



# Mendota Trail Newsletter

## Mendota Trail Is Now Fully Connected!

Restoration work on the five remaining trestles (5 – 9) was completed in August, enabling the full connection of the 12.5 mile trail between Bristol and Mendota. This was accompanied by trail surface rehabilitation and ditch work where needed. Safety fencing and directional signage were then installed as finishing touches.

The work was largely funded by a Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation appropriation advanced by our Southwest Virginia legislative team, namely **Senator Todd Pillion** and **Delegates Terry Kilgore, Israel O’Quinn and Will Wampler**. Restoration of Trestle 5 was separately sponsored by a generous private donor, the **RasKo Charitable Fund**.

From the beginning, the trail effort was advanced from each end in Mendota and Bristol, slowly working toward the ultimate meeting point.



**Promontory Summit, Utah territory, 1869**

The parallel to the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, commemorated with the placement of a golden spike, was not lost.



**Golden Spike Plaque**

The engineering firm, **Tysinger, Hampton & Partners, Inc.** based in Johnson City, TN was contracted to provide expertise for the challenging work for these timber trestles. **Gary Tysinger** brought years of experience to the project. Abingdon’s **Inland Construction, Inc.** was the general contractor. Their team was led by **Cullen Barker** and included **David Villanueva, Stanley Couch, Bryan Boardwine, and Jeremy Boardwine**. Volunteers played a significant role in restoring Trestle 5.

Project management was coordinated by Conservancy Board member **Brian Penley** who contributed untold numbers of volunteer hours to the project. Administrative support, funded by **Washington County, VA**, was supplied by **Angela Wolfe** from the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission.

**We thank everyone for their help in making our dream become a reality!**



## Opening Celebration in Benhams!



We were blessed with beautiful fall weather for our Grand Opening Celebration on September 15<sup>th</sup>. A gathering in excess of 200 people turned out for our big day that commemorated the full connection of the trail between Bristol and Mendota and recognition of the recent ownership transfer to Washington County on August 31, 2023.

The festivities were held on the porch and front yard of Ken Fleenor's homestead which, at 5.2 miles, is the closest large parking area that approximates the midpoint of the trail and most near the recently completed trail work. We thank Conservancy Board member, **Ken Fleenor**, for his hospitality.

Musical entertainment was provided by the **ETSU Old-Time Band** and Mendota resident, **Oscar Harris**, who sang a beautiful rendition of *Keep on the Sunny Side*. **Ellen Mueller** and **Ken** made welcoming comments, followed by a reflective invocation shared by **Tom Mitoraj**, a Benhams resident and co-sponsor with his wife, **Vickie**, of Trestle 10, Gigi's Crossing.



**Jake Holmes**

**Ellen** and **Eva Beale** served as emcees for the remainder of the program. **Jake Holmes**, Council Member for Bristol, VA, shared comments related to the city's acquisition of the trail property in 2000, thereby preserving it and initiating surveying and preliminary legal work. He expressed pleasure of the progress made since the City transferred trail ownership to **Mountain Heritage, Inc. (MHI)** in 2016 and its subsequent development into a regional outdoor recreational asset.



## Opening Celebration in Benhams...continued

**Frank Kilgore**, from Mountain Heritage, regaled us with stories of some of the challenges encountered in our early years. Under his experienced leadership, two trestles were restored and a total of six miles of trail were opened to the public. Also, a 2.4 acre parcel was acquired for the Bristol Trailhead and significant funding was obtained from multiple sources. He and his daughter **Joyce** were instrumental in developing corporation papers for the **Mendota Trail Conservancy, Inc. (MTC)** and then facilitating transfer of trail ownership from MHI to MTC in October, 2020.



**Frank Kilgore**



**Israel O'Quinn**



**Tyler Lester**

**Delegate Israel O'Quinn** and **Tyler Lester**, who represented **Senator Todd Pillion**, spoke on behalf of our Southwest Virginia Legislative Delegation. **Delegates Terry Kilgore** and **Will Wampler** were unable to attend. In total, the four legislators acquired \$866,500 for the development of the trail through DCR appropriations. They shared what a great asset the trail brings to Southwest Virginia. It

complements existing outdoor recreational opportunities, like the **Virginia Creeper Trail**. To paraphrase **Delegate O'Quinn**, 'Unlike Disney, we don't have to manufacture tourist attractions, because nature has already provided us with those to enjoy and showcase to others.'

