. The total number of parking spaces on both the paved and stabilized turf areas will be 219 parking spaces for an increase of 0.7 acres and 70 spaces. The concept behind the stabilized turf area is that this will be an overflow area to be used during events and times of higher rail and trail use. Objectives in the design concept include the removal of parking area from the Cuyahoga River floodway and maximizing and improving the health of the riparian buffer area between the parking area and the river.

The improvement for the parking area will include lighting from 14 pole lights, with seven covering the asphalt area and seven covering the stabilized turf. They will utilize the best available technology for energy efficiency and include cutoff fixtures to minimize fugitive light spill. The improvement also includes installation of another 120 feet of timber platform to eliminate the need for trains to block Old Rockside Road when they are boarding. The Preferred Alternative also includes a Class 1 trail and trail bridge connecting the east edge of the proposed parking area at the Rockside Boarding Area directly to the Lock 39 Trailhead by spanning the Cuyahoga River, a distance of 240 feet.

MITIGATION MEASURES OF THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The Preferred Alternative has the potential to increase the monetary investment and may increase the risk to both human life and property within the flood plain. The structures and facilities associated

with the Rockside Boarding Area and the trail connector bridge and approaches will be designed to be consistent with the intent of the standards and criteria of the National Flood Insurance Program (44 CFR Part 60). To comply with the intent of these regulations, all new construction and substantial improvements will:

- Be designed (or modified) and adequately anchored to prevent floatation, collapse, or lateral movement of the structure resulting from hydrodynamic and hydrostatic loads, including the effects of buoyancy; [44 CFR Part 60.3(a) (3) (i)]
- Be constructed with materials resistant to flood damage; [44 CFR Part 60.3(a) (3) (ii)]
- Be constructed by methods and practices that minimize flood damages; [44 CFR Part 60.3(a) (3) (iii)];
- Be constructed with electrical and other services facilities that are designed and/or located so as to prevent water from entering or accumulating within the components during conditions of flooding. [44 CFR Part 60.3(a) (3) (iv)]
- Prohibit encroachments including fill, new construction, substantial improvements, and other development within the adopted regulatory floodway (the Preferred Alternative will remove approximately 5,300 square feet of the existing parking area from the floodway). [44 CFR Part 60.3(d) (3)];
- Not increase the base (100-year) flood elevation by more than 1.0 feet (the trail bridge Over the Cuyahoga River would increase the base flood elevation by 0.1 foot) [44CFR Part 60.3 (c) (13)]; and
- Require that the minimum setback of the parking lot from the edge of the riverbank be increased from 10 to 30 feet, to allow the development of a vegetative buffer zone. Within this buffer, deep rooting trees will be planted at the top of bank, and posts (cottonwood and willow) will be driven between the top of bank and the water surface corresponding with the median discharge to ensure the long-term stabilization of the riverbank and develop a healthier riparian corridor. [44 CFR Part 60.5 (b) (2)]
- To reduce the risk to human life and personal property damage, use of the Rockside Boarding Area will be suspended whenever the Independence gage height exceeds 8.5 feet and is rising.

The proposed mitigation measures will therefore reduce this risk, provide compliance with the applicable provisions of 44 CFR Part 60, and restore and preserve some existing flood plain values.

Under the Preferred Alternative, there would be a total of 0.51 acres of impact to two wetlands that fall into Ohio EPA Category 1, the lowest quality wetlands. One of the wetlands is dominated by the common reed (*Phragmites australis*), a non-native, aggressively invasive species. The other wetland is a small palustrine emergent wetland with borderline hydric soils. Both wetlands have formed on top of fill within slight depressions and areas of tire rutting and soil compaction. Because of their low quality and domination of one by the common reed, the impacted wetland areas provide minimal beneficial wetland functions. Categories of the functions include sediment /toxicant retention and minimal flood storage.

