river towns
report
2012

The River Town Program, a project of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC), helps communities to recognize the river as an asset around which potential community and economic development can occur, and thus a resource worthy of protection. For PEC, this program serves as a model for implementing collaborative solutions to environmental protection and restoration. Success is built from the work of partners who recognize the inextricable links between the environment, the economy, and quality of life.

This report describes the River Town program and highlights the successes of the communities who have participated in it. The successes described are the work of many partners and the credit for all achievements belongs to the communities themselves.

background

For more than 25 years, Main Street programs have been a successful model of asset-based community development in cities and towns across the United States. The Main Street model has been adjusted for use in more rural areas with long-distance trails as the focus of a visitor attraction strategy. Successful examples in Pennsylvania and Maryland include trail town initiatives along the Great Allegheny Passage, the Schuylkill and Susquehanna Rivers, the C&O Canal Towpath, and others.

In 2010, the Pennsylvania Environmental Council (PEC) launched the River Town Program in communities bordering the Allegheny River in Allegheny County to test the strategies used in previous asset-based community development initiatives for success in river towns. The communities bordering rivers throughout Pennsylvania were founded as "river towns," manufacturing centers close to river transportation and supplemented by rail. With the decline of manufacturing, these communities suffered both job loss and population decline as generations that once prospered working in industries next to the river were forced to leave to find jobs.

The River Towns model improves the vitality, stability, sustainability, and prosperity of communities, businesses, and neighborhoods; introduces the concepts of outdoor recreational market growth, sustainable development, conservation, and environmental sustainability; and positions communities to attract new businesses and jobs to the area.

The overall objective of the River Town Program is to provide an efficient, effective, regionally-based resource to help local communities recognize rivers and their recreational opportunities as a potential economic and community asset, and thus a resource worthy of protection. This recognition is the foundation upon which related economic development, including recreational tourism, and environmental initiatives, such as stormwater management, trail development, and clean energy projects are built.

Following the success of this program in Allegheny County, PEC added six towns along the Monongahela River in Fayette, Greene, and Washington Counties in 2011 and, in 2012, added three communities along French Creek in Crawford County in northwestern Pennsylvania.

The need for community and economic development programs and resources has become even more important in recent years as communities work to recover from financial decline. At the same time, community improvement programs, staff, and resources are in increasingly short supply due to budget cuts, funding reductions, layoffs, reductions in business investment, and decreased private development activity. The River Town Program presents an opportunity to address these issues by pooling resources, providing economies of scale, and building a broad range of professional and technical assistance in an efficient and effective manner.

the process

The overall objective of the River Town Program is to provide an efficient, effective, regionally-based resource to help local communities recognize the river as a potential economic and community asset, and thus a resource worthy of protection.

Strategies include:

- Economic growth based on outdoor recreational services and businesses

- Community engagement that connects residents with healthy leisure activities through outdoor recreation

- Well-maintained business districts that offer needed goods, services and jobs and demonstrate continuous community reinvestment

- Safe, clean, "green," and well-maintained communities that demonstrate continuous community re-investment

- Effective, well-maintained, and well-managed community infrastructure and resources

- Economically and socially desirable land uses that support strong, vital, and healthy business growth, stability, expansion, and turnover

- Strong healthy communities based on a sound institutional foundation that supports strategic decision-making, informed action, and continuous reinvestment

Program Staff

PEC staff bring knowledge and experience on trail development, river conservation, stormwater management, land reclamation, and fundraising to the River Town Program. To provide expertise on economic development, PEC partnered with McCollom Development Strategies. In addition, "on the ground" support in each of the communities is provided by the Student Conservation Association (River Town Outreach Corps).

