

Valley News Dispatch

Bicycle trail consultant to propose scenic byway status for boulevard

By Tom Jewell

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A consultant hired to design a bicycle trail through Penn Hills will recommend "scenic byway" status for Allegheny River Boulevard.

It's one of the proposals that will be presented to the Penn Hills Planning Commission later this month by the "Friends of the Riverfront."

Council authorized a \$20,000 feasibility study for a trail, which could be funded with additional grants through the federal Transportation Enhancement Program.

"Scenic byway status would make Allegheny River Boulevard more of a priority for transportation and beautification funding," said consultant John Stephen, cofounder and past director of Friends of the Riverfront. "It would also provide more of an opportunity to market a trail."

The boulevard was designed in the 1920s as part of the City Beautiful movement, allowing city dwellers to escape urban grit and grime. Although they are less well-preserved, other scenic thoroughfares from the same period include Saw Mill Run, Ohio River Boulevard and Mossy Side Boulevard.

Allegheny River Boulevard qualifies for the National Register of Historic Places and has been declared one of the "Top 10 Most Endangered Scenic Byways" in the country, a list compiled by the national organization Scenic America, said Verona-based historical and archaeological consultant Christine Davis.

Penn Hills has already been awarded an \$85,000 grant for landscaping as well as \$135,000 to fix up two stone turnouts that provided vistas for motorists.

"We're shooting for the fall to get started, but the amount of paperwork involved has been frustrating, to the point where we may have to hold off on the actual projects until spring 2004," said Howard Davidson, Penn Hills planning and economic development director.

One of the first orders of business will be following up with landowners along the proposed trail.

Organizers hope to buy an easement from the Allegheny Valley Railroad, which has offered an 8-foot right-of-way for \$175,000 a mile. A passenger train is also being proposed for the existing freight line. The right-of-way is also a candidate for a high-speed magnetic levitation train, or maglev.

Davidson and Stephen said all three proposals could co-exist.

"There would be some places that would require some grading work because it would be tight," Stephen said. "But it's still doable."

To enhance views of the river, Stephen recommended an inventory of trees and shrubs, aside from the strategically placed sycamore trees that line the boulevard.

"Japanese knotweed is also a problem, and it's growing in clumps," Stephen said of the fast-growing, stubborn bamboo-like vegetation.

One possible solution would be to dig out the knotweed and cover the affected area with tarpaulin for a set time, then plant native wildflowers.

To the north, the proposed bikeway would connect to the street system of Verona, then continue south to Washington Boulevard and Pittsburgh.

"We could also be looking at connections along Negley Run, to the zoo and into Highland Park," Stephen said of points beyond.

If all goes as planned on the Penn Hills portion, Stephen believes the work could be completed in three to five years.

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