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Group looks at watershed trail system

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A local group is examining the possibility of creating a trail system along the creeks from Hamilton Township through Millstone, also running through Allentown and Upper Freehold.

The Crosswicks Creek / Doctors Creek Watershed Regional Greenway Planning Group, that is conducting the feasibility study, comprises representatives from Allentown, Hamilton, Upper Freehold, Washington, Millstone and Plumsted. The group formed a Greenway Plan, a master plan, intended to protect water quality, preserve historic vistas and sites, and to develop a system of trails.

Depending on the conditions along the waterways, the types of trails will vary. For example, on some trails, there will be pedestrian or horse trails, and in others there will be natural trails, paved trails or canoe trails.

Walter Helfrecht, of the Greenway Group said there are a lot of good reasons to create the trails. "The trails that are known (already in existence) are used," he said. "They give a chance to escape from the high-speed pace of everyday life, and you have a chance to contemplate and go with the flow."

He said he does not think there are any negative aspects of having the trails there, but warned that the trails "do not maintain themselves." If created, the group would have to look into how they would be maintained, whether by a private company, by individuals, municipalities, or through the county or state.

The proposed project, known as "The Doctors Creek to Assunpink Trail", is a subpart of a larger trail — The Capital to Coast Trail — outlined in the Greenway Plan that the group hopes will ultimately connect trails running in municipalities from Mercer through Burlington and Monmouth counties and ultimately connecting to areas in North Jersey near Morristown, said Mr. Helfrecht.

The Doctors Creek to Assunpink Trail would run for about 13 miles along Doctors Creek beginning at the confluence of Doctors and Crosswicks creeks in Hamilton Township and connecting to the existing trail system in the southwestern portion of the Assunpink Wildlife Management Area, he said. The trails would go through a southerly portion of Allentown, near Heritage Park and the lake, and behind the Allentown Presbyterian Church and through Lakeview Drive. The other end of the lake in Allentown becomes a

creek again, and runs through Upper Freehold, finding its way into Millstone and then hooks up with Assunpink tributaries, he added.

"There are a number of trails in the Assunpink area, which are just specific to that (area), and they hook up to other places in Millstone," Mr. Helfrecht said. "That's what the whole feasibility (study) is trying to explore."

Right now, the Greenway Group is in the middle of the engineering work, and putting the final feasibility study together, with the help of an environmental consultant, Forbes Environmental and Land Use Planning.

Members of the group put together proposals on the feasibility study idea and approached the local municipalities that would be affected by the trail, including, Allentown, Upper Freehold, Millstone and Hamilton Township. The municipalities each contributed \$2,500 toward the project, equaling \$10,000. Then, the group received a matching grant from the state's Department of Environmental Protection for \$10,000, bringing the project's total funding to \$20,000, said Mr. Helfrecht.

Before the project can move forward, the group will present the idea at a public meeting at 7 p.m. on Sept. 5 at The Allentown First Aid Squad building on Waker Avenue. The group will present the results from survey questionnaires it sent to about 250 landowners in the area where the trails would run, said Mr. Helfrecht. So far, Mr. Helfrecht said there have not been many responses.

After that, "there would be a report along with a finalized map of how the feasibility study came out," he said. "If it finds the level of interest is high enough and the people want to go with it, the report will probably go in the positive direction."

However, concerns might be raised by landowners who do not want the trails running through their properties, said Mr. Helfrecht. If that is the case, the group will discuss alternatives to get around those concerns.

If the project is approved, the group would need to obtain conservation easements on the affected properties.

A conservation easement is legal permission that allows a certain activity to occur on a person's property, said Mr. Helfrecht. That would include allowing people, horses, etc., to pass through the property depending on the type of trail, he said. The conservation easement would apply to future owners of the land if a homeowner sells his or her property, he added.

(The above article's contents have had some minor corrections made that fix several transcription errors and mis-quotes. The bulk of the article is intact and as it was published in the August 3, 2006 edition of the Messenger-Press.)