A special speaking role was reserved for **John Jeter**, of **Ballad Health**. He is CEO of Bristol Regional Medical Center and Johnston Memorial Hospital. Ballad Health became our lead corporate sponsor in 2022. Their generous donation enabled us to purchase trail counter devices so we could track trail usage and significantly helped us with the purchase of our permanent restroom facility at the Bristol Trailhead. His comments highlighted Ballad's commitment to enhancing wellness in general, and specifically in this corner of their service area.



**John Jeter**

## Opening Celebration in Benhams...continued

**Saul Hernandez**, Chairman of the Washington County Board of Supervisors and the representative for the Tyler District, has been a supporter of the trail since 2016. He recounted how important transparency of the trail plan was from the outset to allay concerns of neighbors who were most directly impacted. He concluded his comments by sharing optimism about the trail's future for the county and the greater region.

An honorary spot on the speaker's platform was reserved for **Wade Massie** of **PennStuart** in Abingdon. He was extremely helpful in navigating legal issues for MTC in 2022 and 2023, especially related to the creation of documents for the transfer of trail ownership to the county.



**Saul Hernandez**



**Saul Hernandez and Jim Lapis**

MTC Board President, **Jim Lapis**, made final comments. He capsulized the history of the trail, including commentary of Native Americans, early European settlers, and the subsequent development of the railroad in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jim concluded by presenting a commemorative plaque and a four foot "golden spike", fabricated from synthetic insulation board, to Saul Hernandez.

Following the formal program, a ribbon cutting ceremony was held on the trail that included MTC Board members and elected officials.





# Opening Celebration in Benhams...continued



Attendees were then invited to enjoy the trail! Many did so on foot or on bicycle. Most headed north to view the newly opened sections of the trail. A shuttle service was kindly supplied by **Sundog Outfitter** to transport folks from Mendota back to their vehicles in the Benhams Parking Area.



Over the years, we've experienced positive news and occasional disappointments related to our trail effort. We would often end emails with 'Another good day for the trail!' when we had good news to share. **September 15<sup>th</sup> was A GREAT DAY FOR THE TRAIL!**





# UNDER NEW OWNERSHIP

## Washington County, VA is New Trail Owner

The Mendota Trail Conservancy, Inc. (MTC) has transferred property ownership of the Mendota Trail and the Bristol Trailhead to Washington County, VA and the Washington County Park Authority, respectively. The signing event on August 31<sup>st</sup> at the County's Government Center in Abingdon culminated many months of deliberations between MTC and the County. The final agreement received unanimous support from both Boards.



Wade Massie, Saul Hernandez, Jim Lapis

The MTC Board recognized that this transfer greatly ensured the long-term sustainability and permanency of what was heretofore a privately owned trail. It also opened doors for potential growth of this outdoor recreational asset going forward, including the hope that the trail may some day be incorporated into a future state park.

MTC will continue to be closely engaged with the trail. We will provide enormous passion to the realigned trail ownership. Additionally, we will work with the county in adding trail amenities, including interpretive signage and benches. We will assist with maintenance needs when asked or on an emergent basis, such as removing a fallen tree on a weekend that blocks trail access.

**Wade Massie**, from **PennStuart** in Abingdon, deserves special recognition for his role in the property transfer process. He wrote multiple drafts and dedicated many hours to achieve the end result. MTC Board member **Jerry Grantham** served as the primary liaison on behalf of the Conservancy.

We are enormously grateful for the trail stewardship already demonstrated by **Kevin Hill**, General Services Director for Washington County, and his crew.



## Bristol Trailhead Update

The long-anticipated delivery of our restroom facility took place on July 7<sup>th</sup>. The process was preceded by extensive site preparation by our excavation contractor, **Miller & Miller Construction Inc.**, and our plumbing contractor, **Bradley and Sons Plumbing**.

The delivery day proved to be a logistical challenge. The 56,000 pound all-concrete structure was manufactured by CXT Concrete Products in WV. Following its transport to Bristol, the structure was lifted by a crane onto a smaller trailer provided by Miller & Miller. A bulldozer was required to help pull the crane up our entrance drive. Once on site, the crane was again used to lift the structure from the trailer and then gently lower it onto the prepared site. The process took a total of six hours.



