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Residents speak in support of rail-trail idea

By Anne Danahy

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BENNER TOWNSHIP -- The possibility of a rail trail that would connect Bellefonte to Toftrees drew almost nothing but praise during a public meeting Wednesday night. About 85 people turned out for the meeting, which was held by the Centre County Office of Planning and Community Development. Most who attended spoke in support of the project, although a few people raised concerns and one nearby landowner said she was against it. Supporters said they haven't seen problems with current trails, the area needs safe biking and walking paths, and the proposed trail would benefit residents and draw people to the area. Some said they hope it could lead to more biking and walking paths.

"I cannot tell you how excited I am about this," said Diana Malcom, of State College. She said she got jealous reading about biking paths in Portland, Ore., in a rail-trail publication, and thinks the proposed project in Centre County would benefit people who live in the community.

John O. Buerkle Jr., hired to do a feasibility study, said the trail would be about 16 miles. It would go from Bellefonte's waterfront district through Spring and Benner townships to Toftrees in Patton Township, much of it parallel to Buffalo Run.

Buerkle started the meeting by listing the benefits of rail trails, such as an increase in nearby property values. He also tried to address concerns, including the liability of landowners who provide an easement for the trail. The liability, he said, could be transferred to the easement holder.

Some of the property of the proposed path is owned by municipalities, but other parts would have to be acquired from landowners. One Benner Township resident, who declined to give her name after the meeting, spoke against the project. She said the proposed trail would go through her property and she would rather have her privacy. The trail, she said, would mean more garbage for her to pick up.

Joe Hartle, a farmer whose property would border the trail, said he was concerned about garbage. But overall he expressed support for the idea.

"Nobody is safe to ride a bicycle along this highway," Hartle said.

The study is slated for completion in mid-spring 2007. Buerkle said a draft of the recommendations for the project will be presented at a public meeting in the spring. If the participating municipalities decide to move forward with the project, Buerkle said it could take 10 to 15 years to complete.

Information about the project is available on the county Web site, www.co.centre.pa.us, or by calling 355-6791.

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