

County's rails-to-trails initiatives started slowly, but are making progress.

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(Online article has a brief video message from Mike)



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Following a record-breaking total of 71.6 inches of snow this winter, Mike Fusco, president of The Friends of the Chester Creek Branch, is really looking forward next year to hiking or biking on the proposed 6.8-mile rail-trail from Upland to Middletown.

“As we trudge our way through this difficult winter, it’s nice to think that soon, on a nice spring day, we will be able to walk, jog or bike-ride on the beautiful Chester Creek Rail-Trail,” said Fusco, 52, of Aston, the founder of the 90-member organization.

The trail would include the following sections: 3.2 miles in Middletown, 2.6 miles in Aston; 1 mile in Chester Township and a couple hundred feet in Upland.

More than 13,000 miles of unused rail lines already have been converted into recreational trails nationwide, a large percentage of them in Pennsylvania, but Delaware County has only one other rail-trail, the 2.4-mile P&W Trail in Radnor, which opened in 2005, according to Fusco.

Pennsylvania has 144 open rail-trails, totaling about 1,455 miles, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

This is compared to open trails of all types in the state estimated to be about 25,000 miles.

In the county, there are about 20 trails, not just rail-trails, in various stages of development, some open, some under construction, proposed or conceptual, said Kent Taylor of DCNR’s Western Pennsylvania Conservancy.

Like a locomotive climbing uphill, it has taken a long time for the Friends to get the rail-trail project to

fruition, Fusco said.

An engineering study and design is in the works presently on Phase I of the project, a 2.8-mile section from Lenni Road to Creek Road in Middletown, and a few hundred yards in Aston, Fusco said.

A \$300,000 grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources was received by the non-profit group in August 2006 with the assistance of the Delaware County Planning Department, former county council President Andrew Reilly and state Sen. Dominic Pileggi, R-9, of Chester.

Another \$140,000 is still needed to start construction of Phase I, according to Patricia Tomes, program manager of the Northeast Regional Office, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy.

The funding for construction is a federal match for the DCNR grant, Fusco said.

Parts of the engineering study have to be sent to PennDOT and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection.

“Right now, we speculate we will be able to begin construction in 2011,” Fusco said. “The rails are still down in most places. We’re going to be taking them up hopefully within the next six months.”

The rail line and right-of-way is owned by SEPTA, and the county has a 30-year lease for \$1.

Thomas P. Shaffer, manager of transportation planning for the Delaware County Planning Department, said there were no cost estimates yet beyond the 2.8 mile, Phase I section.

The county has a grant from the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources for \$300,000 and \$170,000 from the state Department of Environmental Protection for stream bank mitigation due to excessive washout areas of the bank, Shaffer said.

Design funding is still about \$140,000 short of the needed amount.

The overall estimated cost of construction of the rail-trail is \$4 million based on preliminary design quantities, including lots of bridge re-decking, one new culvert, a trail bridge, two trail heads to parking areas and mitigation of one major washout and one minor washout, Shaffer said.

Federal transportation funds have been set aside for construction.

Other potential rails-to-trails sites include SEPTA’s inactive Octoraro Line in Concord and Chester Heights; the abandoned Newtown Square rail line in Upper Darby, now a PECO easement; and part of the East Coast Greenway next to Route 291, between Morton Avenue in Chester and Darby Creek in Ridley Township, Shaffer said.

Open Space

Phase I will preserve 30 acres of open space. It will run through Aston Township along Chester Creek, passing the Aston-Middletown Little League and Linvilla Orchards to Creek Road in Middletown. The first phase will also include full rehabilitation of the infamous graffiti bridge that crosses Pennell Road (Route 452) in Aston.

The project will involve the removal of rails and ties, construction of an asphalt surface and re-decking

and fencing of existing bridges.

The Chester Creek Branch of the former Pennsylvania Railroad, was constructed shortly after the Civil War and parallels the Chester Creek. During the Industrial Revolution, mills, factories and warehouses operated adjacent to the rail line while new communities sprouted up near rail depots.

With the advancement of the automobile and interstate highway system, rail service fell out of demand and many creekside businesses relocated. After the Chester Creek Branch sustained severe damage from the Chester Creek flood disaster of September 1971, the line was abandoned and finally deeded to SEPTA.

Much of the rail corridor has become overgrown since the abandonment. Many of the bridges remain intact and the tracks and ties were never removed.

Since the fall of 1994, several citizen groups in the county organized The Friends of the Chester Creek Branch and laid the groundwork to convert the rail line to a multi-use trail.

The Friends were originally incorporated as part of the Chester-Ridley-Crum Watersheds Association, a non-profit organization, and then incorporated separately in the summer of 1997 dedicated to the completion of the rail-trail project.

Fusco, a bicycling enthusiast, said he was first inspired by the idea of a rail-trail when he was on a business trip to Chicago. "One of my business contacts invited me to dinner and afterward they took their kids out on the rail-trail, right up the street.

"I saw this and thought this is wonderful," he said.

He used to ride his bike around Delco and see different rail lines not in use.

"We have the raw material for trails here in Delaware County, and myself and a bunch of other folks got together to try to promote them," Fusco said.

"If you think about it, we have over a half-million people in Delaware County and only a handful of recreational places for them to go," Fusco said.

He pointed out that non-rail trails like the 5-mile multi-use trail in Ridley Creek State Park is often overcrowded on weekends in the warmer weather.

"We got approval from Aston to build already and in Middletown there will be some meetings coming up in the next month or two," Fusco said.