After placement, more project coordination was required. This included installation of a nearby power line by **BVU**, final plumbing hookups, electrical connections to the structure by **W. A. Rhymer Electric** and installation of a sanitary drain line by Miller and Miller Construction. This was followed by the installation of a concrete walk leading up to the facility by **Inland Construction, Inc.**



The structure was opened to the public in late October. Although the doors have a keypad, a code is not needed for access during the open hours. The facility will close during the winter months, December through February. However, the port-a-potty will remain open.

Final steps, some still in progress, include sowing grass where earth was recently disturbed and doing landscaping around the structure and elsewhere at the trailhead.

The Mendota Trail Conservancy wishes to extend heartfelt gratitude to **Ballad Health** for their generous donation that made this trailhead improvement a possibility. Ballad Health is now our lead corporate sponsor.





Mile markers, in half mile increments, were recently installed along the trail, starting at 0.0 on the Bristol end.



Numerals were also placed on trestle end posts.

This signage will help identify your location on the trail, especially important in the event emergency assistance is needed. This signage complements the newly created trail map that is included in our most recent brochure. See page 20 for a full page version. Kudos to **Ellen Mueller** for creating the new map and to her and **Bob** for installing the new signage along the trail.

## TRAIL RULES

- Open dawn to dusk
- No trespassing on adjacent private property
- No motorized vehicles
- No littering, tobacco products, alcohol or drugs
- No hunting or discharge of firearms
- No animals other than leashed, non-vicious dogs.
  - \* Dog owners liable for injuries.
  - \* Dog waste must be disposed of properly
- Equestrian use is not permitted
- Minors must be accompanied by adults

**TRAIL USERS DO SO AT THEIR OWN RISK AND BY USING THE TRAIL WAIVE ALL CLAIMS OF INJURY OR PROPERTY DAMAGE AGAINST TRAIL OWNER, ITS AGENTS, VOLUNTEERS, EMPLOYEES, CONTRACTORS, BOARD MEMBERS AND REPRESENTATIVES**



- Saturday, April 20<sup>th</sup> Trail clean-up day
- Weekend of April 26<sup>th</sup> Yeti runs to include a 50K, 25K and a run-walk





## Thank you Discover Bristol and Virginia Tourism Corporation

The Mendota Trail was recently awarded a generous grant to support the addition of various trail amenities, including dog waste stations and bicycle workstations (including pumps) located at our parking areas. This grant was facilitated by our friends at Discover Bristol (Bristol Chamber of Commerce).



Special appreciation is acknowledged for the role **Christopher Perrin** played in helping our trail qualify for the funding.



Over the summer, **Janet Meadows**, a Virginia Middle School Science Teacher and owner of Mendota Expeditions, hosted teachers from the Southwest Virginia region for a full day of education and fun. Their day began at the Mendota Trailhead, where they learned about honeybees from **Ben Cowan** followed by a talk about the history and development of the Mendota Trail from **Bob & Ellen Mueller**. Afterwards, they enjoyed a hike on the trail to the river. There were about 15 participants on June 20<sup>th</sup> and 25 in attendance on July 19<sup>th</sup>.



**Ben Cowan talking to teachers**





The Mendota Trail Conservancy is humbled to have recently received a generous award from the **Genan Foundation**. The gift of \$25,000 will primarily be used to install interpretive signage. In addition, a portion of the funding will support marketing and trail maintenance.

The award honors the legacy of **Gene and Anne Worrell**, who met in Southwest Virginia, sharing a love of outdoor adventures. They built Worrell Newspapers, starting in Bristol. It later expanded to include over thirty papers across the country. In 1987, they created The Genan Foundation to support their commitment to philanthropy.

We are extremely grateful for this gift as it allows us to further enhance the trail experience. We thank you, Genan Foundation!

## Adventure Town Recognition

**Bristol** was recently recognized as a runner up for being among 'the best places to live and play' in the medium town category by *Blue Ridge Outdoors* magazine, a regional publication.



