

# Our walking trails, a least recognized aspect of our quality of life

The Bethlehem Gadfly Environment, Pedestrian bridge January 11, 2021

 *Latest in a series of posts on the pedestrian bridge* 

Followers will remember the skirmish over the feasibility study for a pedestrian/biking bridge across the Lehigh River back during budget approval time.

Councilman Callahan vigorously objected to funding the study, though he said he was pro-bridge and just against spending the money on a “luxury” while we were cutting staff positions in an austere budget mode that was likely to continue.

Gadfly is happy to call attention to this appreciative witty essay about our local trail system by Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation President & CEO (and former Bethlehem mayor) Don Cunningham.

*selections from Don Cunningham, “The Groundhog Day Quality of Pandemic Life.” Morning Call, January 7, 2020.*

The Groundhog Day quality of pandemic life that makes one day familiar to another returned to the Lehigh Valley with the cold weather.

It came just in time to create a new set of holiday challenges.

Gone, and quickly forgotten, was the exhausting schedule of holiday parties, work dinners and family gatherings. That was replaced with a new set of challenges, such as telling grandpa there’s no family gathering

this year because we don't want to be responsible for killing him, and what to do with a week off between Christmas and New Year's Day.

Humans adapt our complaints quickly. We are quite nimble this way.

Last year's "the holidays are exhausting" became this year's "what are we supposed to do?"

My challenge is I can't sit still for more than about an hour.

Fortunately, I live in the Lehigh Valley, have the ability to walk and love history, cities and nature.

One of the least recognized aspects of the Lehigh Valley's quality of life is the system of walking trails that weaves through the region and showcases its authentic mix of cities and towns, natural environments, rivers, streams and canals and three centuries of history.

It's all free and pandemic safe.

Many of the trails were built to replace former railroads so they pass through industrial areas, natural environments, alongside bodies of waters and connect boroughs and cities. Most of them are part of the larger Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor, which preserves and interprets the 165-mile transportation corridor that fueled America's industrial revolution with the Lehigh Valley as its centerpiece.

Both Lehigh and Northampton counties and the 62 distinct municipalities of the Lehigh Valley have shown great vision in working with state and federal leaders to develop these trails.

The attractiveness of the Lehigh Valley today, which is vital to our economic renaissance and continued success, is built on the foundation of past economic success and the recognition that quality of life keeps people and companies living and coming here.

While struggling through the temporary closure of the region's wonderful restaurants, performing arts venues and tourism destinations, these trails remain open and important.

This holiday season I strapped on gloves, a knit hat and jackets and revisited my favorites and discovered some new ones.

I walked for the first time the Karl Stirner Arts Trail in Easton that runs for about two miles along the Bushkill Creek from the magnificently renovated Simone Silk Mill on 13th St. to the Delaware River. The trail is extraordinary, lined throughout with public art tastefully placed in a natural setting.

Long on my bucket list, I finally got to Hellertown to walk the Saucon Rail Trail, a 7.5-mile converted railroad track in Lower and Upper Saucon Townships and Hellertown Borough.

My 24-year-old son Brendan, forced out of Brooklyn and back into his old man's house in Bethlehem by the pandemic, joined me on many of the walks. In Hellertown, we were fortunate enough to walk into a low-lying fog as we approached the 18th Century Heller-Wagner Grist Mill on Walnut St. The fog over the adjoining pond was as spectacular of sight as I've seen.

Once again, I hit my old favorite the Ironton Rail Trail in Whitehall and Coplay and marveled as always at the Coplay Cement Kilns, which helped launch the nation's Portland cement industry here in the 18th century. The kilns are as striking of an industrial relic as Bethlehem's

preserved blast furnaces, whose best viewing point is from walking the Lehigh Canal Towpath through the Christmas City.

I returned to the great short loop walking trails of Trexler Park in Allentown and Northampton County's Louise Moore Park in Palmer Township, both wonderfully maintained. For a natural experience that required boots in the snow, I got back on my favorite, Bethlehem's Monocacy Way, which runs along the Monocacy Creek and connects Illick's Mill (built in 1856) to the Moravian Colonial Industrial Quarters of the 1700s where America's first municipal water system was developed.

As long as my legs carry me, despite pandemics and quarantine, I'll always have something to do and explore in the Lehigh Valley.

**The Bethlehem Gadfly**