

Executive Director Report – July, 2020

IMPACTS OF COVID-19

Since the coronavirus outbreak in March, the ATA has made major adjustments to programs, operations, staff, and almost every aspect of the organization. The good news is that the Arizona Trail remains (mostly) open and provides a safe venue for people to recreate outdoors. The trail is more relevant now than ever before, which has been proven by the volume of people recreating during the Governor's Orders. We've worked diligently to focus our messaging on being welcoming; celebrating the restorative powers of nature; reminding people of Leave No Trace ethics and social distancing protocols; and keeping volunteers, members, donors, supporters and others engaged during this very challenging time.

Volunteer Program – the ATA suspended all group volunteer activities in March, and began allowing/encouraging small group activities in May with a suite of well-researched healthy and safety protocols. See attachments for more details. We are putting more energy into our Segment Steward program than large group events, and hope to be able to meet our 10,000 volunteer hour minimum in 2020.

Trail Operations – all conservation corps activity was shut down in March, and has only partially resumed due to concerns with COVID-19. Most of our springtime trail projects have been delayed, and are tentatively rescheduled for this fall. Depending on what happens with the Arizona Trail State Fund (see below) we will either cancel these projects or support conservation corps in the field while following strict safety protocols. Despite the challenges, we've been able to accomplish some truly amazing things on the AZT! Please refer to the Trail Operations Report for details.

Staff & Administration – the ATA office was closed in March and ATA Staff have been encouraged to work from home, with ATA providing resources to facilitate this whenever necessary. In anticipation of a sharp decline in income, all hourly staff were encouraged to work only essential hours and to be mindful of program expenditures. One staff member (Intern) was temporarily furloughed in March; and two staff members (Youth Outreach & Education Coordinators) were temporarily furloughed in April. The ATA supports these individuals with fully paid health insurance benefits during their furlough period. We intend to bring them back to 3/4-time or full-time in August. A contractor was engaged in March to assist with data entry of trailhead registers (an important element of the USFS Comprehensive Plan) and has completed all tasks associated with the project.

Vehicles – Two of the ATA's vehicles (Ford Transit and Ford Expedition) have been parked on private property, removed from insurance, and are no longer in use. This will save the organization \$2,200 in insurance expenses in 2020.

Financial Development – our springtime fundraiser generated @ \$14,000 in donations to the ATA, however we expect a sharp decline in income in 2020, especially from business partners, special events, and non-governmental grants. As we enter a recession, income is likely to decline from donations, membership and other sources as well. The ATA secured a \$68,000 Paycheck Protection Program Loan from National Bank of Arizona (through Small Business Administration), and our CFO anticipates we will qualify for a 75% forgiveness of this loan.

Special Events – all of the ATA's special events has been canceled in the interest of public safety, including the Vail Scramble, North Rim Ramble, Arizona Trail Day-Flagstaff, and all public outreach events. Paid registrations from running events have been refunded or have generously donated their registration fees to the ATA or applied it to an annual membership. No special events in 2020 will result in a \$100,000 loss of income. We introduced the Arizona Trail Virtual Adventure in May, which is anticipated to generate approximately \$5,000 for the ATA. Running events scheduled for September, November and January 2021 are now using a "waitlist" format so the participant's credit card is not charged when they register; only when the event is confirmed.

WILDFIRES

Three major wildfires (Bighorn, Bush and Mangum) and one minor wildfire (Polles) have significantly impacted the Arizona Trail this summer. In all, over 10% (80 miles) of the AZT has burned and is currently closed in the interest of public safety. Due to Stage III Wildfire Restrictions the entire Tonto National Forest is also closed. The ATA has been in close communication with land management agencies, and will put boots on the ground over the next few weeks to assess trail conditions and make recommendations for emergency trail stabilization, hazard tree removal, and replacement of infrastructure. I developed an Arizona Trail Wildfire Protocols document that has been shared with Incident Command Teams and land management agencies statewide, which provides direction on best management practices for wildland firefighters and reinforces the need to utilize Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) and Disaster Relief Funding to assist with landscape restoration after fires are fully suppressed. No federal wildfire funding flows through the ATA, but we can help advocate for the best areas to put conservation corps to work in the interest of protecting the Arizona Trail. It is uncertain when the AZT will be open again, and the outlook for a fall thru-hiking season is unfortunately quite dismal at this time. Potential reroutes along roads and other trails, and shuttles around closed areas are currently being researched.

ADMINISTRATION

NICRA – The ATA has completed an updated Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreement (NICRA) with the US Forest Service. BIG THANKS to Anna for diligently pursuing this. Our new overhead/indirect rate is 18.66%.

Insurance – I continue to work with Insurance United to find the most comprehensive yet affordable coverage for the ATA's programs and operations. Our overall insurance premium will be reduced by \$3,500 during the next coverage period (August 2020 – August 2021), and we may qualify for financial forgiveness based on our reduction of operations in 2020.