To the south of the parking area is a forested wetland with some vernal pools that will not be affected by the project. This area includes debris piles covering an area of approximately 0.25 acres. The Preferred Alternative includes the removal of debris piles, which will add the

function of wildlife habitat to those of sediment /toxicant retention and flood storage. Vernal pools are necessary for some species of amphibians and reptiles. Compensation for the remaining 0.26 acres will be accomplished with the enhancement of 3.0 acres of a nearby area of a *Phragmites* monoculture located adjacent and south of an Ohio Department of Transportation mitigation project and will involve restoring native plant communities, planting native woody plants, and the control of the harmful non-native exotics. The *Phragmites* monoculture will be restored to a wet sedge meadow habitat. The enhancement ratio will be 12:1.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

In addition to the Preferred Alternative, the No Action alternative was analyzed in detail in the EA. Under this alternative, the existing 1.7 acre gravel parking area would be maintained and utilized as it is with its accommodation for 149 vehicles, an open air station/waiting area with canopy located adjacent to the tracks, and gravel walkways connecting the west edge of the parking lot, the station and boarding platform. The east edge of the parking area is located between 10 and 40 feet from the top of bank of the Cuyahoga River. Approximately 5,300 square feet of the parking area is within the floodway of the river.

Trains and events scheduled at night would continue to be supported by the single pole-mounted light in the parking area and by lights in the train station along the canopy and night visitors would continue to have difficulty in navigating the gravel walkways connecting the parking area with the station due to the limited lighting.

With the growth in use of the Valley Railway and increased use of the Towpath Trail, use of the parking area would increase to the point where it is filled to capacity or beyond capacity more often than just during special events. This may result in grassed areas adjacent to the parking area being used for overflow (whether planned or not) and additional maintenance would be required to maintain the grassed areas after such use. The ridership numbers from this location during events would be limited by the parking area.

With an increase in use of the Rockside Boarding Area, trains that are boarding passengers at Rockside Station would more frequently block the existing vehicular crossing at Old Rockside Road causing a safety hazard and would be an inconvenience for local businesses.

The Rockside Boarding Area parking facility would continue to be used as overflow parking for the Lock 39 Trailhead parking area. However, in order to do so, users must then walk along roads used by vehicles to the Cleveland Metroparks portion of the trail.

Alternatives Considered and Dismissed

Use of Selected Green Techniques for Entire Parking Area. While some green techniques, such as stabilized turf, are included as part of the Preferred Alternative, other green techniques and applications of green techniques to the entire parking area were considered but rejected. Using grass-pavers or open grass fields for parking was considered for the entire parking area but rejected because they would not stand up to use in winter weather conditions. Semi-permeable pavement was also considered, but rejected due to unsuitable soils.

Manage Existing Lot to Increase Capacity. Rather than adding parking capacity, management of the existing parking facility to provide additional capacity during higher usage was investigated. Various techniques were investigated, but the logistics would be confusing to the visitor and place additional manpower burdens on the limited CVSR volunteers. The variation in train schedules would place additional constraints on potential management approaches.

Use of Overflow Parking. The nearest parking areas to the Rockside Boarding Area are the Lock 39 Trailhead parking area are located too far away and would not provide additional capacity at the times needed.

Use of Shuttles. There are no large lots in CVNP that are adequate to stage shuttle service. Arrangements could be made with facilities in nearby Valley View or Independence for parking space and busses could be used to shuttle people to the boarding area. However, it requires too much coordination and expense to be utilized on a regular, daily basis. Also, it does nothing to improve the surface, access, lighting, drainage or safety. It also does not address the overflow parking for the Lock 39 Trailhead.

Use of Other Boarding Areas. The idea of using other boarding areas when the capacity of the parking lot is exceeded was investigated. This would not be feasible for many schedules and special events because everyone boards at one location and the program begins. For other events, the last ones arriving at the parking area would need an alternative boarding location and would likely not have enough time to travel to the next boarding area ahead of the train.

