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Decade on the Canalway

A piece of the Northeast Ohio past continues to show promise as a significant player in the region's economic future

It is fitting that this area's tribute to its 19th century beginnings take steps into the digital age. Landmarks of the past work best when they point the way forward. As the Ohio & Erie Canalway celebrates its 10th year as a national heritage corridor, it has rolled out a Web site worth a few clicks. Just go to www.ohioanderiecanalway.com for a peek at what the canalway has to offer.

From points of interest and special events to an interactive map that lets the user plan an itinerary based on whether the trip is for sightseeing, biking or hiking, the Web site opens the wonders of this historic corridor. Heck, there's even a satellite view of the canalway framed by photography worthy of the best coffee table book.

Of course, those who have worked tirelessly to bring this local gem back to life have long extolled its virtues. And by now millions of people have taken short to very long trips along the towpath trail, the most visible symbol of the canalway's growing regional importance. Less visible but more important is this historic pathway's growing economic clout.

A recent daylong gathering at the Akron-Summit County Public Library (also near the towpath in downtown Akron) told the story. In the past decade, the corridor has received \$8.5 million in federal assistance. That sum has leveraged more than \$400 million in new public and private development, from new venues opening near the towpath -- Akron's Canal Park is just one -- to new parks, housing developments and other public amenities.

Coming soon to lampposts and bike trails are new signs and information kiosks pointing out the various attractions to be found along the canal's scenic byway. Perhaps most exciting are plans, finally, to extend the towpath into downtown Cleveland, a daunting task requiring negotiating a steel plant and Cleveland's industrial Flats. The Northeast Ohio congressional delegation, particularly Ralph Regula, a Navarre Republican, and Steve LaTourette, a Concord Township Republican, has secured \$23 million in federal assistance toward that \$70 million project.

While parts of the towpath are still to be completed -- parts of Tuscarawas County and one significant section in Massillon -- it is finished enough to make its proponents talk about the next phase.

First is for Congress to reauthorize the National Heritage Corridor designation. That symbolic act has spurred a not-so-small miracle in just 10 years, putting the Ohio & Erie Heritage Canalway near the top of similar national attractions. Imagine what can happen if that show of confidence is reaffirmed.