

The Great Multi-Municipal Link

Communities bringing people together through recreational opportunities

By **Tim Herd**, Executive Director, Stroud Region Open Space and Recreation Commission

The beautiful Brodhead Creek braids a picturesque boundary between the twin boroughs of Stroudsburg and East Stroudsburg in the Poconos of eastern Monroe County. Its abundant natural assets form the core of a growing greenway and trail system rich in shared purposes, resolve and resources.

Natural as it is, however, it wasn't always the unifying feature it is today. Back in 1955, the greatest calamity ever to hit the Stroudsburgs convened when two hurricanes delivered a one-two punch within one week. On August 11, Hurricane Connie deposited over 10 inches of rain in a 48-hour period, raising the Brodhead to flood stage. Just seven soggy days later, Hurricane Diane dumped another 11.25 inches in a 36-hour period with disastrous results.

Angry, churning, wild water rampaged down the stream channel

overnight, snatching and hoisting everything from trees and homes to ten-ton boulders and bridges while residents fled for their lives in the darkness. North of town, a 30-foot-high flood wave disintegrated the facilities of a camp and swept away 46 campers – only eight survived. In East Stroudsburg, another 32 people drowned as the floodwaters ripped apart homes in Maplehurst Flats behind the High School, and even more lost their lives waiting for a ride after an evening game of bingo at the Fire Hall.

In the aftermath, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers constructed a levee system to protect the people from the torrential tendencies of the Brodhead Creek, with the top of the dyke built to the level of the floodwaters at its extreme crest. How that levee – created to separate the boroughs' residents both from each other and their natural environment – came to foster a more unifying function, as

well as a new concept in cooperative governance, is this story.

The Region

Now in place for almost 50 years, the levee has become an unquestioned part of the landscape. Visitors to East Stroudsburg's popular Dansbury Park enjoy its pool, pavilions, picnic tables and ball fields without considering – or even viewing – the still-bountiful Brodhead Creek on the other side of the 10-foot high, grass-covered slope. But like many other environmental issues in the past half-century, out-of-sight has meant out-of-mind, while more pressing needs demanded attention.

In the two decades from 1980-2000, Monroe County nearly doubled its population, and is expected to redouble it in the following twenty years. Its natural and cultural heritage, for so long enjoyed but taken for granted, was threatened by the surge in population, along with its demands for housing,

goods, services and other modern infrastructure needs.

Such demands, however, also resolved its citizens to preserve, conserve and enhance the resources that continue to provide a rich quality of life.

With the development of the Monroe County Open Space Plan in 2000, the county both encouraged and enabled regional cooperation among its municipalities by assisting in joint planning efforts and offering matching funds for development of parks and recreation and preserving open space through a \$25 million bond issue.

“When we first entertained the concept of a regional Comprehensive Recreation and Open Space Plan, it was still unusual,” said Samantha Holbert, a key organizer of the initiative. “But having a greenway along the major creek that bisected the two boroughs and the township made the goal of a regional approach to planning and managing much easier to visualize.”

That vision resulted in the development of two important master plans. The first documented and analyzed the existing conditions and features in the creek corridors and how they may be utilized and enhanced in the Brodhead, McMichael, and Pocono Creeks Greenways Plan. The second brought the municipalities together to define their collective needs, goals, and ideas for open space and recreation.

The Stroud Area Regional Open Space and Recreation Plan created a tool for planning future land preservation, focusing government and community resources, and meeting park and recreation needs in the region as a whole. It also called for a Department of Conservation and Natural Resources



LOOPED SYSTEM Centered on the beautiful Brodhead Creek, the multi-municipal Levee Loop Trail system connects public parks, schools, and other destinations within the Brodhead, McMichael and Pocono Creeks Greenway

(DCNR) Peer-to-Peer Study to explore establishing a regional open space and recreation partnership.

With that recommendation, Stroudsburg and East Stroudsburg Boroughs joined forces with neighboring Stroud Township and the school districts of Stroudsburg Area and East Stroudsburg Area in an intergovernmental agreement to create the Stroud Region Open Space and Recreation Commission (Commission) in 2003. By regionalizing the planning, protection and development of open space and managing recreation resources, the Commission consolidated the separate efforts of three municipalities into one cooperative venture. And through a DCNR Circuit Rider grant, the Commission hired its first employee and began the work outlined in the master plans.

One-Stop Regional Source for Parks, Open Space and Recreation Skip ahead six brief years, and the Commission has grown into its role of becoming a one-stop regional source for parks, open space and community recreation.

To assist its staff and board of directors, the Commission

established two advisory boards to enhance the planning and implementation of programming and open space initiatives. The Greenway Advisory Board is responsible for documenting, updating and coordinating the implementation of the Brodhead, McMichael and Pocono Creeks Greenway Plan. The Recreation Advisory Board is a corps of creative individuals sharing ideas, expertise and professional and social networks to help deliver high quality, innovative and desired recreational, educational, environmental and cultural programming to all who live and work in the Stroud Region. It works closely with the Greenway Advisory Board, the Friends of Stroud Region (the Commission’s nonprofit partner organization) and other committees of the Commission.

As part of its regional approach to community education, the Commission publishes *Stroud Region Connections*, an attractive regional magazine aimed at the region’s increasingly well-connected residents. The twice-a-year, full-color publication offers open space

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and park news, feature articles and descriptions of upcoming recreational programming. With its costs offset by paid advertisements, it is mailed to more than 17,000 households in Stroudsburg, East Stroudsburg, and Stroud Township.