The River Town Program naturally lends itself to phased development:

Phase 1: Review all previous planning efforts

Engage community and municipal leadership through action teams

Develop priorities for implementation and community engagement

Implement short-term, immediate projects

Launch regional branding and outreach

Phase 2: Implement short-, mid-term projects with community action teams

Launch marketing for new businesses, expand existing businesses

Seek funding and support for strategic long-term projects

Phase 3: Transition program leadership and implementation to community action teams.

the towns

Allegheny River Towns

In 2010, PEC worked with six communities along the Allegheny River, located just north of Pittsburgh: Blawnox, O'Hara, Etna, Millvale, Aspinwall, and Sharpsburg. These urban communities share a common industrial past. PEC had existing relationships with each, through their work with community trails and stormwater management. All had involved community leadership that was ready to engage in a more comprehensive approach to sustainable development. While all are located adjacent to the river, access to the riverfront varies by community.

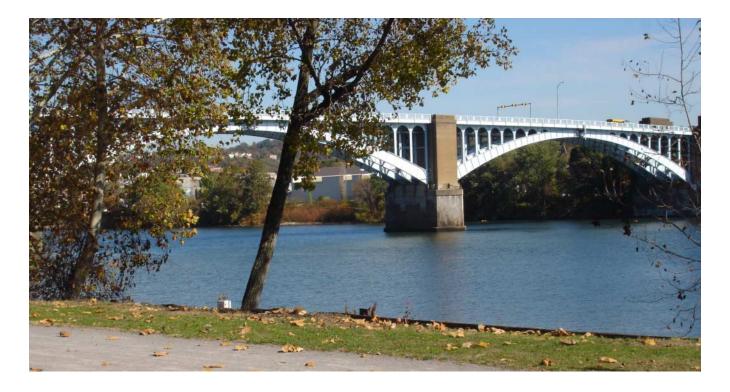**Regional priorities across all towns include:**

- Improving gateway signage and wayfinding
- Providing pedestrian and bike linkages to the riverfront trail
- Improving streetscapes in the business districts
- Developing community gardens
- Building a niche economic development strategy for River Towns

Successfully implemented projects include the purchase of the Aspinwall Marina by a community organization, improved access to the riverfront park in Millvale, streetscape planning in Blawnox, gateway design in Sharpsburg, the attraction of several new business ventures in the communities, and plans for a river conservation overlay in the six River Towns as well as neighboring Shaler Township.

Community Trails Initiative

PEC's work in the Allegheny River Towns is a companion to our work on the Community Trails Initiative, which is a partnership of local municipalities, PEC, Allegheny County and Friends of the Riverfront. The Community Trails Initiative is an effort to complete the riverfront trail from Millvale Borough all of the way to Freeport Borough in Armstrong County. The project includes 17 municipalities and 32 miles of riverfront. A feasibility study is complete and we are currently working with partners on trail development. This work will fill in the missing link between the Three Rivers Heritage Trail and the Armstrong Trail. All of the Allegheny River Towns are part of this project.

Allegheny River Regional Trails

Friends of the Riverfront has led the effort to establish two significant trail systems in this region–one land-based and one water-based.

Three Rivers Heritage Trail – The Three Rivers Heritage Trail is a wonderful pedestrian trail and greenway system in the Pittsburgh region running for 24 miles along both sides of the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio Rivers. It is an almost complete public route for cyclists, walkers, runners, and in some places rollerbladers. The section of the Three Rivers Heritage Trail on the Allegheny River is also part of the Pittsburgh-to-Harrisburg Mainline Canal Greenway and the Erie-to-Pittsburgh Trail.

Three Rivers Water Trail – Covering all of the Allegheny, Monongahela and Ohio Rivers in Allegheny County, the Three Rivers Water Trail covers about 42 miles and has a diversity of uses including motorized and non-motorized boating and fishing.

What is ARTEZ?

