

Trail towns cashing in

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By Shannon M. Nass, Special to the Post-Gazette

A new shade of green is appearing along the 132 miles of the Great Allegheny Passage, and it's not the color of a rare plant. Revenue is on the rise as trail communities are realizing the economic potential of catering to the needs of trail users.

In response, the Ohio River Trail Council is hosting "Economic Benefits of Trail-Based Tourism," with speaker Amy Camp, trail town program manager. The presentation will take place at 6 p.m. March 1 at the Community College of Beaver County in Center.

The program is an economic development initiative created by The Allegheny Trail Alliance, with funding from Pennsylvania's Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and The Progress Fund.

"Our work with the Trail Town Program is to help maximize economic benefits of the Great Allegheny Passage, and we do that by working in trail towns," Brown said.

Some of the topics Brown will cover include the results of economic impact studies that were conducted along the trail, recent business activity and annual trail use counts and patterns.

"I don't want to give the impression that it's a gold mine for small businesses," Brown said. "While the trail market is a part of most of our businesses' customer base, we don't encourage anyone to open business and rely 100 percent on the trail market. But, business is good."

Brown said the Trail Town Program measured the economic impact of the Great Allegheny Passage in 2008 and found that trail spending was attributed to \$40 million in direct spending and \$7.5 million in wages.

"The numbers are good and, anecdotally, businesses that we've talked to have said they have had good business in the 2010 season as well," Brown said.

Vincent Troia, CEO of the Ohio River Trail Council, hopes the event will enlighten residents to the many benefits of living in close proximity to the trail.

"The populace tends to focus primarily on the outdoor recreational aspects of greenways when speaking about the benefits of trails, while overlooking the well-known improvements in public health, transportation, conservation, preservation, culture and heritage," Troia said. "However, what is most often not recognized is the tremendous economic potential of trails."

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