Expansion of Parking Area(s) in Other Locations. The location of the Rockside Boarding area and Lock 39 Trailhead precludes the expansion of parking facilities in other locations. The Rockside Boarding Area is constrained to the north by Rockside Road and to the east by the Cuyahoga River and the river floodway. It is constrained to the west by the railroad and a gas line that runs parallel to it. The Lock 39 Trailhead parking is constrained to the west and south by the Cuyahoga River, to the north by Rockside Road, and to the east by the Towpath Trail and the canal.

ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

The environmentally preferred alternative is the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy expressed in NEPA Section 101(b), which indicates that the environmentally preferable alternative should:

1. Fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations;
2. Assure for all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings;
3. Attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk to health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences;
4. Preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage, and maintain, wherever possible, an environment which supports diversity, and variety of individual choice;

5. Achieve a balance between population and resource use which will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life's amenities; and
6. Enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources.

The Preferred Alternative best fulfills the responsibility of this generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations. This is based primarily on the design objective of the Preferred Alternative to move the facility away from the floodway of the Cuyahoga River and to maximize and improve the health of the riparian buffer area adjacent to the river.

The Preferred Alternative fulfills the second objective by maximizing the assurance of safety, health, productivity and culturally pleasing surroundings. This alternative has the potential to be more aesthetically pleasing since it promotes the restoration of riparian buffer area between the parking area and the Cuyahoga River.

The Preferred Alternative fulfills the third objective by aspiring to the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation or risk to health and safety. The shifting of the impacted area away from the Cuyahoga River has less potential for adverse impacts on the environment.

Both of the Preferred Alternatives and the No Action alternative are intended to meet the fourth objective, and the differences between them are indistinguishable in meeting the objective.

The Preferred Alternative balances population and resource use by providing a high quality experience for visitors to the Valley Railway and Towpath Trail without promoting degradation of the resource through over-use. This experience would be of higher quality than the No Action alternative because of the improvements of paving, striping, lighting and a pedestrian bridge.

The No Action alternative would utilize the fewest depletable resources of the two alternatives. The Preferred Alternatives will utilize depletable materials for paving, striping and electrical facilities.

THE PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE AND SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

As defined in 40 CFR §1508.27, significance requires considerations of both context and intensity. Intensity is determined by examining the following criteria.

1. Impacts that may be both beneficial and adverse. A significant effect may exist even if the Federal agency believes that on balance the effect will be beneficial.

No long-term major adverse or beneficial impacts were identified that require analysis in an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

The EA demonstrated the potential for a number of beneficial impacts to various resources, including flood plains; vegetation and invasive species; cultural resources; health and safety; and visitor experience.

There is a Minor Adverse impact anticipated for direct impacts and Negligible indirect impacts to wetlands under the Preferred Alternative. Mitigation for the Minor Adverse impact includes the removal of debris piles from a 0.25-acre forested wetland with vernal pools located south of the parking area, and enhancement of 3.0 acres of a nearby area of *Phragmites* monoculture as described above.

The amounts of fill in the flood plain (outside the floodway) would result in Negligible to Minor Adverse impacts due to the small increase in the 100-year flood water surface elevation. Analysis of potential impacts from construction of the trail bridge showed that the increase in the 100-year flood water surface elevation would be 0.1 ft for a Negligible to Minor Adverse impact.

The Preferred Alternative is anticipated to have a Negligible direct, indirect and cumulative impact on the nearby water resources.

There is a potential for Minor Adverse impacts to Indiana bat habitat. To prevent impact to Indiana bats, any cutting of trees that may be required (as determined during final design) should take place between 15 September and 15 April, outside the period when Indiana bats are present in the area. Direct and indirect impacts to wildlife and wildlife habitat would also be Minor Adverse.

Direct and indirect impacts to vegetation and invasive species would be Minor Adverse. A specific monitoring and treatment plan for invasive species will be developed during final design.

