

Daily Courier

Towns must band together to market Great Allegheny passage

By Daily Courier

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Area towns, through which a popular hiking and biking trail runs, are joining to attract tourists, boost business and pursue beautification efforts.

To do so, leaders are taking advantage of resources already in place and seeking new ways to make the trail towns attractive to cash-carrying visitors.

It is important that each community participates in the joint project.

Railroads played a major role in the expansion of America. In places where trains stopped for water, fuel, passengers and freight, towns and cities sprouted then grew. As the interstate highway system and air travel grew, many whistle-stop towns suffered.

Over the past 20 years, though, the Rails-to-Trails movement changed that trend as former railbeds were transformed to hiking, biking and horse-riding trails.

Among the most notable of these projects is the Great Allegheny Passage, which runs 135 miles from Cumberland, Md., to McKeesport and passes through the Connellsville area.

In recent weeks, officials and trail supporters from Connellsville, West Newton, Chiopyle, Rockwood, Meyersdale and Confluence met to discuss preservation and marketing plans. The goal is to complete the plans by year's end.

The initiatives will range from window-washing brigades for downtown buildings to educating potential developers about historic tax credits, area residents and businesses. It is important that each community participates in the joint project - to become partners, not competitors, in economic development. Once would-be visitors learn about all that is available along the trail, it is certain they will be attracted to the region.

Trail users are interested in more than snacks and restroom facilities, said Cathy McCollom, director of the Trail Town Program, which is coordinating the effort.

"They are looking for those communities that still feel authentic, that have original downtown buildings and stories to tell," she said.

Erin Hammerstedt, of Preservation Pennsylvania, said such efforts can improve a tax base, create jobs and stimulate private investment.

Community members are being asked to identify resources that might be significant. Most of the six communities have numerous buildings on the National Register of Historic Places -- and more that are eligible. Such places interest many history-minded people.

Clarion Associates, of Denver, was selected to assist with the project. Matthew Goebel, Clarion vice president, said heritage tourists are good visitors.

This new trail effort will provide new money and growth, just like those bygone days when railroads led to expansion in every corner of America.