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Erie-to-Pittsburgh trail plan keeps moving forward

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The proposed extension of the Three River Heritage trail will travel through 17 communities along the Allegheny River and when completed, will connect to the existing 22 miles of trails along the shoreline of Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio rivers.

It also would serve as another link in the proposed Erie-to-Pittsburgh trail.

The developers of the trail, the nonprofit Friends of the Riverfront and Allegheny County, held a meeting on Wednesday at the Harmar Municipal Building to discuss trail specifics with local government representatives and the public.

Local officials such as Jan Barbus, manager of Sharpsburg Borough and Aspinwall Councilman Joe Giuffre are excited about the prospects of a riverfront trail but they are concerned about how it will thread through their towns.

Although both communities have riverfront park properties, much of the riverfront is blanketed by active rail lines and private property.

Recommendations from a trail study propose either using railroad access roads or a share-the-road arrangement along Freeport Road in parts of Aspinwall and O'Hara and Main Street in Sharpsburg.

"No one is in favor of using Freeport Road as a shared bicycle route because of the safety issue," Giuffre said. "The preferred route will be along the railroad property and into the Aspinwall Marina, then the City of Pittsburgh water plant and tie into existing trails in O'Hara."

But it's early in the process for developing the trail and organizers are working on those issues.

For Barbus, it's the same concern: "I'm not sure that they can put in a bike lane and have it be a safe lane," she said of share-the-road options along the busy, narrow streets of Sharpsburg.

"The challenge is getting it through and finding common ground with the railroad," she said.

According to the final recommendations in the feasibility study commissioned by the Friends of the Riverfront, two routes through the towns include the "preferred route" — the ultimate trail route but not necessarily the realistic path.

Then the second route identified in the study is more practical and aptly named the "practical route."

The challenge in developing a continuous trail in the 17 communities along the river is that it is rimmed by private property, industrial sites and an active mainline of Norfolk Southern the entire length of the trail.

And the only way to keep the trail aligned closely to the river would be along railroad property.

An official from the railroad has said that there are currently no plans for the proposed trail to go through railroad property.

The preferred route takes the trail through 12 miles of active railroad property. But given the challenge of accessing railroad property for a public thoroughway like a trail, the "practical route" scales back the railroad property portion of the trail to 4 miles.

So the trail meanders away from the riverfront in the "practical route" throughout most of the 17 communities it passes through.

Highlights of the proposed trail routes through local communities include:

- **Millvale to Shaler and Etna (1.7 miles):** From Millvale Riverfront Park, use existing railroad service road along river side of railroad tracks.
- **Sharpsburg (1.3 to 1.8 miles):** The practical route is to leave the river and thread the trail through town's business district as early as Bridge Street under the 62nd Street Bridge. Trail users can cross back to the river at 19th Street and reach Aspinwall through private property. The report recommends Freeport Road being upgraded for a "share the road" lay-out with the pedestrian/bicycle trail.
- **O'Hara (.4 miles) to be determined:** This short segment traverses through private property along the river, under the Highland Park Bridge to Aspinwall. But considers share-the-road alternative.
- **Aspinwall (.4 miles):** Trail will go through Aspinwall Marina, then a preferred route would be a railroad service road but a practical route would be along Freeport Road and unspecified neighborhood streets.
- **City of Pittsburgh/O'Hara (2.1 miles):** Use existing railroad service road to City of Pittsburgh Water Treatment plant to Chapel Harbor development in O'Hara to Zaenger Drive to Riverfront Drive and Papercraft Park Road to Blawnox.
- **Blawnox (.8 - 1 mile):** The trail continues adjacent to Fourth Street and to Centre Avenue, crosses railroad tracks and then continues north along railroad service road.
- **O'Hara (1.8 miles) to be determined:** Practical alignment is a share-the-road trail along Freeport Road.

The preferred alternative is along River Road and through private property and a railroad access road that parallels the tracks.

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