

# MAIN LINE TIMES

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## Hundreds turn out to celebrate Cynwyd Heritage Trail opening

**CYNWYD TRAIL**, from Page On3

No protest here, though, just celebration of an effort that started nearly six years ago, with extraordinary community buy-in, to transform an abandoned and overgrown rail line into a scenic new multi-use trail.

Even before a ribbon-cutting ceremony, a steady stream of joggers, cyclists and families out for a walk were using the trail while community groups like the Friends of the Cynwyd Heritage Trail set up tents and started the grills for a harvest festival on land that once was Barmouth Station.

It was a perfect example of the community gathering space that the new "linear park" provides, an opportunity, said Lower Merion Board of Commissioners President Liz Rogan, which will "strengthen our community."

"At a moment like this, with this beautiful new trail, it's important to remember how we got here," board Vice President Paul McElhaney told the crowd.

The starting point, he said, was a deal worked out with SEPTA, largely on the initiative of former board president and Cynwyd representative Bruce Reed, to restore the historic but badly deteriorated Cynwyd Station. The station, at the head of an unused rail segment that ran two miles farther to the Schuylkill River, at that time was "hardly an amenity, but rather a danger" in the community.

The Lower Merion Historical Society, under president Jerry Francis, came on board to fund and manage the station restoration, now done.

But Francis, characteristically keeping to the background Sunday, saw "the possibility of an even greater transformation," McElhaney said. He began "walking people down that derelict rail line," one of whom was township Assistant Planning Director Chris Leswing.

Leswing "got it" – the vision of a rail-to-trail conversion and reclamation of precious open space – and "a remarkable phenomenon occurred." With a lease arrangement with SEPTA in hand, "hundreds of people came out for volunteer workdays," McElhaney recalled. Long before trail design and engineering, community members got to work, clearing brush and tangled vines, cleaning out old dump sites and planting trees to, as past Friends group president Nancy Winkler put it, "transform a broken landscape."

The trail plan progressed, with Montgomery County's approval of \$1.5 million in open-space funds to support acquisition of adjoining parcels to expand the rail corridor, grants from several other agencies, and trail and landscaping design by consult-

ant Bryan Hanes Studio and Studio Gaea.

Construction to complete this first phase of trail development, including separate paved multi-use and unpaved pedestrian paths, began last fall, with more improvements in trail accessibility and trailhead parking to come.

The project continues to evolve, with a new initiative to link the trail over the river via a reopened Manayunk Bridge, a partnership sealed last week with a symbolic "handshake across the river" by Rogan and Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter.

Like other moments in the Cynwyd Trail's history, the ceremony was an illustration, Rogan said, of "collaboration to fulfill a vision that individual [parties] couldn't have accomplished."

In his comments, Matthews thanked county voters who several years ago supported a \$150-million bond issue for open space and historic preservation. Noting that the county's contribution to the trail project amounted to "1 percent of the bond you passed," Matthews said there could be "no better use than right here at the Cynwyd Trail.

Another guest, State Sen. Daylin Leach, highlighted why the trail is special. "In an age when most of us do our communication through Twitter" and other technology, "this is a real place you can come where you can see real trees, breathe real air, touch real dirt."

"This is a remarkable day in the Lower Merion Township park system," added Commissioner Scott Zelov, who chairs the board's Parks and Recreation Committee. The opening of the trail – "our first multi-use trail and our first linear park" – brings that system to a total of 44 parks.

The Friends group's Winkler said the organization will continue working to raise funds for improvements, agreeing with Rogan that "there's so much more we can do." "This is going to endure," Winkler said, "because it's a project the community really cares about."

Taking all of it in, beaming from the sidelines, was the township's Leswing, whose enthusiasm, everyone said, inspired many others.

"I couldn't be happier," he said after the ribbon had been cut. "To see all these different people coming out for a common purpose – that's why we do it," he remarked.

So can he plan on a few weekends off, now that this phase is done? Don't bet on it.

Referring to another favorite project in Ardmore, "After this, I'm going to work on Linwood Park," Leswing said.

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Visitors check out the new trail display, which includes a map and other pertinent information.



Elizabeth Paul of Ardmore bounces on the new trail.



At left, Eric Knight of the Wheelmen rolls his antique bike through the crowd.

Photos by  
Pete  
Bannan