ARTEZ, the Allegheny River Towns Enterprise Zone, a multi-municipal economic development organization just outside of Pittsburgh, was founded in 2005 to encourage, support, and assist economic recovery activities and to develop and stabilize financially distressed member municipalities. The member municipalities in which ARTEZ works include the boroughs of Millvale, Etna, Sharpsburg, Aspinwall, and Blawnox, as well as the townships of Shaler and O'Hara. ARTEZ was a key partner in the Allegheny River Town Program through its role as co-manager of the Rivertown Brownfield Coalition, an EPA-funded initiative to assess brownfields for redevelopment. Additional community development initiatives in which ARTEZ is involved include the Community Trails Initiative, co-sponsored by PEC, Allegheny County, and Friends of the Riverfront, and the Overlay District Project, an initiative to encourage new visions for these towns and to ensure that the municipalities are setting in place ordinances that will lead to livable, workable, and healthy communities for future generations.

Blawnox

The Borough of Blawnox is a relatively dense, urban community of 1,400 people living in 0.4 square miles. Recognizing the benefits of walkable communities, including improved public health and increased foot traffic through the local business district, a key priority was improving walkability. In addition, a community priority was enhancing connections to regional bike trails and welcoming trail users to local businesses.

Municipal leadership has launched a fundraising effort to construct gateway landscaping on either end of its Business District on Freeport Road, its main thoroughfare. This is the first phase of walkability improvements that include an improved connection between the River Front trail and the community park. Discussions are underway to determine the most effective bike loop to provide access to the business district. The community is also exploring traffic calming measures, in cooperation with the local Council of Governments.

O'Hara

O'Hara Township, the largest River Town community with a land area of approximately seven square miles, has a population of nearly 12,000. Key priorities identified in the planning process include enhancing pedestrian access, developing bike and pedestrian linkages between the waterfront trail and the business district and improving green spaces. O'Hara Township does not face some of the challenges like access and railroads as the other River Town communities, and as such has been more interested in supporting the regional projects, rather than individual community projects.

Sharpsburg

Although Sharpsburg Borough only comprises 0.4 square miles, it has a dense population with approximately 3,400 residents. During the planning phase, the Sharpsburg community identified better gateway and directional signage as key priorities. Since then, the community held a charette to explore ideas for an improved gateway. A Gateway Signage Program plan was produced, with a focus on creating connections to the river and future trails. Implementation of the plan is an intended next step.

Aspinwall

The Borough of Aspinwall is home to approximately 2,800 residents, as well as a healthy business district. A key challenge for this community was the lack of public access to the riverfront. Friends of the Riverfront, with support from PEC, played a key role in helping community leadership raise funds to purchase the private Aspinwall Marina and make it a public amenity. During the 2012 season the Marina was run by a non-profit organization, Allegheny Riverfront Park, and the property was open for the public to enjoy. The community is currently exploring opportunities to build deeper connections between the marina and the commercial district.

Etna

The Borough of Etna, situated on 2.2 square miles, is home to 3,520 residents. The Economic Restructuring and Development Committees in Etna identified three priority projects: (1) creating a multi-municipal tree commission with Etna, Millvale, and Sharpsburg; (2) holding a legislative event to update officials on water management issues and advocate for more support; and (3) to establish a revolving loan fund for small businesses in Millvale, Etna, and Sharpsburg. The multi-municipal tree commission planning team is researching and creating an ordinance to address concerns about maintenance and boundaries. The revolving loan fund action team has secured pro bono advice from major financial institutions and is seeking funding to determine the feasibility of the proposed program.

Millvale

Millvale has the second largest population of the Allegheny River Towns, with 3,615 residents living within the 0.7 square miles of the Borough. The Borough, in partnership with PennDOT, successfully completed upgrades to the Grant Avenue-Stanton Avenue intersection, improving signage and safety, as well as access to the Riverfront Park. A second, ongoing priority is positioning the community as a niche commercial and residential market for artisans and architectural craftsmen. As part of these efforts, the Millvale Association of Artisans and Craftsmen (MAAC) was formed and has led a marketing effort.

