

Building Better Communities through the Ohio River Trail

A trail or greenway is a corridor of protected linear space set aside for many reasons. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) has reported that multi-use trails are often seen incompletely when it comes to their benefits. The populace tends to focus primarily on the outdoor recreational aspects of greenways, overlooking the multitude of betterments. The enhancements extend into the realm of public health, wellness, transportation, conservation, preservation, environment, ecology, economy, culture and heritage. The evidence to support the development of trails is compelling, especially given the minimal state, county or local investment compared to other endeavors with comparable objectives.

With the growing popularity of cycling, walking, hiking, backpacking, inline skating and cross country skiing it is easily understood why outdoor recreation is the solely perceived benefit of multi-use trails. These trails offer people of all ages with attractive and accessible places to incorporate aerobic exercise into their daily routines. The merits of recurring physical activity include preventing chronic health conditions and promoting weight loss and restorative sleep. Communities that develop greenways, experience a noteworthy effect on public health and wellness.

Furthermore, greenways often function as realistic transportation corridors. Bicycling and walking are important elements in a comprehensive transportation plan. Bicycle commuting is a healthy, affordable, clean means of alternative transportation providing energy independence that benefits everyone with reduction in gasoline consumption, fewer emissions, less traffic, and less demand for parking. Greenways are assisting in transforming the "car-centric" development that has evolved over the years into communities that are more pedestrian friendly, more walkable, more cycling-oriented, and less automobile dependent.

Darren Flusche and Anna Kelso of the American Bicyclist wrote that "according to the U.S. Census Bureau there are more cyclists on their way to work than ever before — during rush hour, rolling bikes into office buildings, and riding with work uniforms and dress clothes folded into shoulder bags and panniers." The number of bicycle commuters has steadily increased in recent years and employers are realizing that commuters are healthy employees which equates to decreased health insurance costs, lower absenteeism and increased productivity. Many businesses are now offering bicycle commuting employees the Bicycle Commuter Tax Benefit. This benefit reimburses employees commuting costs, such as bike equipment and maintenance, up to \$240 a year.

President Bill Clinton, *Bicycling Magazine* 1992, stated "Without question, bicycling is an efficient, economical and environmentally sound form of transportation and recreation. Bicycling is a great activity for families, recreational riders, and commuters."

Linear greenways conserve greenspace. As tools for ecology and the environment, trails preserve natural landscapes. Air quality is maintained by protecting trees that emit oxygen. Water quality is preserved with a vegetation buffer between surface water resources and population centers. Trails promote and safeguard wildlife diversity and provide vital habitat corridors. In addition, trails grant opportunities for birding, butterflying, deer spotting, fishing or enjoying the spring wildflowers or the peak autumn colors.

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), tourism is the second largest industry in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. "Penn's Woods" is teeming with wild resources and beautiful vistas. The Keystone State's trails are like a "magnificent gem on display" attracting visitors, who facilitate job growth in ecotourism-related opportunities like river rafting tours, canoeing, bicycle sales and rentals. Many small towns have used the "Trail Town" model of economic revitalization, which focuses on connecting trails to their "Main Streets". Visiting trail users patronize the downtown restaurants, retail stores, hotels and bed & breakfasts, thereby building vibrant communities.

An article written by Gene Bisbee was entitled "Build It and They Will Come and Spend; the Pennsylvania's Pine Creek Rail Trail". The Pine Creek Trail (PCT) is located in north-central Pennsylvania and meanders fifty-seven miles plus along Pine Creek that passes through a wonderful valley called the "Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania". The PCT was voted by USA Today as one of the "Ten Great Places to Take a Bike Tour." The RTC conducted the "Pine Creek Rail Trail Survey" in 2006 which substantiated "the adage heard in the 1986 movie "Field of Dreams": "Build it and they will come." The survey confirmed that "tourists due come, and most importantly these visitors spend from \$5 million to \$7 million a year, most of which is spent in the local communities near the trail."

Referring to the Great Allegheny Passage, the late U.S. Congressman John P. Murtha is quoted as stating, "The Trail is already attracting a lot of people, and were just starting to market it. It's a major asset for our region, not only because of the tourist dollars it's attracting, but also because it's a piece of our economic rebuilding efforts."

Nevertheless, sometimes small-town revitalization is more subtle, like increased property values in trail towns or when a family or a company decides to relocate to a neighborhood because of quality of life amenities like greenways. In 2002, a survey of two-thousand recent home buyers, co-sponsored by the National Association of Home Builders and the National Association of Realtors, inquired about the "importance of community amenities," and greenways finished second only to highway access. In addition to promoting small-town revitalization, trails are progressively being used to help urban communities revitalize abandoned or brownfield corridors.

