



Trail Town program in West Newton works to stimulate Great Allegheny Passage travelers

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By Margaret Smykla

Getting travelers to explore and discover downtown West Newton while passing through the borough on the Great Allegheny Passage -- that's the focus of the Trail Town Program of the Progress Fund in the borough.

That will be accomplished one project at a time, Trail Town manager William Prince said.

The nonprofit Progress Fund provides business coaching and capital to businesses in tourism and agriculture. Its Trail Town Program is a community revitalization initiative in communities along the Passage, providing marketing, business assistance, economic research, trail surveys and signs.

The Progress Fund's current local effort is finding tenants for the 2,500-square-foot first floor of the former Riverside Lounge building at 101 S. Water St., and which boasts a panoramic view of the circa-1907 West Newton Bridge and the Youghiogheny River.

It is the Progress Fund's first major renovation project.

Since acquiring the property in March 2012, the Progress Fund has installed new windows, storefront and floor; repaired the brick work and roof; and more.

So far, the project has been funded by the R.K. Mellon Foundation through the Progress Fund. The total project budget is \$600,000, from which the property was purchased from the former owner for \$183,000.

"We are for anything that will promote our community and give us exposure," borough council President George Molovich said.

He and borough secretary Pam Humenik counted among West Newton's assets its small-town life in which everyone knows everyone else; proximity to Pittsburgh and Greensburg; the Youghiogheny River for fishing, canoeing and swimming; its three-block downtown area and the Allegheny Passage.

The 150-mile passage connects with the 184-mile C&O Canal Towpath at Cumberland, Md., to create a 334-mile route between Pittsburgh and Washington, D.C. It was completed this summer.

Mr. Molovich, 55, a lifelong West Newton resident, recalls a bustling downtown that declined with the downturn in the coal and steel industries, and the rise of shopping centers, like Greengate and Century III malls.

"Now people are rediscovering the downtown again," Ms. Humenik said, citing widespread interest in the Project Fund's renovation project.

Simeral Square, a riverfront park that opened in June, is a project by Downtown West Newton Inc., the local main street group. It includes a streetscape design, brick walkways, small stage and spectators lawn and benches.

"It is another attraction to bring people off the trail," Mr. Prince said.

The Trail Town Program works in eight focus communities along the passage: West Newton, Connellsville, Ohio, Confluence, Rockwood and Meyersdale in Pennsylvania and Frostburg and Cumberland in Maryland.

"We are starting to work with partners in Homestead, South Side and McKeesport, which are along the trail," Mr. Prince said.

The Trail Town Program's initiative, the Community Connection project, is responsible for 14 public art pieces along the GAP, including a life-size sculpture formed of railroad spikes welded together that represents West Newton's early pioneer history.

Trail Town and its partnerships also erected trail signage, bike racks and kiosks in West Newton and elsewhere.

Mr. Prince said he is hoping visitors will also come to downtown West Newton to view its historic features, such as the Plumer House built in 1814 on South Water Street; a Victorian home on Vine Street and a replica of the former 1910 P&LE train station on Vine Street.

The Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission is working on defining the boundaries of the historic district as it is eligible for the National Register.

"It would be a great opportunity, and an honor for the area, and will attract people to the town, perhaps interesting them in opening a business as there is potential for tax credits for future renovations," Mr. Prince said.

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