

Wednesday, February 25



By Jerry Sowden

It was a warm October afternoon, and the foliage was at its peak as Christine and Warren Baker of Erie and daughter, Sarah, 11, pedaled down the Sandy Creek bicycle trail in Cranberry Township.

The trails are a popular draw for local bicyclists, skaters, joggers and walkers, but they also attract people from outside the area. The Justus, Sandy Creek and Oil Creek trails are particularly popular.

69th annual edition



Recreation Trails getting new attention

The Oil Region greenways and open space coordinator and local communities have been toiling to connect the dots between several stretches of recreation trails in the area.

The coordinator, Debra Frawley, was hired in July. She is assisting with coordinating trail work, grant-writing and technical assistance, and her office is housed within the Franklin Industrial and Commercial Development Authority complex. "It was beyond volunteer organizations" to continue to juggle all of the tasks surrounding the trails, she said.

Frawley describes two types of greenways, one recreational and the other natural. The recreational includes the bike trails, some of them with an added advantage because they brush up against schools. This segment also is open to the possibility of "bringing in economic development, too, such as overnight accommodation, restaurants and bike shops," she said. The organization is working to "fill in the gaps" of these bike trails, stretches between Oil City and Franklin, for example, or between Emlenton and Foxburg. Grant applications are being written to fund such trails. Natural greenways include ecological functions such as wildlife habitat. This tier also focuses on "planning ahead and warding off complications," such as encouraging people not to build on floodplains, Frawley said. The hope is that education and preservation of watersheds and floodplains will also help with stormwater drainage, she said, ultimately saving townships money.

"Gaps" in progress include a trail that would go through the town of Titusville, and Frawley said money was just awarded for an engineering study that would aid with the logistics of its completion. In addition, she said the northern two miles of McClintock Trail were just finished a few months ago, and the organization is hopeful that a grant may be secured through the Oil Region Alliance for the completion of the southern two miles.

Greenways suggests the following benefits will be derived from its initiative:

- Protection of natural resources and water resources
- Stewardship of Pennsylvania's Rural and Farmland Legacy
- Conservation of historic, cultural and scenic resources
- Fostering of public recreation, health and fitness
- Creation of partnerships and educational opportunities
- Support of economic prosperity
- Promotion of sustainable development and sound land use
- Provision of alternative transportation

The Erie to Pittsburgh Trail Alliance also has been a main project this year. "Once the gaps are filled in, people can go the whole way from Erie to Pittsburgh," Frawley said. She added that many are "in shape and up to this," as many long-distance bicyclists and people from other states have expressed interest in it. The EPTA is comprised of 12 individual trail groups, and the end result of their efforts will produce a unified and non-motorized route that will connect the shores of Lake Erie to the Point in Pittsburgh. The alliance "promotes the use of the trail as a system" and focuses on its ability to improve the

quality of life for local residents and to stimulate economic development for communities along the route through such aforementioned recreational tourism. Further information on the EPTA may be obtained by contacting Jim Holden, president, at P.O. Box 264, Franklin, or online at greenways@ficda.org.

Allegheny Valley Trails: There is, of course, some overlap within these organizations and the Allegheny Valley Trails Association, but Jim Holden, also president of this group, noted several projects that his group has been working on individually. AVTA is an all-volunteer non-profit organization whose mission is "the acquisition of abandoned railways in the Allegheny River watershed and their rehabilitation into multi-purpose, non-motorized recreational trails." In the last year, the organization has completed the Allegheny River Trail from Foxburg to Parker and utilized the Justus Fund to resolve a "break in the trail" at Sunnyslopes, said Holden. "There is still an unresolved break in the trail at Foxburg," although he revealed the group was able to establish a coalition of boroughs, cities, townships and non-profits in order to hire a coordinator for the region, which turned out to be Frawley.

On top of the additional manpower, machinery was also purchased for maintenance of trails via the Dr. Arthur Phillips Grant. AVTA has been very active in an alliance of trail groups between Erie and Pittsburgh, namely the EPTA. "There's been a lot of progress and we're about 60 percent complete," he said, "we're working to close some of the gaps this summer." When finished, the EPTA will have linked more than 200 miles of trails. Contributing toward such coverage, AVTA is about 250 members strong, and roughly 60 of those are business partners, he said.

The following awards are given annually, one per state, for successful efforts to influence public policy relating to trail planning, protection, development or maintenance:

State trail worker: With a renowned name within the region's network of recreational trails, Holden was given this award. He has been involved in the Allegheny Valley Trail Association as a volunteer since its founding in 1990. Since that time, he has administered about \$7 million worth of grants for trail acquisition and construction, having resulted in acquisition of 55 miles and construction of 46 miles of the Allegheny River Trail and the adjacent Sandy Creek Trail. Holden personally helps to maintain the trails and keep the corridors mowed. Through a vision and camaraderie, he has promoted many trails and partnerships in the region. These partners include the National Park Service Rivers and Trails Program that assisted with the development of a Trail Feasibility Study in the 1980s. In addition, Holden was behind the Trail Town public workshops in 2006, and the creation of the Erie to Pittsburgh Trail Alliance in 2007.

State trail advocacy: Ron Steffey, executive director of the Allegheny Valley Land Trust, was given this award. The mission of the trust is to "protect and convert railroad corridors into trails for public use, thereby providing opportunities for commuters and outdoor recreational activities." The projects are a means to maintain the integrity of these corridors for future transportation use, while also acting as an economic stimulus for communities. Steffey began his involvement by frequenting the Armstrong Trail after he sustained a foot injury from working in the coal mines. After a number of complaints to a trail volunteer about how the path was being built, he was invited to get involved and fix it. Steffey started out in an AmeriCorps position with the trust, and thus progressed to become their full-time executive director. Steffey also has worked to build public awareness and support for rail-trail projects such as the Erie to Pittsburgh trail, a segment of which would be comprised of the Armstrong Trail.