

LEADER TIMES

Trail programs moving forward, director says

By A.J. Panian

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Armstrong Rails to Trails Association director Lee Calarie sees the current legislative effort by U.S. Rep. John Murtha, D-12th, to attain National Scenic Trail status for many hiking and bicycling trails in the region as a sign of good things to come for current and future related projects.

"From my understanding, when they get those designations, they get prioritized on funding and that can open the door to even more development and amenities," said Calarie.

On Tuesday, Murtha introduced the Forks of Ohio Trail Study Act, which directs the National Park Service (NPS) to perform a study on trails across southwestern Pennsylvania and surrounding states to determine whether such status should be awarded.

"We have a fantastic trail network developing all across this region that is becoming a major attraction for tourists as well as a terrific quality-of-life asset that makes our region more attractive as a business location," said Murtha. "I don't think there's any question that this trail network will qualify for inclusion in the National Trail System, it's just a matter of how many trails should come under designation."

The act, also known as H.R. 1520, calls on the park service to consider including historical transportation routes used by George Washington and British and French troops traveling from Maryland and Canada to the forks of the Ohio River and also canal and railroad routes being converted into rail-trails, including those along the Allegheny River and its tributaries here.

Calarie said work on several trail projects in the county are slated to begin this summer or fall.

Work on a trail that will stretch from the upper end of Kittanning to Cowanshannock Creek will begin in early summer, according to Calarie, and work on a section of the trail at the lower end of the borough will begin in fall.

"A stretch (of the trail) about a mile long or so was completed in Templeton last fall, and a stretch from Cowansville up to Mosgrove is in the design phase and probably two years away," said Calarie. "The eventual goal is to link together all of the trails and hopefully have a continuous trail from Kittanning up to Templeton over time."

Other notable trails under consideration for the designation include: The Great Allegheny Passage, which links Cumberland and Pittsburgh Trails with a spur to Pittsburgh International Airport; The Pennsylvania Mainline Canal Greenway, which links Pittsburgh with Harrisburg along the Allegheny, Kiskiminetas,

Conemaugh, Juniata and Susquehanna Rivers; and The Sheepskin Trail and Monongahela River Trail from Connellsville to Morgantown, W.V.

"We think each of these trails would qualify for inclusion in the National Trails System by itself. But by looking at the entire network, it's hard to imagine a more exciting off-road hiking and biking system anywhere in the world," said Murtha.

Since the park service must perform the prescribed studies to verify that the trails meet criteria for designation as a National Scenic Trail or National Historic Trail, Murtha's press release stated that public input would be considered.

Once designated, the trail system would be eligible for a small annual appropriation and technical and other assistance.

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