



'Sense of place' endangered 'Heritage Parks' program zeroed out of budget

By Natalie Gelb Solfanelli

Since the late Gov. Robert P. Casey designated the Lackawanna Heritage Valley as the first State Heritage Area in 1991, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has been the model for heritage development throughout the country.

Today, Pennsylvania boasts 12 heritage areas, more than any other State in the nation. Gov. Casey understood how important it is for people to understand and appreciate the unique attributes of the place where they live. An awareness of the history and culture of a region translates into feelings of pride and, inevitably, those feelings inspire people to become engaged in preserving and conserving the places, traditions and values of their communities

Thus, it is extremely disappointing and disheartening that the Heritage Parks program was zeroed out of the long-delayed state budget. Despite the support and high marks that our state legislators consistently provide to LHVA, as well as the significant financial support they have been able to obtain in the past, no one was able to overcome the obstacle of starting with a big goose egg. The extraordinary challenges of this year's deficit, evidently precluded the possibility of adding something back once it was done. The budget of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), the state agency that is home to the heritage program, was slashed radically.

People might argue that there are more pressing needs than promoting a sense of place. And none could dispute the acute needs of many for social and human services. This is a tough economy, and many jobs are at stake. At the same time, it is important to know that heritage areas are, in essence, community and economic development organizations. As such, they enhance the quality of life of an area and they attract new businesses, residents and tourist activities. The resulting spending and financial resources bolster the local economy, support social and human services, create jobs and bring millions of dollars to the region.

LHVA has provided monies as well as technical assistance to a wide range of cultural, historic, educational and environmental endeavors. It fosters partnerships that facilitate successful projects that otherwise could not occur. It collaborates with federal, state and local partners to promote heritage tourism. It supports the production of documentaries that celebrate the immigrants who came to northeastern Pennsylvania, bringing a work ethic and value system that made this area a great industrial and commercial center. It works with Steamtown National Historic Site and the Electric City Trolley Museum to move people from place

to place and to enjoy the special character of communities throughout the region.

In the last year or two, the availability funding for historical and cultural programs has all but disappeared. LHVA, both by necessity and design, has focused much of its energy and resources on environmental projects. The Lackawanna Greenway Study and the Lackawanna River Heritage Trail have been priority projects. Yet the challenges of completing the LRHT are tremendous, particularly in light of the radical decreases to the DCNR and DCED programs that have been the traditional funding sources for LHVA and other heritage areas. LHVA will have to be creative in identifying funding sources. Any federal funds that are obtained will have to be matched by state, local or private funds.

LHVA is a National as well as a State Heritage Area. Along with five other Pennsylvania State Heritage Areas, it receives support from the National Park Service. Ironically; LHVA is the only heritage area, both at the state and national level, that is structured as a municipal authority. Yet it receives no monies from the city or the county budgets. Every other heritage area in the country has a 501(c)3 management entity. LHVA has established a separate 501c(3) corporation, Heritage Valley Partners (HVP), in order to be eligible apply for certain foundation grants as well as for private support from corporations and individuals. Other heritage areas have been doing this for years!

LHVA is resourceful, but the support of the public is vital to its continued success. The recently formed LHVA Ambassadors in Action program offers volunteer opportunities to those who value LHVA's mission.

The fate of the six State Heritage Areas without National status remains to be seen.

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