PEC's Allegheny River Town Program, while billed a pilot project, has contributed to several positive outcomes. Across all communities, a greater focus on inter-municipal collaboration was fostered. The completion of the riverfront trail continues to be the focus of a multi-municipal effort with all municipalities interested in the completion and connections between each other. The implementation of an overlay district and multi-municipal comprehensive planning are two tools that are currently underway that will assist in this regard.

Monongahela River Towns

In the spring of 2011, PEC launched its River Town Program in five communities along the middle- and upper-Monongahela River in Fayette, Greene, and Washington Counties. A sixth community joined the program in 2012. The Mon River Town Program builds on the successes and lessons-learned of the first set of communities. More rural in nature than the Allegheny River Towns, these communities have the potential to draw visitors from the Morgantown and Pittsburgh regions. Historic buildings dating back to the Revolutionary War and remnants of the region's historic key industries – glass and pottery, as well as ship building and river navigation – attract the history buff, while canoeing and kayaking opportunities, hiking and biking trails, and a vibrant boating culture will satisfy outdoors lovers.

Examples of regional projects:

- Streetscape beautification, including installing flower planters, painting buildings, hanging banners, and cleaning windows

- Educational workshops on topics such as effective marketing for leasing or selling a building; websites and social media for small businesses; and financing opportunities for new or expanding businesses

- Branding and promotion, including design of a River Town logo, creation of gateway signage for each community, production of window clings for vacant buildings to improve street level appearance, and creation of a website

- Assessment of existing attitudes towards the river, via a professional survey of residents before River Town activities began. A follow-up survey will help us to gauge how effective the program has been

Existing Amenities: Monongahela River Regional Trails

Cheat Lake Trail
Along the eastern shore of Cheat Lake, just below the PA-WV border, this four-mile wooded trail is available for walking, jogging and biking and offers restrooms, fishing piers, boat docks, and a playground.

Greene River Trail
Along the Monongahela River between Crucible and Millsboro, passing through Rices Landing, this 5.1 mile trail is ideal for walking, running and biking. It is partially lined with wood-rail fencing and offers scenic views of the Mon River and surrounding wooded areas. Subsequent phases to extend the Greene River Trail past Crucible are in the planning stages.

Sheepskin Trail
This 1.25 mile trail, connecting Point Marion to Morgantown, WV and 48 miles of West Virginia trails, will ultimately be expanded to 33 miles, connecting to the Great Allegheny Passage, just above Connellsville.

Warrior Trail
A former Native American trail, the Warrior Trail travels 67 miles from the Monongahela River at Greensboro, PA to the Ohio River in Marshall County, West Virginia.

Upper Monongahela River Water Trail
There are several public boat access areas in this stretch of the Monongahela River making it a great place for recreational boating. The water trail is 68 miles connecting Fairmont, WV to the Maxwell Dam.

To learn more about the Mon River Towns, including upcoming events, visit **www.monrivertowns.com**.

Specific Town Projects

Point Marion

Point Marion, in Fayette County is situated at the confluence of the Mon and Cheat Rivers. The Mon River Trail, 43 miles of which are completed, will eventually connect with Morgantown, West Virginia and the Great Allegheny Passage. A community of 1,330, Point Marion has a distinct downtown of intact historic buildings, a river access point, and evidence of civic pride. The potential for growth and positioning as an attractive river and trail town is significant, particularly considering the nearby and growing Morgantown market.

Partners: Point Marion Rotary; Friendship Hill Association; Point Marion Parks Commission

Key Projects:

- *Public Art Project:* Point Marion's River Town action team raised over $2,000 for public art to match a Sprout Fund Seed Award. Workshops are held weekly for community residents to design and create the glass leaves that are part of the gateway public art project underway in this community.

- *Market Analysis:* An analysis of the Morgantown area and its potential for nearby Point Marion housing and businesses to inform future marketing efforts is underway.

- *Park Improvements:* Landscape architecture and forestry students from WVU are working to clear view corridors, enhance the landscaping and remove invasive species from the riverfront park.

