

Proposed rail-trail would benefit community, landowners

[Working Title: Rail trail that shadows towpath is good for Cumberland]

Reader Commentary

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In a recent reader commentary, Leigh Beckman raises several questions regarding the desirability of developing the abandoned Western Maryland rail right-of-way below Cumberland. The Rails to Trails Conservancy (RTC) supports the creation and development of rails-to-trails. The questions asked and the issues addressed by Leigh Beckman are issues that have been addressed on virtually every rails-to-trail constructed. The RTC has researched these issues and I would suggest visiting their website to find out additional information on these topics.

Briefly summarizing their findings, the RTC found that on nearly 27,000 miles of open and project rail-trails, that their research has “shown that crime on rail-trails is not a common occurrence.” In addition, the report notes that the proper design of the trail and appropriate patrolling of the trail are important considerations in the reduction of potential crimes.

Regarding property values, the location of a park next to your property generally increases your property value rather than decreases it. Ask those who live adjacent to Central Park in New York City if their property values are lower because of the park and they will respond that their property is some of the highest priced property in the City because of its location. Several studies done for the RTC on this issue all “found that property values either increased or remained constant.”

On the issue of liability to adjacent landowners, the RTC reports that “49 states have ‘recreational use’ statutes on the books that protect the landowner from mere carelessness on the part of the user.” In addition, the RTC reports that “to recover damages, the injured person would need to show that the landowner engaged in willful and wanton misconduct.”

The issue of creating a trail that would parallel closely portions of the C&O towpath is an issue that deserves further consideration. Actually, the creation of a second trail is an advantage, not a disadvantage. First, Cumberland is the nexus or convergence of numerous trails. Historically, the Braddock Trail, the National Road, the multiple railroad lines, the canal, and the Potomac River were trails that converged on Cumberland and formed its lifeblood. Today, this convergence has transformed itself into one that has a recreational emphasis with Cumberland and Canal Place as its nexus. In terms of developing Cumberland as this nexus, more, not fewer trails are needed and as in the past, today, Cumberland needs to position itself as the hub or starting point of all of these trails.

Second, the development of the railroad right-of-way makes sense from a park planning perspective. From a planning perspective, it makes sense to develop separate roadways to accommodate different forms of travel. Hikers and pedestrians travel at a rate of between 3-7 mph; bikers travel at a rate of between 8-20 mph. The surprise of the pedestrian on the trail is often similar to that which you experience on the highway where a driver suddenly surprises you as they speed past you at 80 or 90 mph. When Frederick Law Olmstead designed Central Park, he knew the desirability of designing separate trails to accommodate different users to reduce conflicts between user groups. The principle remains the same for the towpath and the rail trail. In time, when the towpath below Cumberland becomes congested with pedestrians and joggers, the development of an alternative trail that favors bikers will become an absolute necessity.

Regarding this principle, a case study already exists in Hancock where the abandoned railroad right-of-way has been paved and complements the towpath that runs parallel to it. This summer when I passed through Hancock on my bike trip from Cumberland to Georgetown, I found Hancock bustling with life and commerce. I found the refurbished section of the railroad right-of-way being used by families out for a day's cruise on their bicycles. In addition, there were small shops renting bicycles and selling ice cream in what has become a cottage industry in Hancock. Just as the dual trails in Hancock complement each other, the dual trails in Cumberland will do the same. The development of the rails-to-trails below Cumberland will complement the C&O towpath, not duplicate it.

In summary, it is important for the citizens of Cumberland to embrace the development of a trail system that radiates from the city. Historically, Cumberland became prominent because it was a nexus of transportation. Today, it has the potential of again becoming a nexus of transportation except that today this center will have a recreational emphasis. Leigh's concerns are typical of those who fear the revitalization of Cumberland through tourism. They are real and they not unfounded. However, the development of the trail system that includes the rails-to-trail east of Cumberland will not only benefit the whole community but will it will benefit local land owners like Leigh.

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