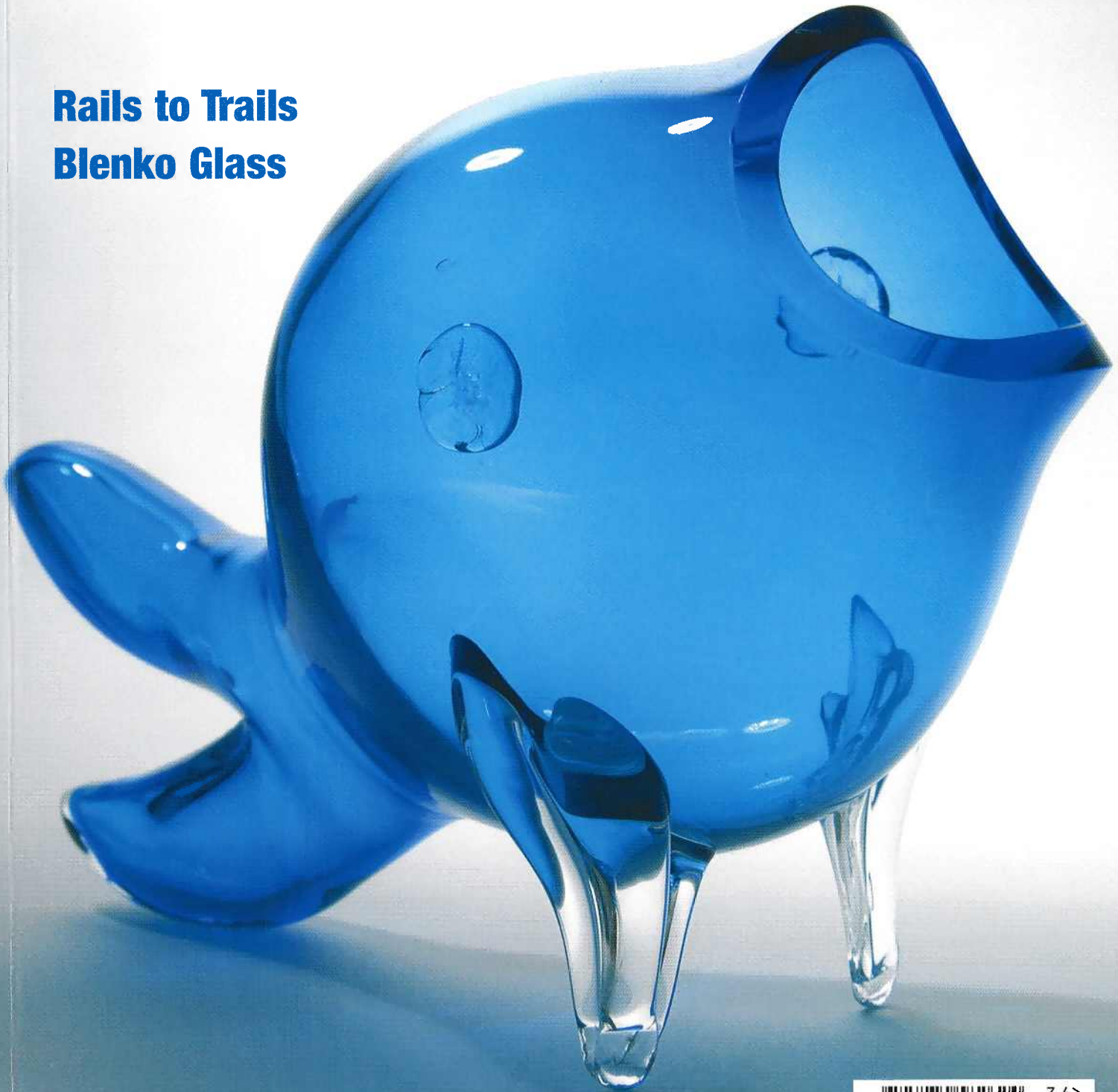


Charleston

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Rails to Trails
Blenko Glass





