

HAPPY TRAILS

## Experts, Townships Offer Tips for Successfully Connecting People and Places

You can see it now. A beautiful trail meandering through your township. But that's all it is: a vision. So how do you turn it into a reality? We've got tips from township officials and experts who have built trails in communities across Pennsylvania. Along the way, they've learned some crucial lessons.

BY JILL ERCOLINO / MANAGING EDITOR

**T**rails are like people: No two are alike. But Judy Stern Goldstein says something holds true for every single one. "If you build it," she says, "they will walk."

Over the years, the Bucks County-based landscape architect has helped many communities create these connections for recreation and transportation.

And what she has found is that although a proposed trail may encounter resistance — nearby landowners often worry about increased crime, vandalism, and trespassing in their backyards — support for the project will grow once the first section is built.

John Burkle, a partner with Pittsburgh's Pashek Associates, agrees: "The hardest part of any trail project is putting that first segment on the ground. Once that happens, it's so much easier to build support for the next phase."

You may be wondering, however, how your township can even get to the construction phase. There's so much to think about: the funding, the design, and buying the land. And how do you

guarantee that your trail project — right now, just a sketch on a piece of paper — is a success?

You can start by following these tips from a crew of seasoned township officials and experts who have been there and done that and learned some valuable lessons along the way.

### **Lesson No. 1: Plan, plan, plan**

Most trail projects start because someone has an idea.

Maybe an abandoned rail line passes through your township and residents think it would make an ideal spot for a hike, so they ask: Can the supervisors clean up the right of way and convert it to a trail?

Maybe school officials are worried about children walking on an increasingly busy township road, so they ask: Can the supervisors install a path or a sidewalk to connect nearby neighborhoods to the school?

The requests have really got you thinking now: What *can* the township do? Well, experts say, the best approach is to step back, take a deep breath, and do some research.



**Trails are a good way for townships to help reacquaint residents with nature, promote exercise, and even become a tourist destination. And always remember: “If you build it, they will walk.” These words of wisdom are playing out all across Pennsylvania in such places as, clockwise from far left, Doylestown Township in Bucks County, Lower Saucon Township in Northampton County, and Broadtop Township in Bedford County. (Photos courtesy of the townships.)**

Remember: A trail project is a long-term commitment, the construction of which could span several months or years, and it's not something you want to rush into. There are necessary things that have to happen, such as preparing a feasibility study, securing funding, negotiating with landowners, mapping out a design, educating the public, and possibly acquiring permits.

“Where folks go wrong many times is that there is so much enthusiasm for a project, they just go gangbusters and start building without a plan,” Burkle says. “You have to take the time to lay the groundwork.”

This is important because you want your project to have a purpose, he says. “For me, it's really frustrating to be on a trail that stops two to three blocks from

the main street,” Burkle says. “That's why it's important to think ahead, look ahead, and connect to destinations.”

Goldstein offers similar advice: “Look at the township map, highlight the nodes of activity, analyze what's already there, and start filling in the gaps.

“Sometimes,” she adds, “a small connection is all that's needed to connect kids to a school or people to local businesses.”

And whatever you do, experts say, look beyond your borders. “Don't plan your trail in a vacuum,” Goldstein says. “Look at neighboring municipalities. The world doesn't end at the edge of a piece of paper. Big results come from big plans.”

So does state funding, say Burkle, noting that multimunicipal trail projects stand a better chance of receiving state grants. Much of this funding, in fact, is funneled through the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and its Bureau of Recreation and Conservation, a valuable resource for any park and rec project.

Last year, DCNR invested more than \$26 million in local recreation projects and has a similar budget for 2013.

“You really do have to think critically about how your trail will fit into a larger regional system,” Burkle says. “DCNR is focused on regional trails so it's important to show how your project fits into the bigger picture.” *(To learn more about*

## TRAILS: LESSONS LEARNED

*available funding, turn to Page 42.)*

Township officials should also talk to people who know a little something about this funding and developing trails, says Laura Hawkins, the greenway coordinator for the Conemaugh Valley Conservancy, a multicounty organization that promotes preservation and recreation in the Kiski-Conemaugh River Basin.

For instance, DCNR has regional advisers stationed throughout the commonwealth (*see the list on Page 43*). Experts on all things related to parks and recreation, the advisers can direct you to the right resources. Help also is available from county planners, land-

scape architects, and fellow municipal officials, Hawkins says.

"I have found that with a lot of these projects, people don't know how to start or how to organize what they want to do," she says. "And let's be honest, they just don't have the time.

"That's why there are professionals who can help them develop a course of action because that's where it all starts: with a plan."

### **Lesson No. 2: Involve the public**

You might think that residents would be thrilled to have a trail in their township, but that's not always the case, says Hank Baylor, a supervisor for East Buffalo Township in Union County.

As a member of the Lewisburg Area Recreation Authority, Baylor helped to transform an abandoned spur of the

Northshore Railroad Co. into a 12.5-mile paved trail that averages 400 visitors a day and was built with \$3.5 million in state and federal funding.

While people love the Buffalo Valley Rail Trail today, the project faced stiff opposition from a faction of farmers whose land abuts the former rail line.

