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Red tape delays Montour Junction

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CORAOPOLIS — Recent prints from deer and dogs, and faded tracks from a thick-tired, two-wheeled vehicle, provide evidence of activity in the former railroad yard between Route 51 and the Ohio River on the east side of Coraopolis.

A predatory bird circles above trees burning orange, red and yellow. Grasshoppers leap along the edges of the high grass. A squirrel scrambles to safety. Schools of tiny fish feed in Montour Run, a shallow stream that bisects the property before spilling into the river.

By the railroad tracks, fishermen have parked their trucks and climbed to the river's edge.

But there is no trace of soccer, or rugby, or lacrosse or field hockey.

In a July 2008 press conference, Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato revealed a plan to convert the abandoned Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad yard into a "world-class recreational facility" to be known as Montour Junction.

A trustee of the foundation who donated the property to the county said in July 2008 that he hoped to see kids playing soccer in the new park "12 months from now."

As 2010 closes, Montour Junction remains an abandoned railroad yard reclaimed by nature, but untouched by developers. The vision, however, has not been abandoned.

"We don't have a specific timeline, but we hope to break ground in the next two years," said Heather Westenzweig, Montour Junction project manager for Allegheny County Department of Economic Development.

Before any work can be initiated at the park, the county must complete a traffic study and some state Department of Environmental Protection compliances.

"We're currently finishing up some studies that need to be completed before construction can begin," Westenzweig said. "Mind you, this is all non-exciting stuff, but it is crucial stuff and we need to get it done."

The 78-acre property includes portions of Coraopolis, Moon Township and Robinson Township. It stretches from the Coraopolis-Neville Island Bridge to the terminus of the Montour Trail.

The land was donated to the county by the Sports Legacy Foundation, a South Hills-based organization that supports a variety of sports, including soccer, lacrosse, field hockey and rugby. The land was donated with the stipulation that it would not be used for baseball or football fields.

The Montour Junction plan revealed by Onorato in 2008 involved a two-stage development process. The first phase, using space between Route 51 and Montour Run, would include a multi-purpose stadium with bleachers, locker rooms, a press box and a synthetic surface.

Two practice fields, also with synthetic surface, would also be installed, along with a playground, parking lots and fitness trails.

The second phase, using the space between Montour Run and the river-side railroad tracks, includes six additional multi-sport fields, parking, picnic pavilions and additional fitness trails.

A traffic study, analyzing the park's impact on Route 51, is nearly complete.

"We hope to have that wrapped up soon," Westenzweig said, adding that a public hearing will probably be scheduled early in 2011.

The environmental compliances will follow, and funding "is an ongoing process, involving a variety of sources," she said.

While the property remains untouched, Westenzweig said the plan revealed in 2008, and still accessible on the county website, "stays the same."