Pathway to a New Charleston

By Michelle Saxton

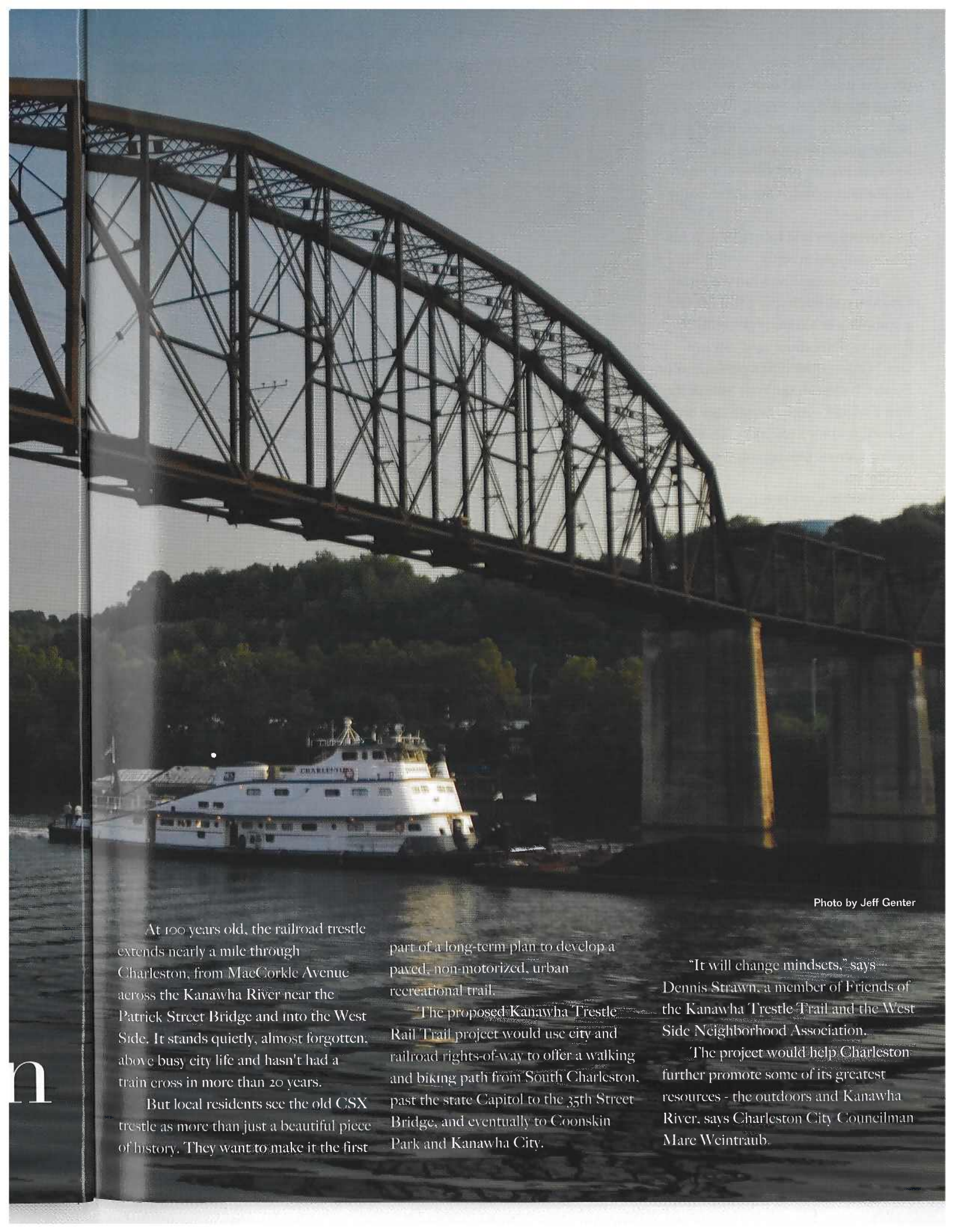


Photo by Jeff Genter

n At 100 years old, the railroad trestle extends nearly a mile through Charleston, from MacCorkle Avenue across the Kanawha River near the Patrick Street Bridge and into the West Side. It stands quietly, almost forgotten, above busy city life and hasn't had a train cross in more than 20 years.

But local residents see the old CSX trestle as more than just a beautiful piece of history. They want to make it the first

part of a long-term plan to develop a paved, non-motorized, urban recreational trail.

