

# Towpath Trail Stage 1

## Purpose and Need

### Background

The Towpath Trail has become a defining feature in the Cuyahoga Valley landscape. Constructed 175 years ago as part of the Ohio & Erie Canal, it began as a simple dirt path on which to lead animals pulling canal boats. Today it has become an extraordinary recreational amenity, highlighting Cleveland's industrial river valley, and serving both its surrounding neighborhoods and region.

The canal, which was proving to be unprofitable, was finally destroyed and ceased being used after a catastrophic flood struck the area in 1913. Large remnants of the towpath survived and served as a silent witness to an earlier era until the area's rediscovery came with the establishment of the Cuyahoga Valley National Park in 1974.

One of the major projects completed by the National Park Service in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park was the conversion of approximately 20 miles of the towpath into a multi-use trail that brings visitors into close contact with nature and the remnants of the valley's history and culture. The Towpath Trail today receives more than 1.7 million users per year.

The success of this segment of the Towpath Trail has sparked a campaign to extend the trail as one of three primary transportation options that serve the 110-mile linear heritage greenway now called the Ohio & Erie National Heritage Canalway (Ohio & Erie Canalway). Unique public/private partnerships have congealed to address individual segments of this expanding Towpath Trail system in Cuyahoga, Summit, Stark, and Tuscarawas counties. In addition, the Towpath Trail acts as the northern leg of the developing Ohio-to-Erie Trail which extends from Cincinnati through Columbus and on to Cleveland.

In Cuyahoga County, Cleveland Metroparks has completed two additional segments of the Towpath Trail in its Ohio & Erie Canal Reservation, located immediately north of the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, adding six miles of trail. The northern terminus of the Towpath Trail is now at old Harvard Avenue, which is where the Stage 1 Extension would begin.

In 1999, the Cuyahoga County Planning Commission (CPC) published Linking the Corridor: A Plan for the Towpath Trail in the North Cuyahoga Valley Corridor. This document is a guide plan for the future design and construction of the approximately six-mile long trail segment from the Metroparks Reservation at old Harvard Avenue to downtown Cleveland at the proposed Canal Basin Park, which will incorporate the original terminus of the Ohio & Erie Canal with the Cuyahoga River. The plan includes an inventory of existing conditions and resources within the study area; an examination of route alternatives, their feasibility and impacts; and implementation strategies. These are all being taken into consideration in the development of this Stage 1 Extension of the Towpath Trail.



Following the 1999 CPC plan for the Towpath Trail, the Ohio and Erie Canal Association (OECA) released a management plan for the development of the entire Ohio & Erie Canalway. The Canalway Management Plan (CMP) envisioned a linear heritage greenway from Cleveland's lakefront south to Dover / New Philadelphia, Ohio. The CMP outlined a programmatic approach that would attract reinvestment in historic settings, conservation of the natural environment, expansion of recreational facilities and opportunities, and stimulation for new business and commercial developments. The report forecasted that the Canalway would become a focal point of visitation and a generator of economic benefits, and will be an engine for local economic development. It noted that investment in the corridor improvements will create jobs and economic opportunities and will ripple through the economy through local spending, citing estimates of an additional 3.3 million new residents and visitors spending an estimated \$69 million per year.

The CMP offered an implementation plan, which the project team closely followed during the development of this Stage 1 Towpath Trail Extension. Some of these recommendations which the Towpath Design Team is incorporating into the project include:

- Promoting the preservation of natural and scenic vistas for future generations
- Developing an interpretive program that combines existing resources and new initiatives to convey a coherent story of the Canal
- Promoting the creation of a continuous multi-use trail along the entire length of the Corridor
- Encourage the creation of additional recreation and open spaces along the Corridor
- Advocate trail, roadway, and greenway linkages between the Canal Corridor and adjacent neighborhoods and park systems.