In an article written by Christopher Swope about "America's Green Mayors" the following excerpt provides an example of economic development from trail projects in Pittsburgh, Pa. "Waterfront greenway rejuvenating a city is a familiar story with Tom Murphy. In eight years as mayor, Murphy led the charge to transform the "Iron City's" waterfront from an industrial eyesore into a recreational oasis with miles of trails. Mayor Murphy understood how "quality of life" is important to urban living, says John Stephen, executive director of Pittsburgh's Additional Fifteen. As Pittsburgh residents rediscover the pleasure of a riverfront stroll, developers are following close behind. The city's most expensive housing is going up near the waterfront, along with offices, museums and two publicly funded sports stadiums."

Sean Garrigan, Principal of the Ohio River Trail (ORT) Feasibility Study, conveyed that "the proposed trail, when completed will enhance and further develop recreational opportunities for the communities along the Ohio River Trail corridors as well as the region, by linking existing and proposed pedestrian, bicycle, recreation, open space, and transportation facilities while protecting environmental and cultural resources and improving public access to the river's edge. One of the major outcomes of the project will be to foster further recreation and cultural-based economic development within the local communities and the region, capitalizing on the synergy of ecotourism and the potential development of a larger recreation and parks system as a way to reposition all the evolved communities for the 21st century business and lifestyle needs." Peter Simone of Simone Collins, expressed that the ORT can become the new "town commons" where neighbors greet neighbors and new friendships can be forged along the scenic banks of the Ohio River. John Beurkle, Jr. of Pashek Associates wrote "to say the proposed ORT would be significant resource in the region would be an understatement. The ORT would be a tremendous boost to the quality of life in Beaver and Allegheny Counties and the communities it would pass through."

The RTC has also ascertained that many community leaders have been astonished on how trails have contributed to community pride. Trails preserve and exhibit historically significant locations and routes which provide an enduring record of the past and educational opportunities into the heritage and culture of our nation. Linear trails connect neighborhoods, schools, parks and riverfronts as well as linking historical forts, bridges, dams, canals, buildings and villages. "Through recognition of these cultural, historical, and natural assets, greenways enhance a sense of community identity."

Carol M. Browner, administrator, Environmental Protection Agency in a speech delivered to the Rails to Trails Conference in Pittsburgh, PA on June 25, 1999 stated: "As Teddy Roosevelt and his generation recognized their duty to save our most beautiful places, our greatest places, so must we recognize our duty to grow different, to grow smart. To recreate that which made this country so great, a sense of community, a need to create those shared places, be they trails, local parks, or perhaps even a simple sidewalk. Greenways are shared places where we can come to know our neighbors as more than someone we simply pass in the car -- windows rolled up -- a small wave the extent of our communication. I thank all of you for what you do and the difference you make. Something is happening in America -- city-by-city, town by town, neighborhood by neighborhood. Communities are being reborn. And that is a great thing, not just for us, but our children and our children's children. I am fortunate to live in such a place -- to raise my son in such a place -- to know the name of every child on my block and how they are doing in school. This afternoon, I am sure all of the parents will gather together on the sidewalk and review those end-of-the-year report cards the kids will be bringing home today. Some would say I live in the city. I would say I live in a neighborhood -- a community -- and what a wonderful place it is."

The ORT is a project spearheaded by the Ohio River Trail Council (ORTC), a non-profit volunteer-led corporation that works to bring individuals, communities, businesses, recreational users and all levels of government together to promote and protect a continuous corridor of natural and cultural resources along the Ohio River and its tributaries. The ORTC's goal is to honor our past and build our future by providing recreation opportunities, environmental stewardship, heritage development, safe transportation networks and economic stimulus to our region.

The ORTC is in support of a progressing state and national movement to develop greenways, especially since 1987 when President Reagan's Commission on "American Outdoors" recommended establishing a national greenways network as reported in Pennsylvania Greenways. Greenways are often accomplished and managed through partnerships between municipalities, counties, and non-profit organizations. Pennsylvania's statewide greenways program was established by Governor Tom Ridge in 2001 to promote and support the greenway efforts occurring in all sixty-seven counties. "The vision is to create a network of trails throughout the Commonwealth, with a greenway in every community by 2020." The ORTC is an organization committed to excellence, with a clear vision and a passion for delivering outstanding results. We ask you to work with us to capitalize on these strengths. I would like to invite you to become a member and support our efforts in making the Ohio River Trail a reality. For additional information, please visit www.ohiorivertrail.org to further enhance your understanding of the mission of the Ohio River Trail Council.

The information provided is cited from The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (www.railstotrails.org), American Trails (www.americantrails.org), Pa Department of Natural Resources (www.dcnr.state.pa.us), Pennsylvania Greenways (www.pagreenways.org), The American Bicyclist (www.bikeleague.org) and Christopher Swope (christopherswope.wordpress.com). December 5, 2010.

Dr. Vincent Troia
Chief Executive Officer
Ohio River Trail Council

