

Area trails expect heavy summer traffic after tough season

By Robert Rider

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Chris Huffman likes bicycling in the scenic quiet of the Montour Trail to escape the traffic and hubbub of suburban living.

"The trail means everything," said Huffman, 40, of Moon. "With the community getting so busy, it is the only place to ride unencumbered and off the busy roads."

Leonard Larsen, 64, of Robinson, walks the trail several times a week for the exercise.

"I had heart bypass surgery three years ago and my doctor said I needed to walk," said Larsen, 64, of Robinson. "Since then I have been coming to the trail three or four times a week."

If history repeats, Huffman and Robinson will be joining a multitude of enthusiasts enjoying hike-bike trails in the region this spring as temperatures warm and wildflowers begin appearing -- despite damage to sections of the trails after remnants of Hurricane Ivan dumped nearly 6 inches of rain on the region on Sept. 17.

The 100-mile Youghiogheny River Trail alone draws more than 500,000 visitors a year and was rated among the top 19 walking trails in the world by Travel Leisure magazine, said Judy Marshall, of Elizabeth Township, president of the Regional Trail Corporation.

The Montour Trail Council has opened 39 miles of the planned 47-mile trail from Coraopolis to Clairton, which estimated nearly 150,000 users a year, said Ned Williams, of Washington, Washington County, engineering and construction chairman of the Montour Trail Council.

Combined, there are about 220 open miles of hike-bike trails in the region that highlight the three rivers, the scenic forests, as well as downtown Pittsburgh.

"The trails gentle grade, smooth surface, isolation from motorized traffic and inherently scenic landscape offer people of all ages and level of physical ability magnificent settings where they can safely walk, jog, cross country ski or bicycle," Marshall said.

"The rail-trails (abandoned railroad lines that have been converted to trails) are relatively easy because of the level grade that the old railroads developed," said Stan Stattinger, of McDonald, a Montour Trail Council member.

Use of some trails this spring was threatened after remnants of Hurricane Ivan dumped almost 6 inches of rain on the region Sept. 17.

The Montour and Butler-Freeport Community trails were among the hardest hit in the wake of Hurricane Ivan.

Nine of the first 10 miles of the Montour Trail-- from Moon to Imperial -- that sustained major damage from erosion are now usable after volunteers filled many holes and replaced the trail surface, Williams said. That section of trail was built in 1992.

Mile 3.1 to mile 4.1 -- from Beaver Grade Road to Park Manor Drive in Robinson -- is the only mile not yet opened, Williams said. Work that must be completed includes filling the holes in the trail, asphalt resurfacing and replacing the trail surface, which Williams said should be completed by August.

"We caution people to be careful on the surfaces of the trail that are not yet finished," said trail council Vice President Mark Imgrund, of Peters Township.

Some surface areas which are uneven due to holes still need to be filled, Imgrund said.

The damage to the trail was estimated at \$450,000, Williams said.

"The people that have really come to help are volunteers and local municipalities with manpower and equipment," Williams said.

Williams said the trail council has received nearly \$20,000 from private donations, transferred \$25,000 from another project on the trail which was funded by the Allegheny Regional Asset District (RAD), and has applied for \$200,000 from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

All 16 miles of the Butler-Freeport Community Trail in Butler and Armstrong counties closed due to the floods are now usable and open, said Ronald Bennett, of Saxonburg, president of the Butler-Freeport Trail Council.

"We've put numerous signs up warning people to be careful and use caution," Bennett said.

Most of the damage was from uprooted trees and erosion, but some sections have lost safety railings, he said.

Damage to the Butler-Freeport Community Trail was estimated at \$300,000, Bennett said. A Federal Emergency Management Agency grant to cover the repairs has not been finalized, he said.

FEMA notified Buffalo Township that the repairs will be covered because the trail qualifies as a public park, Bennett said.

"FEMA has the estimate down to \$90,000 and there has been no final word yet," Bennett said. He said the trail council is also going to ask Buffalo Township supervisors for help in resurfacing the trail.

The first three-mile section of the Butler-Freeport Trail was opened in 1992 in Freeport and when completed will stretch 20 miles to Butler.

"We have about four miles to go," Bennett said. "We have a \$30,000 grant for the engineering costs and when the trail is completely finished it will have cost probably close to \$700,000." Three other hike-bike trails in the region escaped with minimal damage from the Sept. 17 flooding.

