

Economy

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Officials Betting on Heritage Trail Expansion

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THE ISSUE: Does Wheeling's Heritage Trail provided any impact to the local economy?

THE ANSWER: Yes, and it could become much larger if a plan to expand the trail is executed.

WHEELING - The expansion of Wheeling's Heritage Trail could provide a major boost to the local economy.

That's the opinion of Robert "Scat" Scatterday and Dr. Ben Stout. Scatterday, manager/project engineer for the city's Rails to Trails organization, and Stout, a professor at Wheeling Jesuit University, have unveiled a \$10 million, multi-phase plan for the future of the trail.

Once complete, their vision could provide a major economic boost for the local area.

Their plan includes a trail system that has 11 loops, four tunnels, two bridges and two overlooks. The new trail also would visit the area's only cave and also highlight the a railroad hand car, all the while preserving the last 800 feet of the city's rail line.

The new trail also would connect all of Wheeling's neighborhoods while at the same time turning the city into a destination community for those who enjoy outdoor recreation. Aspects of Wheeling's history that both men believe local residents either have forgotten or possibly never learned about (how many people know about the two Mount Wood tunnels?) also would allow the trail system to serve as an educational tool for residents and local schools.

The future trail system got its first endorsement last summer, when West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin awarded Wheeling two grants worth nearly \$475,000 to start the trail expansion project.

Nearly \$100,000 of that funding will provide a new trail loop in South Wheeling that will serve students at Wheeling Middle and Ritchie Elementary schools.

The remaining dollars will fund an East/Center Wheeling trail expansion for a new, 1.4-mile connection between the Ohio River Trail and Tunnel Green, with the new trail section running on abandoned railroad tracks above Wheeling Creek. This section of trail also will pass through the Chapline Hill Tunnel, which starts at 29th Street and comes out 2,400 feet later on 20th Street Extension.

These two projects are expected to start this summer and "get the ball rolling" on the trail expansion, both Scatterday and Stout said.

"We see this as the beginning of something so much bigger," Scatterday added. "People are really going to be interested in some of the things we are planning. It's really exciting to realize that this is going to be a reality."

The proposed trail system would add several more miles along the former Wheeling Terminal Railway line and also pass through three additional tunnels. When complete, it will provide a secondary route that allows riders to get on the trail in South Wheeling, travel through the Chapline Hill Tunnel, along Wheeling Creek to Tunnel Green to the Peninsula, through the Mount Wood South and Mount Wood North tunnels, down bike stairs to W.Va. 2 adjacent to Mull Machine, and then back onto the Ohio River section of the trail.

Scatterday and Stout agree that there are aspects of Wheeling that many people have forgotten over the past few decades. A major part of their goal is to ensure these "hidden treasures" are made available for all to learn from.

"There are a lot of things each of us see every day - but we really don't see them," Scatterday said. "This trail expansion will showcase many areas of Wheeling that people look at every day but really don't notice.

"What I envision is this: trail users who, while riding along the paved trail, take side trips along the way. There's the Wetzel's Cave stop, which we believe will be handicapped accessible; a hiking path from the cave to the Interstate 70 overlook above Tunnel Green; a fossil quarry; a hand rope trail to a second overlook looking east; McColloch's leap from the bottom looking up; taking in the Ohio River overlook from the Top Mill Tunnel, which we call Mount Wood Tunnel North; the bike stairs from Top Mill that take us down to River Road near Mull Machine with a bike crossing that leads back to the trail. It's very

Fact Box

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exciting.

"There's three centuries of history on that trail - history that we want everyone in Wheeling to learn. It's time for this community to reclaim its history."

The plan lists six distinct benefits the Wheeling area will see through an expanded Heritage Trail: revenue, health, recreation, education, social and safety.

The revenue aspect is what has received the most attention.

Stout envisions a time in the near future when many people travel to Wheeling specifically to take advantage of the trail system.

"We really believe this will lead to increased tourism," he said. "What I see as the benefit on the revenue side is when someone comes to Wheeling, parks downtown near the waterfront ... then rides south on the Ohio River Trail to near Green's Donuts, to the La Belle Nail plant, through the 2,400-foot Chapline Hill Tunnel, then along Wheeling Creek to Tunnel Green, through Mount Wood Tunnel South right under McColloch's leap ... then through the Mount Wood Tunnel North and back to the existing Heritage Trail to the waterfront. In less than a 10-mile trip someone coming to Wheeling can experience all these historic structures, tunnels, bridges and businesses and enjoy the beauty of Wheeling."