

Chartiers Creek Conservancy

"to preserve, protect, and promote natural beauty of the Chartiers Valley"

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Preliminary Development Narrative

[The Chartiers Nature Conservancy](#) | [The Chartiers Creek Trail Concept](#) | [Proposal](#) | [What the Conservancy Needs](#) | [Impact of Trail](#) | [Construction Design](#) | [Disabled Access](#) | [Public Access](#) | [Possible Obstacles](#) | [Stopping Points of Interest](#) | [Canoe Launch](#) | [Conclusion](#).

Document is also available in PDF format for your convenience. Click [here](#) to view.

THE CHARTIERS NATURE CONSERVANCY

Concerned environmentalists established the Chartiers Nature Conservancy in 1992 as a private, nonprofit corporation to study, promote, and preserve the Chartiers Creek and its watershed, an area that comprises approximately 277 square miles within Washington and Allegheny Counties. The Conservancy enjoys tax exempt status under § 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code, and is duly registered with the Pennsylvania Bureau of Charitable Organizations.

The ultimate endeavor of the Conservancy is to establish a "greenway" along the Chartiers Creek from the point at which the creek crosses from Washington County into Allegheny County to the point at which the creek empties into the Ohio River. Because the Chartiers Creek flows through several heavily populated Pittsburgh area suburbs, the creek itself is an invaluable natural corridor for wildlife migrating between the Ohio River and rural Allegheny and Washington Counties. The Conservancy's formal mission is to protect these undisturbed natural habitats along the banks of the Chartiers Creek. That mission has inspired the following proposal.

THE CHARTIERS CREEK TRAIL CONCEPT

The Chartiers Nature Conservancy proposes to lead the effort to construct the Chartiers Creek Trail, a hiking and biking trail that follows the twists and turns of the Chartiers Creek as it flows northward from Canonsburg Lake to the Ohio River.

Construction of such a trail is worthy of support. A hike along the Chartiers Creek is a walk through history. Native Americans used the creek as a principal travel artery before

and after Europeans settled the area. Abundant wildlife provided food to both cultures. The Chartiers Creek flows past the former site of General John Neville's home, a battlefield during the Whiskey Rebellion, and past the restored Neville House, home of General Neville's son and the second oldest structure in Allegheny County after the Fort Pitt Blockhouse. The creek flows through land of breathtaking aesthetic beauty. The Chartiers Creek was and remains today the single most consequential natural topographical feature in southwestern Allegheny County.

PROPOSAL [Return to top](#)

Phase One of this effort will concentrate on the eight mile segment northward from East Carnegie to the Ohio River, two miles through the Borough of Crafton and six miles through the 28th and 20th Wards of the City of Pittsburgh. The Chartiers Nature Conservancy would like to execute a cooperative agreement with the City of Pittsburgh in which the Conservancy would assume primary responsibility for planning, funding, building, and maintenance of that segment of the Chartiers Creek Trail, from East Carnegie to the Ohio River, that lies within the municipal boundaries of the City of Pittsburgh. The Allegheny Land Trust plans to cooperate with Crafton on the two mile segment of the trail which lies within Crafton.

The Conservancy estimates that the Phase One of the six mile City of Pittsburgh trail segment can be constructed for a total cost of \$120,000 (\$20,000 per mile). The Conservancy is well positioned to raise funds for this construction. To date, the Conservancy has been the recipient of \$190,000 in grants from state agencies and private foundations for (1) environmental studies, (2) land acquisition and (3) restoration of damaged wetlands. Such grants include those from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), The Pittsburgh Foundation, the Laurel Foundation, the McKenna Foundation, and the Community Foundation. The Conservancy has also received a DCNR Symms grant expressly for trail building (all award letters attached). Accordingly, the Conservancy is willing and able to raise the money necessary to design, construct, and maintain the Chartiers Creek Trail.

