

Inspired by the lively interest given by the audience of our Winter forum to the “nitty gritty” details of the trail system in Randolph Township, the Spring 2008 meeting of the Green Table consisted of an overview of the essentials of building a sustainable trail system, from original vision through writing a plan and choosing a design to putting shovels in the ground and keeping the grass from overgrowing the path.

Laura Szwak, Director of Statewide Greenways for New Jersey Conservation Foundation (NJCF), moderated the program, as well as led it off with a look at the New Jersey Trails Plan update. The Trails Plan, sponsored by both the Departments of Transportation (DOT) and Environmental Protection (DEP), is meant to be a strategic plan guiding the State in both the near-term (3-5 year Action Plan) and long-term (20-year Visioning Horizon) toward goals established by its citizens for the State Trails System. The update will take the 1996 Plan and results of visioning workshops, user surveys, and reviews of state-of-the-art trail practices and create a document that reflects public desires and practical steps to realize them. A draft Plan is due to be posted on the Web (www.njtrailsplan.org) shortly. Ms. Szwak also discussed the funding available as grants from the Recreational Trails program within DEP, which provides almost \$750,000 annually, divided into three categories (30% motorized trails, 30% non-motorized, 40% diversified). The category of motorized trails brought out several questions and sparked a longer discussion during the question-and-answer period, since all-terrain vehicle (ATV) trails are very limited and very controversial in the State. Ms. Szwak noted that the motorized trail funding essentially remained unspent from year to year.

For municipalities interested in beginning to plan a trail in town, she pointed to another on-line resource, Garden State Greenways (www.gardenstategreenways.org), a joint project of NJCF, DEP Green Acres, and Rutgers University, that provides computerized maps of localities and of the features like open space, water resources, vacant lots, and existing trail networks that can greatly influence the siting of a new trail. With the Garden State Greenway maps and images, interested trail builders can identify “hubs” (existing destinations) and “corridors” (potential connections) that will be the backbone of a successful trail system.

Christopher Rath, Township Manager for Roxbury, presented his town’s experience in writing a trails plan, an effort that they began in 2004 with the assistance of a grant from Kodak and they finished in 2005. Part of the reason for their success was in creating a comprehensive trails committee that featured representatives from all sections of Roxbury together with full governmental support and participation from the township Recreation Committee, mayor, and council, assisted by planners from Morris Land Conservancy. This broad spectrum of township stakeholders fostered a real sense of ownership of the plan in the minds of the participants, gaining much-needed support for the concept and for the implementation of trail projects around Roxbury. The goal was to create a “livable” trail system, one that included and united natural, residential, and commercial areas (the Ledgewood Mall being one of the hubs of the system), making Roxbury a more walkable community and producing and promoting positive lifestyle changes for its residents, as well as providing them access to more social and recreational opportunities via interconnections with neighboring trail networks, such as Berkshire Valley Wildlife Management Area.

A key to making the plan a reality, Mr. Rath commented, was to incorporate the trail system into all aspects of township planning and zoning, for example by obtaining trail easements on new developments that intersect the proposed paths. Making sure that such easements are filed and mapped is critical, as well as enforcing them when the time comes for building trail segments across private land with unaware landowners. Roxbury is working on the first of its trail projects, combining historical preservation of its Morris Canal site with volunteer work by a local Boy Scout troop to build a loop trail with a built-in attraction, as well as using a \$23,000 grant

from DOT to create loop and linear trails in Veterans Memorial Park that will be opening on June 7, National Trails Day. Looking forward, Roxbury expects to add connections to Patriots' Path, the County trail network, and to Horseshoe Lake Park, which has been identified as the County's #1 recreation site. Overall, trails in Roxbury are proving to be low-cost/low-maintenance recreation facilities that have increased partnerships both inside the Township and with its neighbors. Mr. Rath said that the Township accepted the challenge of stepping up from simple ownership to active stewardship of Roxbury's public resources, and he hoped to generate further publicity for the new trails to bring more people together on the same path.