The proposed Kanawha Trestle Rail Trail project would use city and railroad rights-of-way to offer a walking and biking path from South Charleston, past the state Capitol to the 35th Street Bridge, and eventually to Coonskin Park and Kanawha City.

"It will change mindsets," says Dennis Strawn, a member of Friends of the Kanawha Trestle Trail and the West Side Neighborhood Association.

The project would help Charleston further promote some of its greatest resources - the outdoors and Kanawha River, says Charleston City Councilman Mare Weintraub.

"The ability to ride on a bicycle over the river trestle will become one of those things that defines our city," Weintraub says. "It will be one of those things that is photographed or featured in a brochure that we provide to folks that are planning a conference and coming to Charleston."

Strawn, an avid bike rider, says the plan has several benefits.

"Recreation: Where can you go in Charleston to teach your 3-year-old or 4-year-old how to ride a bike, without having to worry about cars?" Strawn says. "Transportation: If a person lives in South Charleston, the West Side or the East End and wanted to ride their bike to work, it's only a few miles. They're getting exercise plus cutting down on congestion."

"With the state being one of the most obese in the nation, and everybody promoting healthier lifestyles, this gives them a place to come out and start their healthier lifestyle," he adds.

Plans for the trestle trail have been discussed for a few years now and are part of overall riverfront redevelopment plans. The biggest obstacle now is funding.

Trestle supporters have secured about \$1.3 million for the project, but another \$500,000 to \$1 million is needed to get the first phase started, Strawn says. Including future development, the trail could cost about \$7 million to \$10 million over 15 years, he says.

"The support's there. The plan is there. The structure is here. It literally comes down to funding," Strawn says. "There are just so many different projects that are pressing."

The first part of the plan is restoring the 4,250-foot trestle — removing rails and ties, adding steel pans on the bridge and concrete for the path, as well as railing and light posts.

