

Great Allegheny Passage bike path slated for full completion by spring 2013

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By Moriah Balingit / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Great Allegheny Passage is inching its way toward completion, with the finish on the Cumberland, Md., to Pittsburgh trail slated for next spring.

The completion of the trail will mean cyclists (or really ambitious hikers) will be able to travel from Pittsburgh to the nation's capital on bike or on foot by linking up with the C&O Canal Towpath, which runs from Cumberland to Washington.

Linda McKenna Boxx, the president of the Allegheny Trail Alliance, said Friday that of the four incomplete sections of the trail that remain, three will be finished by the end of October. And the last holdout -- a stubborn section near the Sandcastle Water Park that will require contractors to widen the road and move utility poles -- will be finished in spring 2013.

"It's an amazing feeling," said Ms. Boxx, who has encountered many obstacles to the trail's completion.

The final piece of unfinished trail spans Baldwin Borough, where it dead ends into Keystone Metals, a metal recycling plant, and Sandcastle.

Currently, the trail snakes along the south side of the Monongahela River but dead ends in Baldwin, where trail users encounter a fence that bars them from entering the Keystone Metals. But some ignore the signs and carry their bikes up a steep grade and along railroad tracks.

The completion of the trail will give cyclists and trail users a safer -- not to mention legal -- option to traverse the site. Ms. Boxx said construction on that section will include a large wall to protect trail users from activities at the site, a metal recycling facility.

"In order to protect our trail users from flying metal debris, we are building a substantial barrier wall," she said. That portion of the trail will be paid for with federal transportation money.

The next project section, extending from the end of the Keystone Metals, will span about half of Sandcastle's parcel of land, along Sandcastle Drive. The trail will be sandwiched between the railroad tracks and the road, but because the road will have to be widened, utility poles will have to be moved. This portion is not expected to be completed by spring of 2013 and will represent the last piece of trail.

The second half of the Sandcastle project will be completed next month, in addition with a project to widen 2,000 feet worth of sidewalks that wind through the Waterfront to accommodate cyclists.

Ms. Boxx has been working on the trail for nearly two decades and formed the Allegheny Trail Alliance in 1995. At one point, Sandcastle threatened to destroy the dream of creating 241 miles of continuous trail because the previous company that owned it refused to cede land for the 0.85 miles of proposed passage on the edge of its parking lot. But that obstacle was surmounted two years ago, when new owners agreed to a deal.

And for nearly two decades, she's been getting the same question: "When's it going to be done?"

"There were so many obstacles ... so we didn't know when it was going to be done," she said. "It'll be so nice to not have to answer that question anymore."

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