

Vision forms for giant riverfront park

Allegheny, Monongahela, Ohio, Youghiogheny rivers would be lined with trails, parks and amenities

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By Gabrielle Banks, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Imagine mountain biking, jogging or cross-country skiing from town to town in a world-class riverfront park that lines the entirety of the four rivers in Allegheny County.

County Councilmen David Fawcett, R-Oakmont, and James Burn Jr., D-Millvale, today will unveil their vision of a linear park, spanning 80-some miles, that would cover one shore or another of the Allegheny, Monongahela, Ohio and Youghiogheny rivers and their bridges, connecting the county riverfront from border to border with trails, parks and amenities.

• **Map:** [Countywide riverfront park](#), in .pdf format

"It's the first step of a very long journey, but in the end I think it will be worth every step," Mr. Burn said.

"The park would include an uninterrupted network of trails," Mr. Fawcett said. "The idea is you could get from Etna to Oakmont or McKeesport to Duquesne."

The planned park goes from about 50 feet to several thousand feet inland in municipalities along the route.

A rough blueprint, the product of years of study and collaboration among civic leaders, environmental groups and developers, shows a comprehensive riverfront park that includes hillside preservation in places like Mount Washington and across from the Clairton Coke Works.

Mr. Fawcett said he hopes to get public input and support. Because so much riverfront development has commenced in places like Millvale, Verona and McKeesport, the biggest push would be connecting undeveloped areas and putting in parklets, playgrounds, volleyball courts, fountains, rowing and kayaking facilities that would attract developers to build restaurants and new housing.

Mr. Burn said riverfront development during his tenure as mayor of Millvale allowed the borough to market itself to businesses and families.

"What I'd like to see with this project is an ability for the county to market itself and use this riverfront park and its connector to the trails and the other county and city parks as something to entice people to come here and invest in this region," he said.

Mr. Fawcett didn't flinch at pitching such a massive undertaking in a cash-strapped county. The park could cost in the tens of millions of dollars. He suggested tapping into state and federal economic development money and getting private companies involved.

Riverfront parks have provided complete makeovers to cities like Chicago, Chattanooga, Tenn., and Vancouver, he said.

Once the details are hammered out and the county finds funders, the plan could move forward quickly because a countywide park could bypass local zoning laws.

"I think it could actually happen," said Davitt Woodwell, vice president of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council. "It's complicated because 70 of the 130 municipalities are on the riverfront, but there are great gains that have been made in getting back the riverfronts."

Mr. Woodwell said Millvale and Verona have shown what is possible. With state and federal funding, similar gains could be accessible to others.

Mr. Fawcett and Mr. Burn will announce their proposal for the riverfront park at a news conference at 3 p.m. today in the County Courthouse.

Council members will look at concerns and develop a more concrete plan in committee. Mr. Fawcett encouraged the public to get involved in the discussion and contact him with comments.

The bill has no official endorsements, but he said a number of groups like PUMP, Venture Outdoors, Sustainable Pittsburgh, the Allegheny Conference and the Riverlife Task Force have been "extremely positive" about the prospect.

"I'm concerned that the process be given a chance," said Court Gould, executive director of Sustainable Pittsburgh, who described himself as "an interested observer" of the bill. "It is a good thing when enlightened public officials make connections between parks, open space, green space and economic development for the region. Let's give the process its due," he said.

As planned, the project would not take any homes, but it might require removing some structures along the riverfront. The largest obstacle planners will have to consider are railroads, which Mr. Fawcett said he hoped would collaborate and be "less stubborn" with a countywide plan.

"So many of our rivers are inaccessible and unusable because of industry and the terrain," said retail developer Todd Reidbord of Walnut Capital. "We see Pittsburgh's rivers as Pittsburgh's oceanfront property. So anything you can do to make that riverfront property more attractive and more usable is great for investment."

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