

# Why not here?

As I write, it's Thursday night in Hancock, Md., and I'm at the end of day four of a six day journey by bicycle from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C. With two friends, we biked Monday through Wednesday on the Great Allegheny Passage Rail Trail from Pittsburgh to Cumberland, Md. Today, our travels took us onto the historic Chesapeake & Ohio Canal Towpath, which will lead us to the D.C. suburb of Georgetown by Saturday.

The adventure really started on the evening of Friday, Sept. 14, when we boarded AMTRAK in Atlanta bound for Pittsburgh. And, it won't end until the Monday after this column is published, when AMTRAK brings us back to Brookwood Station on Peachtree Street. In between, we'll rack up some 330 miles on the bike and create memories to last a lifetime.

Why ride all that way on these two trails? For one thing, because it sounded like fun. And, it is. But, for another, because I wanted to experience first hand these two trails that I so often tout as a perfect example of the economic and community impact greenway trails can have in Newton County.

This year, the Board of Newton Trails developed a new vision statement. It says: "We envision a healthy, vibrant, prosperous community connected



MAURICE CARTER  
COLUMNIST

to one another, to nature, to our history and to daily life through a system of greenway trails."

The GAP and C&O Canal trails are the living embodiment of that vision.

Healthy communities are found all along of these connecting trails. In the Pennsylvania towns of Connellsville, Ohiopyle, Confluence, Rockwood and Meyersdale, we've seen a steady mix this week of visitors and locals out biking, jogging, and walking their dogs. The same for Frostberg, Cumberland and Hancock so far in Maryland. We've met people in their 80s, families with small children, and nearly everything in between. The vibrancy comes from the energy brought to town by overnight guests and the welcoming atmosphere each community puts forth. The prosperity builds from the money we leave behind for lodging, food, and essentials. On a Monday night, our bed & breakfast in Connellsville is filled. Our inn keeper Lucille said 60 percent

or more of her business comes from people biking or hiking the GAP trail. She talks about the hard times that have hit the town as the steel industry closed up shop in Pennsylvania. But, she credits the trail with helping to turn things around.

It's been the same story in each of our overnight stops, where hotels, B&Bs, restaurants and bike shops are still springing up each season. A 2008 economic impact study estimated trail-related spending of \$41 million, leading to \$7.5 million in pages paid out in towns along the trail.

The trails connect people to one another. It's like a rolling small town as you encounter the same people each day on the trail and each night in town. And, the interactions with the townspeople are most special. The welcomes are genuine and the conversation comes easily.

The connections with nature are numerous and awe-inspiring. In addition to the natural wonders of the ever-present rivers and mountains, we've spied beavers, otters, deer, hawks, groundhogs, turtles, snakes and bird species too numerous to count. We've traveled through dense forests, remote wilderness, state parks, and national recreation areas. Dairy farms, cornfields and hay pastures paint a vivid portrait of the region's farming

heritage.

Historic markers, buildings, and sites are everywhere and run the gamut from the Industrial Revolution to the American Revolution and the Civil War. George Washington slept everywhere in these parts. Tomorrow, we bike through Antietam National Battlefield and end up for the night in Historic Harpers Ferry. Each day brings new insights into the birth of our nation and its struggles to reach today.

But, the connections to daily life are every bit as precious. Each new town along the way is a slice-of-life look at another small town way of life — in places very much like Covington, Porterdale, Oxford, Mansfield and Newborn. It's so easy to imagine the health, prosperity, and vibrancy a rail trail would bring to our towns.

John F Kennedy popularized the words of George Bernard Shaw: "Some people see things as they are and say why? I dream things that never were and say, why not?"

Well, I see things that are proven successful elsewhere and ask why not here?

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*Maurice Carter is a Covington resident, a native Atlantan, an IT consultant by profession, and an active community volunteer at heart. He can be reached at [mauricec7@bellsouth.net](mailto:mauricec7@bellsouth.net).*