The November 2023 issue states Bristol 'has plenty for adventurers to explore, including the newly developed Mendota Trail...' The towns of **Abingdon and Damascus** were also recognized in their respective categories. We are indeed fortunate to be a hub for enjoying the outdoors! Here is a link to the full article: <https://www.blueridgeoutdoors.com/go-outside/top-adventure-towns-2023/>

## STAY CONNECTED!

Please visit our website!  
Our brochure, video and prior newsletters are available for viewing.  
[www.mendotatrail.org](http://www.mendotatrail.org)



[www.facebook.com/mendotatrailblazer](http://www.facebook.com/mendotatrailblazer)



Instagram @mendota\_trail



Twitter @MendotaTrail

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## Meet Neal Kilgore

The Conservancy welcomes **Neal Kilgore** as the new Trail & Grant Administrator for Washington County. Neal brings years of experience from his background in outdoor recreation management and preservation efforts on behalf of Virginia's landscapes. His years of networking within the various Virginia agency sectors have already had huge dividends for local trails. Neal is dedicated to doing more of the same with a focus on advancing the further development of the Mendota Trail on behalf of Washington County.



Neal states. "It is an honor and a privilege to partner with the Mendota Trail Conservancy (MTC) as we work together to move Mendota Trail and Washington County forward. The Mendota Trail is certain to become a legacy that testifies to the determination and vision of the leaders on the MTC Board and the Washington County Board of Supervisors."

We look forward to working alongside Neal in promoting outdoor recreation in Washington County. He has already shared many pearls with us related to trail funding and development. Recently, he crafted a successful grant submission with the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation that will potentially have enormous positive impacts for the trail and its nearby natural attractions. Welcome aboard, Neal!

## An Abbreviated Mendota Trail Timeline.....

- Early 1890s – railroad began operation
- Late 1940s – end of passenger service
- Early 1970s – freight service ended; property acquired by scenic railway effort
- Early 1980s – scenic railway in operation
- 2000 – property purchased by City of Bristol, VA
- 2016 – ownership transferred to Mountain Heritage, Inc. (MHI)
- 2017 – first mile opened to Holston River on the Mendota end
- 2018 – purchase of Bristol Trailhead property
- 2019 – three miles (and Trestle 1) opened on Bristol end
- 2020 – two miles (and Trestle 3) opened on Bristol end, extending trail to Benhams
- 2020 – Mendota Trail Conservancy (MTC) formed; ownership transfer from MHI to MTC
- 2021 – 1.5 miles added following restorations of Trestle 4 and Trestles 17 – 19
- 2022 – 2.5 miles of trail opened (and Trestles 11 – 15) on Mendota end
- 2023 – remaining trail opened following restoration of Trestles 5 – 10
- August 31, 2023 – property transfer of full trail and Bristol Trailhead to Washington County, VA

**September 15, 2023 – opening celebration!**



## Moths in Wolf Run Gorge: A Mendota Trail Research Project

by John A. Hyatt



Several walkers and cyclists using the Mile 7-10 section of the Trail have wondered about the strange contraption shown in Fig. 1. What they've seen is a *light trap*, used by entomologists to survey nocturnal insect populations. It has a battery-powered light to attract moths, beetles, and other night-fliers; the bugs hit the clear plastic vanes and drop through a funnel into the bucket below, where they remain. Figure 2 shows the interior of a trap after a night near Bridge 14 in September. Moths are being trapped once a month in the Gorge in a survey aimed at cataloging which species live in the nearby woods.

Why study the moths on the Mendota Trail? Where conservation of nature is a goal, it's obviously worthwhile to know what's present to conserve. The Mendota Trail plants are studied by botanists from ETSU, VA Fish and Wildlife experts have looked into the fishes and other aquatic species in nearby streams, and I'm sure someone will eventually produce a list of bird species found on the Trail. Moths form an important part of any ecosystem. Their caterpillars consume much plant material, and both caterpillars and adult moths are an important food resource for birds, reptiles, and small mammals. Moths are far more prevalent than most people realize. There are generally between 10 and 20 times as many moth species as there are butterfly species; some are important pollinators, some are significant pests, and many have little known about them at all. They stay hidden during the daytime in the forest canopy or in ground detritus, and the casual hiker might never suspect their presence.



