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The Ohio to Erie Trail:

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The Ohio to Erie Trail

Stretching 300 miles across Ohio from downtown Cincinnati to the sandy shores of Lake Erie, the Ohio to Erie Trail is close to completion. Now, from city to country, the trail's growth and popularity is driving new development and opportunity.

BY LEE CHILCOTE



The Ohio to Erie Trail:

Building the
Spine Across
the Buckeye
State

By Lee Chilcote
Photos by Leonardo Carrizo

The Ohio to Erie Trail travels 300 miles from the Ohio River in downtown Cincinnati to the rolling hills of rural Amish country and on to the sandy shores of Lake Erie in downtown Cleveland. When the trail is finally complete—more than 70 percent of it is open for use—it will be the longest paved off-road trail in the country. Along the way, it showcases the best of Ohio. >>

Known as "Howard Tunnel," the stone archway carrying U.S. Route 36 over the Kokosing Gap Trail in Knox County provides a perfect frame for Ohio's scenic charm.



At left, a runner and her faithful companion stride out on Scioto Trail at North Bank Park, Columbus.



Trails radiate from Xenia like sunbeams, including the Little Miami Scenic Trail, Creekside Trail and the Prairie Grass Trail. Surf'n Cycle and, above, Xenia Station, are well-known stopping points in this hub for trail users. Below, participants in the Earth Day Challenge walk on the Kokosing Gap Trail outside Mount Vernon.

The trail navigates through charming, historic towns such as London and Mount Vernon, and traverses picturesque areas where Amish buggies can be seen rolling alongside bikers and hikers. Linking the “3C” cities—Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati—the Ohio to Erie also allows users to travel between Ohio’s rural areas and the state’s major metros, which are now undergoing a remarkable revitalization.

Built on hundreds of miles of reclaimed rail-trails and canal towpaths, the Ohio to Erie Trail was conceived more than two decades ago as a focal point for recreation opportunities. Yet the benefits have proved much broader. Today, the trail is known for spurring economic development, attracting tourists and providing a valuable amenity to locals.

The late Ed Honton, an avid Columbus cyclist considered the trail’s visionary, would no doubt be delighted. From Cincinnati to Cleveland, the gradual, mile-by-mile progress of the Ohio to Erie Trail is building a statewide network that is revitalizing communities big and small.

Wealth of Connections

“What was once a nice city or local project now becomes a project of much broader importance, because of the wealth of connections and the potential of these connections,” says Eric Oberg, manager of trail development with the Midwest office of Rails to Trails Conservancy, which has helped local communities complete the trail.

For instance, on a short, 0.6-mile stretch of trail now under construction in Cleveland’s Flats—the historic birthplace of the city—the once-decimated Cuyahoga River is slowly coming back to life, with blue herons roosting on the riverbanks where new fish habitat is being created. Nearby, \$275 million is being invested in redeveloping the Flats East Bank commercial district to incorporate offices, housing, parkland and entertainment venues.

In Columbus, the Camp Chase rail-with-trail is taking shape along a historic railroad line. Once the trail bridges the formidable Interstate Highway 270, users will be able to travel off-road for the first

time from Columbus to scenic villages farther south, creating more opportunities for tourism in Ohio’s small towns as well as the state capital.

The value of rail-trails in the heart of Columbus is already well established. The Olentangy Trail north of downtown draws thousands of joggers, walkers and bike commuters each workday, fostering a morning and evening “rush hour.” Increasingly, communities along the trail are considered desirable locations, a trend that has encouraged fresh investment in the core city.

The Ohio to Erie Trail’s big impact has impressed Jerry Rampelt, executive director of the Ohio to Erie Trail Fund,



a nonprofit organization that coordinates, manages and raises funds for trail development across the state.

“I often joke that trails are like potato chips—I’ve never eaten just one,” he says. “Once a trail has gone in, people want to know, ‘How come we don’t have more? Why isn’t it finished yet?’ We’ve had all kinds of development activity going on along the trail.” Rampelt cites a major housing project under way along the trail in Akron and the redevelopment of downtown Loveland, about 20 miles northeast of Cincinnati, with bike shops, restaurants and new stores.