Duncan Douglas, Trail Crew co-chair for Morris Trails Partnership, turned the discussion to the issue of building sustainable trails, that is, trails that work with Nature and thus are more durable and less prone to require constant maintenance. There are a number of preliminary issues that need to be addressed, he noted, before a trail crew is sent out into the field. The design of the trail, whether it is intended for recreational or community uses, must include consideration of the amount and types of signage to be displayed, the lighting necessary for safe use, the kinds of associated facilities (parking/rest areas/vendors/informational kiosks and directories) that should be included, the possibility of seasonal uses (such as cross-country skiing in winter months), and the permits required and buffer areas needed to properly include sensitive environmental features within the trail users' experience. The need to integrate the trail system into the community also includes the need to have community organizations like first responders (police, fire, EMT) included in the stakeholder meetings. He recommended keeping the design group small and having good maps available, with all design decisions backed up by field visits along the proposed route.

In building the trail, Mr. Douglas stressed the need to understand the basics of natural systems like water flow across the ground and the growth and aging of trees and their roots in order to site the trail appropriate, as well as to remember to include sight lines that show off Nature's beauties. Plan, as well, to revisit a new trail at least a year after it is opened to see how it is being used and what additional work ("polishing and buffing") it may need, he encouraged the audience. He strongly recommended that trail builders use *Trail Solutions*, a manual on trail building published by the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA). Despite the occasional animosity toward mountain bikers, he has found them to be strong trail advocates willing to volunteer for trail maintenance projects in "adopt-a-trail" programs. Jersey Off-Road Bicycle Association (JORBA) is one group with which he has partnered successfully, for example.

Mr. Douglas included some very specific dos and don'ts in his presentation, as well, warning novice trail builders to use stone dust as a trail medium ahead of most of the typically available mixtures like quarry process (QP) or dense-grade aggregate (DGA), which are often uncomfortable for hikers due to large rock fragments being included, or wood chips, which decompose rapidly, leaving a mushy trail that requires frequent resurfacing. He illustrated his list with a series of photos of bad and good trail examples, notably selecting Randolph Township's work (clear trail signs, posted and gated road crossings) for its positive impact on both helping and guarding trail users as well as advertising the existence of the trails themselves to non-users like motorists. He concluded with a comment on the ways that trails can be abandoned, using natural blocks like tree falls, when the time comes to close or re-route segments of the trail system.

In the question-and-answer period, Ms. Szwak helped to introduce the other trail experts who were present at the forum from the NY/NJ Trail Conference and the NJ Trails Council, as well as Randolph Township assistant manager Tom Russo, who contributed his town's experiences in dealing with issues like security and resident resistance (NIMBY - "not in my backyard") during trail planning and construction. Mr. Rath corroborated, noting that Roxbury's biggest security

issue, like Randolph's, was all-terrain vehicle (ATV) use. Acquiring access to connecting property by easement was a very popular subject for discussion. Bill O'Hearn of NY/NJ Trail Conference described a short-term "revocable agreement" that his organization uses as a first step for property owners who are reluctant to open their land up for public access. The brevity of the agreement (limited to one page) and its 60-day notice provision for the property owner to cancel help to eliminate fears of protracted legal entanglements, allowing suspicious owners to have a chance to see how a properly managed trail can be a good neighbor. Questions on accessibility of trails for physically challenged users (such as Americans with Disabilities Act requirements) brought Dave Helmer, executive director of the Morris County Park Commission, into the discussion. He explained that community needs should drive the decision on what percentage of a trail network should be graded and maintained to allow and promote use by people who may be less than robust, like seniors. In response to a question regarding the Highlands Act, Ms. Szwak noted that trails are one of the 17 listed exemptions within the Act, meaning that they do not require additional approval from the Highlands Council. Following a spirited common conversation on motorized trail uses (ATVs), the forum adjourned into many individual conversations as audience members continued to debate trail topics as well as to pick up some of the informative handouts that the presenters thoughtfully provided.

- Eugene Reynolds