ARIZONA TRAIL STATE FUND

The deadline for the \$250,000 allocation approved by the Joint Legislative Budget Committee last year expired on June 30. Approximately \$150,000 has been spent with outstanding deliverables and matching funds in excess of \$262,500. We have made multiple requests to approve an extension through FY2021 since many of our springtime projects were canceled due to COVID-19, however due to the Arizona State Legislature not resuming their session, no decisions have been made about this funding. No funding has been approved for FY2021, but we remain confident the remaining \$100,000 will support Arizona Trail projects already under signed contract with Arizona State Parks & Trails and the ATA.

GOVERNMENT GRANTS

Two of our recently awarded grants from the USFS have been put on hold due to COVID-19 (supporting Seeds of Stewardship program and Veterans Volunteer Work Weekends), however three new federal grants have been secured, including \$15,000 from Tonto National Forest for cultural resource surveys on Highline Passage projects; \$9,897 from National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance for three volunteer projects on the AZT's Passage 10; and an additional \$14,400 added to our Challenge Cost Share Agreement with the USFS Regional Office.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATES

Great American Outdoors Act – passed the Senate and is expected to pass the House later this month, and should be signed into law in August. This will provide permanent and full funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) at \$900/million annually. It will also provide @ \$2 billion per year for five years to address the maintenance backlog in National Parks, National Forests and on other public lands. The ATA has already compiled a list of projects eligible for funding and will share with land managers after GAOA is finalized.

Grand Canyon Centennial Protection Act – passed the House in October and there is increased interest to move it through the Senate before a "critical minerals bill" is included in the National Defense Authorization Act (this would encourage domestic uranium mining with minimal environmental oversight). Sinema is already a strong supporter of the Grand Canyon Centennial Protection Act and McSally is not. The ATA received a grant from Western Conservation Foundation to ramp up trail advocate awareness of the

importance of protecting Grand Canyon from uranium mining and we would like to launch an online postcard platform on July 20. I will give a brief presentation to the Board on this platform during the meeting.

Trail Maintenance Bill – Senator Sinema is an original co-sponsor of a bill that would allocate \$200 million to allow the USFS to develop contracts with outfitter guides to conduct maintenance on trails administered by the US Forest Service. This is intended to provide relief to an industry that has been decimated by COVID-19. There are some inherent issues with the bill, but I have been working with Sinema’s staff to recommend language to include in the bill that engages trail organizations and conservation corps (since trail guides aren’t necessarily trail builders or maintainers – especially to USFS standards – and the agency lacks the capacity to oversee them). I will update the Board if this moves forward.

Conservation Corps Bill – Another bill is being crafted to help put Americans back to work after the COVID-19 pandemic through expanded funding for conservation corps nationwide. This could benefit the Arizona Trail, especially post-fire, but not the ATA directly. I will update the Board if this moves forward.

WILDLIFE CAMERA PROJECT

The Arizona Trail Wildlife CAM Project – now in its second year – hit a major roadblock in May when the Phoenix Zoo canceled funding for the project due to financial stress. In order to keep the project active, the ATA will be hiring the Research Assistant through the end of 2020. Phoenix Zoo and ATA will collaboratively seek funding for the project over the next three years. Trail user data and wildlife data is a vital element of the AZNST Comprehensive Plan, so half of the funding for the position will be funded through our Challenge Cost Share Agreement with the USFS. In addition, a grant writing intern is actively seeking funding for this project. Preliminary data from the trail-wide collection efforts over the past two years is anticipated before the end of 2020.

BORDER WALL IMPACTS

Despite our public outreach efforts and my direct communications with elected representatives and their staff members, Customs & Border Protection forced the National Park Service to close the Arizona Trail on Monday, July 13 between Montezuma Pass and the international border. The “southern terminus” of the AZT will be Montezuma Pass (2 miles north of the border) until after completion of all border barriers, roads, and associated infrastructure. An additional access road will be constructed down Yaqui Ridge, within close proximity to the Arizona Trail. CBP rejected all of the ATA’s suggested mitigation measures. This issue has received international attention, boosted our social media followers by 10%, and our July 9-10 Facebook posts reached over 110,000 people. While we may lose some supporters over the issue, it’s elevating the profile of the ATA and strengthening connections with the overwhelming majority of the trail community. Most importantly, we’re fulfilling our mission to protect the trail.

EQUITY, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

Congratulations to the ATA Board, with special thanks to Lisa Schnebly Heidinger, for crafting a statement of solidarity. While this proved to be an uncomfortable topic for many, it’s beneficial for organizations like ours to have these discussions at the Board level to better define our priorities and commitments to justice, equity, diversity and inclusion (JEDI). In 2019, the ATA crafted an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Statement. I recommend the Board vote to adopt it as a policy. In addition, I recommend the ATA add a JEDI Subcommittee to hold us more accountable to equitable practices within the organization. This subcommittee should be made up of trail users and outdoor advocates who identify as black, indigenous, and people of color.

This is only a brief synopsis of Arizona Trail Association priority happenings over the past four months. Please reach out to me with specific questions that we may not have time to address at the Board Meeting. Thank you for your service to the Arizona Trail Association!