SEPTA Lease

SEPTA provided a 30-year lease to Friends for the rail-trail although it still retains ownership and has the right to restore rail service if need be, but the odds of this happening are doubtful.

But Byron Comati, SEPTA's director of strategic planning and analysis, said SEPTA has never sought reclamation and a rail-trail's growing popularity could preclude this.

"To the best of our knowledge after our discussions with SEPTA, there are no plans in the future to restore rail service to the Chester Creek Branch," Fusco said.

Comati concurred that "... SEPTA has no plans, long-range or otherwise, to reclaim the Chester Creek Line right-of-way for public transit use."

However, in general, SEPTA "... is open to conversion of an unused right-of-way for a trail or recreational purpose by an interested party, with the understanding that the transit agency retains the rights to restore it to an active passenger rail line in the future.

"Rails-to-trails success stories exist in Delaware County, and there are several other examples of former right-of-way that have the potential to become trails in the future," Comati said.

The popular Radnor Trail spans part of the old Philadelphia & Western Strafford Branch from Radnor-Chester Road to Sugartown Road.

SEPTA's plans to extend service on the West Chester Branch 3.5 miles further west from the R3 Elwyn Station to Wawa "... is illustrative of an ongoing debate around the region over what to do with inactive rail lines," Comati said.

This extension is a restoration of service on the existing, dormant West Chester Line, which was discontinued in 1986.

"Ultimately, the noble goals of the rails-to-trails movement must be balanced with the equally worthy desires to restore passenger rail service on long-dormant branches," he said.

The \$80 million Wawa project is at the 90 percent design phase with construction anticipated to start this year, he said. After completion of the project, trains are scheduled to operate from Wawa by 2013.

Comati said there are also planning efforts under way to explore the longer-term possibility of restoring service all the way to West Chester in Chester County, which was discontinued beyond Elwyn in 1986 due to deteriorating track conditions and low ridership.

This project is a long way off and would use the same rail line and right-of-way that was discontinued for SEPTA service in 1986. Since no rail-trails have been built along it, no reclamation would be necessary.

The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission is doing a "West Chester Rail Restoration Ridership Study," to develop ridership forecasts for selected station service scenarios from the Wawa Station to station locations in West Chester, said Joseph F. Hacker, manager of the DVRPC's Office of Transit, Bicycle and Pedestrian Planning.

He stressed that the study primarily involves ridership estimation, not the feasibility of restoring the presently dormant line. The \$100,000 study is expected to be finished in June.

"The (low) ridership didn't justify keeping it running because of the repairs needed; the conditions had deteriorated and the ridership," Hacker said.

"Despite plans to increase the rail network in Delaware County and the wider region, there also seems to be no shortage of potential rails-to-trails corridors ..." Comati said.

He said that "... it appears these two objectives can certainly co-exist." Other inactive rail lines in the county with rails-to-trails potential include a portion of the Octoraro line, which runs from Wawa through Concord and Chadds Ford, and the long-abandoned Newtown Square Branch through Upper

Darby and Haverford.

NIMBY response

Overall, there hasn't been any major public outrage over the rail-trail project or any overwhelming NIMBY — not in my backyard — response.

The Middletown Land Conservancy gave a letter of support to Fusco early on.

At a meeting in December 2005 in the township sponsored by The Friends, most residents supported the rail-trail, but some cited the possibility of vandalism, burglaries and trespassing in adjacent residential communities. Others questioned state police response.

Township Manager Bruce Clark said The Friends of the Chester Creek Branch made an initial presentation to township council in April 1996 at which time they voted to basically endorse the general concept of the project.

Since then, the non-profit group has been back before township council periodically to provide updates, Clark said. Township council has approved several different aspects of the project, including a lease agreement between SEPTA and county council for the right-of-way in 2005.

Township officials have indicated their support of the overall concept, but still have to sign off on the final approval when the engineering design has been completed, Clark said. It's hard for council to act on the plan until they see the final engineering details, including parking and safety factors, he said.

One township resident in late 2005 said the township-owned Linvill Trail, which runs around part of the Linvilla Orchards farm property, has brought undesirable elements into the area, but another resident who lives adjacent to the trail then said there hadn't been any problems he was aware of.

Paul Linvill, 83, a lifelong township resident and member of the parks and recreation board, says he supports the rail-trail.

"I support recreation" overall, he said. "In Europe, they have bike trails all over and this places lanes in places where people can ride their bicycles. It's nice to have a safe place for the kids (to ride)."

The only objection he said he had was the length of time that will be required to close Knowlton Road in order to tear up Knowlton Road to construct a trail tunnel under it. Linvill, who is co-owner of Linvilla Orchards, in business since 1914, said that work would definitely affect his business.

"The rail-trail goes through our property, but is far enough away from our homes and business not to be a concern," Linvill said.

Radnor Rail-Trail

Aston Township Manager Richard Lehr said the township board of commissioners is supporting the rail-trail project although it has some concerns about its maintenance and police patrols.

In Radnor, the 2.4-mile Radnor rail-trail since its inception "...has been a great asset to our park system," said Tom Blomstrom, director of parks and recreation.

The trail has been heavily used by a variety of recreational enthusiasts, including walkers, joggers and cyclists, he said.

The trail which cost \$3.1 million was funded with 80 percent federal money and 20 percent state funds.

Since it opened in 2005, problems haven't been any different "...outside of what we have in the rest of the park system," Blomstrom said. "We've been very fortunate.

"Obviously open space is a very important issue right now, affecting many different communities in this region," he said. "It's great when land can be preserved for generations to come."