

Volunteers on the trail of elusive mountain-bike path

Group carving first route in Metroparks

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CUYAHOGA HEIGHTS — The mountain bikers of Northeast Ohio are a rugged and resourceful bunch.

Facing wintry winds and the daunting task of carving an icy hillside trail through the Ohio & Erie Canal Reservation on Saturday, two dozen volunteers from the Cleveland Area Mountain Bike Association simply buttoned up and buckled down.

And started swinging their firefighting tools.

"It's weird, but it turns out that the tools they use to fight forest fires out West are best for cutting a mountain-bike trail," said trail-builder Jim Olander of Strongsville, using a spade like tool to cut a 45-degree angle, perfect for water drainage. "Sustainable trail building has become a pretty reliable science."

That's the idea Cleveland Metroparks officials are banking on.

Volunteers from the bike association are engineering and building three mountain-bike trails scheduled to open this summer near the East 49th Street entrance to the reservation.

There are public mountain-bike trails in Lake, Lorain and Portage counties, but the Ohio & Erie Canal site will be the first in the Cleveland Metroparks system.

Metroparks officials previously had resisted building mountain-bike-only trails and expressed doubt that cyclists could peacefully co-exist on trails with hikers and equestrians.

Mountain bikers appear to have eliminated those fears at the Ohio & Erie Canal site. The 33 acres were donated by Ohio Edison, and the area wasn't fit for horses anyway.

Designers also came armed with new trail-building expertise.

Metroparks spokeswoman Jane Christyson said park leaders are impressed with the volunteers' professionalism and dedication to detail.

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figure out a way to do this — to build a trail in a way that we at the Metroparks could accept," she said.

Trail-building expert Craig Wood of Akron said standards put in place by the International Mountain Bicycling Association have radically improved the way public trails are cut.

"The key word is 'sustainability' and is what has finally convinced park systems that these trails can work for them," Wood said. "These trails won't wash away, and mountain bikers won't destroy the area."

A key aspect of good trail building is following the contours of the land — not going against them, said association founder Mike Farley of Lakewood.

"When you think about it, it just makes sense," Farley said. "You don't build a trail straight down a hill because that's the same path that water would follow and we would just be accelerating erosion."

Farley and fellow trail-builder Olander said the opening of the biking area — featuring more than four miles of trails on about 30 acres — is a step toward making mountain biking more accessible for the public and acceptable to the Metroparks.

"This is huge for us — a foot in



PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS ONDREY | THE PLAIN DEALER

Volunteer Michael Ryba of Hudson, a member of the Cleveland Area Mountain Bike Association, chops away at a hillside Saturday to help create a mountain-bike trail through the rugged ravines beneath the Settlers Bluff picnic area in the Ohio & Erie Canal Reservation of the Cleveland Metroparks.

Mountain biking in the Metroparks

Volunteers from the Cleveland Area Mountain Bike Association have teamed up with Cleveland Metroparks in the construction of the first mountain-bike trail in Cuyahoga County. A trio of trails — expected to open by this summer — will add up to four miles and will include a beginner's course, an intermediate course and a more-challenging expert course.



SOURCE: Cleveland Metroparks

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the door with the parks systems to prove to them that it can work here," Olander said.

Volunteers on Saturday came from all over Northeast Ohio — Hudson, Chagrin Falls, Mentor,



Casey Kaskey of North Olmsted, a member of the mountain-bike group, was ankle-deep in freezing mud during Saturday's detail.

Olmsted Falls, Lakewood and Akron.

Some had seen the great mountain-bike trails of Colorado, North Carolina and San Diego. And some see a future where Cleveland becomes a hip destination for urban mountain bikers.

"This is more than a mountain-bike trail," Farley said. "This is something new and cool about Cleveland. That's the bigger picture."

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