“During the 2009 swimming season the Commission assumed responsibility of managing the pool,” Stroudsburg Borough Manager Barbara Quarantello said, “freeing up our staff to attend to other daily matters. From the hiring process to the daily activities and programs at the pool, to the policies and safety procedures the Commission has put in place, it has improved the atmosphere and made our pool safer and more pleasant for our residents and visitors.”

Speaking like a satisfied customer, Quarantello adds: “Since its inception, Stroudsburg Borough has benefited from the professional knowledge and leadership of the organization and its employees.”

Adding Value: A Community Center and More

As the Commission’s public track record grew, and a regional sense of identity has taken hold, other community groups began to see additional possibilities to add value to the overall regional enterprise with a collaborative spirit.

A member of the Leadership Pocono Class of 2004, East Stroudsburg Councilwoman Sonia Wolbert recalls how the group partnered with the newly formed recreation commission to convert the former East Stroudsburg Police Station into a community center. Now chairperson of the Friends of Stroud Region Open Space and Recreation, Wolbert has seen how the efforts both galvanized and coalesced the entire community in helping to renovate and open the Day Street Community Center.

The local Kiwanis and Rotary clubs turned out in force to apply new siding to the exterior of the building and paint interior walls. A school for Polish language and culture that meets in the center volunteered its own stores of labor to various tasks. Lowe’s of Stroudsburg donated materials and labor in the installation of a kitchenette; area landscapers donated shrubs and planted materials to beautify the exterior; and many local businesses contributed time and materials at reduced rates.

The 4,600-square-foot facility now houses the friends organization, with a fulltime staff of three, and is filled to capacity many days with public recreation programs, and the meetings of many non-profit and private groups that rent the facilities.

Funding

Since the Commission’s very beginning, the municipalities have supported its operations through per capita allocations. In its first full year of existence, 2004, both boroughs and the township contributed \$1.98 per capita. (The two school districts do not provide cash, but do allow use of their facilities at no charge.) A four-year Circuit Rider grant from DCNR, which reduced by 25 percent each year, helped pay the wages of the director and enabled a stable start. And while the per capita allocation has increased each year as the scope of responsibilities has grown, its percentage of the operations that it supports has decreased, from 39 percent in 2004 to about 22 percent in 2010. Because of the success of the self-supporting recreation program, a recreation director was added in 2007, and a fulltime recreation associate joined the team in 2009.

In 2010, the total annual municipal contribution amounts to \$131,380, based on \$4.11 per capita. With a commitment to moving forward on greenway improvements, each municipality has also agreed to dedicate an additional 25 cents per capita specifically for greenway projects. While the amount is not great – almost \$8,000 – it does enable small but necessary improvements like trail easements or signage.

The Levee Loop Trail

Now back to our flood-and-levee tale – while its original purpose was to protect the boroughs from the catastrophic effects of nature, the levee also separated residents from each other and their connections to their natural environment.

The Commission’s first executive director, Chuck Reid, recognized the potential of the levee as a great multi-municipal, unifying link: “Creating a trail system on the levee not only reconnects the residents and visitors to the defining natural feature of the region, the Brodhead Creek, but also promotes a vibrant and healthy community.”

The Levee Loop Trail Master Plan, publicly funded through the regional commission and a grant from DCNR, identified the natural assets, potential access points, physical facilities and links to other opportunities within the regional greenway system.

At its full development, the Levee Loop Trail will extend approximately ten miles from Glen Park in the south to the Stroudsburg Municipal Authority in the north. At present, about four-and-a-half miles of the central portion is in use with easy connections to many other destinations.

On National Trails Day (the first Saturday in June), the Commission hosts the Levee Loop Annual

Fitness Festival and Trail Run. Exhibits, demonstrations and fitness activities promote the trail, raise awareness of the benefits of trails and outdoor activities and help protect and maintain the regional greenway corridor. In a timed race, runners mount the levee in Dansbury Park, and hit the trail for a four-and-a-half mile trek through leafy suburban pathways, wooded streamsid es and scenic natural vistas.

On a regular basis, residents are traversing the levee, walking their dogs, transporting sacks of groceries, biking, exercising, commuting to work, and communing with nature on the Levee Loop Trail.

What's Next

While the municipalities are agreeable to designating more management responsibilities to the Commission, the specifics of those duties must still be determined to best meet the needs and expectations of each in terms of physical, fiscal, and human resources. On the current agenda is creating a unified regional policy of park and facilities regulations.

“Formation of the Regional Commission has enabled the borough to have full-time professional staff to run a comprehensive year-round recreation program, including a very popular summer day camp at our community park,” said East Stroudsbu rg Borough Manager Jim Phillips. “The Commission, via its staff, is also the logical organization to take on the regional park and open space issues.”

Samantha Holbert, commission chair, agrees: “The largest obstacle was overcoming the sense that ‘power’ would somehow be lost with regional planning and management. Yet when decision makers see a path with increased funding



A COOL DAY IN THE SUN Campers from the local Stroud Kids Summer Day Camp series enjoy afternoons in the pools and enjoy a water feature in East Stroudsbu rg’s Dansbury Pool

possibilities and efficiencies, it becomes a clear incentive for them and the region.”

Thanks to the cooperative spirit among those decision makers – borough managers and mayors, council members, township supervisors, appointed commissioners, and an entire cadre

of community-minded planners and volunteers – the regional concept of governance for managing parks and open space and providing year-round community recreation has become a workable reality in the Stroud Region. (B)