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Support for 'Secret Valley' rail line from Boyertown to Pottstown picks up steam

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Volunteers, including members of the Pottstown Roller Derby Rockstars, recently volunteered to clean up along the tracks of the Colebrookdale Railroad.

Plans for a tourist excursion railroad on the eight-mile Colebrookdale line between Pottstown and Boyertown are moving forward and picking up support, most recently from a team of 40-or-so volunteers to get together to do a clean-up along the route.

Last weekend, the volunteers, led by the [Pottstown Roller Derby Rockstars](#) and folks in Montgomery County's ARD program performing court-ordered community service, picked up trash along the right of way.

Berks County Subway provided lunch for all volunteers, and the Pottstown Health and Wellness Foundation provided water.

J.P. Mascaro & Sons provided two dumpsters.

The clean up was coordinated by the Beanie Clark and Pottstown Mayor Bonnie Heath, with support from the Borough of Pottstown, said Nathaniel Guest — the lawyer, historic preservation advocate, Pottsgrove High School graduate and railroad enthusiast spearheading the effort to transform the infrequently used freight line into

an historic passenger attraction named “The Secret Valley Rail Line.”

He said the number of volunteers who showed up is just one indication of the kind of support the idea is drawing from all quarters.

Last month, Guest conducted an update of the project for both the Pottstown and Boyertown borough councils.

He was there, he said, to let both bodies know where the project stands and to get updates and to seek their input about what they hope to see from the project.

It's important, he said, to ensure that the railroad is integrated into major events in both Boyertown and Pottstown so that it enhances those events and does not interfere with them.

“So, for example, Pottstown has things like the BMX race, and the Fourth of July and the Volleyball Rumble, and we want to make sure the railroad is at the heart of those things,” he said.

Of primary interest to both boroughs, said Guest, is the project's potential to drive revitalization and economic growth.

“In addition to this project affecting the physical imprint of both communities, and to provide a learning laboratory for school children, this project really has the ability to create jobs and to boost, in a major way, economic growth for both boroughs,” Guest said Friday.

The latest successful benchmark for the project has been the completion of the implementation plans and economic analysis, which are currently being “fine-tuned.”

“We need to look at the market in more detail” to ensure that initial estimates of attracting 20,000 to 30,000 a year are validated, Guest said.

Those studies, which cost in the \$40,000 range, were funded by a variety of sources, including the Redevelopment Authority of Berks County, the Pennsylvania Department of conservation and Natural Resources, as funneled through from the Schuylkill River Heritage Area and the Schuylkill Highlands, as well as money from both Pottstown and Boyertown, which re-purposed a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development.

Guest said the project has also made it into the “capital bill” in two places, put there by state Sen. Judy Schwenk, D-11th Dist., and supported by many legislators in Harrisburg — “every elected official I have written to for support and written me back and said ‘absolutely,’” Guest said.

The bill does not mean that money has been allotted for funding, only that it is approved to receive funding

Such diverse funding sources also demonstrate the wide support the project enjoys, Guest said.

But it's not as if money is exactly flowing into the coffers — at least not yet.

“I'm entertaining all ideas, particularly the ones written on the back of big checks,” Guest joked.

But it's important, he said more seriously, to be sure the project is undertaken at a level adequate enough to ensure its survival.

“There is some pressure to get this moving, but we need to avoid the temptation, I think, to put something in place just to put something in place,” he warned.

“The idea behind this is to make this an enjoyable, worthwhile experience for everyone, not just railroad enthusiasts,” he explained.

“So we want people to say ‘oh Pottstown, I’ve been there. That’s where they have that great railroad trip.’ It’s a loss for us and a loss for Pottstown and Boyertown if people say ‘I remember that place. It’s where we went on that awful train ride,’” Guest said.

As a result, he said, the trust needs to be sure to raise adequate funding for the project to ensure it is a quality attraction from the start.

“I would not feel comfortable with less than \$4 million, and I think the project would be implemented at an even higher level with more,” Guest said, emphasizing that without the economic analysis, any figure he offers is just an educated guess.

For example, having a stop mid-way, that featured anything from a historically accurate hobo camp from the early 20th century; to a “Christmas Village,” or corn maze, picnic grove, or other seasonal attraction, adds value to the ride and turns it from a quick visit to a full-day affair.

“When you have things like the carousel and the mini-golf and [maybe the park train in Pottstown](#), and the automobile museum and farmer’s market in Boyertown, all of which benefit from higher numbers of foot traffic, and you have something that’s worth spending an entire day,” said Guest.

“To ensure the viability of this, we have to appear to funders as a united front that is working together, and I think the meeting with Pottstown and Boyertown council helps to demonstrate that, as does the support from the community, in terms of the volunteers willing to give up a Saturday or Sunday to clean up along the line to the hundreds of people who have liked us on [our Facebook page](#) on [Twitter](#) and [visited our web site](#),” said Guest.

In fact, he said, that’s one of the best ways people can help support the project right now, by visiting those sites. “I know it sounds simple, but it makes a difference, those numbers really demonstrate support,” he said.

Because support will be needed, but financial and otherwise, even when the rail line is up and running, said Guest.

“No matter how you run the numbers, this project will provide a lot of good jobs, but running a railroad is labor intensive,” he said, “and we are always going to need volunteers in some capacity.”

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