



Allegheny Highlands Trail now open for business

Maria Smith

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— CUMBERLAND — It once was the “highway of hope, the highway of opportunities” and brought hundreds of jobs to this community.

A century later, it can happen again.

U.S. Sen. Barbara Mikulski issued that sentiment as she and several others celebrated the official opening and completion of the Allegheny Highlands Trail on Thursday.

“It brought jobs to this area 100 years ago; it’s time to do it again,” Mikulski said.

Al Feldstein of the Maryland Department of Planning emceed the ceremony held outside the Western Maryland Railway Station on an atypical December day with the temperature near 60. More than 100 people, including a number of government officials, attended the event as tractor-trailers with their jake brakes on rumbled above on Interstate 68.

A banner was unfurled and cut symbolizing the opening of the final section of the 21-mile trail; the portion from Frostburg to the Pennsylvania line opened in 2004.

The Allegheny Highlands Trail completes the Great Allegheny Passage that joins Pittsburgh to Cumberland. The passage then links with the C&O Canal towpath providing nearly 350 miles of continuous hiking/biking trails from Pittsburgh to Washington.

It also was announced yesterday that the Big Savage Tunnel will stay open because of the weather until Dec. 22, an extra week.

Mikulski said when she first heard about the passage, it was “a new one for me” and thought it sounded like a Lewis and Clark expedition. The more she read, though, she learned it was George Washington who first had the vision of the passage.

She said if Washington could start it, there was no reason why she and her colleague in the Senate, Paul Sarbanes couldn’t finish it.

Sarbanes called the trail a vital link and said it will make a remarkable contribution to the area’s outdoor recreation and tourism opportunities.

The trail, he noted, has some of the “most scenic visits in the nation” and he predicted it “will have a notable and substantial impact on the economic development of the region.”

It also will improve public safety, public health and protect the environment, he said. It’s also an area that will bring not only tourists here, but also will improve the quality of life of those living here.

The project cost nearly \$12 million of which \$5.5 million came in federal funding. Sarbanes said the Appalachian Regional Commission was instrumental in seeing that the work was funded and also gave credit to the state for stepping up.

Robert Flanagan, the state’s Department of Transportation secretary, also was able to secure a \$1 million secretary’s grant to bridge the funding gap.

On Thursday, he said more than 250,000 people would enjoy the trail annually and it would bring \$3.5 million a year in economic benefits. Those numbers, he believes, are an underestimation.

“Going out on that trail and seeing the beauty this region has is priceless,” Flanagan, who was on the trail in October, said. “It makes environmentalists of us all.”

U.S. Rep. Roscoe Bartlett, a long-time advocate for the environment, said the trail has three dynamics that will make it appreciated. One is that when people are insecure, they turn to historic sites to reconnect to the

past with another the sense to go back to nature.

The third is that the price of gas will continue to increase and that for those living in Washington, it's close enough to spend vacation without spending much money on gas.

June and Colin Deakins, along with their friend, Bob Holt, all of Somerset, Pa., have waited for this day for many years. The three biked down 10 miles for the ceremony.

"We've been riding it and supporting it, absolutely, since its inception," June Deakins said, adding that was in the late 1970s.

She called the day satisfying and said while the three have biked the entire trail in bits and pieces, they plan to do the entire thing this summer.

Holt, who began to bike after retirement, said he rides to "get away from everything and to let your mind wander." And while none of them had a doubt the trail would be completed eventually, he's pleased it's finished so he can ride on it.

Delegate George Edwards, state senator-elect; Allegany County Commission President Jim Stakem and Mayor Lee Fiedler also spoke during the ceremony. All speakers gave thanks to a number of individuals who made the project come to fruition.

Thursday's event also was the last time Sarbanes, Maryland's longest serving U.S. senator at five terms, and Mikulski will appear in public together. Sarbanes retires from office in three weeks.

She said the region and she and have "no finer partner" than Sarbanes.

"Whenever you needed him, Paul Sarbanes was there," Mikulski said.

She expects the two, though, will be on the trail at some point — he on a bike, and she walking.

For more information, visit www.ahtmtrail.org or call (301) 777-2161, weekdays.

Maria Smith can be reached at msmith@times-news.com.

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U.S. Sen. Paul Sarbanes speaks during a ceremony marking the official opening and completion of the Allegheny Highlands Trail on Thursday. Cumberland Times-News