



ANJEC Smart Growth grants help towns connect trails

By **Kerry Miller**, ANJEC Assistant Director

To become more sustainable by reducing automobile-generated pollution and consumption of resources, many towns have developed bicycle/pedestrian and trail network plans that connect schools, stores, sports facilities, cultural resources and other “destinations” within the municipality. The next step is to connect each town’s internal walking and biking network with those in adjacent towns, expanding opportunities for both local and longer-distance non-motorized travel.

On Saturday, September 18, 2010, residents and officials from three southern Sussex County municipalities – Byram, Hopatcong and Stanhope – gathered for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to mark the opening of a connecting link that joined their local trails into a unified system. It was a joyous occasion, and the culmination of 18 months of intensive work by dedicated volunteers from each of the towns.

The project had its start in early 2009, when Byram Township and the Boroughs of Hopatcong and Stanhope reached across their borders to establish a Tri-Community Trails Committee (TCTC). The Committee included representatives from each town’s environmental commission and its trails and/or recreation board, as well as other interested volunteers.

Beginning with a grant

The TCTC obtained a 2009 ANJEC Smart Growth Planning Grant of \$3750 to help cover the projected costs of mapping and

professional assistance for their first effort, a plan to connect planned and existing internal trails at their borders. A narrow historic bridge over the Lackawanna Cutoff rail line looked like the ideal point for the connection, and was the focus of the grant project. Byram and Hopatcong contributed an additional \$940 each to the planning effort, and all three communities committed to in-kind labor by volunteers and town staff.

At a grant project kickoff meeting, the group discussed the unique issues each town needed to address. Both Byram and Hopatcong already had established bike and pedestrian trails in the vicinity of the project, freeing them to focus on a few remaining gaps and deal with the larger “connections” issues. The Byram and Hopatcong linking trails are co-aligned with the Highlands Trail.

Stanhope’s trail resources in the project area were not as refined, consisting of “ad hoc” footpaths created by schoolchildren and residents to access local schools, so Stanhope’s representatives needed to concentrate on formalizing their local segments. The Sussex County GIS Office agreed to assist with producing a trail map for distribution to the public, with TCTC members refining its final form.

A year of many hours

Over the next year, the Tri-Community Trails Committee logged hundreds of hours, considering potential routes, identifying environmental features that should be avoided, doing field investiga-



Byram, Stanhope and Hopatcong trail walkers

tions and GPS plotting, taking photos, researching property records, and talking with landowners, most of which were public entities. They also kept the communities informed by posting web site updates and feeding information to the local press, which responded with numerous newspaper and online articles throughout the project.

Said TCTC member and former Hopatcong Mayor Cliff Lundin, "One of the most challenging aspects of the project was working with landowners to obtain trails easements. In a few cases, we had to go around parcels if the owner was not willing to cooperate. We had to be flexible."

Although the ANJEC grant only covered the planning portions of the project, the TCTC was committed to putting their plan into action as quickly as possible. They felt that an 18-month implementation schedule was possible because most of the trails were on publicly-owned lands. The



A 3-way trail marker at the intersection of the Tri-Town Trail

Committee recruited local volunteers to help clear, rake and blaze trail segments, and installed yellow trail markers, triangular to symbolize the three participating towns. As the last segments were being put in place, TCTC finalized a tri-town trail map for the public, and began to plan for an opening ceremony.

The big day arrives

The ribbon cutting ceremony was attended by Mayor James Oscovitch of Byram, Mayor Diana Kuncken of Stanhope, and Councilman Howard Baker of Hopatcong, as well as many residents and the press. Lundin, who is also Hopatcong's Open Space Committee vice-chairman, noted that, in addition to the obvious environmental, health and recreational benefits provided by the project, "The connecting trail is a symbol that the environment does not stop at municipal borders." It is also proof that a small grant can go a long way, and that towns and environmental commissions can work together productively.

The network, parts of which traverse old Native American trails, will allow inter-community bike and pedestrian access to the Sussex County Library, Byram Elementary and Intermediate Schools, Hopatcong and Lenape Valley Regional High Schools, and the Hopatcong Natural Area Preserve. The full system, most definitely more than the sum of its parts, will, "promote healthier living and make [the communities] more walkable, to get away from the hop-in-the-car mentality," said Byram Township Committeeman Scott Olson.

TCTC member Janice Hunts from Stanhope reflected the feelings of the group: "It's just exhilarating...being part of something that is so beneficial to the towns." TCTC member Malcolm Piester from Hopatcong, who at the opening ceremony was given a "You Make A Difference" award by Hopatcong Mayor Sylvia Petillo, called the Hopatcong wooded trail "really beautiful, a good way to exercise and get away from the congestion of town." 