In only 7 nights of trapping between April and October this year, I've caught and identified a bit over 300 distinct, different species of moth on the Wolf Run Gorge stretch of trail. That's 300 little creatures no one knew were sharing the Trail with them, going about their quiet little lives in the dark. Many are common things found almost everywhere, some are rarities about which little is known save that they exist, and a lot are in between. I should be able to double the number of species in continued trapping over the next few summers. Voucher specimens of all species are retained and

will eventually be placed in a research-oriented museum collection, and results will be published in an ecological research journal. Fig. 3 shows voucher specimens of 34 of the over 300 species found so far.



## Please...help me fill my sack!



Amazing goodies are available at Mountain Sports, Ltd. (MSL) to help you check off items on the wish list of your family and friends. These items include 2024 calendars, multiple options for T-shirts, hats, and bumper decals. All the merchandise sales directly support the Mendota Trail!

MSL is located at 1061 Commonwealth Ave. in Bristol, VA. Stop by and chat with them about the trail and view their many offerings for enjoying all our nearby outdoors has to offer.



2024 Mendota Trail



## Road Scholars Ride the Trail

A **Road Scholar** tour visited the trail on October 3rd, biking from Bristol to Mendota. The organization, formerly known as Elderhostel, leads numerous domestic and international tours each year. They have previously visited our area multiple times, enjoying the Creeper Trail as well as taking in a show or two at Barter Theatre. This year they added the Mendota Trail to their itinerary! **Sundog Outfitter** provided shuttle service for the group.



## Where is Benhams?

Benhams is a well-kept secret. This small rural community is named after John Benham, an early settler in the Mendota area in the late 1700s. It was an important stop along the former railroad route. See photo below, circa 1940.



Benhams is located near mile marker 5.3 on the trail, approximately mid-point. There is a large gravel parking area offering users access south toward Bristol or north to Mendota. We have a port-a-potty at the location and recently added a bench at a shaded spot along the trail.

It can be accessed at **7720 Rich Valley Rd, Bristol, VA (GPS)**.

For visitors from Kingsport and Johnson City, use 11-W or I-26 to I-81. Then head north at Exit 1 on Gate City Hwy. (58) to Rich Valley Rd. (700). Turn right (east) and go four miles to the parking area in Benhams.



# 2023 Cut to the Chase 5K & 1 Mile Run/Walk

Over 100 participants did not let intermittent rain showers dampen their spirits on October 14th during the trail's 3rd Cut to the Chase 5K & 1 Mile run/walk. Located in Benhams, the 1 mile course headed to the Cut and back while the 5K went out beyond Trestle 3 before returning and then going into the Cut.



The event was organized by **Jerry Grantham & Ellen Mueller**. Volunteers included **Eva Beule, Terry & Kiku Harvey, Bob Mueller, Randy Olson** and **Phil Young**. Thanks to all the participants for their support of the trail.



**Mountain Dew** provided refreshments, games and giveaways. Timing was by **WeRunEvents**.



Photos by **Rick Hamm, Bob Mueller & Ellen Mueller**



# Sponsors for the Mendota Trail 5K & 1 Mile

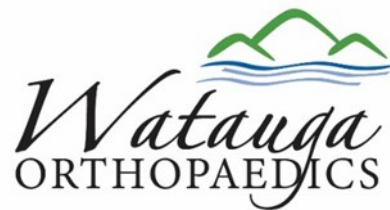
Platinum level:



Gold level:



Silver level:



Bronze level:







# Sit a Spell

**Cheryl LeBlanc** recently donated a beautiful cedar bench for placement at the Benhams parking area, located under a shaded tree. **Phil Young** helped with the delivery and construction of the bench. We thank both for this trail enhancement!



We have also recently placed a rock bench at mile marker 9.1 in memory of **Mark Salyer**. This is situated at a particularly scenic location in the gorge, overlooking Wolf Run Creek.



In addition, a bench was installed by **Bob & Ellen Mueller** near mile marker 12.2 on the Mendota end of the trail. The bench was constructed by Bob with assistance from **Mike Spear**. It memorializes **Margaret S. Poegl** and has a beautiful viewpoint of the North Fork of the Holston River and Clinch Mountain.

# Fall Decorations Along the Trail



We thank our neighbors for their creative contributions along the trail.

Thank you to the Breedlove and the Mitoraj families.