The second phase is developing a trail from the South Charleston mound

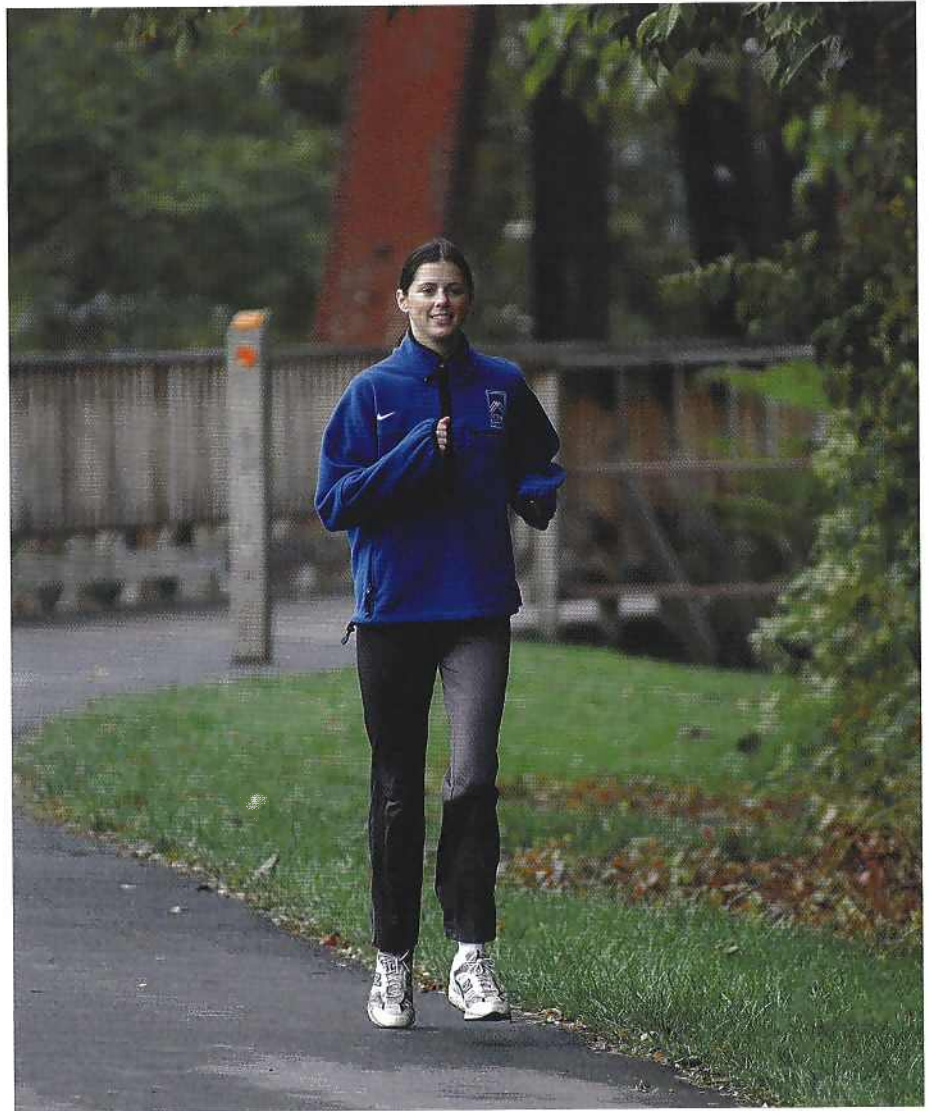


Photo courtesy Greater Morgantown CVB

Recreational rewards

The Rail Trail in Northern West Virginia provides 48 miles of recreational opportunities in three counties. Here, a runner jogs near the Deckers Creek Bridge in Morgantown.

to the trestle and continuing it from the West Side to the East End. The Whipple Bridge, an inactive, historic trolley bridge over the Elk River, would be restored as part of the trail.

Currently, one of the few places in Charleston to ride bikes or go running without having to worry about cars is along Kanawha Boulevard, says Bill Nottingham, owner of Charleston Bicycle Center in Kanawha City.

