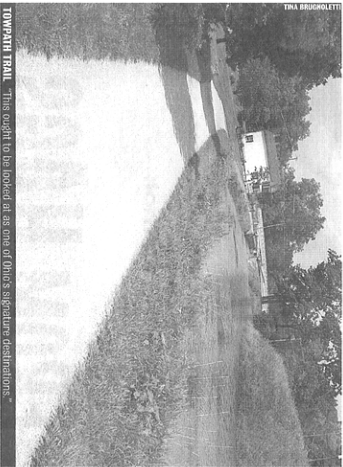


Trail of Years

The Towpath Trail project is a no-brainer. But for 25 years, the people have led and the leaders have (sometimes) followed.

BUSINESS OWNER MITCH PAUL HAS BEEN WAITING A LONG TIME for the Towpath Trail to come through Tremont. Outside his cluttered bike shop, he points down the hill to where West 4th street used to be, where the trail will eventually run, bringing a steady stream of customers in need of repairs, burgers or a bottle of something cold.

By Michael Gill



TOWPATH TRAIL "This ought to be looked at as one of Ohio's signature destinations."

He bought this building and reopened by the railroads, well over a century ago. Shaker Cycle five years ago because he'd heard that the trail would be completed by now. Businesses thrive along the completed sections to the south, so he made exactly the kind of investment planners and public officials hope will follow the extension of one of the region's major recreational resources.

"At the time, five years was the pessimistic estimate" of when the trail would come through, he says.

But five years is not long in land-use terms. Historic Warehouse District executive director Tom Yablonsky, one of the founders of the nonprofit organization Ohio Canal Corridor, says that when anxious people ask him when the towpath will be complete, he mentions the example of the Metro Parks — an idea introduced in 1905, but not incorporated until 1917.

"You're changing the way people look at the landscape," he says.

And if you're a nonprofit agency trying to motivate dozens of governments and landowners to share a new vision, it doesn't happen fast. Especially if the state just can't seem to see.

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A RECREATIONAL CORRIDOR became a possibility as soon as the canal was supplanted

by the railroads, well over a century ago. Then, 40 years ago, the state began divesting itself of the obsolete right-of-way. Congressman Ralph Regula was solicitor for the Village of Newarr at the time and recalls that the land was offered first to the municipalities it crossed, and then to private owners. He persuaded Stark County to snatch up the property within its bounds for use as parks. But not every government thought that way, and so what had been one solid, state-owned right-of-way was splintered.

Ohio Canal Corridor, which has championed the Towpath Trail and other projects in the Cuyahoga Valley, traces its roots back to the 1984 meeting of Yablonsky and Jeff Lenartz, who were volunteers in the Cuyahoga Valley National Recreation Area. Both envisioned the possibility of a trail system along the length of the canal, eventually connecting to downtown Cleveland.

Despite the promise of economic benefit to every community it touches, the trail project has not been an easy sell.

There was no talk of regionalism at the time. So if someone conceived a project that involved a common thread through land in 48 municipalities and four counties, there was no government venue for cooperation. It wasn't a superhighway, so the Ohio

Department of Transportation wouldn't take it up.

So Lenartz and Yablonski set out to form a nonprofit organization and develop a community plan that would reflect the potential they saw. In 1985, the North Cuyahoga Valley Corridor — eventually to be renamed Ohio Canal Corridor — was born. But facing a hodgepodge of public and private ownership, and with little money and no regional or state entity to help coordinate money and land issues, the question was, "Now what?"

Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency planner Rick Sieha advanced the idea with the North Cuyahoga Valley study, the first plan that considered the river not as a dividing line, but as something that would draw people together. Still, despite the strength of the vision, by 1988, Ohio Canal Corridor had just \$10 in its bank account, and supporters considered calling it quits.

Along came a documentary producer named Tim Donovan. Yablonsky met him at a party and described the idea of a park and trail system extending into Cleveland. Less than two months later, Donovan and a partner threw a party that raised \$10,000 and rallied the organization. Tired volunteers took heart. And in 1990, Donovan would become their first paid staff member (today he is director).

What happened since then has been a long tale of volunteerism, fundraising and lobbying.

In the early '90s, OCC (which focuses on the northern section of the corridor) collaborated with Ohio and Erie Canal (a similar organization to the south) and formed an umbrella group called Ohio and Erie Canalway Association, which could receive federal money and coordinate "continuity issues," such as signs and maps. Legislation designating the canal and surroundings a National Heritage Corridor was adopted by Congress in 1996, bringing with it \$10 million in funding over 10 years. OECA makes the most of it by offering competitive grants to communities for their own projects along the corridor. To get grants, communities have to match the money. So for every federal dollar Ohio and Erie Canal Association has received, local governments and private investors have added \$55, for a total of \$270 million. As a result, 70 of 101 miles of tow-path trail have been completed. The Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad has been extended from Rockside Road to Canton. A scenic byway has been mapped and marked. Historic buildings have been restored.

About \$55 million is needed to complete the remaining 31 miles of the trail. But the federal money is about to dry up. Another

bill extending the stream by \$1 million a year for 12 years is stuck in committee, Congressman Regula says, because "a lot of other areas have gotten interested in the same thing."

UNTIL JANE CAMPBELL, became mayor, the city of Cleveland hadn't taken much interest in bringing the towpath to its ultimate destination, a place in the Flats known as Canal Basin Park. Campbell has been a veritable cheerleader, participating in rallies and supporting the effort by asking for funds at the federal and state level.

According to Campbell's chief of staff, Chris Romayne, the city has helped by securing federal funding, including \$3 million from the National Oceanic Administration for Canal Basin Park, and with the tax incremental finance (TIF) package that is expected to accompany the controversial Steelyard Commons development.

"The missing piece has been the state," says Romayne. The city asked for funding from the state this year and last, but was rejected both times.

"There are no-brainer opportunities in Ohio, and the towpath is one of them. One would hope that since what is being contemplated is a 100-mile intrastate trail, this ought to be looked at as one of Ohio's signature destinations."

State Rep. Jim Trakas, a Republican from Independence, where the towpath is already complete, did not return a call for comment.

Hope for the completion of the Towpath Trail now rests with Steelyard Commons and its developer Mitch Schneider. Schneider has agreed to build a one-mile stretch of the towpath as part of the retail project, which will be anchored by a Wal-Mart store. He's vowed not to take money from the city for the development, and encouraged them to use the occasion to create a TIF district, which would enable the city to take taxes generated by the increased value of the property and spend the money on the remaining six miles that would bring the trail downtown — past Mitch Paul's bike shop, and into the Flats.

Mitch Paul, the Tremont bike shop owner, says on the one hand that Steelyard Commons will create "a big sucking sound" that will take money out of neighborhood businesses. But at the same time the private investment will help others by completing the trail and literally bringing a market into his neighborhood. It's a continuation of the Towpath tradition of growth through local and private investment.

As Donovan says, "We will leave no partner behind." ■