

Final piece of canal path falling into place

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Michael Mancuso / The Times of Trenton

The Delaware & Raritan Canal State Park, near Old Rose Street, Trenton, which can be seen to the right. The last portion of the path is finally coming together.

TRENTON - You could say some cyclists are excited by the construction of the "missing link," a 1.5-mile stretch that connects a 70-mile nature trail along the Delaware and Raritan Canal.

Ernest Hahn, the executive director of the Delaware and Raritan Canal Commission, relays a story told to him by Department of Transportation workers, who were laying gravel and pouring asphalt on the trail even as one biker tried to navigate around them.

But cycling enthusiasts and champions of alternate modes of transportation say it's hard not to get excited -- the bike path that will connect Trenton to a 70-mile trail that stretches from Frenchtown to New Brunswick is well on its way to being completed.

There's still work to be done -- while workers finished laying the asphalt earlier this week, signs, fences and gates will need to be installed over the next year.

But the lion's share of the \$400,000 Department of Environmental Protection-funded project is finished, and local cyclists say they can't wait to take a crack at it.

"I know we have people who will want to ride it simply because it's open," said John Powers, a member of the Princeton Freewheelers cycling group. "And that includes myself."

The completion of the so-called "missing link" has been in the works for years.

A portion of the path, which winds along the D&R canal, was believed to have been buried underground when Route 1 was constructed in the 1950s.

The Trenton path ended at Old Rose Street and then picked up again 1.5 miles north at Mulberry Street, leaving pedestrians, cyclists and others clamoring for a completed trail.

Negotiations with freight company Conrail, which owned an easement alongside the D&R canal, finally resulted in the company releasing its easement on 12 acres and handing over two portions of land to the state to allow the trail to proceed.

The final piece now connects with an old path near Old Rose Street, where bikers, walkers and joggers will then be able to use an old railroad bridge to cross over Route 1 before continuing north to Mulberry Street.

"It's a really great way to open up the city for tourism," said Dan Fatton, chairman of the Trenton Cycling Revolution, an organization that works "to create a safe and healthy environment for bicyclists in Greater Trenton."

Besides commuters who will be able to use the path to get to and from work, Fatton said "hopefully people will take advantage of it to explore the historic sites that are prevalent in Trenton. I'm hoping people will use it. I know I will."

John Watson, vice president of D&R Greenway Land Trust, helped spearhead the project during his tenure as the Deputy Commissioner of the state DEP. The canal itself was built in the early 1800s, dug primarily by hand by Irish workers, and the pedestrian path that accompanied it for years was unbroken, save for the 1.5-mile stretch in Trenton, he said.

Flying overhead while doing aerial property surveys yesterday, he was finally able to see the progress that has been made in an area that was once choked with brush and litter.

"People in the Trenton community have been using this corridor for many, many years to get along the city and now it's a formal recreation path they can use and enjoy," he said. "Cities throughout the nation are looking for the opportunity to build bicycle paths like this."

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