

Closed railroad tunnel may become part of bike trail

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October 19, 2015 LISBON, OH - The state is planning to reopen a closed railroad tunnel in the Grimms Bridge area of St. Clair Township that could one day become part of a proposed bicycle trail.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) is currently seeking bids to drain the water-filled tunnel and reopen the east end that was closed by a landslide 50 years ago. Bids are to be opened Nov. 3, and the estimated project cost is \$129,572.

The tunnel was once part of a 13-mile rail line that ran from the Ohio River near Ohioville, Pa., to Negley, paralleling the Little Beaver Creek. The rail line operated from 1933 until 1965, when the tunnel was closed by a landslide caused by a mining company operating in the area.

The closed east end has caused an estimated 500,000 gallons of water to back up in the 1,042-foot concrete-line tunnel, and the plan calls for pumping out and treating the water before discharging it into the nearby creek.

East Liverpool native Justin Conkle is a natural resources engineer with ODNR and serves as project engineer. He said they view the tunnel as a public hazard because people who try to walk through might become trapped. The state is also concerned the impounded water could break loose, washing out several homes below and Grimms Bridge Road.

Although the tunnel is not being reopened for the specific purpose of becoming part of the planned bike trail, "I think it is a step in that process," said ODNR spokeswoman Bethany McCorkle.

The plan to turn the abandoned railroad bed into a paved bicycle/walking trail is the idea of the Columbiana County Park District, which oversees the Little Beaver Greenway Trail that links Washingtonville and Lisbon. The project would be known as the Grimms Bridge Connector.

ODNR signed a 25-year lease in 2014 granting the park district access to the portion of railroad bed that passes through state forest lands in the Grimms Bridge area. The plan is to convert a 4.6-mile stretch of the rail bed from Beiler's Run south of Fredericktown to the Pennsylvania state line.

Park board president Dottie Betz was aware of the state's plans to reopen the concrete-lined tunnel.

"It'll be fantastic. It'll be a major draw and people will come just to see that tunnel," which will be lit, she said. "People are really excited about this."

Earlier in the year the park district applied for a \$2.5 million federal grant to fund the Grimms Bridge Connector project, but Betz said the application was denied.

She said the state will not consider the application until the Pennsylvania portion of the property is secured, either through ownership or easement, which is needed to extend the trail all the way to the Ohio River.

As an Ohio entity, the park district cannot purchase property or obtain easements in Pennsylvania. To do that, the park board is working with the Ohio River Trail Council, a Pennsylvania bicycle trail group.

"This is just taking longer than we had hoped, but we're going to keep working on it," she said. "We're hoping to work with the Pennsylvania people to help them acquire the property."

Source: <http://www.reviewonline.com/page/content.detail/id/595746/Closed-railroad-tunnel-may-become-part-of-bike-trail.html?nav=5008>