



## Trails could join national system

By Patti Dobranski  
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The network of hiking and bicycling trails that winds through some of the region's most historic areas may someday be included in the National Trail System.

U.S. Rep. John Murtha, a Democrat from Johnstown, has introduced legislation asking the National Park Service to study the potential for awarding National Scenic Trail status to hiking and biking paths in southwestern Pennsylvania and adjoining states.

"We have a fantastic trail network developing all over 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," Murtha said during a Fayette County Tourism Summit last week at Nemaquin Woodlands Resort and Spa in Farmington.

The Forks of the Ohio Trail Study Act seeks consideration of the historic transportation routes that have been transformed into recreational trails. A number of these routes were used during the French and Indian War as French and British troops - including George Washington - traveled between Maryland and Canada.

If the legislation is passed this year, the trails could be admitted to the national system by 2006.

Three primary trails are proposed for the national registry: the Great Allegheny Passage, the longest multi-purpose rail-trail in the East; the Pennsylvania Mainline Canal Greenway, linking Pittsburgh with Harrisburg along the Allegheny, Kiskiminetas, Conemaugh, Juniata and Susquehanna rivers; and the Allegheny River Trails, including the Armstrong, Allegheny River and Justus trails.

These paths along the region's major rivers -the Monongahela, Youghiogheny, Casselman, Allegheny, Kiski, Conemaugh, Juniata and Susquehanna - would comprise a distinctive biking and hiking network crisscrossing the state, said Brad Clemenson, a spokesman for Murtha.

Clemenson said the legislation's passage could encourage the various trails to band together as a regional attraction.

"This study will create a mechanism for groups to come together and become eligible for small annual appropriations, in the neighborhood of \$50,000 to

\$100,000 for the network as a whole," he said.

Entry into the National Trail System could encourage trail builders to complete the unfinished legs and "spur trails" in the network, Clemenson added.

"If they come together under one large umbrella group, it would be easier to manage. It could help with the maintenance and the marketability. If you are one of the premier trails in the world, you would want to market it," he said.

Clemenson said the plan's supporters hope to overcome the resistance of some landowners who live along the paths.

"Studies show trails increase property values and decrease crime because people are always around using them. They are very safe and are a great source of free recreation," he said.

In addition to the three primary trails proposed for national recognition, the proposal names these trails:

- The Sheepskin Trail and Monongahela River Trail.
- The Panhandle Trail from Carnegie, Allegheny County, to Weirton, W.Va.;
- The Five Star Trail from Mt. Pleasant, through Greensburg, to Saltsburg, eventually linking the Great Allegheny Passage with the Mainline Canal Greenway;
- The Ghost Town and Hoodlebug Trails in Indiana and Cambria counties, which provide a bicycling route for the Mainline Canal Greenway.

"If there is enough funding to start the study, we would hope to hire a contractor to do the needed study for consideration and move forward," Clemenson said. "We may find they may want to limit the study to just the larger trail lines."

David Lange, a spokesman for the Rivers and Trails Program in Philadelphia, a division of the National Park Service, said three Pennsylvania trails currently are part of the National Trail System.

The North Country National Scenic Trail meanders through northern Pennsylvania as it links seven states from New York to North Dakota. The Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail connects Pennsylvania with the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia, and links to the 70-mile Laurel Highlands Trail, managed by Laurel Ridge State Park. The Appalachian Trail, a renowned footpath 2,167 miles long, runs from Maine to Georgia.

The push to have the Great Allegheny Passage included in the National Trail System may stem from a desire to link it to the Potomac Heritage Trail via the Laurel Highlands Trail, Lange said. A majority of the trails currently recognized in the National Trail System are designed for hiking only, he added.

To qualify for National Historic Trail status, a trail must meet three criteria. The corridor must have retained its physical and historic integrity, have national significance and have tremendous potential for public and recreational use and

historic interpretation.

The public will be involved in the registry process, which may take 18 to 24 months to complete.

"There will be a series of public meetings and workshops, as well as research to verify the historic status of the area," Lange said.

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