2016 Annual Report

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2016: A Balancing Act

The Montour Trail found itself in an interesting position in 2016. The big bridge completions of the year before had made the trail a lot more complete and connected, so overall awareness of the Montour and interest in it had increased. As expected, usership had taken a jump, particularly in the central Washington County and in South Park areas. This presented an opportunity to get some of those new trail users interested in becoming members or even volunteering for one of the many different tasks needed to keep the trail, and the trail organization, healthy and in good condition.

So, it’s still critical to focus on all of the complex requirements involved in completing the remaining sections of trail. At the same time, the needs continue to increase for more volunteers, especially those with a more diverse set of skills. Add in the maintenance of existing trail, plus the new sections. The continual balancing of all these competing needs was certainly one of the major areas of attention in 2016.

Volunteers Always Anchor the Core

All of you who came out and volunteered for the trail just cannot be thanked enough. The successes of 2016, like those of all previous years, are entirely due to your efforts. At a busy time in the world and in our lives, we all have lots of other things calling for our attention. But the trail is important to you, so you engaged in some trail issue and moved it along. Some of you took on large, complex tasks that took a lot of time, perhaps extending over the course of the entire year. These efforts, along with hundreds of those of shorter duration, add up to what the Montour Trail accomplished last year. Once again, the total volunteer hours can only be estimated: somewhere in the range of 24,000. It’s a huge effort, and a measure of how important the trail is to the people of the region.

The Friends Groups Remain Strong

Joining a Friends Group trailside work party is still a frequent entry point for new volunteers. Some of the 2015 work parties saw a number of people who had showed up for the first time. Sometimes they came back, and became regulars. The Friends Groups continue to work on communication and follow-up, to try to encourage new people to stick around. In addition to performing maintenance on their local section of the trail, Friends Groups are the key outreach of the Montour organization to the local community, including business leaders, schools, and municipal government, particularly elected officials. These kinds of fruitful interactions grew stronger in 2016, leading to the best relations with our host communities to date.

Committees Start to Fill in the Missing Pieces

Last year the newly expanded Real Estate Committee enlarged its scope well beyond crossing easements, to proactively managing Montour’s real estate footprint; this kind of awareness and expertise in real estate matters had been sorely needed for a long time. The Operations Committee continued to encourage all the different parts of the Montour organization to integrate together more cleanly. Specifically, they conducted a user survey, which yielded up much useful information. They also launched an organizational assessment, intended to get us to look at ourselves unflinchingly, with an eye to how we can better achieve our mission. And the Membership and Community Outreach Committee, by setting up on the trail, got a lot of new members. They are also improving the ways in which we reach out to the public, to more effectively tell the Montour story.

In the overall layout of how everything about the Montour Trail gets done, there are still lots of detours and missing gaps. Going forward, filling in these kinds of operational and communication gaps will loom large, in much the same way that completing gaps in the physical trail has consumed much of our energies in the past.

More Trail Got Built

After 2015’s yearlong administrative delay, the Pleasant Street trail section went into construction in 2016, and was completed and opened late in the year. It and the companion Library Viaduct finally worked together as designed, and began to carry a lot of trail traffic. This considerable triumph set the stage for a dual ribbon cutting, which just took place in June 2017. At the far western end of the trail, the Montour Street piece of the Coraopolis trail project was completed mid-year. All the way east, in Clairton, a new trailhead and adjacent trail section was built for us by the municipal authority. So, the extreme ends of the Montour are now both completed.

. . . and Planning to be Built

The remaining ¾-mile part of the Coraopolis project was mostly designed last year, and awaited regulatory clearance. (It still does.) In South Park Township, the half-mile Piney Fork trail section was also largely designed and awaiting approvals. In Library, we were awarded a DCNR grant to build trail through the former Consol property, but awaited actual release of the funds. (We still do.) There’s still main line trail to be
built, and these three projects got off to a good start in 2016.

Last year also saw the beginnings of a wholly new phenomenon for us, namely new trailside communities. Two of these got started with their planning stages: a residential community in Cecil and a mixed use development in South Park Township near the Port Authority T station.

**Setting the Stage for the Future**

The more trail we have, the more trail we have to maintain. The more trail users we have, the more complex trail operations become. How can we assure that funding and people will be in place to take care of these issues, long term? It was these sorts of questions to which the Montour Trail Council directed much attention last year, and started to take steps towards some of the answers. We felt that we were making enough progress at overall trail management to apply for the Trail of the Year competition. As you all now know, this will be the big story of 2017.

**Members and Donors Provide Broad, Enduring Support**

At its foundation, the Montour Trail Council is a membership organization. Membership is stronger than ever, and donations are up, making a loud statement that the trail is very important to an increasing number of people, some local, but some pretty far flung. It’s clear that the people of this region want to keep the trail in place and in good shape for their children and grandchildren to use and enjoy.

Your Board of Directors, along with everyone who works on the trail, thanks you all for your ongoing support of the Montour Trail.

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