The Youghiogheny River Trail, built on the former Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad corridor, runs continuously for 100 miles from McKeesport through Connellsville to Meyersdale.

"The damage was minimal and everything was repaired," said Marshall. "The trail was built to withstand floods. Some of the hillside along the trail slid down and there were trees and mud."

Most of the clean-up work was done by volunteers and local municipalities which donated equipment, Marshall said.

"The trail is a treasure and people really love it and it shows by how well it is taken care of," said volunteer Dan Piesik, of Boston, Pa.

The Steel Valley Trail will run 13 miles along the Monongahela River from the Three Rivers Heritage Trail beginning at the Glenwood Bridge in Homestead to the Youghiogheny River Trail in McKeesport by the time it is finished.

"We're still working on the Steel Valley Trail and no segments are under construction right now," said Hannah Hardy, president of the Steel Valley Trail Council.

Because the Steel Valley Trail is not built on former railroad beds the trail council has faced many challenges in completing the trail, said Hardy.

"The trail is a real challenge to construct because we've needed to work with a lot of property owners in the Mon Valley along the river," Hardy said.

Two and a half miles of trail -- along the Waterfront in Homestead, and connecting with the Three Rivers Heritage Trail -- and two miles from the Duck Hollow Trail to the Glenwood Bridge on the other side of the Monongahela River have been completed, Hardy said.

Thirty-two miles of completed Three Rivers Heritage Trail runs along both sides of the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers and passes through downtown Pittsburgh, the South Side and connects to the Steel Valley Trail.

"The Three Rivers Trail is in good shape," said Thomas Baxter, associate director of Friends of the Riverfront. "Many municipalities and volunteers help maintain the trail from collecting rubbish, recycling and planting trees along the rivers."

Construction of the trail, which is proposed to run 40 miles, is ongoing, Baxter said. Work from 1st to 9th streets in the South Side should be completed by the

beginning of June, Baxter said.

"We caution people using the one to 10 section between the Liberty Bridge and 10th Street on the South Side," said Baxter. "It should be completed by the beginning of June."

About \$5 million in cash and another \$5 million of in-kind donations have been spent building the trail, Baxter said. A dedication and celebration ceremony June 4 will officially open the completed section on the South Side, he said.

The Youghiogheny River Trail, the Montour Trail, Steel Valley Trail and the Three Rivers Heritage Trail are part of the Great Allegheny Passage, which, when completed will be a series of continuous trails stretching from Pittsburgh to Cumberland, Md.

"The trails are great," Bob Cobbett, of Bethel Park, said while pausing on the Youghiogheny River Trail at Boston last week. "They are low grade, so you can let your kids go."

For Roy Everett of Pleasant Hills, it's the scenery and a chance to get some exercise that draws him to the Youghiogheny River Trail three times a week.

"I like the shade the trees provide, you get a good workout and you don't have to pay for it," Everett said.

Many of the local trails are holding special events this spring and summer, including:

Montour Trail

- 5th Annual Burgh's 10K Run & 2 Mile Walk. Sunday April 24 at 10 AM in Cecil Park, Cecil, PA. Fee: \$20. For more information call (412) 278-3653.
- IKEA-Montour Trail 10th Annual 1/2 Marathon, and 5K Fun Walk. Saturday Sept. 10 at 7:45 AM at IKEA in Robinson. For more information call (724) 695-2638.
- 3rd Annual Tour the Montour Bike Tour. Saturday Sept. 24. For more information call (412) 257-3011.

Three Rivers Heritage Trail

Pittsburgh Triathlon and Adventure Race. Sunday July 17 at 7:30 AM at the boat ramp near PNC Park. For more information call (412) 488-0212.

Youghiogheny River Trail

- 10th Annual Yough River Trail Council 1/2 Marathon and 5K Run & Walk. Saturday April 9 at 10 AM in Yough River Park, Connellsville, Fayette County. Fee: \$15. For more information call (724) 628-5500.
- Mon-Yough Trail Council Yough-n-Roll. Saturday June 4 at the Boston Trailhead, Boston, PA. For more information call (724) 872-5586.

- Five Star Poker Run. Saturday July 30 at Lynch Field in Greensburg. For more information call (724) 872-5586.

Butler-Freeport Community Trail

- 4th Annual Pennsylvania Greenway Sojourn tour of the Allegheny River Valley. Saturday July 16 to Friday July 22 at Presque Isle State Park in Erie. Fees range from \$350 to \$240. For more information call (717) 238-1717.