## In Memory, Robert "Bob" Cheers, 1940-2023

We are sad to share we lost an early trail supporter on May 25<sup>th</sup>. Bob was an advocate of all activities related to the enjoyment of the outdoors.

He founded Mountain Sports Ltd. in Bristol in 1981. It is truly a family business and the place to go to meet your outdoor needs. You will receive the utmost personal attention and professional advice. The entire family has been actively engaged with Scouting over the years.



Bob's passing is a loss for fellow outdoor enthusiasts, the Mendota Trail and the broader Bristol community. The family has selected a memorial bench location at a tranquil spot along the trail to honor Bob's memory.



*In  
Loving  
Memory*

Please consider joining other donors who have recently made special gifts to our trail effort in memory of those no longer with us:

Robert "Bob" Cheers

Margaret S. Poegl

Rex & Justine Eades

Mark Salyer

## Iskra Bench Dedicated

A heartfelt celebration was held on the trail at the site of the John Iskra bench on June 28<sup>th</sup>. The date was special as it was the anniversary of John's birthday. A group of family members and friends shared personal recollections of John and his sense of humor, love of running and the outdoors. John's father, Joe, a church deacon, personalized John's humanity with words that were especially touching. A number of those in attendance conveyed how John had directly impacted their lives. Glasses were raised in a champagne toast to John at the conclusion of the gathering.





## Students Visit the Mendota Trail

A large group of students visited the Mendota Trail on July 26th. They were hosted by **Eva Beale**, a long time Board member and Mendota resident. It was great to see so many young folks enjoying the trail for their first time.



## Green Mountain Bike Trail Opens in Bristol, VA



**Jake Eige** enjoys the new Green Mountain Bike Trail at Sugar Hollow Park on the day of its opening celebration, September 22nd.

Emily Ball photos, Bristol Herald Courier

A new “gentler” trail option was recently made available at Sugar Hollow Park in Bristol, VA for walkers and less experienced trail riders. The Mendota Trail Conservancy promoted the effort with a letter of support for the undertaking. This is a great addition to the outdoor experience that Bristolians and residents of Washington County can enjoy in our area!

## KROGER REWARDS

Shopping at Kroger with a Rewards Plus Card can now earn money for the Mendota Trail!!

