Herald-Star

LOCAL NEWS

Benefits of rec trail development in Jefferson County touted

By **Linda Harris** October 23, 2026 7 min read



Photo by LINDA HARRIS Soil & Water Conservation District Project Manager Aaron Dodds, right, said recreational trail development is having a positive impact on Jefferson County communities.

STEUBENVILLE -- With Piney Fork Trail and Preserve slated to officially open in two weeks, the Jefferson County commissioners agreed Thursday to use around $34,000 in oil and gas revenue to pay for a few finishing touches.

Jefferson Soil and Water Conservation District Project Manager Aaron Dodds told commissioners the last $139,720 of their American Rescue Plan Fund allotment was used to complete four miles of trail from Piney Fork to state Route 151, most of it -- nearly $128,000 -- going to contractors and suppliers based in Dillonvale, Rayland and Mount Pleasant.

He also pointed out Piney Fork Trail and Preserve is a continuation of investments in the area: Commissioners previously replaced the bridge on county Road 11; the Jefferson County Landbank has been removing blighted properties; and Smithfield Township has been looking to build a safety center.

"We're very happy that we were able to not only invest in the southern part of the county, an area that was heavily impacted by coal, but we were able to spend all the money in that area as well too," Dodds said. "So it was kind of a double impact on (that part of the county)."

The oil and gas funds will be used to get bollards in place to keep UTVs off the trail, install safety railings on the old railroad bridges, add benches along the trail and a parking area.

"The amazing part is we've been working on this the last two years," Dodds said. "We've seen six houses renovated in Piney Fork, and whenever we talk to (the owners), they've said it's because of the trail. Someone else actually built a house in Piney Fork because the trail is coming, so we're seeing investments within the community of Piney Fork -- and farther along the trail, there was a house, a 600-square-foot-house on half an acre, that just sold for $180,000 because they advertised it as having the Piney Fork Trail so it's a good selling point, this trail is seeing a lot of impacts."

Dodds said they've already scheduled a birdwalk in Piney Fork for Nov. 14, "and (Wednesday) night we hosted the government officials from the state of Ohio at Hellbender Preseve. They were only going to be there for an hour but ended up spending twice that amount of time because they were invested, they want to talk about it and learn how this is creating positive change. The word is getting out. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy has brought in the national media this year -- NPR just showcased us too -- so word is getting out and it's bringing people to Jefferson County."

Commissioner Tony Morelli proposed using oil and gas money to finish the work, calling it an appropriate use for those funds.

"It's perfect," Morelli said. "If you know any history, that was big, big coal country -- lots of tons of coal rolled across that track. I think the oil and gas money, that's what it's for. So I'll make that motion."

Dodds pointed out Piney Fork was once home to the largest coal mine in North America and the rail line was tied to the Wolf Run coal mine, just north of Amsterdam, which was the second largest.

"These communities have collapsed since coal went out," he said. "So, with what we're doing at the Roosevelt Inn and the trail, we're already seeing investments back in the community so it's gone beyond a conservation project and a recreation project -- it's a quality of life and revitalization thing."

Commissioner Jake Kleineke said they're fortunate to have oil and gas money to assist with projects.

"For what it's worth, you know when you get other county officials together throughout the state, you see the dire straits that some counties are facing compared to ours," he said. "We're very fortunate that the county, the people of the county, own so much property here that we're able to negotiate good deals with gasoline leases and different things, and then we're able to give that money back (to the community)."

Thursday also saw solar energy proponents Sean Logan and Tom Butch asking commissioners to consider an installation at the old Sammis plant property. But before they did, Logan, former ODNA director for the Strickland administration and a member of the Columbiana County Park District board, weighed in on trails as economic drivers.

"I 100% agree with that," he said. "They're fantastic for the local economy. Our trail is part of the Industrial Heartland Trail Region, which is a four-state (Ohio, West Virginia, Pennsylvania and the tip of New York) regional trail coalition. I believe the Great American Rail-Trail is part of that, also, so it's a fantastic achievement for the county and the entire region."

The two men said they have "no financial interest in "what we're talking about, we're just strong believers" in solar power.

"We've been talking to a couple of national solar energy developers and one thing they always ask about is local government support for a project," Logan said. "If a local government is supportive, if the local residents are supportive, then there's a good chance of going forward -- that's the main reason why we wanted to talk to you and see if there's any interest in it, if we can tell these developers that local government, local county commissioners, have any interest."

"Let me say this," Morelli said. "We don't own the property. We have nothing to do with that."

At the owner's request, commissioners did request a priority investment area designation for that area, which would open the door to financial and tax benefits designed to encourage redevelopment and business growth. The owner, at the time, had hopes of bringing a data center to Jefferson County, but opposition here and across the state has been fierce and the DeWine administration has paused permitting for them.

Morelli said their only involvement is that they "signed a piece of paper that basically said we're open to talking to somebody" about opportunities at the Sammis property, "but that doesn't mean we're involved in the decision making in any way. With any property that is privately held in this county, we have no control on (what it's used for)."

There is also a non-disclosure agreement in place with regard to the Jefferson County Port Authority's pursuit of development opportunities at the site.

Commissioner Eric Timmons said he fields calls on a regular basis based on misinformation.

"I got accused on Facebook the other day of selling out the county 'because of the data center we supposedly voted on.' I told the person we didn't vote on that but it didn't matter (to them)," Timmons said, calling the Sammis plant closing "catastrophic for that area, the revenue and the jobs (lost)."

"I'd like to see a new business on that industrial site -- that's why we voted to make it an opportunity zone," he said.

Commissioners also:

*Agreed to use up to $270,000 in bond funds to finance purchase of election equipment now being required by the state.

*Opened bids from Ohio-West Virginia Excavating of Powhattan Point, and Alan Stone of Vincent, Ohio, for the county Road 54 slip repair. The engineer's estimate was about $178,000.

*Signed a cooperative agreement with Steubenville to jointly apply for Ohio Public Works Commission funding to resurface a portion of county Road 43.

*Signed off on a resolution designating October as Breast Cancer Awareness month in Jefferson County.

*Approved the airport authority's contract with Shelly and Sands for the taxiway extension.

*Gave the sheriff permission to sell two 12-year-old SUVs to a salvage yard, where they can be destroyed. Both of them have "complete engine failure," and one also has transmission issues.