Incorporating the plans from both the OECA and the CPC and working closely with members of the local community, the Towpath Design Team will seek solutions that provide an economic catalyst for the surrounding neighborhoods and communities. The Design Team will also plan for additional recreational and green space opportunities for both local residents and visitors coming from outside the immediately adjacent communities. Additionally, the Design Team will produce a plan that provides new connectivity between local communities to over one hundred miles of multi-use trails.

## Overview

This Stage 1 Extension project proposes to extend the multi-use Towpath Trail a distance of 0.75 miles from its current terminus at old Harvard Avenue north along the banks of the Cuyahoga River and ending at the recently redeveloped Steelyard Commons site where a private developer has already completed the second stage of the Towpath Trail Extension.

The project will encompass the first stage (Stage 1) out of a five-stage process that will see the Towpath Trail extended by approximately six miles. Once all five stages are complete, the Towpath Trail will provide connectivity to 90 miles of multi-use trails, extending throughout the Cuyahoga Recreational Valley to downtown Cleveland. In downtown Cleveland, the trail will connect to the proposed Canal Basin Park, a gateway park that will orient visitors with information on the Ohio & Erie Canalway.



## **Current Conditions**

The study area through which the current proposed trail alignment runs is primarily an industrial area containing steel mills, railroad tracks, and chemical plants. Neighborhoods, including Old Brooklyn, Clark-Metro, Brooklyn Centre, and Tremont, along with the villages of Cuyahoga Heights and Newburgh Heights, lie just beyond the industrial valley. The trail itself would run primarily along the banks of the Cuyahoga River keeping a safe distance from these industrial areas.

## **Goals and Objectives**

There are several important community and regional goals and objectives for this project, including:

- Providing an economic stimulus to neighboring communities, through increased neighborhood connectivity, providing increased access to restaurants, shopping, and events in the surrounding neighborhoods.
- Providing additional access to green space, through environmental regeneration and the development of connector trails, particularly in the parts of Cleveland that are undergoing rapid residential development
- Integrating the Towpath Trail into Cleveland's citywide bicycle plan which will provide bicycle connectivity throughout the entire metropolitan area, strengthening the connections between communities.
- Protecting waterways, wetlands, and other natural resources through environmental regeneration and the creation of additional green space in the valley.
- Promoting sound environmental practices in project design and implementation
- Communicating the story of the Canal and its industrial history to people throughout the Corridor through interpretive design.

## **Logical Termini**

Stage 1 of the Towpath Trail Extension will connect the trail from its current terminus at old Harvard Avenue to the Steelyard Commons development. At Steelyard Commons, the Stage 1 Extension will connect with Stage 2 of the trail extension which has already been completed by a private developer.

## **Agency Mandates and Legislation**

The Towpath Trail Extension is part of The Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency's (NOACA) Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP), and is also included as part of the city of Cleveland's Master Bikeway plan.

## **Purpose and Need**

The Stage 1 Towpath Trail Extension is being proposed as a way to:



- Provide connectivity between old Harvard Avenue, where the trail currently ends, to Steelyard Commons where Stage 2 of the Towpath Trail has already been built by a private developer, as well as provide connectivity between the local neighborhoods to over 90 miles of multi-use trails.
- Promote economic development in the neighborhoods along the trail
- Provide a safe recreational area with new green space in environmental regeneration areas  
Provide Connectivity to Over 90 Miles of Multi-Use Trails and to Cleveland's Citywide Bicycle Plan
- Residents of the Cleveland neighborhoods and communities which line the east and west sides of the Cuyahoga River Valley do not have direct trail access to the extensive trail system that runs throughout the city of Cleveland and throughout the Cuyahoga River Valley. Cyclists, pedestrians, and rollerblade users currently have to either use old Harvard Avenue, a busy road used mostly by large trucks, or get in their cars and drive to a trailhead to access the Towpath Trail.