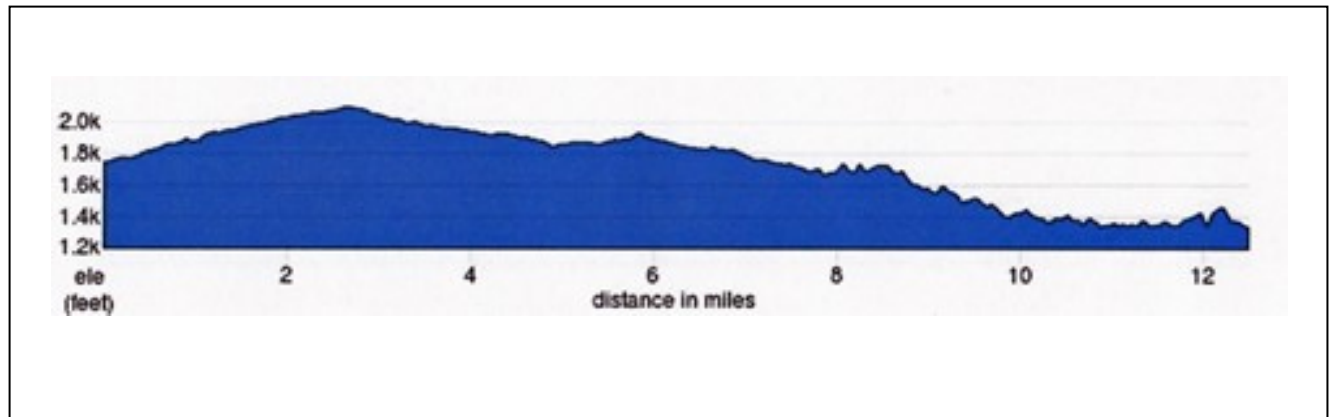
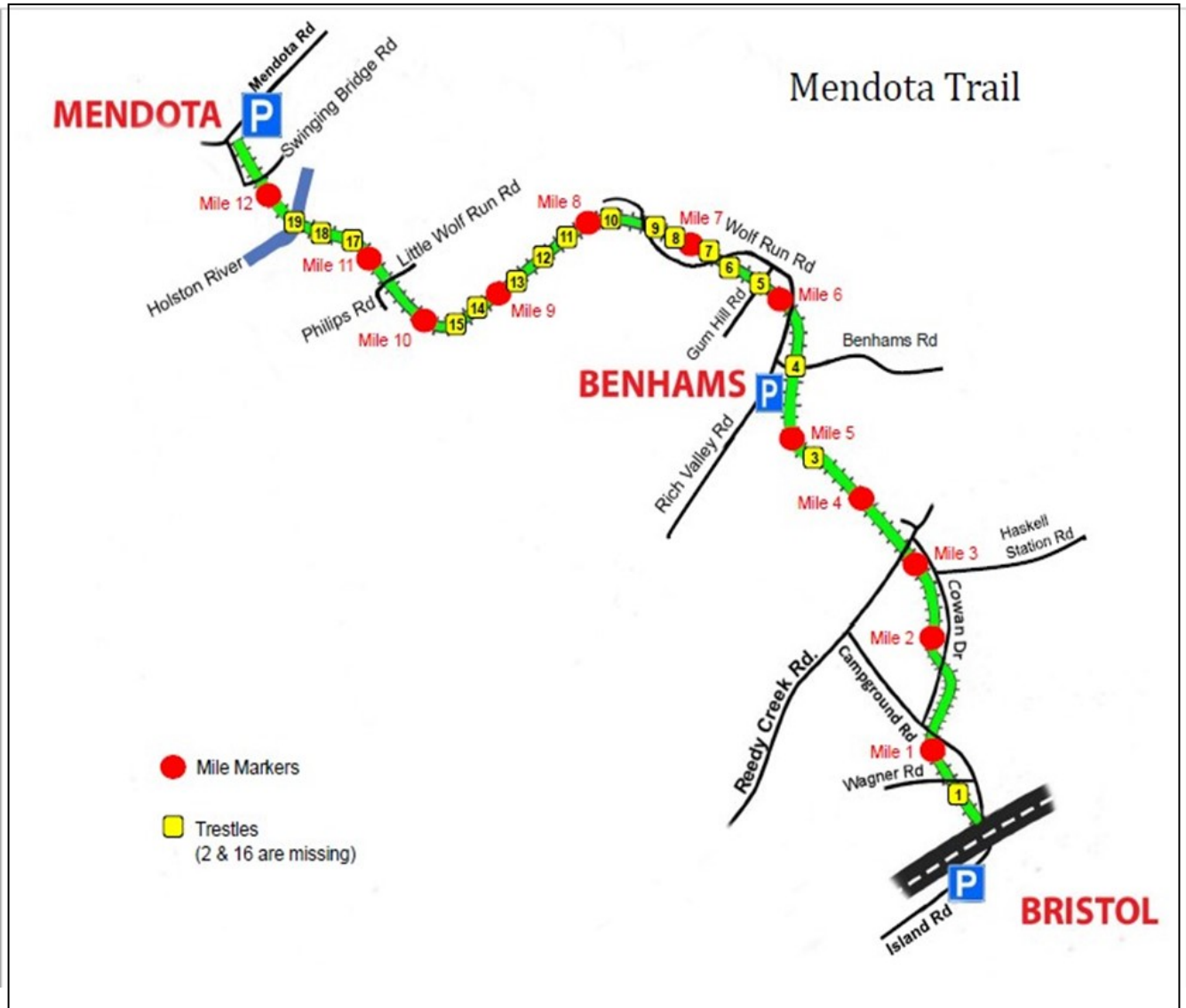
Link your Kroger rewards card to the trail and Kroger will make a donation to us every three months.

1. Go to [Kroger.com](https://www.kroger.com) and sign in.
2. From the menu at the top, click on Save, then Kroger Community Rewards.
3. Scroll down and click I'm a customer.
4. Type Mendota Trail in the organization search box then click Save.

The more people that register, the more money we receive!

