

People, communities eager for Ohio River trail, recreational paths

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February 25, 2016 MONACA, PA — Monaca resident John Thompson can't wait for a recreational trail along the Ohio River to be created.

He currently relies on an indoor track at Bradys Run Park's recreation facility and an outdoor loop across the road from the building in Brighton Township. And he's also used the Montour Trail, a recreational path with more than 40 miles in Allegheny County, to help exercise for his physical training with the 171st Air Refueling Wing in Moon Township.

The Ohio River Trail Council has been working for years to create such a path, dubbed the Ohio River Greenway Trail, which would run from Moon Township to Ohioville. Trail council representatives say this link would connect more than 450 miles of existing route and trail systems from the Midwest to Washington, D.C.

The trail would seek to make a dangerous corridor safer. The corridor, Route 51, was designated by the state for cyclists to share the road with vehicles, marked by Bicycle PA Route A signs. But as noted in a November 2015 study, "North Shore Connector: Sewickley to Center Township," three cyclists have died in the last three years after crashes with vehicles on that state road.

Moon police Chief Leo McCarthy has cycled repeatedly from his home in the township to Presque Isle near Erie. He even has gone to Chicago by bicycle, and he said the most dangerous part of that trip was northbound on Route 51 between South Heights and Monaca.

"It is my opinion that Route 51 in Beaver County is unsafe for bicycle travel," McCarthy wrote in a letter to the Ohio River Trail Council this year.

Building upon the past Beaver County and multiple communities already have been making some progress with regards to developing trails for pedestrians and cyclists. Multiple Brighton Township housing developments have been linked together with trails, and the township has added paved trails in parks. Beaver River Rails to Trails created a roughly two-mile trail by the river in Beaver Falls, and the county has a little under 20 miles of trails in its three county parks, part of which includes prime mountain biking.

Now many people are hoping to build upon that. The Beaver River Rails to Trails Association wants to extend its trail through New Brighton, having it go over the Beaver Falls New Brighton Bridge, trek down Second Avenue and link up toward the Beaver County YMCA in Rochester Township, said Ernie Piscioti, president of the association.

“The whole objective is to link up to the Ohio River trail,” Piscioti said, adding that the trail also could extend northbound.

Allegheny County has a project that should start and be completed this summer in Neville Island, adding bike lanes to its main corridors, an approximately five-mile stretch on Grand Avenue and Neville Road. County representatives have been gathering input from the public about the best ways to make the changes. Bids on final plans could be sought in the spring, and federal money would pay for 80 percent of the costs, estimated at \$400,000.

The Ohio River trail has been visible in studies so far, but Snitger’s Bicycle Store Owner Marlin Erin said people continue to call his Beaver based business to ask, “Where (are) the trails?”

Now some of the first physical additions to the Ohio River trail are expected to begin. Vincent Troia, Ohio River Trail Council executive chairman, president and chief executive officer, said in an email that two phases of the trail are planned to be completed this year. That would include adding share the road and shared lane markings, affecting parts of communities between Monaca and Coraopolis.

“This construction will be an important milestone, but we still have some 40 miles to finish before we connect in with Ohio,” said Jack Manning, an Ohio River Trail Council board member.

Studies from 2011 and 2012 showed the cost could be more than \$12 million, but Ohio River Trail Council board member Mario Leone said those studies identified ideal scenarios. The studies call for completing individual projects in phases to help complete the trail as quickly as possible.

That cost could translate to economic benefits for businesses. The Ohio River trail would connect with the Great Allegheny Passage, a multistate biking and hiking trail that connects with a recreational canal towpath that extends to Washington, D.C.

Research and marketing firm Campos Inc. estimated in a 2009 study the trail, at the time 132 miles long, generated nearly \$41 million for businesses.

Manning, who is also president and executive director of the Beaver County Chamber of Commerce, said recreational amenities are important to retaining families in the area. The chamber sees that quality of life balance as an important factor to advocate for in local economic growth strategies, he said. “It’s one thing to bring jobs into the county; it’s another to bring families,” Manning said.

Erin, of Snitger’s Bicycle Store, compares having a recreational trail system to a high school being able to offer a foreign language program. He said areas without trail infrastructure will not entice people to relocate there, and other places will instead benefit.

Erin said because other counties have more developed trail systems in place, many people seek them out, even taking their bicycles in their cars to go to nearby counties or Ohio. Erin said that means Beaver County loses twice: Residents don't spend their money here, and businesses lose out on tourism.

Beaver County is currently updating a long term recreation plan, a key instrument in helping obtain grants. Representatives of a committee for the plan said the No. 1 priority people identified in public meetings last year are recreational routes, ranging from so called "blueways" or water ways to "greenways," which could consist of a variety of pedestrian and cycling routes.

The county plans to gather more input through additional meetings this year to detail how exactly that priority can be achieved along with five other priorities identified. A final report could be issued in June.

"There seems to be a lot more activity around this," county tourism and recreation director Tim Ishman said of streets becoming more pedestrian and bicycle friendly.

"People are getting onboard."

Source:

http://www.timesonline.com/progress/2016/peoplecommunitieseagerforohiorivertrailrecreationalpaths/article_3922c0e2cb8f11e5b8434f3115729afa.html