

CHAPTER 1: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC) received funding to prepare a Trail / Greenway Feasibility / Master Plan for the City of Wilkes-Barre in Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. The goal of this project has been to define in sufficient detail the wishes of the community and its priorities as they relate to the trail/greenway alignment and amenities, estimate trail/greenway construction and maintenance costs, and lay the foundation for the entity(s) which will ultimately be responsible for the development and maintenance of the trail.

STUDY AREA

The City of Wilkes-Barre is an industrial city located along the Susquehanna River within the Greater Wyoming Valley of Luzerne County. The City consists of a total land area of 6.85 square miles. Like many downtowns throughout the country, the City of Wilkes-Barre suffered from the decentralization of its commercial districts, as well as, suburban sprawl. However, the City has a strategic advantage because it includes the county seat, as well as, several major universities and colleges, an active citizenry and an active Chamber of Commerce and downtown associations, all working toward revitalizing the urban center, as well as, the communities within the city boundaries. The greater Wilkes-Barre area has become a desirable location for many businesses and industries which benefit from the City's proximity to major airport service, several major highways and numerous rail service providers.

There are numerous existing trails in Luzerne County including the Luzerne County National Recreation Trail, the Susquehanna River Levee Trail, the West Side Trail and the D&L Black Diamond Trail (part of the Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Trail). As the plan for the City of Wilkes-Barre Trail/Greenway proposes connections to these trails, it is likely that those trail users will also use the Wilkes-Barre trails. The Pennsylvania Environmental Council is also currently conducting a trail/greenway master plan for the Greater Kingston Area which will also connect to the Wilkes-Barre trails via the Carey Avenue Bridge, the Market Street Bridge and the Pierce Street Bridge thereby providing connections to the Susquehanna Warrior Trail and the Back Mountain Trail also attracting those trail users to the Wilkes-Barre Trail. Based on the public survey responses current users of existing trails throughout the Wyoming Valley, use these trails on a weekly basis at a minimum. Survey respondents also indicated that their current trail usage is consistent throughout the week, as well as, throughout the day.

PUBLIC INPUT

PEC organized and hosted a public meeting on July 21, 2008 to provide information about the project and solicit input from the community. Held at the Kirby Memorial Health Center, the meeting was attended by representatives from the City of Wilkes-Barre, local business leaders, neighborhood and community groups, and interested citizens. The Project Consultants attended this public meeting to provide technical assistance and answer questions. A brief demonstration of the project's GIS Database was given followed by an open discussion about the goals of the project.

A Trail Steering Committee was selected by the Northeastern Regional Office of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC). Members of the Steering Committee included representatives from the City of Wilkes-Barre, local business leaders, neighborhood and community groups, and interested citizens. A series of three Steering Committee meetings were organized by PEC and facilitated by Project Consultants. A portable GIS system was used by the consulting team to provide interactive GIS presentations during Committee meetings. This technology provided instantaneous access to invaluable information needed to make key decisions in the trail planning process. The Committee provided local insight into regional issues that impacted the project. Key Destinations, Preferred Trail Routes and other key decisions were made by the Trail Steering Committee.

Various representatives from the City of Wilkes-Barre and community organizations participated in the planning process through the steering committee meetings. Therefore, the City of Wilkes-Barre determined it was not necessary to conduct extensive key person interviews. However, PEC did conduct five (5) key person interviews.

Public surveys were distributed via a variety of means including distribution by steering committee members to their respective service populations. PEC also partnered with Action Communities for Health, Innovation & Environmental Change (ACHIEVE), Steps to a Healthier PA (STEPS) Luzerne County, Partners for a Healthy Luzerne County, Wilkes-Barre Family YMCA and the Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails Partnership to distribute surveys.

A Public Presentations of the draft final plan was given on December 17, 2009 at the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business and Industry's office in Wilkes-Barre. A Power Point presentation was made by the Consultants outlining the project goals, planning process and proposed trail alignments. Final comments were solicited from the attendees and some of those recommendations were incorporated into the final plan.