"By having the bikeway, by having greenways, which would encompass bikers, walkers, joggers, runners, you're going to create some additional safe

places where everybody is able to get out and enjoy themselves away from the motorists' traffic," Nottingham says. "And the motorists are going to feel safer that they're not going to have as many bikes to contend with."

Creating more green space and scenic views is also a goal.

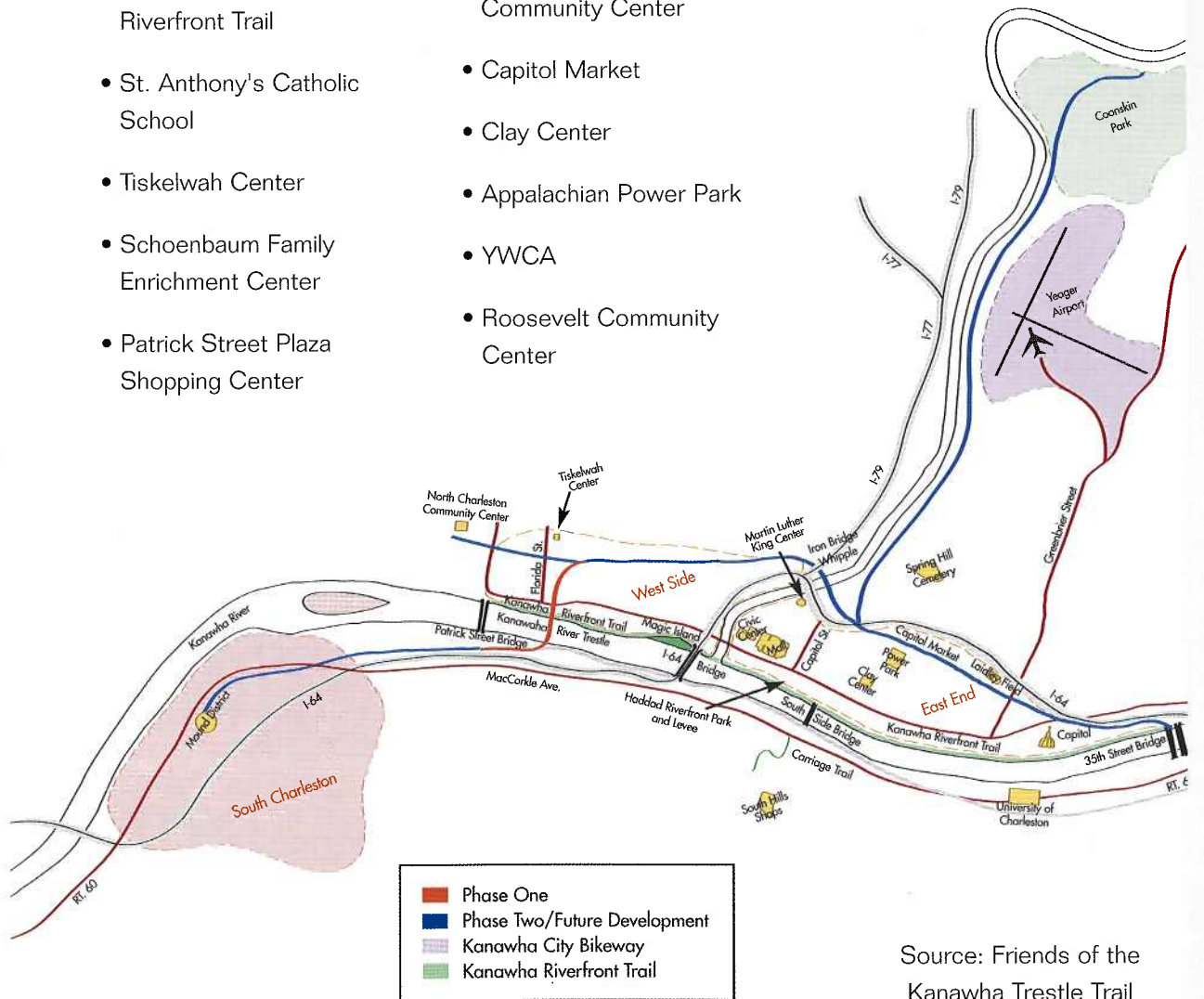
One spot Strawn has his eye on is a small patch of woods near the trestle on the West Side that has been littered with trash and broken glass.

