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## Trailblazing: Beaver County welcomes first rails-to-trails project

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By Brian David, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

There's an almost-spectacular view toward the northern end of the Beaver River Trail in Beaver Falls.

The river lies below, rushing over the Eastvale dam and foaming through rocky shallows. Far across are the stone walls beneath the Beaver Falls Municipal Authority buildings.

But the view is only almost spectacular because from the trail -- a rails-to-trails project scheduled for a ribbon-cutting ceremony Saturday -- the river is distant, down a slope and across the railroad tracks, and is partially screened by trees.

If you leave the pavement, take one of the unofficial trails down to the tracks and cross them, there's a short concrete bridge crossing a river inlet. From there the view is fully spectacular, with the Eastvale bridge reflected in the pool above the dam and the water roaring below. Almost better is the river inlet itself, a little stone grotto with cool breezes coming up from a miniature waterfall.

There are only two problems with this. First, it's illegal. Crossing the tracks is trespassing, despite the fact that people do it all the time. Second, it's a bit dangerous, with rickety, minimal railings and unimproved trails.

"It'd be great to get across the tracks," said Karl Boak, mayor of Beaver Falls and chairman of the Beaver River Rails-to-Trails Association. "We can't get across them anywhere."

In a way, it's a metaphor for Beaver Falls itself: beauty and potential seemingly forever frustrated by the vestiges of the industrial past. That's a metaphor reflected throughout the trail's length.

The trail, which was completed last fall, has its south end at 11th Street and First Avenue, by the Moltrup ballfields and the defunct Moltrup Steel Company buildings. It runs primarily on the bed of a former Pennsylvania and Lake Erie rail spur, jogging occasionally along little-used side streets, to its terminus almost a mile north in a park-like area at 23rd Street and Fourth Avenue.

It's a study in contrasts along the way. There are grassy areas, birds and trees, not to mention the views of the river toward the north end. There are also stunningly decrepit buildings, one showing signs of use as a crack den and another an iconic example of Appalachian "anything you can nail together" architecture.

In one spot is a drooping gate marked "keep out when closed" -- but the gate has no fence attached, and is guarding only a pile of old tires.

"We're looking for grants to clean a lot of this up, take some buildings down," Mr. Boak said, stopping to pick up a stick and tossing it into the woods. Would he welcome a little thunderstorm targeting a few select properties for gale-force winds? "A storm could be a good thing," he said with a chuckle.

There are also contrasts in community reaction. The trail is seeing a gratifying level of use -- three women walked it up and back on a recent morning before stopping to chat with the mayor -- and many neighbors view it with pride. Mr. Boak said one calls it "his" bike trail, and promised that as long as he was around it would be clean.

Other places, ATV riders have cut across it heading for the woods, leaving trails of dirt and gravel. Some dog owners let their pets wander loose, and others don't clean up after their dogs, making it hazardous to wander from the trail into the grass.

But Mr. Boak is determined. Again and again, he points out areas where vacant lots can be turned into park areas, where old buildings can be demolished, where this one improvement can lead to more. "It's a wonderful thing for the community," he said.

And it's not done. Phase II of the trail will continue to the north, jogging onto Route 18 then going back to the rail spur on Geneva College's property, eventually reaching city limits. The association hopes to eventually extend it both north and south, connecting with existing bike trails.

Again, though, the trail's second phase is limited by problems dealing with CSX, which owns part of the old rail bed passing underneath the Eastvale Bridge. Mr. Boak said so far, the railroad's asking price is too high, though negotiations are ongoing.

Whatever the future holds, Saturday promises to be a celebration of eight years of hard work. Mr. Boak said he and Big Beaver Falls school board member Gene Marx "thought about this for years, listening to other communities talking about rails to trails."

The association was formed in 1998, and finally landed a \$263,000 federal Transportation Enhancement Act grant through the state Department of Transportation to get the work done.

Perhaps surprisingly for an area lined with railroad tracks, this is the first rail trail in Beaver County.

"It will bring people into the community, when they know there's something they can put a bike on," Mr. Boak said. And that will be more the case when Phase II is done, when it is "more than a five-minute ride."

And it will be even more the case if Mr. Boak can conjure that storm and get a few old buildings taken down.

The ribbon-cutting is set at 11 a.m. Saturday at the trail's south end, at 11th Street and First Avenue.

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