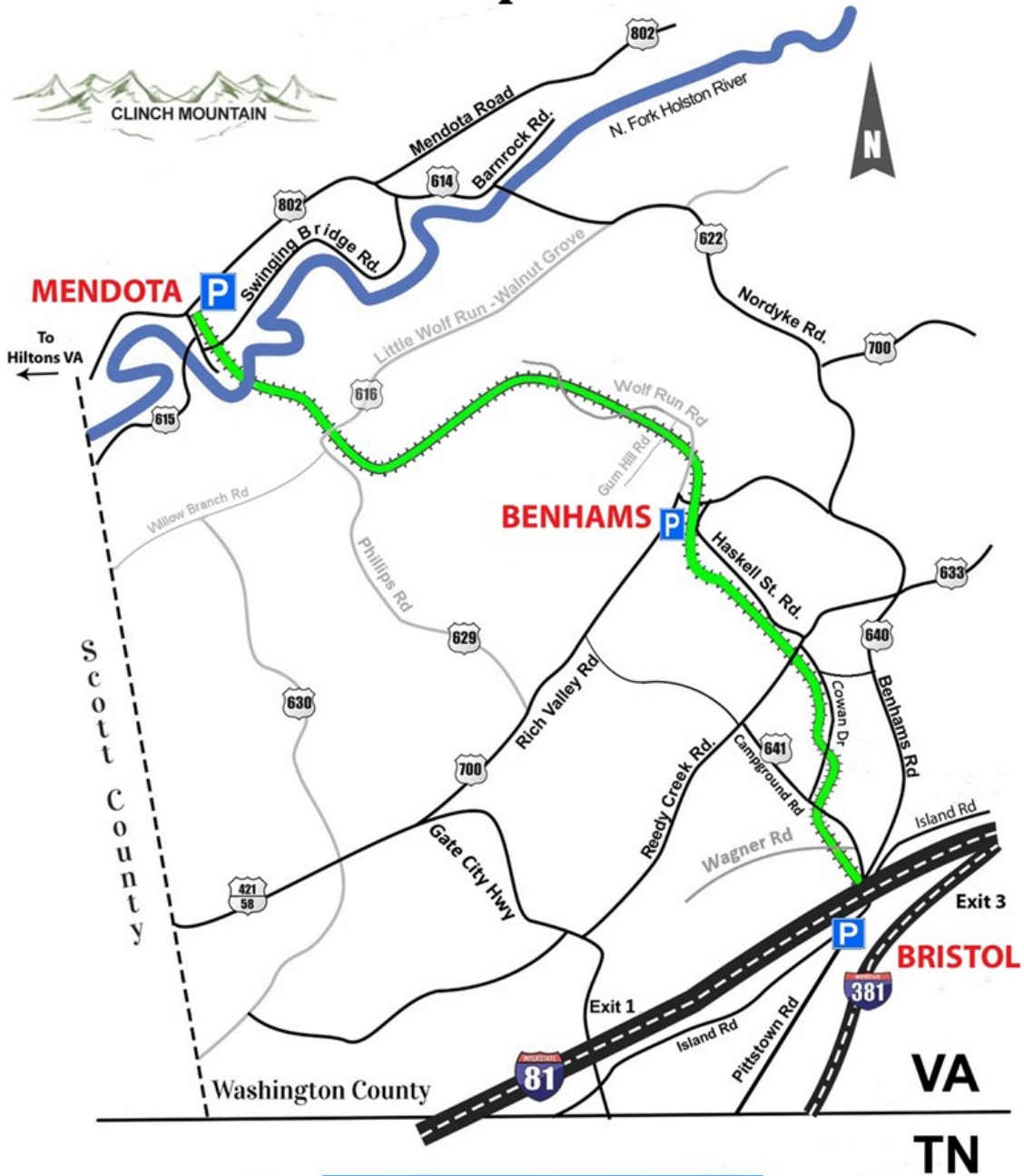
## Thank You Volunteers!

We have been very fortunate to benefit from a dedicated team of volunteers who have regularly provided trail support in a number of ways. We are sincerely grateful for the many hours of service these volunteers have shared with us!





# Mendota Trail Map



## Parking Locations:

- Bristol Trailhead: 3460 Island Rd.**
- Benhams: 7720 Rich Valley Rd.**
- Mendota Trailhead: across from 2421 Mendota Rd.**