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LOCAL NEWS

Trail will boost region's economy

By **ROSS GALLABRESE** September 23, 2026 4 min read



Ross Gallabrese EXCITED ABOUT POSSIBILITIES — Steubenville Mayor Ralph Petrella was among the speakers at Tuesday's reception at Historic Fort Steuben.

STEUBENVILLE -- Completing an Ohio River crossing would not just help to fill in a major gap on the Great American Rail-Trail, it would help drive economic development across the region.

"This is the first gap that we really have between here and Washington, D.C., and the Ohio River is a barrier we have struggled with," explained Aaron Dodds, project manager for the Jefferson Soil and Water Conservation District. "The Market Street Bridge is a critical component in conquering that area. We're really looking at that because we have some opportunities to

build some trail here through Steubenville and then get out to the Hellbender Preserve and on to the Conotton Trail in Harrison County."

Dodds was speaking before a reception held Tuesday night at Historic Fort Steuben that brought together representatives of the Rails to Trails Conservancy and members of the community to discuss the trails, the proposed new bridge and the benefits they could bring to the region.

The visit came at the end of a leg of a three-day tour during which about 40 cyclists are using the trail to travel between Pittsburgh and Columbus.

"Connecting the towns is important because of the opportunities for economic development," said Kevin Belle, project manager for the Great American Rail-Trail at Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. "We know that when people go on trails, they spend money. It's really important for communities. We can see Weirton right there, but we have such a physical barrier of this river, and these communities need to be connected in a better way."

About 60 percent of the planned 3,700-mile trail is complete. When it is finished, it will connect Washington, D.C., with La Push, Wash., on the coast of the Pacific Ocean.

That makes completing the 4.1-mile gap between the end of the Panhandle Trail in Weirton and a crossing at the river, and the 10.1-mile gap between Steubenville and the Hellbender Preserve in Bloomingdale an important project.

While the site of a replacement for the now-closed Market Street Bridge has not been finalized, it's expected the new bridge will include access to and a lane for hikers and cyclists, which will fill in one of those gaps.

"That's exactly what we would like to see, and we believe that is exactly what should happen," Belle added. "That would be very helpful."

Finding a way to make that happen is important for the area.

"It would be huge," Steubenville Mayor Ralph Petrella said. "It would be a national entity coming to Steubenville and connecting to a national trail. That would mean a lot for Steubenville in regard to economic development, and the connection between Steubenville and Weirton would strengthen our economic ties.

"This is a regional economy, with a lot of travel across the state borders," he added. "To make that more accessible and to make that a stronger connection would be valuable to us."

Weirton Mayor Dean Harris agreed.

"This is a vital piece to this area," Harris said while speaking during the reception. "I believe very much in economic development. Steubenville has been a great partner with Weirton during the years and will continue to be."

According to information from the conservancy, there are only 4.1 miles of the trail that have not been completed in West Virginia -- the area between the head of the Panhandle Trail and the river. In Ohio, there are 79.2 miles that need to be finished.

"I have seen the economic impact communities have been getting from having bikers come through on the trail. They might stay all night, eat or buy a pair of shoes. It's just another positive thing for the region," added Jefferson County Commissioner Tony Morelli.

Estimates from the conservancy say that spending by those who use the trail will hit at least $229 million annually when it is completed.

"When you're trying to build a trail across a town, a trail across a region and a trail across the country, it is only as powerful as what it connects to," said Brandi Horton, vice president of communications for the conservancy. "So, when you hit a river, you can't go any farther, you can't get over to Ohio, you can't get over to West Virginia from either side. You're stuck. So what we

need to do is to be investing in ways people can walk and bike to places they want to go, and the places they need to go.”