

[Bumpy, perilous bicycle route to D.C. will smooth out](#)

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After riding more than 150 miles along the Great Allegheny Passage from Pittsburgh toward Washington, Ellen Mavrigh encountered a group of cyclists heading the other way.

They were sitting by the side of the trail with their bikes, tired, muddy and dispirited.

"It looked like they'd just come out of a cave," said Mavrigh, who helped lead four McMurray girls on a weeklong bike trip last month during a fundraiser to save Canonsburg Lake. "I mean, they looked shell-shocked. They were completely spacey."

Mavrigh and the girls soon found out why.

As more and more cyclists take advantage of a 320-mile, car-free bike route to the nation's capital, they are learning that the journey is a tale of two trails.

There's the Great Allegheny Passage, stretching about 150 miles from McKeesport to Cumberland, Md., on a restored railroad bed. The crushed limestone surface is smooth, the trail is scenic and the trip is a joy, said several people who rode the trail last month.

Then comes the C&O Canal towpath.

The second half of the trip, they said, descends into an odyssey of tire-gripping mud, exposed rocks and roots, deeply rutted trails, overhanging branches, poor signage and many flat tires and spills.

"Maybe I was wrong to assume that the trail would be like the Great Allegheny Passage all the way to D.C., but that is the impression I got," said Max McIntosh, 36, of Coraopolis, who rode with friend Nick Santillo, 47, of Carnegie in early June.

"With all the roots, rocks, potholes and mud ... Nick and I had to ride single-file in some areas because the trail was so overgrown."

That soon could change.

Kevin Brandt, superintendent of Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park, said millions of dollars in federal money is earmarked for C&O trail improvements.

This fall, crews are scheduled to begin repaving the most problematic stretches of the trail with a gravel mix, paid for with \$660,000 from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Fund, Brandt said.

An additional \$12 million has been allocated to restore sections of the trail that washed out years ago near an area known as Big Slackwater, he said. The park applied for \$4.4 million more for other upgrades, he said.

"We're absolutely thrilled and working furiously," Brandt said. "People will see big improvements."

More than 3 million people visit the park and tens of thousands of cyclists ride the length of the two trails each year, making the upgrades all the more important, officials for both trails said.

"We're attracting visitors from all over the world. There's a buzz, and people want to do this," said Linda McKenna Boxx, president of the Allegheny Trail Alliance, which maintains the Great Allegheny Passage. "It is incumbent upon all of us to work with our congressional delegates and make sure the condition improves."

It's unfair in the meantime to criticize the C&O Canal towpath, Boxx and Brandt said.

"Our (Great Allegheny Passage) trail was a railroad -- it's graded perfectly, and we just came and pulled off the rails and ties and put down stone," Boxx said. "But the towpath was always just a dirt trail. It was something for mules to walk on."

Indeed, the C&O Canal, built in the early 1800s, once served as a way for miners, sawmills and farmers to float products down the Potomac River Valley. In 1971, after nearly 50 years of neglect, the canal became a National Historical Park.

Because it runs so close to the Potomac River and its many tributaries, water collects more easily on the trail surface, Brandt said. In addition, the C&O trail has more trees than the Great Allegheny Passage. The trees provide shade on hot days, but they slow the dry-out after heavy rains, he said.

"And we've had a very wet spring," Brandt said.

Some cyclists said the C&O Canal is actually more interesting than the Great Allegheny Passage because of the many historic locks and dams along the way.

But, they said, the trail was so bad they usually were too tired to explore the sites.

"The trip went from 'Wow, this is great' to 'Man, let's just get there,' " said Paul Christensen, 44, a director of revenue management at the Omni William Penn Hotel, Downtown.

Said Mavrigh: "It was actually dangerous to ride parts of the C&O trail. When you're in two, three inches of mud, and it's potted, and there's branches all over the place, it was just so easy to wipe out. ... The girls wiped out many times."

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