

Allegheny Valley Community Trail creates excitement for officials, bikers

By Jodi Weigand
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A bike trail along the Allegheny River would be a dream come true for Jared Rossi, who braves a bicycle ride along Route 28 to get work each day.

"I love the idea," said Rossi, 32, of Shaler. "I think it's something to go for within the next five years."

He was among about 50 residents and community leaders who attended a public meeting Tuesday in Millvale about the 27-mile Allegheny Valley Community Trail, which would stretch from Millvale to Harrison. The initiative is a collaboration among Allegheny County, Friends of the Riverfront and the Pennsylvania Environmental Council.

Preliminary drawings show the trail running on 16 miles of railroad property, 2 miles of private property, 6 miles of public right-of-way and 3 miles of existing trails. The engineering firm McTish, Kunkel & Associates spent months meeting with government officials in the 17 communities along the trail to determine who owns the land, where it would be built and how to connect it to existing riverfront trails to develop the ideal course.

The design still is being evaluated, and the next steps include using residents' input to revise the trail course, identify areas for parking and then meeting with private property owners and railroad officials to gain access to their land.

The trail would connect with the Erie-to-Pittsburgh Greenway and the Pittsburgh-to-Harrisburg Mainline Canal Greenway.

Creating such a large trail could have a great economic impact on the region, said Kevin Geiselman, 43, of Churchill, who frequently makes longer bike trips.

"The more trails we have, the more the trails do for you," he said. "It's an exponential return because you've got people who are riding a long way and are willing to spend money because they're riding the trail."

People of all ages and abilities will be able to use the trail, meaning it will meet accessibility standards set by the Americans with Disabilities Act, said Thomas Baxter, executive director of Friends of the Riverfront, a nonprofit group that helped complete 21 miles of the Three Rivers Heritage Trail.

"It will certainly (help the communities) offer a higher quality of living, better physical health, better mental health, increase property value and offer alternative transportation," he said.

Officials anticipate that the trail will bring more city dwellers out to their suburban communities.

"I think it would be good for our community, having bike riders coming through our town to come have lunch and shop in our community," said Joe Noro, president of Aspinwall council.

"It's a great thing for all the communities and will help connect Pittsburgh with some of these outlying areas," said Tarentum Manager Bill Rossey. "There's no reason why some of these people on the outskirts can't use these trails to commute to Pittsburgh."

Tarentum's Riverview Memorial Park will connect with the new trail, as will parks in Millvale, O'Hara and Sharpsburg.

In anticipation of the trail's construction, Sharpsburg officials included a ramp from where the trail would be built to the borough's newly renovated 13th Street boat ramp.

"There's a belief by our council that anything that can bring traffic into our business district is as effective as a business coming in," said Sharpsburg Secretary Ronald Borczyk.

It will take years to complete the trail, but people will see "significant steps forward" as its development progresses, Baxter said. Officials Tuesday urged residents to keep interest in the project alive so that all the connections can be completed.

"It's a community access project," said Joe McLaughlin, 62, of Shaler. "It will give people an excuse to get on a bike ... and get families and folks out to enjoy recreation."

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