

Residents continue to appreciate Rails to Trails project

By Leah Schmalz Lschmalz@timesonline.com | Posted: Saturday, July 23, 2011 8:30 pm

BEAVER FALLS -- Beaver Falls was once an industrial city, bustling with railroads that fueled businesses along the Beaver River. While many of those businesses have left, the railroad spurs have not.

Thirteen years ago, a group was formed that sought to utilize the outdated spurs to fulfill a present-day need. Their name fit their purpose: Beaver River Rails to Trails.

The concept of creating a recreational path in the city sparked interest among community members. "We needed something in the city for people to walk," said Mayor Karl Boak, president of the group. "Walking Seventh Avenue or side streets just wasn't what the people wanted."

Since its first meeting in 1998, the group has completed two phases of the project. Phase one runs along the Beaver River for about a mile, from First Avenue and 11th Street to 23rd Street and Sixth Avenue. The second phase, which was completed last summer, is accessed from 27th Street between Sixth and Seventh avenues and extends behind Geneva College about half a mile.

Construction for both phases was completed using two Transportation Enhancement grants from the federal government, each totaling more than \$250,000. Securing the grants was relatively easy; it was moving plans through the rigorous approval process that required the most time and patience. The group's secretary, Todd Stevenson, estimates it took eight years from the time they received the grant for phase two until its completion last spring.

"You're just not prepared to go through that amount of red tape when all you really want to do is help the community," he said. "It's not like we wanted to come in and mine uranium or anything like that. We were just trying to build a neighborhood trail."

The group also faced concerns from those who resided near the trail about its potential invasion on their privacy. Yet those worries dissipated once it became clear that the addition of the trail improved the area significantly.

Janet Buffalo, who lives along phase one of the trail, said that the area behind her house used to look like an untamed forest before the trail was built.

"The beauty of it is just what we need here," she said. "I just think it's really an asset to the city."

Mark Lyons lives further down the trail, with a back deck that extends near the edge of the path. While he noted that the trail gets plenty of use, privacy hasn't been a concern.

"People walking don't seem to bother us," he said.

Some residents have even volunteered to clean up litter and care for the landscape. Bud Rea, retiree and Beaver Falls resident, is one of them, devoting part of his time every day for the past three years to maintaining the area. His reasons are simple.

"It's for me, it's for my health and I feel good doing it," he said. "I like to say, 'Look what I did.' It's self-

satisfaction. Heck of a thing to say, but that's what it is."

Eventually, the group hopes to collaborate with similar trail projects, such as the Ohio River Trail, the Montour Trail and the Great Allegheny Passage, to create a combined trail.

"Theoretically, at some point in the future, you could get on a bike in Beaver Falls and ride to Washington, D.C.," Stevenson said.

As for the immediate future, the next step is to link the first two phases by extending the trail either across the entrance to the Eastvale Bridge, or under the structure. Both options have been quoted at more than \$100,000, at a time when grant money is limited, leaving the board to research other ways of moving the project forward.

"We can maybe raise \$5,000 a year for maintenance and so forth, but a big-ticket item like construction of a new half-mile link is beyond our means," Stevenson said.

<http://youtu.be/FqZWjny8Mvk>