

Put the pedal to the Hot Metal: Bridge across Mon opens at last

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By Lawrence Walsh / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The handful of dignitaries and hundreds of bicyclists, walkers and inline skaters gathered on the historic, rehabilitated Hot Metal Bridge were all headed in the same direction: south.

And that's where they pedaled, walked and skated shortly after noon yesterday after Pittsburgh Mayor Luke Ravenstahl, Allegheny County Chief Executive Dan Onorato and Pennsylvania Department of Transportation District 11 Executive Dan Cessna cut the ribbon to officially open the new bike-pedestrian bridge.

The attire of the convivial group ranged from suits and top coats to multiple layers of brightly-colored cold weather gear to counter the breezy 41 degree weather. And the bicycles varied from standard single and tandem uprights to recumbents featuring wide, well-padded seats and comfortable back rests.

Their short journey began on the Second Avenue side, near the Pittsburgh Technology Center, and ended at the SouthSide Works. At the north end of the black steel bridge, which extends 1,052 feet over the Monongahela River, a new truss bridge crosses over busy Second Avenue. Both bridges have 14-foot-wide concrete decks.

The combined spans connect two sections of the Three Rivers Heritage Trail -- the Eliza Furnace segment that runs from Downtown to Oakland and the South Side segment that extends from Station Square almost to the Glenwood Bridge. They provide a safe crossing for bicyclists, especially those who commute daily to school or work.

The Urban Redevelopment Authority has been working on the \$11.6 million project since 2003. Most of the money -- \$9.7 million -- came from federal enhancement and state transportation funds. The state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources supplied \$931,000 and the Allegheny Trail Alliance contributed \$389,000.

The alliance, a coalition of seven rails-to-trails organizations, helped to build and maintain the almost completed Great Allegheny Passage, a 150-mile-long multipurpose trail from Point State Park to Cumberland, Md. It connects there with the 182-mile-long C&O Canal towpath that ends in Washington, D.C.

The rehabbed Hot Metal Bridge for bikers and pedestrians parallels its industrial twin that was converted in 2000 into a two-lane bridge for cars and trucks.

At one time, the former railroad bridges carried hot metal in ladle cars from the Eliza and Soho blast furnaces on the Oakland side of the river to the steel processing mills on the South Side. Hot metal is freshly smelted, slag-free iron stewing at about 3,000 degrees.

"The rehabilitation of this [125-year-old] bridge symbolically captures Pittsburgh's economic revival," Mr. Ravenstahl said. "Built to support the once flourishing steel industry, [it] will now support our burgeoning knowledge-based economy by linking critical places of economic development to social, research and medical centers."

Mr. Onorato, whose wife and children often join him on the bike trails, described the Great Allegheny Passage as "one of the most scenic, user-friendly and accessible trails in the world. Completing the trail is a signature project of the Pittsburgh 250 celebration in 2008. It will be a great asset to our region for tourism and economic development."

Linda McKenna Boxx, president of the Allegheny Trail Alliance, said the organization has just started work on a nine mile section of the trail between Pittsburgh and McKeesport.

"Today is a great day for the city and the region," she said.

Brenda Barrett, director of the DCNR's Bureau of Recreation and Conservation, said the new Hot Metal Bridge "demonstrates Pittsburgh's leadership in trail development." She said Pennsylvania is ranked fourth for rail-to-trail mileage and "is poised to become the nation's leader" in mileage when the passage and other rail-trails are completed.

Veteran walkers Melvin and Estelle Mann of Greenfield waited until mid-afternoon to visit the bridge. They were taken with the downstream views and gently chided one another for neglecting to bring their camera.

"Isn't that a beautiful sight," Mr. Mann said as they looked toward the Golden Triangle. "It's like a picture postcard."

Lawrence Walsh can be reached at lwalsh@post-gazette.com and 412-263-1488.

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