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Towpath at 10

The Ohio & Erie Canalway adds to the quality of regional life and carries the promise of an even larger contribution

In the 10 years since Congress created the Ohio & Erie Canal National Heritage Canalway, progress has been breathtaking. Of the 101 miles included in the corridor, 73 miles of the towpath are complete. There is a national scenic byway along the length of the canal between Cleveland and New Philadelphia.

Perhaps most breathtaking is the pace of economic development this new canal era has ushered in. Since 1998, \$8.5 million in federal money has flowed to this region. That federal support has in turn spurred \$274 million in other public and private spending, an enviable multiplier effect by almost any measure. The heritage canalway has been cited across the country for its accomplishments.

There is much physical work to be done, mostly at the northern and southern ends of the canalway. Most of Tuscarawas County has yet to see substantial trail work, delays due as much to bureaucratic slumber as to the rural, privately owned nature of the towpath. But that area now stands poised for rapid towpath development, key components such as a bridge over Interstate 77 between Bolivar and Zoar now under construction.

As for Cleveland, the obstacles are formidable. Industrial land does not lend itself to recreational trails, and much of the six miles -- from Cleveland Metroparks' towpath to Whiskey Island on Lake Erie -- traverses heavy industry. Reviving that final six miles is now estimated to cost \$23.5 million and may be years from reality. Still, there is momentum north and south. The race will be to see which end is finished first. For that to happen, Congress must renew the act creating the federal heritage area.

But it is not too early to begin asking another, larger question: What happens after the towpath is finished? Certainly, the millions of people who have made the Cuyahoga Valley National Park so popular will expand their route. But the towpath and all it encompasses is more than just a trail. How will that larger story be told?

For example, there have been thorny environmental issues to overcome to bring the trail this far, particularly into cities. As trail builders learn the lessons and develop new technologies to address old pollution problems, there is an opportunity to market those solutions to other areas struggling with the same or similar problems. How will those proprietors offering the amenities that make the towpath so attractive -- restaurants, bed and breakfasts, historical sites and others -- tell their story as something more than

individual attractions?

As the very old saying goes, success has a thousand fathers; failure is an orphan. As the success of the towpath builds, the lesson of the early years must not be forgotten: The towpath has succeeded because many people have had a stake in its creation. It remains successful because of the broad involvement of volunteer groups, local governments and state and federal entities. The trail is a regional phenomenon, a clear example of people seeing beyond political parties and job titles to the importance of a larger project. That alone is a legacy worth preserving.

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