- *Gateway Signage:* Friendship Hill Association successfully obtained a grant for a gateway sign and the design will be used across the River Towns.

- *New businesses:* A local businessman purchased riverfront property and opened a public marina in summer 2012. The second floor of a warehouse has opened as a community center.

Greensboro

A few miles north of Port Marion is Greensboro, a historic town of just under 300 residents. A small but attractive business district boasts a popular bed and breakfast and gift shops. Capitalizing on their waterfront, a new walking and biking trail extends for nearly two miles, and full service public restrooms and a gazebo overlooking the river have recently been built. Greensboro was also recently awarded a DCNR grant to install a kayak launch capitalizing on a nearby motorized boat launch.

Partners: Greensboro Elm Street Program; Nathanael Greene Historical Foundation

Key Projects:

- *Public Art Project:* A sculpture in the public park; also additional donated sculptures by local artist

- *Events:* Saturday Farmers' Market throughout the summer and fall; Art Blast on the Mon

Rices Landing

The next community downriver is Rices Landing in Greene County, with a population of close to 500. Rices Landing is home to Pumpkin Run County Park, as well as two community parks with access to the river, and nearby available buildings that offer great potential for growth. The Greene River Trail also passes through town. The Rivers of Steel Heritage Corporation owns the historic W.A. Young & Sons Foundry and Machine Shop and has recently began offering tours on Sundays.

Partners: Civic Organization for Community Outgrowth (COCO)

Key Projects:

- *Summer Concert Series:* Public concerts offered riverside throughout the summer.

- *Riverfest 2013:* Planning has begun and funds raised for the re-creation of a popular riverfront festival

Fredericktown

Fredericktown, located in East Bethlehem Township, Washington County, has a population of 1,094. Situated along the Maxwell Basin, a popular area for motor boats and jet skis, Fredericktown hosts multiple special events each year, including a huge Fourth of July celebration, Ribfest, Dock Dogs, and more. The public docks are being expanded, in part with donated materials and labor from local businesses and the municipality, to encourage more river boaters to enjoy the town.

Partners: Fredericktown Area Chamber of Commerce; Maxwell Basin Recreation Area; Izaak Walton League of America (IWLA) Greene County Chapter

Key Projects:

- *Dock Expansion Project:* Donated docks and labor leveraging a Port of Pittsburgh grant will expand an existing public dock and create a welcoming entryway including signage and landscaping on the shore.

- *Street Banner Program:* Banners focused on businesses and events enliven the streetscape in Fredericktown.

- *Traffic Calming program on State Road 88:* With the assistance of PennDOT, local officials have added a speed reader to SR 88 to slow traffic. A stop sign and pedestrian crossing will also be added at the request of residents.

- *Public Art:* Several "fish" sculptures have been created and installed throughout town to emphasize the community's connection to the river.

Events

Special events are an important aspect of the River Town Program. Examples of special events in the Mon River Towns include:

Point Marion Regatta

Brownsville Community Day

Mon River Sojourn*

Fredericktown Ribfest

Art Blast on the Mon in Greensboro

California River Fest*

2012 Rices Landing Gazebo Summer Concert Series*

River Town Sustainability Fair*

Dock Dogs Competition

FestiFall in Point Marion

Initiated through River Town Program

Brownsville

Brownsville in Fayette County, population 2,330, asked to participate in the River Town Program in year two. The Fayette County Redevelopment Authority recently acquired 29 historic properties in downtown Brownsville, placing the town at a crossroads for growth.

Key Projects:

- *Community Space Improvements:* High school students are working on Operation Falcon to adaptively reuse a parking lot as a community center and amphitheater, and to clean up and restore a neglected park in the center of town.