WHAT THE CONSERVANCY NEEDS

- 1) An agreement between the City of Pittsburgh and the Chartiers Nature Conservancy to cooperate on the planning, building, and maintaining of the Chartiers Creek Trail;
- 2) Assistance in approaching the Chartiers Valley District Flood Control Authority, the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh, and several private property owners whose cooperation will be crucial to development of the Chartiers Creek Trail;
- 3) A signed Agreement to Work on Public Lands from the Chartiers Valley District Flood Control Authority (attached);
- 4) A signed Agreement to Work on Public Lands from the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh (attached);
- 5) A set of maps from the Gateway Engineers delineating the exact location and boundary lines of the Flood Control Authority's property within the City of Pittsburgh;
- 6) A set of property maps, if available, of higher quality than those provided on microfilm printouts from the County Map Room;
- 7) Planning and engineering assistance as available from the City of Pittsburgh;
- 8) Information from the City of Pittsburgh Planning Department regarding necessary permits, ordinances, and zoning requirements within the project area.

The Conservancy needs, as a DCNR-required prerequisite to spending the \$20,000 Symms grant awarded exclusively for trail building, signed Agreements to Work on Public Lands from the Flood Control Authority and the URA.

Quality of Life

This trail will substantially improve the quality of life and recreational opportunities for the people in the western neighborhoods of the city of Pittsburgh and in the southwestern portions of Allegheny County. It will provide a low impact, non-motorized connection between the city and the country, between urban/suburban and rural living spaces.

Commuter Alternative

The trail will provide alternative commuter access to downtown Pittsburgh when the Three Rivers Heritage Trail is completed and connected to the Chartiers Creek Riverfront Park and the South Shore of Pittsburgh. Also, the railroad right of way secured for the Panhandle Trail will link Carnegie with Burgettstown in Washington County. A connection between the Chartiers Creek Trail and the Panhandle Trail will bring together the rural areas of southwestern Allegheny County and Washington County and the urban and suburban areas of the City of Pittsburgh. In addition, when the Chartiers Creek Trail expands beyond Phase One to continue southward along the course of the Chartiers Creek, it will eventually connect to the Montour Trail in Washington County.

Wildlife Corridor

The Chartiers Creek Trail will also be invaluable as a wildlife corridor. It will function as a sanctuary of green space for a tremendous variety of birds and animals. For this reason, the Chartiers Nature Conservancy aggressively pursues a strategy of land acquisition and protection along the Chartiers Creek. Wildlife will continue to coexist in this area only as long as we do not infringe upon their migratory routes and habitat.

CONSTRUCTION DESIGN [Return to top](#)

We propose a walking, hiking, and biking trail with absolutely no motorized vehicles permitted with the exception of motorized wheelchairs. A dusk to dawn curfew would also be in effect. The trail would generally be six to eight feet wide, but in no case less than four feet wide. It would be constructed according to the guidelines contained in Non-motorized Trails: An Introduction to Planning and Development, using a compacted gravel base and a treadway surface of Limestone Fines (PennDOT 2A Modified). This type of surface is relatively inexpensive, easy to acquire, drains freely, is visually compatible with the natural environment, and is rated as a good surface for the disabled.

DISABLED ACCESS

The physically challenged frequently do not have enough opportunity to experience the natural world under conditions that allow the highest level of independence. Therefore, the Chartiers Nature Conservancy would incorporate disabled access into every aspect of design and construction of the Chartiers Creek Trail. The Conservancy would seek advice from organizations with experience serving the special needs of the disabled.

PUBLIC ACCESS

The Conservancy has preliminarily identified at least five public access points (trailheads). These are places that the public may easily enter and exit the trail. The trailheads would include some parking arrangements. The five preliminary trailheads are (please refer to trail map):

1) Mouth of the Chartiers Riverfront Park - already under development in the City of Pittsburgh Planning Department;

1) Sheraden Park - Sheraden Park trail head would significantly increase public access to city residents;

2) Scully Yard/Brodhead - A trailhead somewhere close to the industrial park near Brodhead Manor and the old Scully Railroad Yards;

3) Crafton Park - in cooperation with Allegheny Land Trust;

4) East Carnegie - The Chartiers Nature Conservancy owns nine acres of property adjacent to Chartiers Creek in the neighborhood of East Carnegie in the 28th Ward of the City of Pittsburgh.

