

Importance of recreational amenities highlighted at chamber discussion



Recreational amenities at parks and walking trails are an important component to attracting young families to a community, although local leaders are still keeping an eye on big infrastructure projects such as sewage construction and broadband internet expansion that are needed to drive development to area municipalities.

Several township managers led a roundtable discussion Friday morning at the Washington County Chamber of Commerce's Municipal Leaders Breakfast, where they talked with other local government officials about obstacles they face trying to grow a community and the success stories along the way.



"People value their recreation facilities," Peters Township Manager Paul Lauer told the crowd. "They value the walkability in housing plans."

He called the Montour Trail a main attraction for people who live in Peters Township and neighboring communities, and said township parks are just as important to have a thriving community.

"It's like Main Street. It's where people meet and greet," Lauer said. "Those amenities are so important. They're valued in the community and (residents are) willing to pay for them."

That's what North Franklin Township officials determined when they approved a plan in 2021 to build a new municipal building and community park that will include a pavilion, playgrounds and walking trails near the water company's reservoir on Franklin Farms Road. Erin Dinch, who serves as North Franklin's director of planning and development, said the township does not currently have a town center, so they're hoping to change that with the new community complex.

"We're excited for people to get together and get to know each other," Dinch said.

While North Franklin is building its new park from the ground up, other municipalities are trying to improve their current locations.

Mt. Pleasant Township Manager Darla Protch said the dek hockey and pickle ball courts next to their municipal building near Hickory are wildly popular, but are somewhat limited by not having lights. Township officials are now looking to spend money on expensive upgrades to install lights so residents can use the facilities after the sun goes down. She noted that teenagers often turn their car headlamps on at night to illuminate the courts when they

want to keep playing at night.

"It is used year-round," Protch said. "It's 12 degrees outside and these kids are out there playing (dek hockey) with their car lights on."

Cecil Township Manager Don Gennuso echoed the need for upgrades and pointed to his community's plan to build a connecting pathway from the Montour Trail to Southpointe. The 1,300-foot pathway that was announced last year will officially open later this spring and connect the bike trail to the mixed-used business park in Cecil Township. The first leg leads to the township's Klinger Park where the Southpointe Field House is located, but future phases will lead farther into the business park.

"This project took some time," Gennuso said. "It provides a connector for people walking from Southpointe to the Montour Trail."

It was fitting that a portion of the panel discussion focused on recreational activities in municipalities since the meeting was held inside the relatively new Chartiers Township Community Center in Arnold Park. The \$1.4 million building constructed in 2013 includes a banquet room, kitchen, multipurpose room, office, conference room, concession stand, meeting room for the local senior citizens group and restrooms.

The panel discussion led by Chartiers Township Manager Jodi Noble touched on other topics besides recreation opportunities, such as obstacles municipalities face from state regulations and what the public's common misconceptions are about local government. But it also centered around the importance for sewer extensions and broadband internet expansion projects to give residents the infrastructure improvements they want and need. Sewage and internet installation projects can be especially expensive, the panelists said, but they're needed to drive development to their township.

As townships become more populous, once-rural areas often become hubs for commercial development, which South Strabane Manager Brandon Stanick said has become an important driver for his township. He enthusiastically pointed to the new Menards store that will be built at the Old Mill shopping center along Route 19.

But he acknowledged many other challenges they face – especially in rural areas far from boroughs and city centers – as they try to create walking communities for their residents.

"That's one challenge that townships will always have," Stanick said. "Creating that walkability."