“We’re moving from ideas and long-term projections to actual mileage on the ground, and that’s exciting,” adds Oberg. “There’s knowledge in cities now—they understand the trail’s significance and how it relates to the kind of communities they want to build.”

Adding Value

When Don Mills became involved in pushing for completion of the Little Miami Scenic Trail, a rail-trail that runs through five counties in southwest Ohio, some of his neighbors in the Cincinnati suburb of Terrace Park stopped speaking to him. They feared a trail through their community would cause home values to decline. A decade later, however, they’re humming a new tune.

“People have taken me out to dinner and apologized,” he says. “They’ve realized I’ve not devalued their house but actually increased the value of their property.” Indeed, a 2011 study completed by researchers at the University of Cincinnati showed that for every foot closer a house is to a trail, its value goes up by \$9. In other words, owners are willing to pay a \$9,000 premium to be 1,000 feet nearer a trail.

CONNECTING THE OHIO TO ERIE

Recent major construction highlights (From south to north)

- Four-mile extension of the Little Miami Scenic Trail, south from Milford to Newtown.
- Creation of the 6.5-mile Roberts Pass Trail in Madison County, from London northeast to the county line.
- Completion of Phases 1 and 2 of the Camp Chase Rail-Trail, from the eastern end of the Roberts Pass Trail to Georgesville, west of Columbus.
- Construction of a 9.4-mile paved connection between Centerburg in Knox County, to the western terminus of the Kokosing Gap Trail in Mount Vernon.
- A 6.4-mile extension of the Holmes County Trail, from Millersburg to Killbuck.
- Completion of the Ohio & Erie Canalway Towpath Trail (Summit section) through downtown Akron.
- A 1-mile extension of the Ohio & Erie Canalway Towpath Trail (Cuyahoga section) through the Steelyard Commons in Cleveland.

On the horizon

(From south to north)

- The Ohio River Way project to connect the southern terminus of the Little Miami Scenic Trail and the Ohio River in downtown Cincinnati.
- Completion of the final 4 miles of the Camp Chase Rail-Trail through Columbus’ west side.
- Closing the gap between northern Franklin County and the southern end of the Heart of the Ohio Trail in Knox County.
- Completion of the Ohio & Erie Canalway Towpath Trail through Scranton Peninsula in downtown Cleveland.
- Completion of the Ohio & Erie Canalway Towpath Trail through the Cuyahoga River Valley to Lake Erie.

Below, the Holmes County Trail has made buggy travel much safer for the local Amish communities; at right, cyclists and runners share the Ohio & Erie Canalway Towpath Trail in Cuyahoga Valley National Park.



Ryan McKenzie, a bike mechanic at Century Cycles in Peninsula, makes repairs for a visiting customer. The towpath trail runs through this picturesque village, and trail tourism supports a number of local businesses.

the work. When it's done, cyclists will be able to commute into downtown on an off-road, paved trail—enhancing the bike-friendliness of a city that is in the throes of revitalization.

Twenty-three miles north of Cincinnati, the Ohio to Erie Trail has made the small town of Loveland a recreation destination and attracted more economic activity to its center. Loveland is now seen as an outdoor activity hub that connects visitors to recreation opportunities throughout the region—from Xenia to Cincinnati, Columbus and beyond.

"With its amazing setting right on the Little Miami River, Loveland was primed for this renaissance," says Oberg. "What the trail did was turn many of the businesses' back doors into their front doors, opening right onto the trail. They have capitalized on the trail so well that for many Cincinnatians, the entire trail is known as the 'Loveland Trail.'"

Local Color

Loveland is not the only small town that has benefited from its proximity to the Ohio to Erie Trail. The town of London, located 30 miles southwest of Columbus,



also saw an uptick in foot and bicycle traffic to its downtown after the trail segment there was fully opened in 2007.

Friends of Madison County Parks and Trails (FMCPT) created a road route through downtown London after the rail-trail through Madison County had been completed. They chose the road route because the railroad company declined to grant an easement through the town, not yet comfortable with rail-with-trail development. Thanks to good signage, the road route has not only helped trail users get through London, but also encouraged them to shop at local businesses.

