

Federal BUILD Grant Would Fund \$38 million Trail Project

The vision is clear: A scenic recreation and commuter trail that rivals San Antonio's Riverwalk snaking along the Lehigh River, from Allentown to Whitehall Township.

It's part of a \$38 million project designed to close the largest gap along the 165-mile D&L Trail, connecting urban, suburban and rural neighborhoods along a 3.5-mile stretch that has been identified as Pennsylvania's highest priority trail gap.

The Lehigh Valley Planning Commission, with help from dozens of business, government and community partners, has applied for a \$19.6 million federal grant to make it happen.

The Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) grant would be added to \$18.4 million in matching funds that includes money from state grants, the City of Allentown and The Waterfront Development Company – the Jandl Enterprises-owned company that owns the right-of-way and is building a \$425 million business and residential park along Allentown's riverfront.

“This project would tackle the most difficult trail gap in the 165-mile D&L Trail,” said LVPC Director of Development Tracy Oscavich, who helped prepare the 30-page grant application. “This section, due to its urban nature, would be more than a biking and pedestrian trail. It would essentially become a robust multimodal commuter's corridor.”

The trail would extend from the Hamilton Street bridge in Allentown, through The Waterfront project, beyond Route 22 and north into Whitehall Township. The section through The Waterfront would include a Riverwalk outside of several proposed office buildings, restaurants and hundreds of riverfront apartments.

The Riverwalk will overlook the Lehigh River, connecting two outdoor plazas and an amphitheater, while the corridor connects to other regional trails including the Jordan Creek Greenway Trail, Northern Lehigh Rail Trail, Lehigh River Water Trail, Slate Heritage Trail, 911 Memorial Trail and the Appalachian Trail.

Once complete the trail would give neighborhoods greater access to the Lehigh River and improve safety by enabling people to navigate between different housing and work zones without getting into their cars.

“It will provide safe, efficient transportation mode choices by connecting roadways, transit, sidewalks and trails into a seamless rural-to-suburban-to-urban corridor,” said LVPC Executive Director Becky Bradley. “The linking of the trail to other rural, suburban and regional trails will enhance both connectivity and quality of life.”

Perhaps the biggest advantage is that it would help close the largest gap left in the D&L Trail. Organizers more than 20 years ago began with an ambitious mission to create a 165-mile

scenic pathway from Bristol, north of Philadelphia, to just outside Wilkes-Barre. Today, most of the trail is open and passable by foot and bike, and according to the D&L Trail website, only the section that passes through Allentown is listed as “unimproved, open, travel at your own risk.”

This project would change that, but much of it will rely on the federal grant and that’s no slam dunk. The BUILD program offers \$1.5 billion in grants for roads, bridges, transit, rail, ports or intermodal transportation, but projects from across the country will be competing for the money. This is the fourth time the LVPC has applied for the region, the last in 2016 when the same project made it to the final stages before being cut.

“We were this close last time,” Oscavich said, holding her fingers half an inch apart. “Hopefully, we’ll get it across the goal this time.”

It is expected to take as long as six months before applicants will know which projects will be funded.