

Main Line Times > News

Trail of dreams: Rail bed comes alive with possibilities

Friday, April 2, 2010

By Cheryl Allison

Lower Merion Township's Cynwyd Heritage Trail project could have been a pretty straight-and-narrow undertaking.

But township officials and trail enthusiasts have always seen the potential for the rail-to-trail conversion to be something more than simply paving an unused rail bed.

That picture is coming into the clearest focus yet, with the presentation last week of a recommended trail plan to a trail-study committee. After some fine-tuning in the next month to bring preliminary cost estimates in line with the \$1.3-million budget for the first phase of trail construction, it's expected the plan will be presented to township commissioners for review in May.

If commissioners approve it, the township could go to bids for construction by August, Assistant Director of Building and Planning Chris Leswing said this week. Construction could begin by the fall, and by about this time next year, the trail could officially be open to walkers, joggers, bicyclists and other users.

The Cynwyd Heritage Trail is a two-mile rail-to-trail project on a long-unused portion of SEPTA's R6 line from Cynwyd Station to the banks of the Schuylkill River at the Manayunk Viaduct. Future trail links to the Rock Hill Road corridor and the Schuylkill riverfront are also envisioned.

Important vestiges of Lower Merion and railroad history, uncovered in some of the many trail cleanups to date, have encouraged planners to emphasize the area's heritage in future educational features along the path, hence the name.

As the project has evolved, the township has come to look at it as more than just the rail alignment but a "linear park" encompassing or providing access to 350 acres of open space in a developed landscape where open space is at a premium.

Last summer the township hired consultant Studio Bryan Hanes, with landscape-architecture firm Studio Gaea, to design the main trail corridor. That process has been taking place throughout the fall and winter in a number of community meetings where the consultants have presented concepts and gotten community input.

Late last year, Hanes and Studio Gaea's Kim Douglas presented three concept plans, each focusing on a different theme. In one the trail corridor was seen as an "experiential park" promoting exploration of and education about the natural areas and heritage of the corridor. Another was a "fitness park" promoting health and fitness "by providing mind and body recreation." In the third, described as a "cultural park," the design revolved around art, performance and history, including opportunities for art installations and gathering spaces for "Shakespeare in the Park"-type events along the trail.

The plan Hanes presented last week seems to bring in some of the elements of each of those concepts. Most important for

future users, Leswing said, is that the plan incorporates two separate trails: a main, paved trail running along the old rail bed, and a compressed-gravel path that can be more winding and meandering in some areas.

Leswing said there was a strong consensus in the community meetings that walkers wanted a separate track to enjoy the trail away from the bicyclists and others who would use the paved trail. Each trail would be between 10 and 12 feet wide.

The trail plan is broken into several distinct sections. It follows the rail alignment most closely in a section that runs behind residential neighborhoods in Bala Cynwyd from the Cynwyd Train Station to Bala Cynwyd Park. The emphasis here is on providing privacy and screening, with fencing and new landscape plantings, behind homes.

At Bala Cynwyd Park the trail area would include a wetland area, a natural and cost-effective approach to handling stormwater management in that part of the trail. A comfort station, either renovated or new, would be here. And a long, narrow area along the trail, between the tennis courts and the trail edge, is now seen as the best site for an off-leash dog park.

A little farther on, the area of the former Barmouth Station is seen as the location for “one of the more significant gathering spaces in the middle of the trail” route, Hanes said. In the future, if funds become available, a train shed-style shelter, recalling the railroad heritage, might be built here.

“The gravel path from this point meanders along Vine Creek. The width of the trail begins to vary as it takes on a different character,” as it passes through an area of “relatively significant green space,” Hanes said.

Finally, as the trail reaches its end near the Manayunk Viaduct, there’s an opportunity for the path to open up into a sort of graveled plaza at a point perfect for an overlook of the Schuylkill River.

In all of the areas along the trail, there will be efforts to replant and revitalize habitats that were disturbed long ago for construction of the rail line. Much of that can be done as volunteer efforts by groups such as the Friends of the Cynwyd Heritage Trail continue.

A significant start on that effort — even before construction of the trail begins — will come as soon as next weekend, when a major community planting of nearly 300 trees will take place. The “bare-root” trees, donated by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society through its Pennvest and TreeVitalize initiatives, will be planted by volunteers in a two-day event, Saturday and Sunday, April 10 and 11, beginning at 8:30 a.m. each day.

Many of the amenities Hanes described, in addition to expanded parking at some trail heads, could come later, as funding becomes available. But, while preliminary cost estimates for Phase 1 will continue to be examined over the next month for areas where they can be tightened, Hanes said he is confident “we can get a fully functioning and beautiful trail accomplished,” within budget.

For more information about the trail project visit www.cynwydheritagetrail.com. There you will be able to view a slideshow of the trail-plan presentation and follow upcoming trail events and workdays.

URL: http://www.mainlinemedianews.com/articles/2010/04/02/main_line_times/news/doc4bb3727d44c26266368781.prt

© 2010 mainlinemedianews.com, a **Journal Register** Property