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Filling gap in Great Allegheny Passage could bring more cyclists to Pittsburgh



A sign at Fort Pitt Boulevard directs cyclists Friday April 19, 2013 at the start/finish of the Eliza Furnace Trail at Grant Street.

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Filling the last gap of the Great Allegheny Passage could bring out -of-town bicyclists to Downtown Pittsburgh in droves.

But once here, they would be on their own in a bustling Downtown with no shared or dedicated bike lanes, few bike racks and what can be a confusing street grid, advocates say.

“There's nothing Downtown that really says, ‘Welcome cyclists,’ ” said Eric Boerer, advocacy director for the Lawrenceville-based nonprofit Bike Pittsburgh.

Officials are looking for ways to change that, but any significant improvements probably would happen after the Great Allegheny Passage's missing link — a one-mile stretch near Sandcastle Waterpark in West Homestead — opens in June.

When done, the 150-mile passage will be unbroken from the end of the Eliza Furnace Trail at PNC's Firstside Center and Grant Street to Cumberland, Md. There, it connects with the C&O Canal Towpath, which goes to Washington.

The passage's steepest grade is 1.75 percent, making it acceptable for bicyclists of all ages and skill levels. About 800,000 use the passage annually, spending \$50 million a year along the corridor,

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said Allegheny Trail Alliance President Linda McKenna Boxx. She expects the numbers to jump significantly when the Sandcastle link opens.

Boxx downplayed the lack of bicycle amenities Downtown.

“Bike-friendliness doesn't happen overnight. There have been great bicycle improvements in Pittsburgh in recent years and I expect that will continue,” Boxx said, noting it took about 40 years and \$80 million to develop the Great Allegheny Passage.

Proposals to make Downtown more bicycle-friendly include the establishment of an on-street bike lane or “cycle track” from the end of the Eliza Furnace Trail to Point State Park, advocates said. From the park, bicyclists could easily make their way to trails along both sides of the Allegheny River.

Though bike lanes are simply painted onto streets, cycle tracks rely on barriers to separate bicyclists from vehicular traffic, such as poles, jersey barriers or parking lanes. Five-foot-wide bike lanes run along about 60 miles of city streets. The city doesn't have any cycle tracks, typically about 10 feet wide.

Stephen Patchan, Pittsburgh's bicycle and pedestrian coordinator, said a lane or track would “mimic the trail on the street,” providing more security for novice riders and those unfamiliar with the city.

Boerer and Pittsburgh Downtown Partnership CEO Jeremy Waldrup think Fort Pitt Boulevard would be the best location for a dedicated bike lane or cycle track. Patchan said the city is investigating several corridors, meeting with property owners in each one.

Downtown-based Riverlife Pittsburgh is looking to plug a hole in the riverfront trail that runs parallel with Fort Pitt Boulevard. It wants to build a switchback on the east side of Mon Wharf Landing, connecting Smithfield Street Bridge to the landing and Eliza Furnace Trail.

Riverlife would make improvements on the west side, to better connect the landing and trail. The project could cost \$5.5 million, Riverlife spokesman Stephan Bontrager said.

Bontrager said the nonprofit plans to finish design work and seek bids from contractors late this year, though it's unknown when the work might start.

Until then, Boxx said, “Visitors to the city who don't feel comfortable riding in traffic might have to get off their bikes and walk a few blocks. It's not the worst problem,” she said, since the Golden Triangle is compact.

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