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EDITORIAL

VICE PRESIDENT OF NEWS, USA TODAY
Jamie Stockwell

DIRECTOR
Michelle Washington
mjwashington@usatodayco.com

MANAGING EDITOR
Harry Lister
hlister@usatodayco.com

ISSUE EDITOR
Joshua Alston

PHOTO EDITOR
Robin A. Smith

ISSUE DESIGN MANAGER
Tricia Reinhold

ISSUE DESIGNER
Brian Gray

EDITORS
Sandra Guzmán, Lisa Fe
John Sanchez, Crystal
ontaira Terrell, Jennie

CONTRIBUTORS
Matt Alderton, Lisa
garet Buranen, Joe
te Perez, Hope Ho
ekula, Cari Shan
Temblador, Suz

ADVERTI
VICE PRES
Patrick
burke@usa
COUNT
Vane
lvo@us

Tim and Nesta Feltner, of Jefferson, Iowa, bought this Latitudes RV Resort lot a few months after it opened. TIM FELTNER

"The amount of benefit that trails can bring to a place is only limited by the imagination of the people who live there."

Brandi Horton
Spokesperson for the Rails to Trails Conservancy

One of those trails is the High Trestle Trail, whose 13-story bridge attracts about 20,000 visitors a month. Kollmorgen knew that once the High Trestle Trail and the Raccoon River Valley Trail were linked, economic opportunity would ride his way. On the day of the ribbon cutting in August 2024, a cyclist from Virginia — in Iowa to bike what is now the longest paved trail route in the U.S. at 120 miles — became his first customer. He sold six additional RV lots that day.

Kollmorgen has the Rails to Trails Conservancy (RTC) to thank for the traffic. Celebrating its 40th anniversary this year, RTC has helped grow the national trail network from 1,000 miles in 1986 to more than 42,500 miles today. Those trails generate $387 billion in annual consumer spending, support 7.6 million American jobs and produce $125 billion in revenue. At the same time, the Trump administration has called trails "hostile" to cars and is clawing back grants for future trail expansion.

cotton and textile mills shuttered in the 1980s and '90s. The multiuse trail brings 30,000 cyclists through each year. In 2025, the trail was extended into Anniston, Alabama, creating a 105-mile, continuously paved route from Alabama to Georgia.

In South Cle Elum, Washington, Matt and Leanne Martinson own the Iron Horse Inn Bed and Breakfast, which draws visitors riding through on the old Chicago Railroad corridor, now the Palouse to Cascades Trail. The inn's main building, originally built in 1909 to house train crews, features old cabooses converted into suites that overlook the trail.

"Trails are a testament to the legacy of the railroads and the very definition of sustainability," says Brandi Horton, spokesperson for RTC, the primary national organization dedicated to rail-to-trail conversions since its founding. Known as railbanking, the practice was codified in 1983 when Congress voted to preserve rail corridors as trails, bringing public benefit — and new economic opportunity — to communities across the country.

That economic impact is substantial. In Minburn, Iowa, the chair of the Raccoon River Valley Trail Steele, says that

Back on Track

The Rails to Trails program turns 40

By Cari Shane

On the day of the ribbon cutting for the High Trestle Trail in central Iowa, John Kollmorgen held an open house for his new business, Latitudes RV Resort. The campground is just steps from the new trail that's popular with cyclists.

For decades, the 9-mile corridor had been unusable — a strip of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad that was abandoned in the late 1970s. But Kollmorgen believed the stretch of disused rail line would one day become a multiuse trail, connecting two of Iowa's most popular rail-to-trail conversions and two small towns, Perry and Woodward.