There would be no direct impacts to the nearest historic structures, the Valley Railway and the Towpath Trail. There could be Minor Adverse indirect and cumulative impacts associated with growth in the use of the Valley Railway and the Towpath Trail. These would be minimized with appropriate maintenance. The direct impacts to cultural landscapes are anticipated to be Minor Adverse. The direct impacts may be minimized by softening pavement by incorporating grassed or vegetated islands, trees, etc.

Overall, there may be short term, minor impacts to the nightscape resulting from the additional parking lot lighting for the paved and turf overflow parking areas. These impacts may be expected to have a Minor Adverse impact on the nightscape, but would be limited to the early hours of the evening during late fall, and would be altogether absent in the summer months and from winter through spring.

2. The degree to which the proposed action affects public health or safety

There are three occasional and localized impacts to this alternative, each of which may be expected to have a Minor Beneficial impact on health and safety. This includes the safety of pavement and lighting improvements to the parking area, removing the parking area from the floodway, and construction of the trail bridge so that pedestrians would not need to share roadways with vehicles in using the Rockside Boarding area as overflow parking for the Lock 39 trailhead. The combination of these impacts may be considered to be Moderate Beneficial,

considering the planned growth in the use of the Valley Railway and the Towpath Trail. To reduce the risk to human life and personal property damage, use of the Rockside Boarding Area will be suspended whenever the Independence gage height exceeds 8.5 feet and is rising.

3. Unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historic or cultural resources, park lands, prime farmlands, wetlands, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas.

Historic resources include the Ohio & Erie Canal (including the Towpath Trail) and the Valley Railway, both of which are on the National Register of Historic Places. The Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Corridor, which was established by Congress in 1996 under the Omnibus Parks Bill, runs through the area. There would be no direct impacts to these resources. There could be Minor Adverse indirect and cumulative impacts associated with growth in the use of the Valley Railway and the Towpath Trail. These would be minimized with appropriate maintenance.

There is a Minor Adverse impact anticipated for direct impacts and Negligible indirect impacts to wetlands under the Preferred Alternative. Mitigation for the Minor Adverse impact includes the removal of debris piles from a 0.25-acre forested wetland with vernal pools located south of the parking area, and enhancement of 3.0 acres of a nearby area of *Phragmites* monoculture.

There are no prime farmlands or ecologically critical areas known to be in the project area.

4. The degree to which the effects on the quality of the human environment is likely to be highly controversial.

There were no controversial impacts identified during the analysis done for the EA, and no controversial issues were raised during public review which ended on September 15, 2006.

5. The degree to which the possible effects on the human environment are highly uncertain or involve unique or unknown risks.

The analysis in the EA did not reveal, and the review by the public did not identify, any uncertain effects or unique or unknown risks associated with the Preferred Alternative.

6. The degree to which the action may establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects or represents a decision in principle about a future consideration.

The Preferred Alternative neither establishes a National Park Service precedent for future actions with significant effects nor will it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration.

7. Whether the action is related to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant impacts. Significance exists if it is reasonable to anticipate a cumulatively significant impact on the environment. Significance cannot be avoided by terming an action temporary or by breaking it down into small component parts.

The EA included an evaluation of the potential for cumulative impacts for each impact topic. The Draft Riparian Buffer Plan for Proposed Agricultural Lands of 2002 provides documentation that there are no reasonably foreseeable future plans that would add impacts to the direct and indirect impacts identified in the EA and summarized above for wetlands, flood plains, wildlife and wildlife habitat, and vegetation and invasive species. The reasonably foreseeable future plans of others are expected to result in a beneficial impact to water resources in the project area. Actions of others beyond CVNP that may impact threatened, endangered or special concern species could not be reasonably be assessed in the EA. There are no cumulative impacts anticipated to the nightscape, health and safety, or visitor experience.

