



Riverfront trails lead us in the right direction

Sunday, September 23, 2001

This trail isn't much to look at yet, going from asphalt to gravel to not there at all. The view of the Ohio River is mostly blocked by tall, scraggly trees. The back end of industry is over your other shoulder. Most people don't even know a bike and jogging trail exists this far upstream.

But John Stephen, director of Friends of the Riverfront, sees the future clearly from here. On a dreary Thursday morning, we bike past bags of litter and piles of refuse he and 85 other volunteers collected Sept. 15, still awaiting pickup by the city. We detour around the Casey Industrial Park and on to obscure North Side streets, then head back down along the Ohio River.

I'm in a mood to look for something, anything, that is going right, and I believe I'm seeing it in this trail still in embryo. Its Spartan form, its modest intent, only makes me surer Pittsburgh can do something here that will outlast us all.

We ride northwest along the river. Across from Brunot Island, south of the McKees Rocks Bridge, we find a cement ramp to the water. Built and used by industry, the ramp offers a perfect spot to launch canoes and kayaks, if we had 'em.

Farther down river, we bike past a sign: "In Memory of Pork, The Duck Man, 1934 to 1998." I see no man and no duck, but when we bike behind the ancient walls of the state prison, I stand as I ride to see prisoners shooting hoops in the exercise yard. We turn around when we reach the Alcosan plant.

OK, so it's hardly the Tour de France. There's nonetheless something soothing about skirting the water. We bike the mile and a half back toward town through the commercial district west of Route 65, detour around more riverfront construction near Heinz Field, and then come upon The Watersteps.

Five hundred blocks of sandstone cut from a Butler quarry, The Watersteps descend with a pleasing unevenness toward the Allegheny River just west of PNC Park.

Stephen has to leave to go to work, but I hang around in my shorts and sweat shirt. Soon enough I'm surrounded by suits. There's a lot of shaking of hands and mutual patting of backs and exchanges of the microphone, because they're about to add water to The Watersteps.

County Chief Executive Jim Roddey says something about how the rivers used to be "the back door of the city," and now we're learning to embrace them. Steve Leeper of the Sports and Exhibition Authority says we're about \$33 million into the \$48 million development of North Shore park land, big numbers Leeper can use without fear because we're developing a

world-class riverfront.

Then somebody flips the switch and the mayor's boy, T.J. Murphy, 11, finds himself standing in the midst of all this back-lit, falling water. And it's great, just great, because you know kids will be swarming over this crazy little waterfall come the dog days of next summer.

Mayor Tom Murphy tells me he's talking to the mayor of Bellevue about taking the riverfront trail farther down the Ohio. One day it might even cross the river to Coraopolis, where it can hook up with the Montour Trail. Meantime, the Riverlife Task Force dreams of taking it in the other direction all the way to the headwaters of the Allegheny River.

Just up the Allegheny from where we stand, at the entrance to PNC Park closest to the Roberto Clemente Bridge, there's a sign on a locked gate that says: "Given the recent tragic events, the Riverwalk will remain closed to public access as we comply with our security measures."

The Riverwalk is just off the trail, but that sign is a reminder, as if we need one, of where America is right now. We're having to make changes. Yet on this morning, anyway, I can bike home knowing people are also making changes that have a permanence about them, that remind me we're sticking to the one plan we've always had: Leave our children with a better place.

Brian O'Neill's e-mail address is boneill@post-gazette.com

[Back](#)

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