



Reconnecting to our river

Major developments on Lackawanna River in '08

By Natalie Gelb Solfanelli

As 2008 begins, the Lackawanna Heritage Valley Authority (LHVA) is launching an exciting new phase of development for the Heritage Trail along the Lackawanna River. Completion of the trail is the signature project of LHVA. Therefore, a renewed commitment and more aggressive approach have been adopted to develop the trail in its entirety rather than mile by mile. In the next few months, it is hoped that years of effort and collaboration will result in progress regarding funding, feasibility studies and preliminary design of every segment of the forty mile trail.

The Lackawanna River has been the lifeline of our region. The boundaries of LHVA are defined by the geography of the Lackawanna Watershed. The Lackawanna River links the communities that represent our history and the people who created, maintain and preserve our cultural traditions. "Reconnecting people to the river" is a major goal of the Lackawanna Heritage Valley.

Cities are born along rivers and, since native-American tribes developed villages and trails along its banks to the days when European immigrants laid rails to carry Anthracite to the great American cities, the Lackawanna River has been the spine of the Lackawanna Heritage Valley. Rail lines, coal breakers and factories that no longer exist, as well as remaining structures from the industrial era, remind us that the river was the common thread.

The Lackawanna River Heritage Trail (LRHT) will allow walkers, runners and bikers to enjoy forty miles of recreational opportunities along the river from Forest City to Duryea at the confluence of the Lackawanna and Susquehanna Rivers. Eventually, the LRHT will link with the D&H and O&W trails to the north, connecting to New York State, and the D&L in upper Luzerne County, eventually linking to the Schuylkill Trail and south across the Pennsylvania border. Much of the route will reuse abandoned railroad corridors. Acquisition of rights of way must be negotiated with property owners.

The Lackawanna River Heritage Trail will be a powerful engine for economic development. Inevitably, businesses spring up near trails, providing equipment to accommodate hikers and bikers, as well as food establishments and other related enterprises. Health and wellness activities, art and historic interpretation on the trail and other innovative approaches will enhance community life in new ways. Trails are, arguably, the most universally popular aspect of modern life, crossing social, economic, political and cultural strata in today's society.

Sections of the Lackawanna River Heritage Trail have been completed in Mavfield, the Mid-Valley and Scranton's

South Side. These trails are extraordinarily popular and attract hundreds of regular users. Funding for these completed has been provided largely by the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), PennDOT, and the National Park Service (NPS). Proximity to the trail has enhanced property values. Home buyers and potential employers routinely ask realtors and Chamber of Commerce representatives about trails as a major consideration in then-decisions about where to live and/or move their businesses.

LHVA's Downtown Scranton Riverfront Heritage Greenway is in the final design stage and it is anticipated that construction will begin in the summer of 2008. A spur trail to Scranton High School, providing a safe alternative route to the neighborhoods in South, West, North and East Scranton, as well as Central City, will ameliorate a treacherous traffic situation at the end of the school day. The Greenway has been the catalyst for the creation of a Riverfront Partnership, a collaborative effort led by LHVA and Scranton Tomorrow to develop a Master Plan for a Riverfront District. The footprint of that plan will extend to the proposed Medical College and the Scranton Laceworks and ArtSpace projects along the levee at Albright Avenue.

Senator Robert Mellow, recognizing the impact of these trail projects, has provided critical funding for the Master Plan, as well as for Greenway development and for a feasibility study for the Levee Trail. By September 2009, as a result of the efforts of Congressman Paul Kanjorski, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Senators Bob Casey and Arlen Specter, along with a commitment of matching funds by Mayor Chris Doherty, the City of Scranton will have a completed trail extending from the Taylor border in South Side to Parker Street in north Scranton to the border with Dickson City.

Congressman Chris Carney, as well as Representatives Staback, Wansacz, Smith and Shimkus, are working to assist LHVA in this expensive, time consuming but worthwhile venture. We will continue to work with our State and Federal legislators, our new Lackawanna County Commissioners, municipal officials in trail communities, to explore new funding opportunities. With their support and collaboration, we are working to have every mile of the Lackawanna River Heritage Trail at some level of development by this time next year!

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