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Exercise path scales 'The Summit'

Towpath Trail section to open Cascade Locks route shows off downtown skyline

By Bob Downing
Beacon Journal staff writer



Robin Tinay Sallie/Akron Beacon Journal

The trail runs under train trestles and across a covered bridge in the new cascade locks section of Metro Parks Cascade Valley Trailhead in Akron, Ohio.

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■ [Map of the new trail \(pdf\)](#)

Virginia Wojno-Forney's long-held dream comes true this morning.

Ceremonies at 10:30 a.m. will mark the opening of one of the toughest, most expensive and most important sections of the Ohio & Erie Canal Towpath Trail.

"It's exciting... and a huge accomplishment," said Dan Rice, head of the Akron-based Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition. "We've reached The Summit."

The new, 5,185-foot leg runs from Akron's Mustill Store off West North Street south through Cascade Locks Park, which features five historic canal locks, into downtown.

The trail connects downtown Akron with the 33,000-acre Cuyahoga Valley National Park and the southern edge of Cleveland.

For 17 years, Wojno-Forney and her grass-roots Cascade Locks Park Association have been working on the city-owned park and trail. Her dedication and hard work have earned her the title "grandmother of the project," the 76-year-old Akron woman said with a laugh.

She said she is "very impressed" with the trail extension that the city built through a narrow gorge filled with canal locks, tumbling water, an old mill race, railroad trestles, historic sites, walls, arches and factories.

Her favorite feature is a 130-foot-long covered bridge for trail users that goes over the canal and under an active railroad trestle.

The new trail section ends at Lock 3 Park. It provides users with a first-rate vista of the Akron skyline, with downtown buildings popping up through the greenery.

The landscaping is nearly complete, and kiosks and interpretive signs will soon be posted. Some fencing is in place; more is to be installed.

Wojno-Forney said people seeing the newly landscaped, 10-foot-wide trail have no idea how rugged and remote the Cascade Locks area was in the 1980s. It took a machete to cut one's way through the brush on the east side of the canal; the west side was impassable.

"Now it just looks so ideal, so beautiful," she said. "It's hard to realize how terrible, terrible it was."

The key to the project's success, she said, was "how farsighted the city of Akron was."

Building the extension cost about \$4.1 million, with construction by Cavanaugh Building Corp.

Routes to walk, bike

Walkers will be routed from the southern end of the new trail section -- near where the foundation remains from the old Beech Street power plant -- up Beech Street to North Howard Street. They can then head south to Lock 3 Park on South Main Street and pick up the Towpath Trail there.

Plans call for routing bicyclists along the west side of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard (the Akron Innerbelt) and then over the highway. Bicyclists would then connect to the Towpath Trail from the west at Lock 2 Park. Building that cycling leg will cost about \$3 million.

The Towpath Trail is a key part of the still-developing Ohio & Erie National Heritage Canalway. The new extension brings the total trail mileage built to 74, Rice said, and the goal is to complete the remaining 27 miles in the next eight years.

The Towpath Trail stretches from Harvard Avenue at the edge of the industrial Flats in Cleveland south through the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. It runs through Akron, Barberton, Clinton, Canal Fulton, Massillon, Navarre, Bolivar and Zoar to Dover and New Philadelphia.

Section is a bit steep

The new section of trail was one of the toughest to build because it rises 80 feet between West North Street and the innerbelt.

It is steeper than most of the trail, but cyclists and walkers should be able to ascend the trail from the north without too much trouble.

The canal is still used by the city for storm-water runoff. The trail was designed to survive 100-year floods.

Building the new trail was due largely to "building and developing partnerships," said Bridget Garvin, executive director of the Cascade Locks association. Key partners included her group, the city, Metro Parks, Serving Summit County, the National Park Service and the Akron-based Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition.

Some of those partners were involved in the \$1.1 million restoration in 2000 of the historic Mustill Store, one of Akron's few canal-era buildings.

The Cascade Locks group is developing a plan for a small park at the site of Ferdinand Schumacher's long-gone Cascade Mill on the east side of the canal off West North Street.

"We've never rested on our laurels," Wojno-Forney said with a wry smile. "There's always more to do.... It's always great to get involved in a project that never ends."

Bob Downing can be reached at 330-996-3745 or bdowning@thebeaconjournal.com