

Cuyahoga Valley advocates see progress, win grant

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Like a tugboat churning upriver, Cuyahoga County's planning staff is nudging strategies for a renewed Cuyahoga River valley into the mainstream.

The Cuyahoga Valley Initiative, led by county planning Director Paul Alsenas, has a modest record of success two years after its rollout as a regional strategy to restore habitat, revitalize industry and establish 75 square miles of the valley as a national destination.

But boosters say the initiative succeeds at a level higher than a

simple accounting of completed tasks or money spent.

The initiative is changing how people view the valley within Cuyahoga County. Insiders are taking a more holistic view of the valley's economy and ecology, and outsiders are seeing opportunity in a gritty terrain that once drew little notice.

The initiative, along with the Steelyard Commons retail project, is drawing more business interest to Cleveland's river valley, says Brooke Furio, head of the city's effort to redevelop industrial land.

The city has three or four possible deals working in the valley,

Furio said, and his phone is ringing more often.

"People are talking to us, suddenly wanting to go down there," said Furio. "People are thinking, 'If I get in now, it's cheap, it might be a good investment.'"

The Gund Foundation sees promise, too, announcing last month that it will commit \$500,000 to the initiative over the next two years.

The initiative is among forces that push key projects in the valley, including extending the Towpath Trail and the Cuyahoga Valley Scenic Railroad into downtown, said David Abbott, Gund Foundation executive di-



Alsenas



Furio

rector.

Diverging from their historic uses as a transportation route and dumping ground, the river and valley could host new industry and commerce "that has an environmental consciousness to it," Abbott said.

An initiative goal is to offer property owners and governments an array of best practices, land-use tools and incentives to promote "greener" business practices and develop tourism.

Alsenas said the initiative employs whole-systems thinking, exemplified by the county's push last year to open a park on Whiskey Island, at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River. Crews cleared litter and planted natural grasses to restore habitat. That will draw park-goers who can hike the 22 acres, stand by the lake and watch river traffic, building interest in the valley.

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"The idea is one intervention, multiple benefits," Alsenas said.

Part of the Gund money will be used to hire a full-timer for the initiative, which is handled now by Alsenas, his staff and several consultants.

The plan is to continue spreading the word on the valley plan, build support among 13 municipalities that touch the valley and convene a 20-member team to decide whether the initiative should organize as a formal entity.

Such an entity could tackle vexing problems like sagging bulkheads, said Jim White, executive director of the organization overseeing cleanup of the Cuyahoga River.

Sheet-metal bulkheads that line the 5.6-mile navigation channel are rotting and will cost property owners tens of millions of dollars to fix.

A new entity could act as a clearinghouse for funds and expertise in repairing bulkheads. In fact, White and county planners landed a \$500,000 federal grant for a "green" bulkhead project. The idea is to replace the sheet metal with materials that would help restore river habitat and water quality.

Furio suggested that the initiative could spin off a nonprofit

corporation that could clean and assemble valley land for redevelopment, much as Milwaukee leaders have done in the Menomonee River valley.

The initiative has met with some skepticism. Consultants have interviewed more than 50 community leaders, some of whom said the initiative "creates confusion and suspicion" because of its broad scope.

The plans "are important to

many, but the priority of a few," consultants reported.

But interviewees also saw the initiative as a "powerful mechanism" to build identity and self-esteem in the region.

To learn more about the initiative, go to www.cuyahogavalley.net.

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