"When the Great Ohio Bicycling Adventure stopped here in 2011, the group stayed two days in the London area," says Wayne Roberts of FMCPT. "Some of the local restaurants were delighted. They couldn't believe it when the town was inundated with thousands of bike riders."

FMCPT cites as many as 40,000 people using the trail segment over the course of a year. Roberts believes that when the Camp Chase Rail-Trail improves the linkage between London and downtown

Columbus, the numbers will rise even higher.

To that end, the Columbus and Franklin County Metro Parks is working on plans to finish the Camp Chase rail-with-trail segment into downtown Columbus. To carry the trail across I-270, the agency must build and install a pre-fabricated bridge just south of the Camp Chase railroad bridge.

The bridge and the downtown leg of the trail represent "one of the biggest challenges of the whole project," says Steve Brown, chief landscape architect with Columbus and Franklin County Metro Parks. The project requires building a retaining wall on a side slope with a two-to-one angle to create the 12-foot-wide trail. "You're working in a confined space, so it's a tricky construction project."

When it's complete next year, the trail between Columbus and points farther south will serve bike commuters as well as many families that prefer off-road cycling, Brown says. "When you've got families and kids involved, the number one thing is, 'How do I bike safely from where I live and get on the trail?' There's been demand for this trail for a long time."

Piece by Piece

The scenery in Knox County, 55 miles north of Columbus, is among the most beautiful in Ohio, with sparkling rivers, deep gorges and towering hemlocks framing the landscape. Small towns including Mt. Vernon, the county seat, were built along the railroad lines here more than a century ago. However, as the railroad companies quit the lines over the past few decades, these rail corridors began to return to wilderness, with bridges decaying and saplings growing up on the ballast. "Railroads had a great impact on small villages and hamlets on the railroad line, and when they left, there was a negative impact," says Knox County Parks Commissioner Kim Marshall.

Yet today the rail lines in Knox County are being turned into the Heart of Ohio Trail, connecting Mount Vernon to Centerburg, at the geographic center of Ohio. "Now, with reusing those railroad beds, we have an opportunity to provide services," says Marshall. "They used to be called railroad towns, but now they're trail towns."

Applying funding from the federal Transportation Alternatives Program



The Rogers family, Tim, Timmy and Sam, play amongst the trailside sculpture that welcomes cyclists on the Ohio to Erie Trail into the city of London.

National Park Service Ranger Nick Roll opens the Ohio & Erie Canalway Visitors Center at the Boston Store; bottom, as he does almost every day, Bill Jenkins rides his custom bicycle by Gambier Station outside Mount Vernon.



At right, the recently constructed boardwalk across Summit Lake in Akron is another improvement to the developing Ohio & Erie Canalway Towpath Trail; above, runners in Boston Township pass the iconic Boston Store and M.D. Garage, a restored gas station now used for art shows and community events.

and the Clean Ohio Trail Fund, Knox County has been able to acquire portions of the railroad right-of-way. But it hasn't stopped there. With the help of a generous business owner in Mount Vernon, Karen Wright of Ariel Corporation, the county is working on developing connector trails. Marshall says the trails have brought an uptick in traffic to local business, leading one to start a bike rental operation. "The trail is reinvigorating a part of Mount Vernon that was economically depressed."

Knox County also is home to the Mohican Valley Trail, a rail-trail that is not yet paved but is open to Amish buggies and equestrians. It features the Bridge of Dreams, the longest covered trail bridge in Ohio, the second-longest in the nation and a significant tourist attraction.