"You can save as many of these trees as you can, cut out the undergrowth, clean it up, plant some grass, just make

From here to there

The proposed Kanawha Trestle Trail would be within walking distance of many recreational, historic and community places throughout the area, including:

- South Charleston Mound
- South Charleston Library and shopping district
- LaBelle Theater
- DOW Visitor Center
- Kanawha Boulevard Riverfront Trail
- St. Anthony's Catholic School
- Tiskelwah Center
- Schoenbaum Family Enrichment Center
- Patrick Street Plaza Shopping Center
- North Charleston Community Center
- Stonewall Jackson Middle School
- West Washington Street shopping district
- Martin Luther King Community Center
- Capitol Market
- Clay Center
- Appalachian Power Park
- YWCA
- Roosevelt Community Center
- Laidley Field
- East Washington Street Village District
- West Virginia Capitol Complex



Source: Friends of the Kanawha Trestle Trail

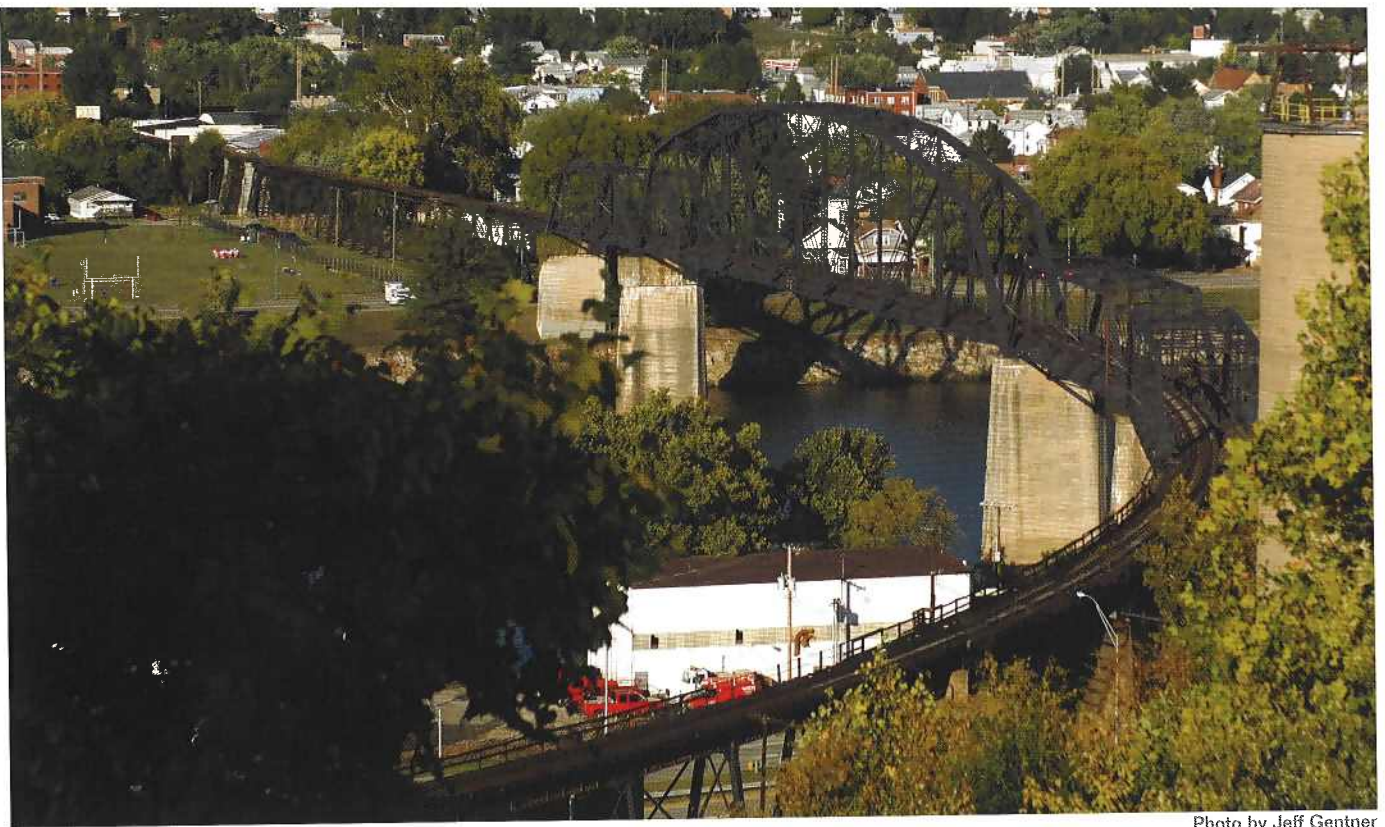


Photo by Jeff Gentner

New Direction

Supporters of the Kanawha Trestle Trail project envision safer, scenic, and more convenient ways to get around Charleston and enjoy the outdoors.

it a park," he says.

Outside an abandoned building overlooking Court Street near I-64, Strawn imagined the possibilities if residential lofts were developed nearby.

"A person could live right here, jump on the trail, go downtown and work at the Capitol. If they work on the West Side they could cross back over. They could walk to the mall, which is two and a half blocks, for anything, for dinner or shopping," Strawn says. "It's a great location to live."

Several cities in West Virginia and other states have successfully developed rails-to-trails projects.

Morgantown recently finished its system, which took about 12 years, and now covers about 50 miles in Monongalia, Marion and Preston counties.

Free public recreation is a tremendous quality of life issue, says

Ralph LaRue, associate director of Morgantown's Board of Park and Recreation Commissioners. He often sees people outdoors riding bikes, walking and rollerblading. The trail is enormously popular, and has helped spur economic development, including the construction of new hotels and restaurants.

"Out on the rail trail we see two and three generations of families, all out for an afternoon ride," LaRue says. "It has become something that every realtor talks about."

Funding was a challenge, but private contributions helped get the project moving, LaRue says.

Meanwhile, South Charleston has plans to develop a bike path throughout its city with connections to the Spring Hill area, Little Creek Park and the South Charleston Community Center.

"People are biking more, and we're

going to give them a trail," says Bob Anderson, executive director of the South Charleston Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Charleston area leaders say it just makes sense to have a trail here.

"Why not Charleston?" says Susie Salisbury, the Charleston Area Alliance's vice president of community development. "Instead of why, why not?"

"If we could do the trail project and do the riverfront project, Charleston would be a showpiece for the eastern United States," Charleston Mayor Danny Jones says. "People would come here and wouldn't believe what they could see - a city park from Patrick Street all the way to the Kanawha City Bridge."

Anyone interested in helping with the trail project can contact Friends of the Kanawha Trestle Trail at (304) 343-5241.