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Steel Valley share-the-road bike route is light on signs and riders

Wednesday, July 17, 2002

By Linda Wilson Fuoco, Post-Gazette Staff Writer

The share-the-road bike trail from McKeesport to Clairton was designed with good intentions -- and \$200,000 in grants used for studies, signs and engineering fees.

The urban route meanders for 4.5 miles along public roads in McKeesport, Glassport and Clairton.

Some of it is marked with white lines and diamond-shaped signs that say "Share the Road." The signs have silhouettes of a car and a guy on a bike. Other signs say "No parking on this side."

Sporadically throughout the route are other signs that say "Steel Valley Trail."

Planning and development of the trail was done by the Rivers of Steel National Heritage Area. The trail has been lightly utilized in the three years it has existed.

"I was on that trail once," said Peggy Krall of Golden Triangle Bike Rentals. "It took me a long time and a lot of driving around to find it" because there seemed to be gaps in the signage. She has never returned.

While Krall's bike rental business is located in Downtown Pittsburgh, she leads guided bike tours on area trails, including riverfront bike trails built where railroad tracks used to run.

There's another reason she hasn't taken any groups on the share-the-road Steel Valley Trail: "Most of the people on my tours are novices



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In Glassport, the Steel Valley Trail runs mostly on back roads. The on-road segment links the Steel Valley Trail to others such as the 100-mile-long Youghiogheny River Trail, which includes a 100-mile stretch between McKeesport and Meyersdale. (Tony Tye, Post-Gazette)

and they don't want to ride on roads."

Efforts to put a share-the-road bike trail in Virginia Manor, a Mt. Lebanon neighborhood, have attracted vehement opposition from the people who live there.

Larry Ridenour, recreation and natural resource coordinator for Rivers of Steel, told Virginia Manor residents that Mon Valley residents initially had some concerns about cycles on their road. The concerns were addressed and residents cooperated with plans for the Steel Valley shared-road trail. He termed the trail a success.

'A' for effort

The Steel Valley share-the-road trail gets an "A" for effort from Mary Shaw, a CMU professor who, with Roy Weil, has written "Free Wheeling Easy," a book that describes and critiques bike trails in the area. They've sold 15,000 copies. They also maintain a Web site, "Free Wheeling Easy in Western Pennsylvania," which can be found at <http://spoke.compose.cs.cmu.edu/fwe/traildesc/nearpgh.htm>.

"It was a real triumph to get any trail in there," said Shaw, who rides all the trails she writes about. "The Steel Valley Trail has a really tough problem because they are trying to put trails in places where all the land is used.

"It is a triumph the way they have kept the Steel Valley Trail out of heavy traffic, for the most part. The on-road segment provides a way to link" to other trails, including the 100-mile McKeesport-to-Meyersdale trail, which is part of the Great Allegheny Passage.

"Steel Valley Trail is a necessary connector. It needs more riders and more enthusiasm," Shaw said.

It also needs more signs.

A Post-Gazette reporter and photographer recently drove the Steel Valley Trail.

The first stop was the Web site of the Allegheny Trail Alliance - <http://www.atatrail.org> -- to look for maps. The maps show a large overview of the Mon Valley with not enough detail to find the actual trail.

A drive through McKeesport picked up Steel Valley Trail signs in the 10th Ward -- along with a man riding a bike near the intersection of Rebecca and Atlantic streets.

Jack Ryan, 29, of McKeesport, said he "rides every day for recreation and transportation. I don't own a car."

He seldom sees other bicyclists on the Steel Valley Trail "except for kids," he said. "Sometimes in the summer we get boaters and bikers from all over down at the marina" at McKees Point. "It's pretty cool in the summer."

The Steel Valley Trail in McKeesport includes portions of Atlantic, Pacific and other roads that don't have visible signs letting bike-riders know the name of the road.

When the trail hits Glassport, the signs become more frequent and easier to follow. The trail winds through a quiet back alley in the vicinity of Marie Street and loops around the Glassport High School sports stadium.

Trail signs point the way to the Clairton-Glassport Bridge where the signs stop. No signs were seen anywhere in Clairton, including none in the vicinity of the city's water pollution control plant, a Steel Valley trailhead, according to The Montour Trail Web site - <http://www.montourtrail.org>.

Why do the signs stop?

"I guess that's my fault," Ridenour said.

"Penn DOT has never given approval to use the Clairton-Glassport Bridge for the trail. Clairton officials have expressed concerns about losing parking spaces on streets where the trail would go. We're meeting with Clairton officials" to try to resurrect the shared-road trail in that city.

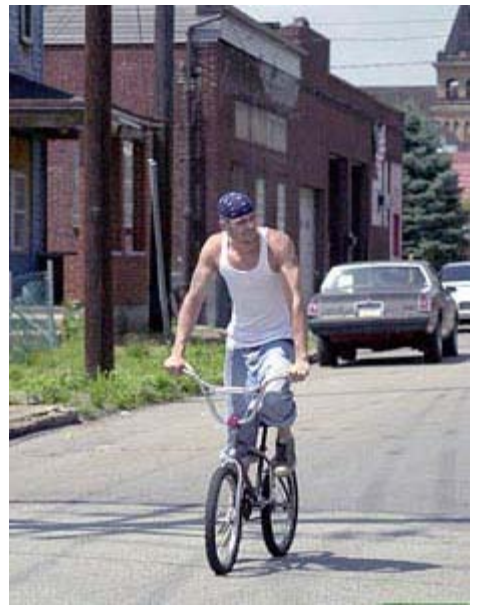
As for bike trail signs along other parts of the Steel Valley trail, Ridenour said, "I'm a little embarrassed about that trail. It has not been maintained very well," and bike lane lines need to be repainted.

He said the PG reporter and photographer veered off course in Glassport, missing "the best part of the trail" which includes a vacant, historic train station. Rivers of Steel hopes to buy that station and open it as a bike shop and rest stop for people who use the trail.

The funding is there

About \$200,000 has been spent on the share-the-road trail so far, including planning studies and engineering fees to Trans Associates, the engineering firm that designed the trail.

"We have almost \$4 million" to buy land and build trail sections that will link up other segments of bike trails, Ridenour said. "This part of the trail is tough because we are not dealing with abandoned railroad right-of-ways. There are many individual owners."



Jack Ryan, 29, rides his bicycle on Atlantic Avenue in McKeesport's 10th Ward, where cyclists share the road with motorists along the Steel Valley Trail. He says he rides every day but rarely sees other cyclists on the trail. (Tony Tye, Post-Gazette)

The bike trail development money has come from Allegheny County's Regional Asset District, the Heinz Foundation and from federal highway enhancement funds and other government sources, he said.

One of the Virginia Manor bike trail opponents complained that he hasn't seen anything in McKeesport and Clairton that looks like the Mt. Lebanon neighborhood nominated for a bike trail.

Shaw and Ridenour said the Beechwood Boulevard bike lane, built and maintained by the City of Pittsburgh, provides a better comparison.

The 4-mile bike lane is in Squirrel Hill, from Fifth Avenue to Browns Hill Road.

"There are big, beautiful houses all along that trail, Shaw said. "The trail has been there for years. I haven't seen any traffic counts on it, but it is used by many people. I ride it all the time.

"Beechwood Boulevard is wide and so is the bike lane. Though people park in the bike lane, you can still ride to the left of the parked cars without having to move out into the lanes used by cars. I'm not aware of any neighborhood complaints."