California

California in Washington County, has a population just over 5,000, and is home to California University with a student enrollment of 9,000. The community has an attractive downtown with opportunities for growth, but river access is limited and the railroad tracks between town and river make additional access difficult. Community and municipal leadership have partnered to raise money to clear view corridors, improve river access sites, develop unused park land, and connect this park to other municipal parks via a 5.5 mile trail along the river and through the town.

Key Projects:

- *Design Work:* Design work is being completed to develop plans for the undeveloped public lands and for connecting via trail to a riverfront boardwalk.

- *View Corridors:* Work has been completed to open view corridors to the river from town and private property enhancing the riverfront connections.

Mon River Sojourn

On June 9, 2012, over 60 participants in canoes and kayaks paddled the Mon River between Rices Landing and Fredericktown as part of the first ever Mon River Sojourn. Paddlers were welcomed to the region by Ryan Belski, mayor of Rices Landing Borough, before launching. During a lunch stop at the Greene Cover Marina on Ten Mile Creek, participants enjoyed an informative presentation on water quality and citizen water monitoring efforts, presented by the Izaak Walton League of America (IWLA), Harry Enstrom Chapter.

After lunch, participants enjoyed the scenery of a more tranquil paddle up Ten Mile Creek a few miles, then floated back to the Mon and took out for the day at the Fredericktown Ferry Landing. Most participants walked as a group to the Riviera for Ribfest 2012 and enjoyed food, drinks, and sharing stories about the trip.

The trip was supported by a grant through the Pennsylvania Organization for Watersheds and River (POWR) and Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR), in addition to sponsorships provided by local businesses.

The sojourn was a sold out event that raised awareness of the recreation and tourism potential in this area for visitors and residents alike. More paddling trips are planned for the future.

French Creek Towns

French Creek flows from its headwaters in Chautauqua, New York, through northwestern Pennsylvania before joining the Allegheny River at Franklin, Pennsylvania, passing through some of the most scenic countryside and historic small towns in the state. Despite farming, industry, and land development in this region, French Creek has amazingly maintained its high water quality and biological diversity. With 15 species of darters, 29 species of freshwater mussels and thriving hellbender, muskrat, and bald eagle populations, French Creek is recognized by conservation biologists for its significant biodiversity.

This waterway also has historic importance, as it was traveled by a 21-year old George Washington carrying a message from the British commander in Pittsburgh to the French army stationed in Fort LeBoeuf, during the French and Indian War. A regional treasure, French Creek presents an opportunity for the communities along its banks to attract ecotourists, history buffs, and outdoor recreation enthusiasts. In the summer of 2012, PEC launched a River Town program in three communities along the creek – Venango, Saegertown, and Cambridge Springs – all located in Crawford County. Community needs assessments were completed in early October, the results of which will be used to develop action plans for each town.

Venango

The Borough of Venango is situated on 0.3 square miles along French Creek, with a population of 288. Located along Scenic Route 6, Venango's small but attractive business district of historic buildings presents an opportunity to attract visitors.

Saegertown

The community of Saegertown, with a population of 1,071, sits on 1.4 square miles beside French Creek. Its amenities include a grocery store, several small restaurants, and close proximity to a popular boating and recreational area, Woodcock Creek Dam.

Cambridge Springs

With 0.9 square miles of land area, Cambridge Springs boasts the largest populations of the three French Creek Towns, with 2,363 residents. In addition to its scenic outdoor amenities, a historic Inn and Resort attracts regional visitors.

conclusion

At a time when funding for many state and local government community development programs are being eliminated, it is essential that towns develop alternative models. The River Town Program is based on a cooperative, collaborative approach that builds closer connections between communities and their riverfronts as a significant asset with the potential for attracting visitors, business, and economic revival. As these communities begin to realize the economic potential represented by the river as a resource, they become invested in its long-term sustainability. The River Town Program embodies PEC's vision, recognizing the inextricable links between the environment, the economy, and our quality of life.

thank you

pennsylvania environmental council

22 Terminal Way | Pittsburgh, PA 15219
412-481-9400

www.pecpa.org