PROPOSED TRAIL SYSTEM

There are several current and proposed regional trail systems in the area. However, there are numerous gaps in these systems and there is a general lack of connectivity between the trails. The City of Wilkes-Barre Trail / Greenway Feasibility / Master Plan provides an opportunity to bridge the gaps in these trails and develop a cohesive network of trails throughout the City.

Based upon discussions with the Steering Committee, Public Meetings, Opinion Surveys and Key Person Interviews the Wilkes-Barre Trail / Greenway network has been developed. Nine new trails are proposed for the area which will provide access to key destinations, bridge gaps in current trails and create a cohesive network of trails throughout the City of Wilkes Barre.

Details of each of the trails in the proposed network follow:

Parsons Trail – 2.75 miles

The Parsons Trail will begin at Miners Memorial Park at the northeastern end of the city and will connect to the Luzerne County National Recreation Trail and the East End Trail and Bikeway near the center of the city. Most of this trail will follow a long abandoned railroad grade from the region's coal mining past. The trail will connect Miners Memorial Park with Parsons Park and Scouton Lee Park. More importantly, it will provide the residents of the

communities of Parsons and Miners Mill a safe route to walk or bicycle into center city Wilkes Barre and the Susquehanna River Waterfront. The pedestrian connection of these two communities with the rest of the city was lost when the Cross Valley Expressway (Route 309) was built through the Wyoming Valley. An over-road connection to the proposed Plains Trail will create a potential loop trail route through the region. There is also a future opportunity to extend this trail to the northeast into Plains Township.

Plains Trail – 1.9 miles

The Plains Trail will begin at the Polish American Veterans Club in Plains Township and will travel southwest along Mill Creek through Hollenback Park until it intersects with the Luzerne County National Recreation Trail at North Main Street. An over-road connection via Mayock Street will tie into the Parsons Trail just west of Miners Memorial Park. A spur trail will also allow for access to the Solomon Plains Educational Complex. This trail will cross under the Cross Valley Expressway (Route 309) at the Washington Street underpass. The Plains Trail will connect the Solomon Plains Educational Complex with Hollenback Park and the Luzerne County National Recreation Trail. With connections to the Parsons Trail via the National Recreation Trail and Mayock Street a 4.7 mile regional trail loop can be created. There is also a future opportunity to extend this trail to the northeast into Plains Township.

East End Trail & Bikeway – 0.6 miles

The East End Trail and Bikeway will connect the East End community with Parsons Trail and the Sherman Street Trail and Bikeway. It will also provide the community with a safe route to Coal Street Park. This trail will utilize a series of existing streets, sidewalks and alleyways to guide pedestrians and cyclists through this densely developed community. Along its route, the trail will pass Weissman Playground, The Edward Mackin School, Coal Street Park and the East End Towers Housing Complex.

Sherman Street Trail & Bikeway – 2.14 miles

The Sherman Street Trail and Bikeway will provide pedestrians and cyclists with a safe route through the southern section of Wilkes-Barre. This trail route will utilize a series of existing streets and sidewalks in this densely developed community. This route will also provide important linkage between several proposed trails including the East End Trail & Bikeway, the Newtown Rail Trail, the Black Diamond Trail, the Luzerne County National Recreation Trail and the Ridge to River Trail.

Newtown Rail Trail – 0.75 miles

The Newtown Rail Trail will be located in the southern corner of the City. This trail will provide a connection from the Sherman Street Trail & Bikeway to the Black Diamond Trail in Hanover Township. An abandoned rail grade passes through this area and will be used as a base for this section of trail. A ten-foot wide, crushed gravel path is recommended for this trail. Due to its remote location, no trailheads or facilities are proposed in this area.