Providing new connectivity is part of the Canal Management Plans goal of promoting community and economic development by unifying and strengthening connections between communities and neighborhoods. The Towpath Trail Extension will address this need by forming a trail network with contiguous connections to the Lakefront Bikeway, Emerald Necklace, Big Creek Trail, West Creek Trail, Mill Creek Trail, Train Avenue Trail, Treadway Ravine and the City Loop Trail. This off-road trail network will also connect into Cleveland's citywide bicycle plan with its dedicated street routes that will interface with the trail network that will be anchored by the Towpath Trail. The result: these connections will provide uninterrupted bikeway access from the neighborhoods and communities in the vicinity of the Towpath Trail to more than 90 miles of trails through the federally designated Ohio & Erie Canalway. Additionally, the Towpath Trail will serve as the northeast Ohio section of the State of Ohio's developing Ohio-to-Erie Trail, linking Cincinnati to Columbus and on to Cleveland.

### **Rejuvenate Local Neighborhoods**

The Canal Management Plan lists community and economic development as one of its major goals, and lists the addition of multi-modal access into the local neighborhoods as a key element to meeting this goal.

The Towpath Trail Extension will provide this much needed multi-modal access which will introduce new visitors to the neighborhoods which surround the trail in a way that meets the goals mentioned in the Canalway Management Plan. Instead of having to drive to local neighborhoods, Towpath Trail users will be able to walk, rollerblade, or ride their bikes. This new access will provide a new influx of people that might not have otherwise visited these distinct historical neighborhoods and will provide a prime opportunity for economic growth in these communities, repositioning the very core of Cleveland's settlement to attract a new marketplace of city dwellers. These alternative mode choices, such as walking, biking, or rollerblading, will alleviate the negative impacts that come with driving, such as noise and air pollution, as well as traffic congestion and limited parking.



## **Provide a Safe Recreational Area with New Green Space in Environmental Regeneration Areas**

Another goal of the Canal Management Plan is to enhance the recreation and visitor experience by creating a safe visitor experience in the recreational and open spaces along the corridor. With the development of planned residential properties in nearby Tremont, Cleveland's downtown area, and other local neighborhoods and communities, access to additional green space becomes vitally important and the Towpath Trail Extension can help to meet this demand.

Residential communities in downtown areas want to be able to enjoy the same type of access to recreational activities and natural areas that are frequently provided to suburban communities and the Towpath Trail Extension will provide those opportunities to these urban residents. Greenways such as the Towpath Trail encourage interaction among their users, provide opportunities to explore the outdoors, create re-vegetation efforts that decrease air pollution, and promote exercise.

Over the generations of urban development and industrial use, the natural systems of the valley have been overlooked in favor of the needs of manufacturing and transportation of materials. The development of a trail and greenway through this landscape provides the opportunity to refocus attention on improving and correcting the natural systems of the river valley allowing for the natural systems and industrial uses to co-exist and work in partnership.

The additional green space will be created through the development of the greenway associated with the Towpath Trail itself and through the environmental regeneration of the surrounding landscape. Some areas along the trail are ripe for ecological restoration while others will provide opportunities for picnic areas and rest-stops where interpretive stories will be shared.

Due to the industrial history of area, environmental regeneration is needed in the project area. Opportunities may exist where restoration of natural areas can be incorporated where trail users can access the river's edge, fishing areas, and the valley's scenic vistas. These areas will serve as buffer zones from industrial activity by providing for green space between the immediate trail and the industrial activities in the area. The areas will also assist in flood control by providing additional wetlands.

## **Conclusion**

The study area through which the current proposed trail alignment runs is primarily an industrial area containing steel mills, railroad tracks, and chemical plants. Neighborhoods, including Old Brooklyn, Clark-Metro, Brooklyn Centre, and Tremont, along with the villages of Cuyahoga Heights and Newburgh Heights, lie just beyond the industrial valley. The trail itself would run primarily along the banks of the Cuyahoga River keeping a safe distance from these industrial areas.

