

Bike Trails: The Best Path Forward for Developing Beaver County's Rivers

Beaver County's official motto is "Divided by its Rivers, United by its People." A bridge spanning a river appears on the county's flag. So why are our rivers utilized only for industry? I could probably count on my hands how many times I have been to one of the county's rivers for a recreational activity. It seems fairly obvious to me that if Beaver County is to be "re-imagined" as the title of the Clean Air Council report suggests, riverfront development, starting with bike trails, provides the best path forward for Beaver County by supporting the environment and public health, providing Beaver County workers with green job opportunities, and because it has already been proven to be viable within Western Pennsylvania.

When bike trails are built, they support plenty of jobs from a wide variety of sectors wherever they appear. According to a nationwide 2017 study, bicycle recreation contributed to the creation of 848,000 jobs (1). While not all these jobs are "green jobs", it gives a good idea of the potential job-related benefits of bike trails in general. If ecosystems along the river were redeveloped as they were shown in the report, there are plenty of jobs to be had in wildlife preservation and maintenance similar to those found in a national park. Additionally, the riverfront could be zoned to only permit green construction projects for the businesses that would eventually want to open by the river, creating green construction jobs. Also related to green construction is the redevelopments of brown fields which could host anything from businesses to new parks. Along the entire county's waterfront, there could be hundreds of new jobs created just in the development of the riverfront, not to mention all the businesses that would open up along its path.

In terms of promoting health and the environment, one of the best things a county can do is invest in biking infrastructure. After all, there's a reason that bike lanes have been popping up everywhere from Pittsburgh to New York City. One of the most identifiable benefits of increased biking is getting cars off of the road. According to a 2017 study, the average car occupancy in the United States was 1.67 people per vehicle (2). By promoting alternative forms of transportation, namely biking, Beaver County can get these 1.67 people out of their cars and onto their bikes for, at the very least, local travel. This reduces emissions and helps Beaver County begin to transition away from fossil fuels. After all, why drive a car to the grocery store that's half of a mile away if you can ride your bike along the new riverfront trail? As for public health, a thread was posted in 2015 on BikePGH.org, a website for Pittsburgh cyclists to talk craft, where one user made a list of all biking accidents involving cars on Route 51, noting that the route would need serious improvements to remain a state bike route (3). To promote public health and safety, bike routes parallel to Route 51 would be a widely popular idea. And of course, there are the obvious health benefits of riding a bike every day, such as lower rates of obesity and improved cardiac health (4). Along with their clear economic benefits of bike trails, riverfront development should begin with them to encourage public health and the environment.

By now, it's clear that riverfront development in the form of biking trails has several benefits, but do bike trails truly lay the groundwork for greater economic development in the areas where they appear? Regionally, the answer seems to be a resounding 'yes'. For an example of the great economic potential of biking trails, one only needs to look a few miles south to the Great Allegheny Passage (GAP), a bike trail that spans from Pittsburgh to Washington D.C. According to a study about the economic impact of the trail, businesses along the GAP reported

that an average of 30% of their gross revenues were from trail users (5). If riverfront development was to start with a simple biking trail followed by encouraging business along its path, the economic benefits for the county would be immediately recognizable as they have been along the GAP. Linking the riverfront bike trails to the GAP would allow Beaver County to reap some economic benefits as other towns along the passage have.

While it's easy to hear the words "riverfront development" and get grand visions of a vibrant Ohio River, it's important to start small and simple, and bike trails along the riverfront should be that small and simple step. While Beaver County will continue to be "divided by rivers," perhaps its people can now be united by riding their bikes along the river.

Bibliography:

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