Carey Avenue Connector Trail – 1.5 miles

The Carey Avenue Connector Trail will provide pedestrians and cyclists with a safe route through the western section of Wilkes-Barre. This trail will connect the Black Diamond Trail to the Levee Trail System and the Carey Street Bridge. On the west side of bridge, users will be able to pick up the Susquehanna Warrior Trail and the western section of the Luzerne County Levee Trail System. The original proposed route of the Black Diamond Trail had

planned to leave its current route near the intersection of Pennsylvania Ave. and Main Street and continue north past Barney Farms Park to the Levee Trail. However, due to ownership issues it has been determined that this route is unfeasible. Although this proposed trail runs out of Wilkes-Barre and into Hanover Township, it was important to identify this route to provide connectivity through the City's trail system.

Wilkes-Barre Train Station Connector Trail – 0.4 miles

In the late 1800's the Wilkes-Barre Train Station on Wilkes-Barre Boulevard was the transportation hub of the Wyoming Valley. Visitors arriving by train were welcomed to the region at the station and were within walking distance to the city's hotels, restaurants and downtown businesses. Under the proposed Trail and Greenway Master Plan, this historic building will once again become a hub for travelers throughout the region. However, rather than arriving by train, these visitors will be coming into the City via the trail network. The Train Station is currently owned by the Redevelopment Authority of Luzerne County and long-term plans call for this building to be renovated into a Visitor's Center. Through the interconnection of the regional trail network, users of all of the trail systems will be able to reach the Train Station. This will create a unique opportunity for all of the area's trail organizations to work together to develop a regional trailhead that will cater to trail users from across Eastern Pennsylvania. It will also provide an opportunity for trail related businesses to market their services to trail users at one central location.

Miner Park Connector Trail – 0.47 miles

This short trail will create a connection between Miner Park and the Luzerne County Levee Trail at Gordon Ave. Park. Kistler Elementary School which is adjacent to Miner Park will also benefit from this connector trail.

Flood Elementary School Connector Trail – 0.1 miles

This short trail will create a connection between Daniel J. Flood Elementary School and the Luzerne County National Recreation Trail. Just east of this connection, the National Recreation Trail leaves the railroad right-of-way and runs along the sidewalks of Pennsylvania Avenue. The connector trail will utilize the existing sidewalks along Hollenback Avenue and Chester Street to guide trail users from the Elementary School to the National Recreation Trail. Not only will this trail provide additional access for recreational trail users, but it will also provide improved safety for children walking to school.

TRAIL OPERATION, MAINTENANCE AND SECURITY

The Steering Committee was presented with the following potential organizational structure options to oversee the management of the trail system. These options included:

1. Formation of a Non-Profit Organization
2. Creation of an Authority
3. Creation of a Commission
4. Creation of a Council of Governments
5. Ownership by the City of Wilkes-Barre

An ongoing maintenance and improvement program will ensure that the entire trail system is kept in optimal condition, and meets or exceeds existing standards. Landscaped areas along the trail will require some periodic maintenance, but good design can keep this to a minimum. Low

maintenance and drought resistant trees, shrubs, and ground covers can also minimize upkeep activities. Like all transportation improvements, trail systems require funding and staff time for maintenance. Fortunately, several strategies and funding programs are available to reduce the burden to local agencies. Hundreds of trails around the state provide examples of successful management and maintenance strategies.

Although studies show that rail-trail crime is rare, it is nonetheless a legitimate concern for residents and trail users and should be treated accordingly. There are several methods for addressing such concerns and minimizing the potential for crime. Encouraging trail use is one way to help ensure trail safety, as the presence of other users helps to minimized undesirable behavior. In addition, trail users should exercise common sense when using trails after dark and remain aware of their surroundings at all times. Several other mitigation strategies help suppress criminal behavior and lessen the impact of incidents that do occur. In particular, trail design features and trail patrols are useful to keep in mind and recommendations for their implementation are included in this report. However since every rail-trail environment is unique, trail managers should assess the need for these strategies on an individual basis.