

Tuesday, August 26, 2014 - A7

Trail plan might help city watershed

*Concerns expressed
over misuse of land*

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LOCK HAVEN — A Regional Ridge Trail linking McElhattan to Muncy is a 41-mile vision of the future that can be low impact yet bring big benefits to Lock Haven and neighboring communities, according to landscape architect Brian Auman.

It's a vision that the Clinton County commissioners have invested \$20,000 into studying.

Lycoming County also has kicked in \$30,000 for the study.

On Monday evening a number of city representatives, including members of the City Authority which has stewardship of the watershed, heard their first presentation from Auman about what the trail could be and how it would involve watershed land.

June Houser, chair of the authority, asked some pointed questions including how much this would cost and why the authority had not been involved before this.

Other concerns raised at the meeting seemed to focus on increased use of the trail system.

Auman opened the meeting with a series of

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photos taken along the 41 miles the Regional Ridge Trail would encompass. Photos from trails in the city's watershed showed erosion into McElhattan Run that links the two reservoirs, and Auman called McElhattan Road "a classic dug road" made by a backhoe without much improvement since. The photos indicate that silt is getting into the waterways.

After the meeting, the architect said he had other photos of worse conditions but he did not wish to show them at the informational session.

It seemed clear to all at the meeting that people can — and are — damaging watershed trails.

However, the hikers who spoke said the damage is being done by vehicles that shouldn't be on those trails in the first place.

"This isn't 'build it and they will come.' They're already there," County Commissioner Jeff Snyder said.

He and Lock Haven Mayor Richard P. Vilello Jr. both said water quality is the top priority.

The Regional Ridge Trail plan could help keep the water quality high. It calls for narrowing some roads in the watershed from 12 feet in width to only 3 feet to deter trucks and other vehicles, according to Auman. It also calls for drainage improvements to keep water from rushing down trails and carrying soil into the waterway.

He called the plan a win-win.

A non-motorized trail will attract hikers, cyclists, horseback riders, cross-country skiers, birders, he said.

"The recreational users are your best stewards and best police out there," he said.

The proposed trail could include a loop here in Clinton County that would provide a day hike for local residents, he said.

And as an official multi-county trail, it could provide protection for beautiful vistas and birding areas as well as source water. The trail project could enhance habitat, provide for sustainable timbering, and contribute to environmental education and the health and well-being of the people who use it.

The trail also would link "greenway" towns along the river, Auman said.

It's possible that people from all over the country would come to the region to bike-pack the Rail Trail at Pine Creek, then take the Regional Ridge Trail, he said, boosting the region's economy with their tourist dollars.

Lock Haven is ahead of the game in some respects, he said, with its Riverwalk atop the levee and its new designation as a River Town by the Susquehanna Greenway Partnership.

County Commissioner Chairman Pete Smeltz said the Regional Ridge Trail still wasn't an easy sell at first. Now, however, the county leaders see the benefits, he said.

"We want to see Clinton County as a sort of mecca for this type of recreation," he said.

The county also is supporting a Castanea-to-Wayne-Township bike trail, he said.

Snyder said, "We believe there is huge support for this sort of thing in terms of grant dollars." The county will help other municipalities and agencies apply for such grants, he said.

The costs aren't in yet, Auman said, but they won't be astronomical.

Jack Bailey, the city's recreation director, said young people are already interested in improving the trails and could build footbridges over the 16 creek crossings the trail would take in this watershed.

Jerry Walls, board chair of Susquehanna Greenway Partnership, and local hiker Jim Burnworth both said trail users can be counted on to build and maintain trails. Walls said he has a four-county list of 450 volunteers who want to help with recreation projects.

The Regional Ridge Trail planning should include a way trail users can communicate trail conditions to the city and to each other.

The trail also would result in the watershed's hiking potential showing up on maps.

However, photos of the trails already are on the internet, according to City Manager Richard W. Marcinkevage, and they are drawing people from other

states who want to see the beauty they reveal.

"The City Authority lands are some of the most scenic in the whole 40-mile corridor," Auman said.

He told Houser that the trails don't necessarily have to stay where they are now, and might be moved away from the reservoirs and the creeks in some sections if needed.

Jeff Stover, founder of the Megatransect ultra-hike that uses watershed property, said the stretch from Keller Reservoir to Ohl Reservoir is one of the most beautiful trails he's been on in Pennsylvania.

It's not the people on foot who are the problem there, he said, and the Dirty Dabbers' dirt bikes that hit the trails once or twice a year aren't causing the problems either.

The trouble is caused by drivers of Jeeps, ATVs, even pickups who go off-roading where they aren't supposed to be. In one instance, he said, he saw four Jeeps coming over the Kammerdiner Trail which isn't built for vehicles, and he wondered what would happen if one of them hit a rock and lost its gas.

On any given weekend in the summer, both Stover and the mayor said, 20 vehicles can be seen in the Zindel Park parking area, many of them with out-of-state license plates. Their drivers and passengers are walking the reservoir, Snyder said. They also are staying at local hotels and eating at local restaurants.

The mayor noted that he officiated at a wedding at Zindel Park recently, and he believes that the city must install gates or do something right now, not wait for this trail plan, to protect the watershed from illegal vehicles.

"Water quality is No. 1," he said.

"Just putting your head in the sand and thinking people are not using the watershed isn't right," he added.

Proper public use of the watershed is one of the things he has wanted to enhance during his tenure on city council and as mayor, he said. Half the watersheds in Pennsylvania are open to the public, he noted.

"The Megatransect has grown to the scope of Sentimental Journey as far as its potential to bring international attention here," he said.

The Mega and its twin event, The Frozen Snot, are all a part of the quality of life this area offers, he said.

The Regional Ridge Trail concept started for Auman when he was working with a Lycoming County developer who wanted to have his development connected not just to Williamsport but also to a ridgetop that is part of the state's public lands. This ridgetop is also part of the proposed regional trail.

"I love watershed restoration and planning," Auman said.

The 41 miles of trail proposed would take hikers up 4,200 feet in elevation if they hike from Lock Haven to Muncy. From the Castanea reservoir gate, they would take Nittany Road, then the East and West Kammerdiner trails that afford what Auman called "an intimate hiking experience," then Reservoir Road and McElhattan Road to Pine-Loganton Road. From there, the trail would move along a series of small roads to a section of Route 880 that leads to Ravensburg State Park. From the park, the trail would use forestry roads to link to Summit Trail and Skyline Drive, then cross Route 15 to end at the Armstrong Road gate in Muncy.

If built as envisioned, Auman said, it would be "a nice smooth path but with a lot of climbing."

Also at the meeting were City Authority members Edward Robbins and Karen Gugino; City Council members Ted Forbes, Stephen Stevenson and Machell Scott; County Planner Tim Holladay; and local resident Jack Neal.

A 30-member study committee has been formed, Auman said, and probably will meet again in about a month.

Houser asked why no one from the City Authority had been invited to be on the committee. Auman said he would notify as many people on the authority as are interested about the upcoming meetings, as well as other interested city officials.

Houser and Vilello both said the authority, and other city boards, need to discuss the Regional Ridge Trail further.