POSSIBLE OBSTACLES [Return to top](#)

Property Acquisition Problems - According to Allegheny County property maps, most of the targeted property adjacent to the creek is owned by the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Pittsburgh (URA), especially near Scully Yard. Much of the remaining land near the creek, especially upstream of the Thornburg Bridge, is owned by the Chartiers Valley Flood Control Authority. The Conservancy trusts that some of this land would be available, with the assistance of the City of Pittsburgh, as public land for trail construction. The construction of the Chartiers Creek Trail depends on the willingness of the URA and the Flood Control Authority to provide Agreements to Work on Public Lands, easements, or donations of property from the creek bank inland for approximately 150 - 200 feet. There are also at least four other private owners: Total Pac, Inc; Pennadel Company; Windgap Enterprises, Inc.; and Duquesne Light Co. The City of Pittsburgh could provide invaluable assistance in negotiations with private owners and public authorities.

Mapping Problems -The Conservancy currently uses property maps from the County Map Room. The microfilm copies are difficult to read. Gateway Engineers is the official engineering firm for the Flood Control Authority and have higher quality maps than the County. It would be of great assistance if the Conservancy could procure copies of those maps showing the extent of Flood Control property. If the city has access to any other property maps of better quality than the County Map Room, copies would be greatly appreciated.

Physical Barrier Problems -The Conservancy has identified six preliminary physical barriers to trail construction, none of which are insurmountable with the proper engineering. Working northward from East Carnegie to the Ohio River, these are (please refer to trail map):

A) Bell's Run - Alcosan maintains one of it's largest combined sewer overflows (CSO's) at the confluence of Bell's Run and Chartiers Creek in the 28th Ward. A walking bridge seems the most likely solution for the 15 foot wide concrete chasm.

B) Blue Bridge into Thornburg - A stormwater runoff overflow pipe under the bridge leading into the industrial park near the Thornburg Bridge may restrict taking the trail underneath the bridge. Accordingly, the trail may need to lead up and over the road and drop down to the creek bank next to the Sharp Edge Restaurant.

C) Railroad Bridge at Scully Yard - The old stone railroad bridge may pose the biggest physical barrier. Existing railroad tracks may preclude crossing above the bridge. Although Scully Yard is no longer in general service, the railroad uses the two remaining tracks for car storage. Crossing beneath the bridge may require a carefully cantilevered walkway/bridge. It is a difficult problem that may appeal to some creative civil engineer.

D) Industrial Park Road - An industrial park access road comes very close to the edge of the creek upstream of the Windgap Bridge. There is probably room enough for the trail, but it would need to be carefully reinforced to make it sturdy and safe. This is private property. An appropriate lease or easement agreement with the owners would be required.

E) Steep Cliffs - Steep cliffs downstream from the Windgap Bridge make the terrain impassable along the creek. The trail would need to run across the top of the cliffs along property owned by Duquesne Light Company.

F) Carson Street Railroad Bridge - In order to get from the proposed trail to the planned

city-owned Riverfront Park and Trailhead at the mouth of Chartiers Creek, the trail must go under the Carson Street Railroad Bridge. The City Planning Department may already be addressing this problem.

STOPPING POINTS OF INTEREST [Return to top](#)

Attractions and points of interest that would increase public use of the Chartiers Creek Trail might include:

Explanatory signage - Easily readable signs to explain the historical, cultural, aesthetic, ecological, and industrial significance of particular sites will increase appreciation for the unseen areas and forgotten history of this part of the City of Pittsburgh. A sign at the mouth of the Chartiers Creek might instruct hikers about the Native American village and burial mound that once stood nearby in McKees Rocks, including recognition of the significant role of the Seneca and Delaware tribes in the history of the Chartiers Creek watershed. In the early part of the century, Scully Yard was one of the principal working rail yards of the great Pennsylvania Railroad. Further upstream, a deep hole within the banks of the creek itself was created by a five foot waterfall. Called the Fall Hole by locals, who considered it a dangerous and mysterious place, Pennsylvania Railroad expansion destroyed the site when a channel cut through a hillside changed the course of the creek. In 1777, General Edward Hand built the first federal hospital in the new nation along the banks of the Chartiers Creek, near the fording between the Thornburg Bridge and Brodhead-Fording Road. Educational signs would make the trail experience more rewarding.

