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Schuylkill River Greenways has a plan to complete trail in Berks

The organization unveiled a plan to complete the Reading-to-Hamburg portion of the Schuylkill River Trail.



The Schuylkill River Trail follows the Bartram Trail along Industrial Drive in Hamburg. The Schuylkill River Greenways has a plan to complete the Reading-to-Hamburg portion of the trail. (BILL UHRICH – READING EAGLE)

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A plan is in place.

Connecting Philadelphia with Frackville in Schuylkill County with 120 miles of trails winding along the banks of the Schuylkill River is not an easy task to complete. It requires detailed planning and lots of collaboration with community partners.

So far, about 80 miles of the trail exists, leaving 40 more to build. About half of that is in northern Berks County, with significant gaps appearing between Reading and Hamburg.

But [Schuylkill River Greenways has now charted a path forward](#) that would close them.

At a Berks County operations meeting this week, leaders of the organization unveiled a study for completing the Schuylkill River Trail as it winds its way through the county. The study presents the most feasible, constructible 20-mile trail segment that will finally connect Reading with Hamburg.

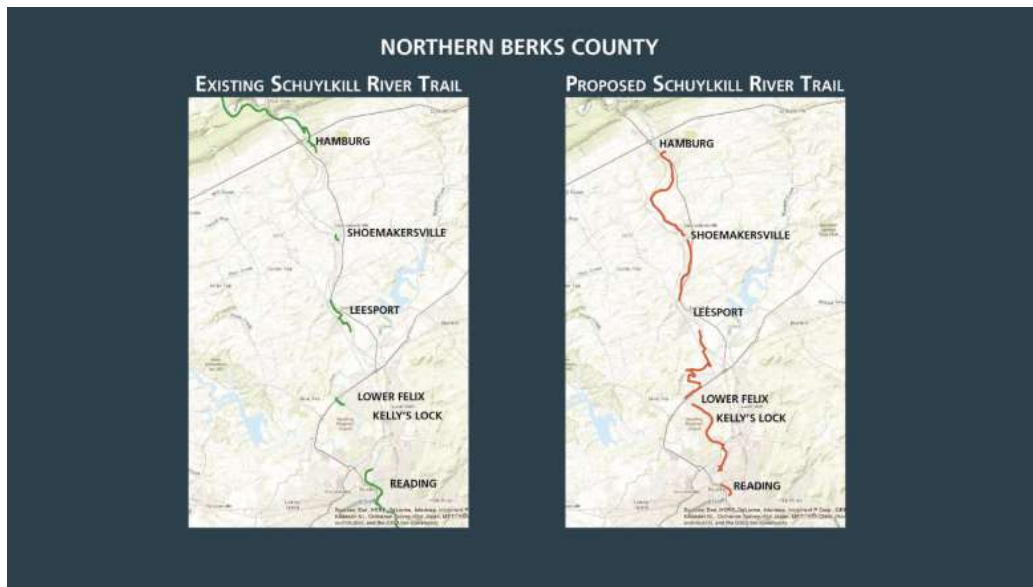
Elaine Schaefer, executive director of Schuylkill River Greenways, told the county commissioners that turning the plan into a reality will require a lot of help.

To complete the remaining 20 miles of trail, Schaefer said, the organization will work with municipalities and other community partners to develop engineering plans, secure funding for construction and begin the building process.

Schaefer told the commissioners that at this point they are taking the plan on the road in an attempt to find partners. The group has already presented its findings to Bern Township officials and will make the same presentation to Hamburg officials next month.

“Right now, we have two big construction projects going on in Schuylkill County and we can only handle two big projects at once,” she said. “So we are really begging community members to help. Whoever puts their hand up first is going to be the next section of trail to get built.”

The effort will require high levels of coordination, as the path laid out in the plan calls for portions of the trail to be built in 17 municipalities.



But all of the work that needs to be done will be well worth the effort, Schaefer said.

Schaefer said that once the trail is constructed through additional areas of Berks and Schuylkill counties, those areas will benefit from the recreation resource, economic development, increased transportation opportunities, health benefits and community building opportunities that the established parts of the trail have experienced.

“We are excited to get going and build the rest of the trail,” she said.

Schaefer is hopeful a lot of the projects needed to connect the trail can be started simultaneously so the entire plan can be put



The Schuylkill River Trail follows State Street in Hamburg. The Schuylkill River Greenways will work with municipalities and community partners to help close gaps in the trail between Reading and Hamburg. (BILL UHRICH – READING EAGLE)

“If it’s just us and we are only doing two projects at a time, we’re looking at an even longer horizon,” she said.

Schaefer also stressed the alignment of the trail is a suggested path that came about after working with community members and engineers to put one down on paper. She said they have not spoken to every single landowner along the trail and have several different alignments for each section because they are aware they will probably not get permission from all the landowners.

“This is the preferred alignment right now and if the world was perfect all of these landowners would raise their hands and say, sure you can come on my land,” she said. “But we have alternatives where there is a landowner conflict.”

Julia Hurlle, director of trails for the organization, said they compiled information from a variety of sources over the course of the past year to complete the study.

A consultant team was hired to prepare the feasibility study. Working with Schuylkill River Greenways and a regional steering committee, the consultant team analyzed the existing gaps in the trail, sought input through public workshops and presentations, conducted a survey and interviewed stakeholders to come up with the recommended route.

The steering committee included trail users, municipal officials, business owners, property owners, the Berks County Planning Commission and elected officials at all levels of state government.

“We cannot build this all ourselves so we need to work with community partners to accomplish this,” Hurlle said. “We are going to need partners up and down the trail system to start getting some of these sections built.”

Berks County Commissioners Chairman Christian Leinbach expressed excitement about the prospects of completing the trail and said it highlights the county’s long history.



“What this trail connects is history,” he said. “If you look at the Schuylkill River Trail, it largely follows the old canal system that went all the way from Schuylkill County down to Philadelphia. You can still see those canals in different areas. This was a significant part of our history.”

Leinbach also lauded the work of Schuylkill River Greenways.

“There are a lot of good things here and the trails really do work,” he said. “We look forward to seeing where this goes in the future.”

Berks County Commissioner Michael Rivera also expressed excitement about the plan.

“It’s great to see what you’re working on,” he said. “Beside the history element and economic development opportunities, getting out into nature has proven to be beneficial for people physically and mentally.”

The county contributed to the funding of the study, along with the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development, the Berks County Community Foundation and the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission.

Schuylkill River Greenways owns and manages the portion of the trail that goes through Berks and Schuylkill counties.

To view the entire feasibility study or for more information about the project, visit schuylkillriver.org.



Karen Shuey | Government and policy reporter

Karen Shuey joined the Reading Eagle staff in 2015. She covers county government as well as policy issues at the state and federal level with a local focus. Before arriving at the Reading Eagle, Karen covered policy issues in Harrisburg and Washington for LNP. She is a graduate of Temple University with a degree in journalism.

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