

Valley News Dispatch

Trail enthusiasts envision Erie-to-Pittsburgh bicycle pathway

By Mary Ann Thomas
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Linking what looks like unrelated squiggles on a map of Pennsylvania is a proposed 270-mile bike and walking trail from Pittsburgh to Erie.

The Erie-Pittsburgh Trail Alliance, a conglomeration of trail associations and other rail-to-trail advocates, is working on the details of connecting a series of community trails, many of which traverse the defunct routes of the Pennsylvania Railroad, into a seamless path stretching from Allegheny to Erie counties.

More than 50 trail enthusiasts and government officials met Monday night at the Freeport Fire Department on Market Street in Freeport.

The groups touts the health, recreational and economic benefits of the trail project.

"It's not just a trail," said Ron Steffey, director of the Allegheny Valley Land Trust, which oversees the Armstrong Trail. "It's a place for family outings, couples and a child to learn how to ride a bike."

Years and millions of dollars in the making, three of the "struggling" trail projects are sewing up 27 miles in 17 municipalities along the Allegheny River corridor from Pittsburgh to Freeport, according to Jim Holder, volunteer chairman for the Alliance.

"It's a big challenge," he said. "You get into more population and industrial areas where there are more challenges."

The Alliance will release results of a study about efforts to thread the trail along riverfronts and through business and residential districts in towns such as Aspinwall, according to Tom Baxter, executive director of Friends of the Riverfront in Pittsburgh.

"Ideally, we would like the trail on the riverfront, but we also look at what is practical," he said. Active rail lines and private property are the biggest hurdles.

Early next year, the Alliance will host a public meeting with the study results that will propose both a preferred route and a practical route.

According to Baxter, the Alliance has met with representatives from the 17 river communities in Allegheny and Armstrong counties.

Also vital is the bike and pedestrian path to be built on the Freeport Bridge, according to John Haven, a South Buffalo supervisor.

"You're looking at three years for the Freeport Bridge project," Haven said, "and by the time it's done, it will be ready to connect to other trails."

In addition to the Pittsburgh trail going to Erie, he wants a link to the Butler-Freeport trail.

The Alliance is looking to bring the bike and walking paths into the towns.

For example, planners are exploring River Road in Natrona as a "share the road" used by cyclists and motor vehicles, according to Darla Cravoia, special program coordinator for Allegheny County.

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