Benches at scenic points - Aesthetic scenery abounds throughout the Chartiers Creek channel. Some of the most beautiful areas are in the City of Pittsburgh, near Scully Yard, where great sycamores and weeping willows hang gracefully over the stream, evoking images of wilderness and unspoiled natural beauty. A small waterfall marks the confluence of a stream flowing along the Steubenville Pike and identified on floodplain maps only as Tributary A of the Chartiers Creek. Benches made of natural materials such as logs and rough stone would encourage rest and reflection.

Birdwatching stations - Professional naturalist Chuck Tague of the Rachel Carson Institute at Chatham College in Pittsburgh, and formerly of the National Aviary in Pittsburgh, has identified a variety of bird species that live along or near the creek, specifically as a result of the riparian floodplain habitat. These include: Great Blue Heron, Green Heron, Osprey, Red-tailed Hawk, Wild Turkey, American Woodcock, Black-billed Cuckoo, Great Horned Owl, Common Nighthawk, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Belted Kingfisher, Great Crested Flycatcher, Wood Thrush, Cedar Waxwing, White-eyed Vireo, Blue-winged Warbler, Yellow Warbler, American Redstart, Indigo Bunting, Eastern Towhee, Orchard Oriole, and American Goldfinch, among others. Mr. Tague states that this local type of riparian floodplain habitat is rare and endangered. Loss of this particular type of habitat will eventually endanger these birds. Protection of the riparian floodplain habitat is a preventive action that is directly addressed by this trail plan.

Native species plant gardens - certain portions of the trail area could be set aside for the planting, protection, and identification of species that are natural to southwestern Pennsylvania riverine systems. Native plants, once established, require no watering and will support the local ecosystem in ways that introduced species simply cannot. These native gardens could be used as nurseries for transplanting native plants to other areas and as an educational resource to raise awareness of the importance of native plants to the regional ecosystem in general.

Vegetation identification - a careful and accurate system of signs made of natural material for the identification of trees, bushes, medicinal plants, berries, and even dangerous plants would serve a dual purpose of educating hikers and bikers while protecting them and the vegetation itself.

CANOE LAUNCH

The Chartiers Nature Conservancy has identified two possible sites for development of a canoe launch in the city neighborhood of East Carnegie. The Conservancy will raise the money for construction in the most appropriate location. Ample parking space is needed. A ramp leading to a small docking area would allow canoe and kayak launching. Private foundations have already expressed interest in funding this recreational improvement (please refer to trail map).

1 Carbon Street, between Copley Street and Moffat Way, is adjacent to and parallel to the Flood Control Authority land and the creek. This is already a city-owned street.

2 Pringle Way, which crosses from Idlewood to Bell Avenues, leads to a heavily overgrown lot. Although privately owned, the Conservancy intends to investigate this property as a possible canoe launch site. It is flat and contains room for a small angle-parking lot with easy access to Chartiers Creek.

CONCLUSION [Return to top](#)

Historical circumstances have resulted in a unique opportunity for the City of Pittsburgh. The rise and subsequent demise of the railroads and the acquisition of much of the former railroad property by the URA, in conjunction with the steep hill and stream valley topographical characteristics of southwestern Pennsylvania, have resulted in the preservation of a natural, green corridor along a major local waterway very near to Downtown Pittsburgh. The opportunity to preserve this corridor as a recreational trail and wildlife refuge will be irretrievably lost if not done soon.

[Return
to top](#)

It is the Conservancy's intention to submit a Keystone Planning Grant to the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources for funds to obtain expert advice and assistance to create the trail. The Conservancy will obtain matching funds from private foundations. The Conservancy will raise the money needed for this project. It is important to note that the Conservancy already has funds dedicated specifically to trail construction that will become available only when agreements to work on public lands are in place. The Conservancy will begin development as soon as the necessary agreements are executed. Phase One of the trail will be a significant recreational resource to city residents in the southwestern neighborhoods. Accordingly, the Conservancy requests that the City of Pittsburgh cooperate with us to plan, construct, and maintain the Chartiers Creek Trail.