The planned extension of the Valley Railway to downtown Cleveland and the continued promotion of the CVSR would result in Minor Adverse impacts to the historic structure of the Valley Railway as long as NPS and CVSR continue to maintain the Valley Railway appropriately. Likewise, the cumulative impact may intensify in correlation with the planned extension of Cleveland Metroparks' trail system to the north of Lock 39. Beneficial impacts to cultural landscapes are anticipated as a result of NPS efforts such as the Rural Landscape Management Program being implemented in CVNP.

8. The degree to which the action may adversely affect districts, sites, highways, structures, or objects listed in or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places or may cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historical resources.

Archaeological survey work at the project area found no significant materials. There would be no direct impacts to the nearest historic structures, the Valley Railway and the Towpath Trail. There could be Minor Adverse indirect and cumulative impacts associated with growth in the use of the Valley Railway and the Towpath Trail. These would be minimized with appropriate maintenance. The direct impacts to cultural landscapes are anticipated to be Minor Adverse. The direct impacts may be minimized by softening pavement by incorporating grassed or vegetated islands, trees, etc. The only comments from the Ohio Historic Preservation Office was in a letter dated June 13, 2003 in response to the initial scoping letter, expressing concern for an historic railroad building. Investigation confirmed that their reference was not to a building but to the actual railroad tracks.

9. The degree to which the action may adversely affect an endangered or threatened species or its habitat that has been determined to be critical under the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

Indian bats (*Myotis sodalis*) have recently been found within the park. As a result, all cutting will take place between 15 September and 15 April, outside the period when Indiana bats are present in the area. If tree removal is required outside of the permitted period, all trees will be inspected for characteristics favorable to Indiana bats. If potential roost trees are found, surveys will be conducted to determine whether bats are present. Following review of the Draft EA, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sent a letter dated September 5, 2006 which requested that the EA be updated to include that the proposed project lies within the range of the Federally-listed threatened bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) with the a recent discovery of a bald eagle nest along the Cuyahoga River within the park boundaries. The letter was provided as technical

assistance, and not as a completed document under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act. The EA was updated to include this information along with the conclusion that there should be no impacts to the bald eagle.

10. Whether the action threatens a violation of Federal, State, or local law or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment.

The action violates no federal, state, or local environmental protection laws.

IMPAIRMENT

The EA determined that implementation of the Preferred Alternative will not constitute an impairment to the critical resources and values of CVNP and will not violate the NPS Organic Act. This conclusion is based on a thorough analysis of the environmental impacts described in the EA, public comment, relevant scientific studies, and the professional judgement of the decision-maker guided by the direction in *NPS Management Policies 2001*.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Scoping was conducted for the Rockside Boarding Area in April and May 2003 with federal, state, and local agencies and organizations. Each of the agencies and organizations involved with scoping had direct and indirect jurisdiction, insight, knowledge, expertise or concern for CVNP resources. Additional scoping was not conducted with the addition of the bridge to the Lock 39 Trailhead facility. The EA was made available for public review and comment during a 30-day period ending September 15, 2006. A comment letter was received from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and from two Native American Tribes. Only minor changes to the text of the EA resulted from the comments.

CONCLUSION

The Preferred Alternative does not constitute an action that normally requires preparation of an EIS. The Preferred Alternative will not have a significant effect on the human or natural environment. Unmitigated negative environmental impacts that could occur are negligible or minor in intensity, or are not significant within the geographic and temporal context. There will be no significant impacts on public health, public safety, threatened or endangered species, sites or districts listed in the National Register of Historic Places, or other unique characteristics of the region. No highly uncertain or controversial impacts, unique or unknown risks, significant cumulative effects, or elements of precedence were identified. Implementation of the actions will not violate any federal, state, or local environmental protection law nor result in the impairment of park resources or values.

Based on the aforementioned, it has been determined that an EIS is not required for this project and thus will not be prepared.

Recommended:

Jennie Vasarhely
for Superintendent

11/16/06
Date

Approved:

David N. Cron
Acting Midwest Regional Director

12/4/06
Date