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March to benefit Westmoreland County trail

By Julie Martin

An annual event to raise money for county parks is expanding its efforts — and that means bringing the fundraiser into Murrysville to help cover the cost of expanding a recreational trail.

The March for Parks, a success at Twin Lakes Park for the past 10 years, is now taking place at multiple locations on March 29. Among those spots is SportZone on School Road South, where participants will meet and, from there, hike through Duff Park.

Last year's effort attracted nearly 600 participants and raised about \$64,000. As the fundraiser has evolved over the past 10 years, those behind it decided to double, or rather, triple, their efforts.

“We think that from the point of view of the people living in different parts of the county, having different events that make it more convenient for residents that live in different locations is a reasonable thing to do,” said Jeff Richards, parks planning coordinator for Westmoreland County.

This is the first year that the March for Parks will take place at three locations. In addition to Twin Lakes and the Murrysville sites, a walk also will be held at Cedar Creek Park in Belle Vernon to raise money for a dog park. According to organizers, it's likely that the multi-site approach will be used in the future, too.

“Each march is a little bit different and a little custom tailored to its own greenway or park,” Richards said.

For Malcolm Sias, director of parks and recreation for Westmoreland County, the response shows that people care about the recreational facilities in their communities.

“I think people love their county parks and they love their trails that we've been doing around the county.”

The support of county residents goes a long way, not only in dollars, but in proving to potential donors that the projects are viable.

“(Foundations) basically say, ‘We want to see the grassroots pull on this. Are they really willing to invest in this and make it happen?’”

And in the past, residents have shown that that's the case.

Sias cites a skate park project at Twin Lakes as an example. Children and parents who wanted the skate park hosted fundraisers, such car washes and concerts, and ultimately raised \$30,000.

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“That's basically telling the foundations we have tremendous support from people who are out there willing to help themselves to get this done,” Sias said.

“That convinced everybody else that it was a worthwhile project and worth doing.”

Because of their involvement, the residents take ownership of facilities once they are complete, he said.

“There's a lot of good that comes out of that,” he said. “It's giving people the chance to effect their own neighborhoods.”

To raise money, participants take donations, either individually or as a team before the event. Businesses are also invited to participate as sponsors.

The money will go toward projects in their respective areas. The donations have helped in the past with local matching dollars required for park projects, Richards said.

The money raised at the Murrysville march will be put toward acquiring a segment of the Turtle Creek Industrial Railroad Corridor. The nine-and-a-half mile section will run from Export to Trafford, weaving through Murrysville, Penn Township and Monroeville. It will be developed for walkers and bikers.

“It's a great stretch, and in the bigger picture, it's a westward expansion of the Westmoreland Heritage Trail,” he said.

The Westmoreland Heritage Trail currently runs from Saltsburg, in Indiana County, to Delmont.

According to Richards, those at the county level are working with communities along the trail to determine how to best integrate it into their communities.

All told, trail acquisition will cost more than \$1.06 million, according to Richards. A land survey and environment assessments also will be completed.

A sales agreement with Export-based Durabond, which owns the land, is already in place, having been formalized in September.

“So that agreement gives us a framework to move forward,” he said.

The agreement dictates that the money for trail acquisition be secured and the closing on the property be completed within a year.

“It's a big project and at this point, we're trying to drum up some more support through March for Parks,” Richards said.