"It was difficult getting the landowners on board," Baylor says. "They didn't want the disruptions or anyone touching their cows. They were worried about theft and vandalism, too."

So what did the authority do? Rather than ignoring the farmers and their concerns, the group involved the landowners in the discussions and eventually received their blessings, Baylor says.

"We brought people together, educated them with facts and figures, and marketed the project every chance we got," the supervisor says. "And you

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know what? The trail has been one of the best things to hit this area. It's brought in revenues and new businesses. It's just been amazing."

Recreation expert John Burkle says the authority did the right thing.

"Some projects do get pushback, and while it may seem counterintuitive, if you include opponents on your steering committee, you can start educating them, responding to their concerns, and turning them into champions for the project," he says. "Don't ever be afraid to get people involved."

Doug Knauss, director of parks and recreation for Whitemarsh Township in Montgomery County, agrees. He's developed a number of park and trail projects in the community and has found that involving the public, whether they're with you or against you, is a necessary step.

"Are you going to have headaches and turmoil? Probably," he says, "but in the end you'll come up with a good project that the public is happy with. From there, people will take ownership of the trail. They'll be your eyes and ears on the ground."

### Lesson No. 3: Turn an eyesore into an asset

It was an eight-mile eyesore that cut through four municipalities in Northampton and Lehigh counties.

However, local officials believed so much in the potential of that abandoned SEPTA train line, once used to transport materials between Philadelphia and the now-defunct Bethlehem Steel, that they put up their own money to clean up the overgrown land and develop the Saucon Rail Trail.

With five miles of surface laid, the project is a work in progress.

"The SEPTA line had been sitting there, unused for decades, and a rail trail was always at the top of our list," says Jack Cahalan, manager of Lower Saucon Township in Northampton County, whose partners are Hellertown Borough, also in Northampton County, and Upper Saucon Township and Co-



**When developing this walking trail in Koontz Park, officials in Whitemarsh Township, Montgomery County, made a smart move. They connected the trail to two nearby neighborhoods. “The park is so close to the neighborhoods, why would we want to force someone to hop in their car to get there?” says Doug Knauss, director of parks and recreation. (Photo courtesy of the township.)**

persburg Borough in Lehigh County. “Now, the trail has become a top recreation asset and is used by thousands of people year round.”

Even better, he says, the former rail site has morphed from an embarrassment into an asset for the municipalities.

“The natural beauty of the trail is spectacular,” Cahalan says. “It goes past a creek, historical sites, and geologic formations, and it’s really opened up opportunities for residents to see things in our communities they never had access to before.”

Although the project required Lower Saucon Township to ante up \$50,000, which it stretched by doing most of the work itself, Cahalan says the trail’s benefits far exceed the municipality’s costs.

“We look at this as a service to our residents, who can go out and enjoy the beauty of the countryside,” he says. “It’s been well worth the investment.”

A similar story is unfolding in Broadtop Township, Bedford County, which started buying the land along a 10-mile abandoned rail line in 2001 to develop the H&BT Rail Trail. When completed, the project will connect residents in four municipalities to the township’s 80-acre park.

Township secretary Dave Thomas walks the trail every day and says

projects like it are important to local officials, who are determined to revive a landscape marred by strip mining.

“Last year, we finished the first two miles,” Thomas says, “and I’m shocked at just how many people use it.”

He is also humbled by the support the township has received.

“It really is hard to stand alone and do something like this by yourself,” Thomas says. State grants, private and public partnerships, and local talent — township workers are building much of the trail — have made the \$2 million project possible. “No one has ever denied us help,” he says, “and we’re thankful.”

#### **Lesson No. 4: Have a vision**

Growth brings traffic, and in Doylestown Township, Bucks County, it also raised concerns about the safety of residents walking and biking along local roads.

Those concerns surfaced 20 years ago, and since then, the township has been partnering with neighboring Doylestown Borough to create what has become known as the Doylestown Community Bike and Hike System, a network of trails that connects people in both communities with places, including the local train station, muse-

ums, a pool, the local YMCA, and businesses.

“It all started with a trail that connected a proposed development and several older neighborhoods with a local elementary school,” township manager Stephanie Mason says, “and that small section has grown into more than 20 miles of trails.”

Although the project started small, local officials always had a purpose, knowing that one day all of the parts — a series of seemingly random segments and loops — would come together as a whole.

“Back in the ’80s and ’90s, when we were seeing a lot of development, we required developers to put in sections of trail,” Mason says. “They’d look at me and say, ‘But it doesn’t go anywhere,’ and I’d just say, ‘It will.’”

Today, residents use the trail for recreation and transportation, and its success has led to another regional effort, the Destination Peace Valley Trail. The project will connect the Doylestown system with another serving four neighboring municipalities, New Britain and Buckingham townships and New Britain and Chalfont boroughs.

And while Mason sees many more opportunities for trails in central Bucks County, she says her region isn’t unique.

“If you look around, you’ll probably find there are already paths in your own community,” she says. “Follow those foot trails and see where people are going. Opportunities exist everywhere. You just have to find them and make the connections.” ♦

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