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## Greenway partnership links health of PA towns to that of Susquehanna

By Sara Rappaport

The borough of Shickshinny, located along the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania's Luzerne County, might be considered "the little town that could." Over the years, Shickshinny has endured many floods, most recently when Tropical Storm Lee led the river to overtake its banks last September.

"It devastated 75 percent of my town," said Shickshinny Mayor Beverly Moore. "I don't see the flood threat leveling off unless something more is done."

As Moore and other Shickshinny residents know, rivers rise and fall with the season, higher after spring rains; lower after summer drought. Sometimes rivers swell to reclaim their entire floodplain, leading to loss of life, property and clean, drinking water.

Protecting natural areas from flooding and enhancing green space along the Susquehanna River is a big reason why the Susquehanna Greenway Partnership was formed 10 years ago. Since then, the organization has been helping Susquehanna River towns grow and develop in sync with the Susquehanna's ebbs and flows instead of counter to its natural path.

"We can't stop natural flooding," said Trish Carothers, the partnership's program director. "But we can implement practices to mitigate future damage while revitalizing many of Pennsylvania's charming and historic river towns."

The Susquehanna Greenway Partnership's efforts also impact the Chesapeake Bay. Although Pennsylvania does not border the Bay, the 444-mile long Susquehanna - which is fed by a 27,500-square-mile watershed - provides 50 percent of the Bay's freshwater.

Prior to European settlement, the Susquehannock Indians occupied much of the region. Then, large unbroken stretches of forests absorbed and filtered rainfall and snowmelt before gradually releasing it into the river. The natural flood plains were buffers against severe weather.

With colonization, towns began emerging along the Susquehanna, and river and canal boats carried the region's coal, timber, food and other natural resources to destinations along the Eastern Seaboard. Later, roads, railroads, parking lots and factories emerged to produce and transport resources more efficiently. They were followed by dams, flood walls and levees to protect towns and ensure productivity. Floodwaters began to rise higher and flow faster across an increasingly impervious watershed carrying soil, debris, sewage and pollutants along the way.

According to Carothers, the partnership hopes to reverse these trends. "Many towns are starting to recognize that green, open spaces have a role to play with regard to human, environmental and economic health. Finding a sustainable balance is key to a community's future," she said.

This vision may be jeopardized by the growth of the natural gas industry. Like clear-cutting timber and mining coal, extracting natural gas from the Marcellus Shale underlying much of the watershed jeopardizes water quality. Additionally, the industry boom has led to new drilling pads for gas wells, pipelines, roads, staging areas and water treatment facilities that run counter to the vision of a greener corridor.

"In Pennsylvania, most land use planning decisions take place at the township or borough level, not at the county or regional level. The Susquehanna Greenway Partnership fills a void in big picture thinking," said Brian Auman, landscape architect with the SEDAC-Council of Government's Community Resource Center. "The partnership looks at the river's 250 municipalities and townships as one unit, working with many of them on development and revitalization efforts that will benefit the communities as

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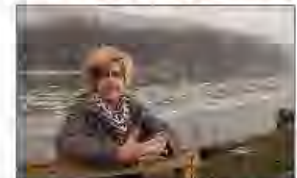
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well as the region as a whole."

Once realized, the partnership's vision of a "Susquehanna Greenway" will preserve the river corridor's natural, cultural and scenic features while sending clean water downstream to the Chesapeake Bay. Getting there will require mapping and connecting public and privately owned open spaces, conservation areas, land and water trails, bike paths, farmland and sustainably developed towns that together illustrate the history and spirit of the Susquehanna River.

"Greenways also improve the quality of life in participating communities and stimulate local economies," Carothers said.

Indeed, greenways yield a return on investment by buffering towns and neighborhoods from floods and fueling tourism for nature lovers, history buffs, hunters and anglers.

Greenways also filter sediment, fertilizers, pathogens and chemicals before they reach the river, cleaning one of society's most precious commodities - water. In fact, establishing a green infrastructure, as the partnership is working to do, can save money otherwise spent on building and managing costly water treatment facilities.

Auman said that he thinks the partnership is on the right track. "They provide the vision for this ambitious undertaking. Then we work with the river towns to connect the dots." A new River Town Assessment Tool developed by SEDA-COG and the Susquehanna Greenway Partnership is helping things along.

"When first conceiving of the Greenway, we identified which towns should be linked but weren't sure about how to get there, Auman said. "Now we're returning to those communities with specific plans for integrating them into this vision."

The work has been well-received.

The borough of Shickshinny employed the River Town Assessment Tool to assess the town's physical, environmental, cultural and economic conditions to determine the best direction for enhancement efforts. Mayor Beverly Moore credited the partnership for "providing a vision and tools for how Shickshinny can not only survive, but thrive, in the midst of inevitable floods."

Once a shipping hub for local farms and coal mines, Shickshinny has begun to transform into a destination for hundreds of canoe and kayak enthusiasts who pass through the town each year.

Moore is taking steps to make these sojourns into an annual event that includes entertainment, chicken dinners and other activities.

The River Town Assessment Tool and Shickshinny's participation in the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Long-Term Flood Recovery Program have identified additional actions that will incorporate Shickshinny into the broader Greenway, make it more resilient to future floods and re-invent it as a destination for visitors. These include transforming abandoned lots into pocket parks or riverfront access points, securing funding for campsites and playgrounds, and highlighting the nearby Susquehanna Warrior Trail with an improved trailhead, maps and signs.

This assistance has also connected Moore and Shickshinny's residents with other towns that are further along in the process of becoming part of a "ribbon of green" that buffers the landscape and feeds clean waters into the Chesapeake Bay.

These include places like Williamsport, where a river walk located on top of its levee system now reconnects the town with the Susquehanna and a regional system of trails.

Farther south in Sunbury, the town is constructing a riverfront trail and amphitheater that will reconnect with the river. The town aims to redevelop underutilized industrial sites to revitalize neighborhoods and the economic prospects of the city.

Elsewhere, the Susquehanna Greenway Partnership posted signs to foster learning, environmental stewardship and civic tourism in and around the river towns of Danville, Lewisburg and Selinsgrove.

"The signs encourage people to 'Live, Learn and Explore' - to walk around a historic downtown, ride a bike along a trail or visit the local fishing hole," Carothers said. "An added bonus is that these pleasurable pursuits also benefit places farther down the river - including the Chesapeake Bay."

For Moore and her "little town that could," these actions represent a drastic new way of thinking about the role of the river and Shickshinny's responsibility for its stewardship.

"The West has wildfires and earthquakes, the Midwest has tornadoes, the Southeast has hurricanes and we've been flooded since the beginning of time," Moore said. "But it's little towns like ours that make up the Susquehanna River landscape. I look forward to finding ways to work in harmony with the river in an effort to become recognized as a viable community and part of a healthy landscape that benefits people and nature."

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