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Dream of Cynwyd Heritage Trail moves closer to becoming reality

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By Cheryl Allison

Working with other volunteers over the past two years, Friends of the Cynwyd Heritage Trail member Kathy Burns says the “biggest question” she hears is, “When?”

They want to know, “When will the trail be finished?”

The day that question can be answered with a good, firm “Soon” moved much closer on the horizon with a vote by Lower Merion Township commissioners May 5.

Meeting as the Parks and Recreation Committee that evening, commissioners voted unanimously to accept a consultant’s design for the early-awaited trail, and to authorize completion of construction documents so that the project can go out for bids. The action is to be finalized at a regular board meeting May 20.

If those bids are favorable, work is expected to begin this fall. Less than a year from now, Phase I of the project should produce a “clean, safe two-mile-long trail from Cynwyd Station to Rock Hill Road and Belmont Avenue” as Assistant Director of Building and Planning Chris Leswing described it. What’s more, the project can be done within its stated budget, a very large majority of which will come from grant funding.

That concise, matter-of-fact summary hardly begins to convey the enthusiasm that brought dozens of trail supporters — most wearing bright green Friends T-shirts — to the boardroom to join trail neighbor Peter Brigham in calling for “the strongest possible majority vote tonight.”

Brigham is the same close neighbor who coined a new term early on in trail discussions to describe how even adjacent property owners feel about it: “PIMBY,” or “Please in My Back Yard.”

“This is an amenity for the community that you don’t see developed often in this day and age,” agreed Drew Reese, whose yard backs up to the future trail. Reese said he got involved to help in the early work to clear the long-abandoned, vine-choked rail corridor, but found it delivered an unexpected “greatest benefit.”

“There’s been a big change in the way I interact with my community,” he said, expressing a feeling echoed by others. “It makes me feel much more connected.”

For other reasons of environmental soundness and sustainability, health benefits, the potential to boost revitalization in the Bala

shopping district and promoting regional connections, groups including the township's Environmental Advisory Council, Shade Tree Commission and Health Advisory Council, the Bicycle Coalition of Greater Philadelphia and the Manayunk business district, with which the trail may one day link, all lined up to endorse the plan.

What has made them so excited?

It's a design, developed by consultant Bryan Hanes of Studio Bryan Hanes and landscape architect Kim Douglas of Studio Gaea through a series of community meetings, that follows the township's own vision to take an old rail bed, expand it with some key open-space acquisitions and produce what can be viewed as a 48-acre linear park.

In Phase I, according to the design, two side-by-side trails, one paved and one in a softer surface of compressed gravel, will be built. It was a strong preference in the community sessions, Leswing said, to have separate paths, one for walkers and joggers, and another for faster-moving bicyclists and rollerbladers.

The paths, separated by a landscaped "median," would follow the old rail bed closely at the start, near homes in Bala Cynwyd. But after it passes Bala Cynwyd Park, where a new dog park will be added in this first phase, it can begin to meander a bit, where more land is available and the terrain calls for it.

At the old Barmouth Station, the one-time entrance to West Laurel Hill Cemetery and again at the current rail-line terminus at the viaduct, there will be room for gathering spaces and an overlook of the Schuylkill River.

Along the corridor, the work scores of volunteers have already put in to wrestle out invasive vines, clear brush and remove items that had been dumped over the years will pay off with room for new plantings and landscaping. In a real sense the project will go a long way to "heal a damaged landscape," Leswing said.

To do all that, plus add other amenities in future phases, isn't an inexpensive undertaking, to be sure. A master plan for the trail, looking ahead to other phases, put the overall estimated cost at more than \$4 million. Phase I alone is budgeted at \$2.4 million.

Where supporters saw a special plus to this project, though, is that, in the end, the actual contribution of township dollars will be just about \$538,000. That's because as other agencies have heard about and gotten on board with the project, it has attracted multiple grant awards.

A large portion, \$1.15 million, will come from Montgomery County for main trail construction, Leswing explained. The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources is putting in \$250,000 toward trail-head improvements at Bala Cynwyd Park; a Department of Community and Economic Development grant of \$75,000 will go to main trail-bridge access; and the Pennsylvania Community Transportation Initiative has pledged \$350,000 for improvements to the Cynwyd Station access point, including handicapped access.

In other targeted grants, Preserve America is giving \$20,000 for trail signage and PECO \$10,000 to plant trees.

Of all these, the township is required to provide a matching amount or percentage match for just the county and DCNR grants, so that, in all, Lower Merion will pay about 22 percent of project costs.

For most of the discussion, it appeared this might be the rare occasion when the frequent division on the board over spending issues did not rear its head. In fact commissioners were uniform in praising the vision and creativity of the trail design.

The conversation headed off on a short but unpleasant spur line, though, when Commissioner Jenny Brown, explaining that she would support moving ahead to construction bids because of the strong grant support, noted that the trail is “another multimillion-dollar discretionary project that we’re being asked to support” in tough economic times. As a precaution she wanted to set the \$2.4-million figure as a not-to-exceed budget amount.

Those were incendiary words for board President Bruce Reed, who saw the budget-cap talk as “symptomatic of a trend in recent years” by some on the board to “constrain” township projects.

The action proposed that night was “not taking away [the board’s] ability to reconsider” budget issues, Reed said, adding that he found Brown’s suggestion not only “inappropriate” but “actually an insult to us.”

Brown’s motion for the budget limit failed. On the subsequent vote on Bala Cynwyd Commissioner George Manos’s motion to accept the design and solicit bids, the board was in unison, voting aye.

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