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## Latrobe considers trails linking to Saint Vincent

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By Candy Woodall

Latrobe foundation and city leaders are deciding how to establish a trail system that would link the region's educational, recreational and industrial institutions.

The first step is creating a 2-mile trail from Saint Vincent College in Unity to neighboring Latrobe to provide a connection for the campus' 2,000 students to the city's business district.

It's part of an effort to revitalize the community, according to Ron Weimer, who wears two hats as chairman of the Latrobe Community Revitalization Program and chairman of the Latrobe Planning Commission.

Reaching out to the college has been a goal of the revitalization program for a long time, he said.

Drafts for the trail include utilizing two of the college's greatest assets -- and Westmoreland County's most famous names -- and connecting them to the city's biggest park.

The school's Fred M. Rogers Center and Winnie Palmer Nature Reserve would tie in to the proposed trail, and patrons would be able to walk, jog or bike to the 52-acre Legion Keener Park in the heart of Latrobe's business district. Those on foot or bicycle could then connect to the park trails there.

And those trails may be extending as well. Plans are in the works throughout Latrobe and Derry Township to lay down a trail system that would run along Loyalhanna Creek up to Keystone State Park and the Loyalhanna Gorge.

Early funding -- which paid for the Saint Vincent to Latrobe viability study -- was provided by the Port of Pittsburgh Commission and the McFeely-Rogers Foundation. The commission awarded a \$16,000 grant and the foundation provided \$4,000 to finance the \$20,000 study conducted by Pittsburgh-based Pashek Associates.

Jim Pashek, president of Pashek, said his firm's job was to find a feasible way to get from the college to downtown, and that was fraught with some challenges.

The plan features options of how to have the \$2.2 million trail -- which would largely be funded by foundation grants and private money -- bypass the busy Route 981.

One option calls for building a bicycle bridge, and another would use streets parallel to the highway to form the crushed-stone trail, which is designed for traffic by feet, bicycles, strollers and wheelchairs, but not skateboards.

With volunteer work and in-kind services, Mr. Pashek said project costs could be reduced by \$482,000. And if the trail parallels the highway, the costs could be reduced by \$700,000.

Latrobe's foundation and commission leaders will have to decide which path the trail should take and will then secure private funding to construct it, Mr. Weimer said.

Mr. Pashek's firm has worked on dozens of trail projects throughout the region, and he said the popularity is growing.

Mr. Weimer said there's no question trails are popular in Latrobe.

"All you see are cars around here with racks to haul bikes," he said.

That popularity inspired the McFeely-Rogers Foundation to support the trail project as it has always had a vested interest in parks and recreation, according to James R. Okonak, executive director at that organization and vice president of the Latrobe Foundation.

"We feel recreation enhances the quality of life," he said.

"Because of the state of the economy, people can't always afford to go to the beach for a week or two anymore, so they sort of hunker down and rely on local activities," he said.

Municipalities are also struggling through the poor financial climate, and the new trail will offer another way to attract a young demographic to Latrobe.

Students will have a choice of restaurants and businesses to go to, as well as a "fantastic arts center," Mr. Okonak said.

"Anything that helps to connect us with the community of Latrobe to make the city more accessible to our students is all very positive," said Don Orlando, the college's spokesman.

Mr. Okonak said he can't ignore all the Steelers traffic during training camp.

"Maybe the connection would be that fans would come to practice and then bike into the city center," he said.

His sights are set on even bigger things. He said he sees an opportunity with an abandoned Norfolk Southern rail line parallel to Lincoln Avenue.

That slice of the city can be developed into a dog park and walking/jogging area, he said. City leaders have engaged in talks with the rail company to take over the property.

"And there's also a thought of taking the trail parallel to the Loyalhanna Creek through Derry to connect to Keystone [State Park] and up to the Loyalhanna Dam," he said.

Not only are trails a hot topic in Latrobe, they're gaining popularity all over the state. The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources has given out "multiple millions of dollars" in grant money to fund trail work, said Chris Novak, press secretary.

The state's 281 trails span nearly 7,000 miles and provide "a good, family activity that's not expensive," she said.

With high gas prices, it's also being looked at as an alternative to getting around, she said.

It's also looked at as a way to bring in visitors to an area to spend money.

Several businesses, ranging from ice cream parlors to produce stands to bike shops, are popping up along trails and can be a large part of what spurs the economic benefit, said Mike Kuzemchak, program director at the Ligonier branch of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy.

Multi-use trails are extremely popular throughout the Laurel Highlands and attract a diversity of people, he said.

That diversity of traffic is good for the ecosystem and is what attracted the Port of Pittsburgh to provide a grant for the Saint Vincent to Latrobe project.

Jim McCarville, executive director of the Port of Pittsburgh, said his organization has a small grant program that awards between \$5,000 and \$20,000 to make improvements along streams and waterways in the region.

That the Saint Vincent/Latrobe project may spur growth along the Loyalhanna Creek and beyond is very inviting to Mr. McCarville.

The surge in interest in trails, many of which locally are along rivers and streams, proves that people want to reconnect with waterways and see them as an attractive resource.

"Each trail has its own charm and beauty, and linking the college with the downtown area will create a very attractive place for recreation," he said.

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