

The Environmental Need. In the late 1980's the rivers of western Pennsylvania were presented with an incredibly unique transformation opportunity. Railroads were being abandoned at record rate and this region had hundreds of miles of rail service being terminated. Here was a chance to acquire rail corridors, almost always along rivers and streams, to convert for recreational purposes and at the same time protect the waterfront to enhance water quality and wildlife habitat. Larry L. Ridenour, then a planner with the Allegheny County Planning Department, saw this opportunity as an urgent priority, and spent the rest of his career at the county building the basis for the system of rail-trails that is now one of this region's most recognized outdoor amenities. The "rails to trails" movement was new and, even by 1990, the only rail-trail in the region was in Ohiopyle State Park. There was a narrow window of opportunity to make this fantastic idea a reality and Larry's vision, persistence, and passion began a movement in western Pennsylvania that goes strong today.

The Solution. From his position in the planning department, Larry set out with determination and a focused agenda to build a trails and greenways network along the rivers in the county and the region. He established a process, which he employed to create both the Montour Trail in Washington and Allegheny Counties, and the Youghiogheny River Trail North in Allegheny, Westmoreland and Fayette Counties. For each he established a multi-county task force to gather information and begin to generate grass-root support for the projects. As a registered landscape architect, Larry had the technical skills to assist in designing the trail lay-out, including the trail construction and access area development. He enlisted many other talented people to tackle certain components needed to develop the concept plan, which he would then take to elected officials. Getting

the counties to assume the responsibility to buy the abandoned rights-of-way was a mighty challenge, so the plan had to present a compelling story to justify the public expenditure. Coupled with legislative support, the teams were successful and the Montour Railroad was acquired in 1991 and the P&LE Railroad between McKeesport and Connellsville was acquired in 1992.

To manage the Yough River Trail, Larry created the Regional Trail Corporation as a collaborative organization chartered by the boards of Commissioners in the three counties through which the trail passes. The expectation was that, at any point, more trails could join in under this structure which provided general governance, financial management, comprehensive liability coverage, volunteer training and other services needed to build trail and trail organizations. And they have. Besides the Yough River Trail, the Regional Trail Corporation now also houses the Five Star Trail, the Sheepskin Trail, the Coal and Coke Trail, and another trail will be added within a few months. Larry's ingenious structure for a regional trail building organization has enabled trail projects to get started and thousands of local citizens to actively participate in re-creating their communities and their environment.

Impact on the Environment. The impact of these projects on the environment is extensive. These remote riverside properties were often used as illegal dumps and one of the first challenges trail volunteers faced was the removal of tons of refuse, 60 tons in one site alone. Protection of these river corridors became a top priority and, through Larry's insistence and assistance, a river conservation plan was developed for the Yough River and a task force

created to implement it. Riverbanks were restored and much replanting has been accomplished, employing native landscaping techniques.

Another major impact of Larry's trails is the environmental awareness that is brought to its users – over 250,000 per year. People walk or bike along the waterways, appreciate the beauty and mobilize when they see problems. People see mine drainage or abandoned gob piles and want to know what can be done to remediate these problems. Impact to local economies of the many communities is also significant. Trail-related businesses are steadily opening and achieving economic success. Bike shops, bed & breakfasts, restaurants and snack shops are creating more vital local economies. And the trail is becoming an outdoor classroom as teachers are taking advantage of the low cost and safety of a field trip to a trail to learn about the region's history and its natural environment.

Specific Examples of Impact. Three major dumping sites were cleaned up as a result of trail building along the Yough: an old farm property in Allegheny County, Smithton Beach in Westmoreland and Dickerson Run siding area in Fayette. Each had been used by area residents as illegal dumps and the clean-up and subsequent monitoring have made these attractive spots along the trail. With the help of a local Rotary club, the Smithton site is now a popular picnic area.

The City of Connellsville has the beginnings of becoming a tourist town because of the trail. As a typical city of our region with a deteriorating economy, the city embraced the trail idea as a key component to its revitalization. They faced a serious challenge to get the trail across town since a major railroad bridge had already been removed. To solve the problem, a lane of a street was dedicated for trail use only and the street, now one-way, is decorated with medial planting.

An economic impact study was conducted in 1998 and showed that trail use in southwest PA generated over \$14 million in direct spending. The trail as a recreational amenity, within the setting of western PA's beautiful rivers and forests, is a strong component in the tourism industry and will continue to grow.

There are now at least two school districts that are using the trail as part of their environmental curriculum. Students can study flora and fauna safely from the trail and perform water sampling and tests of the Yough River. Trails are connecting children to their environment. Trails are reversing the trend, as noted by the National Cycle Network, "of a lost generation of unfit children." Children are given the gift of experiencing the environment in a way that in this urbanized and suburbanized region that otherwise would be impossible.

Other Pertinent Information. Larry's combination of interests, training, and personality were key ingredients to the success of this endeavor. Larry is an avid hiker and cyclist, having hiked the entire Appalachian Trail in segments over a number of years and has hiked and cycled in Europe. Larry's background as professional landscape architect was invaluable, along with his respect for sound planning practices and good land use controls. Larry is very deliberate in his actions and provided strong leadership. As others took on different projects he initiated, Larry continued to provide on going support and holds a deep appreciation for the volunteers who have committed to these projects.

Larry's conviction that these trails will permanently enhance the livability of this region in so many ways has been a driving force in this region having more trails on the ground and more planned than another similar region in the country.