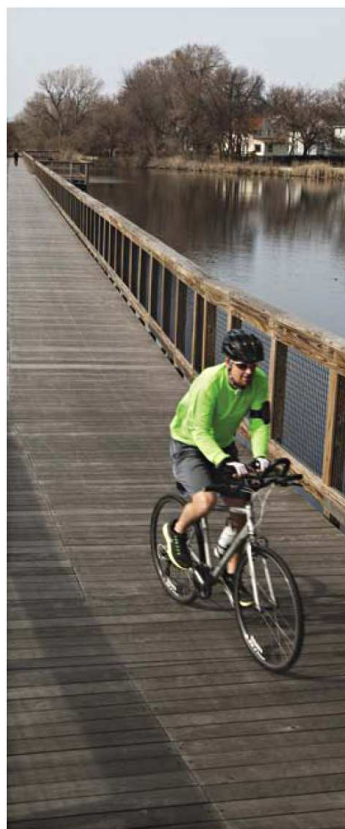
Ninety miles north, the 110-mile Ohio & Erie Canalway Towpath Trail runs through downtown Akron. The trail, which follows a historic canal that traces the curve of the Cuyahoga River, was completed in Summit County in 2011. The towpath trail has created recreation opportunities for downtown employees and residents, while encouraging revitalization of old rubber factory buildings.

"We've seen companies relocating next to the towpath trail so their employees can have access to it," says Dan Rice, president and chief executive officer of the Ohio & Erie Canalway Coalition, which helped complete the trail. "The project is being used as part of an economic development package to help companies relocate and move to northeast Ohio."

Akron had the foresight to recognize the importance of the trail a decade ago. Since then, Rice says the city has seen \$110 million in investment along the trail. "We created a beautiful park along the canal, and we have over 100,000 people attend concerts there in the summer," he says. "There's also Canal Park, our Double A [Akron Aeros] baseball stadium. The Towpath Trail goes right behind the left-field fence."

The Home Stretch

The towpath trail is a key connector in the Ohio to Erie Trail network. From Akron, the Ohio to Erie Trail travels 40 miles north to Cleveland. In the last five miles of its winding journey to Lake Erie, the trail slices beneath railroad bridges, jogs alongside steel mills, passes through a



On the Mohican Valley Trail near Brinkhaven, the Bridge of Dreams across the Mohican River is the longest covered bridge in Ohio.



shopping center and chases barges to the mouth of the Cuyahoga River.

While most of the trail is now complete, some of the toughest challenges lie ahead. That's because the hardest parts to build run through Cleveland and other built-out cities, where trail development requires costly cleanup, infrastructure and construction work.

Although making steady progress, the Ohio & Erie Canalway Towpath Trail is still several miles from its endpoint at Canal Basin Park in downtown Cleveland. To get the towpath trail there, developers must burrow through an active industrial area of the Flats and the area's crumbling infrastructure. Trail advocates have assembled \$62 million in funding so far to bring the trail to the park within the next five years, but this work is a game of miles that can sometimes feel like inches.

Nonetheless, the impact of the Ohio to Erie Trail network is palpable.

Neighborhoods along the trail are slowly being rebuilt. In Cleveland's Tremont neighborhood, which sits along a bluff overlooking the Cuyahoga River and downtown, trilside homes are going up in anticipation of the corridor. Cleveland's Flats is seeing a rebirth, with the East Bank celebrating a new 18-story office tower.

"The trail has had a big impact on Cleveland," says Tim Donovan, executive director of Ohio Canal Corridor, the nonprofit group working with the city to finish the trail. He points to the fact that the developer of Steelyard Commons, a large shopping center on the site of a former steel mill in the Flats, spent \$1 million to build the trail through the complex.

Once the towpath trail is fully built, Donovan says, the number of users could rival that of the Cuyahoga Valley National Park, climbing to some 2 million per year. The towpath trail will also

offer a commuter route into downtown Cleveland, the area's biggest employment center.

The slow but steady progress of the towpath trail—and, indeed, of the entire Ohio to Erie Trail—inspires Eric Oberg. He says Ohio's trail advocates have encountered and triumphed over nearly every possible challenge along the way—from negotiating railroads for rights-of-way to crafting easements and securing funds. With only 10 percent of the trail's right-of-way left to be acquired, he is also cautiously optimistic that the Ohio to Erie Trail will be fully complete within the next 10 to 15 years.

"Sections of this trail have set the standard—not just in Ohio, but nationwide," Oberg says.

Lee Chilcote lives in Cleveland and writes for a range of regional and national magazines. He enjoys hiking and biking Ohio's trails and can often be found along the towpath trail.