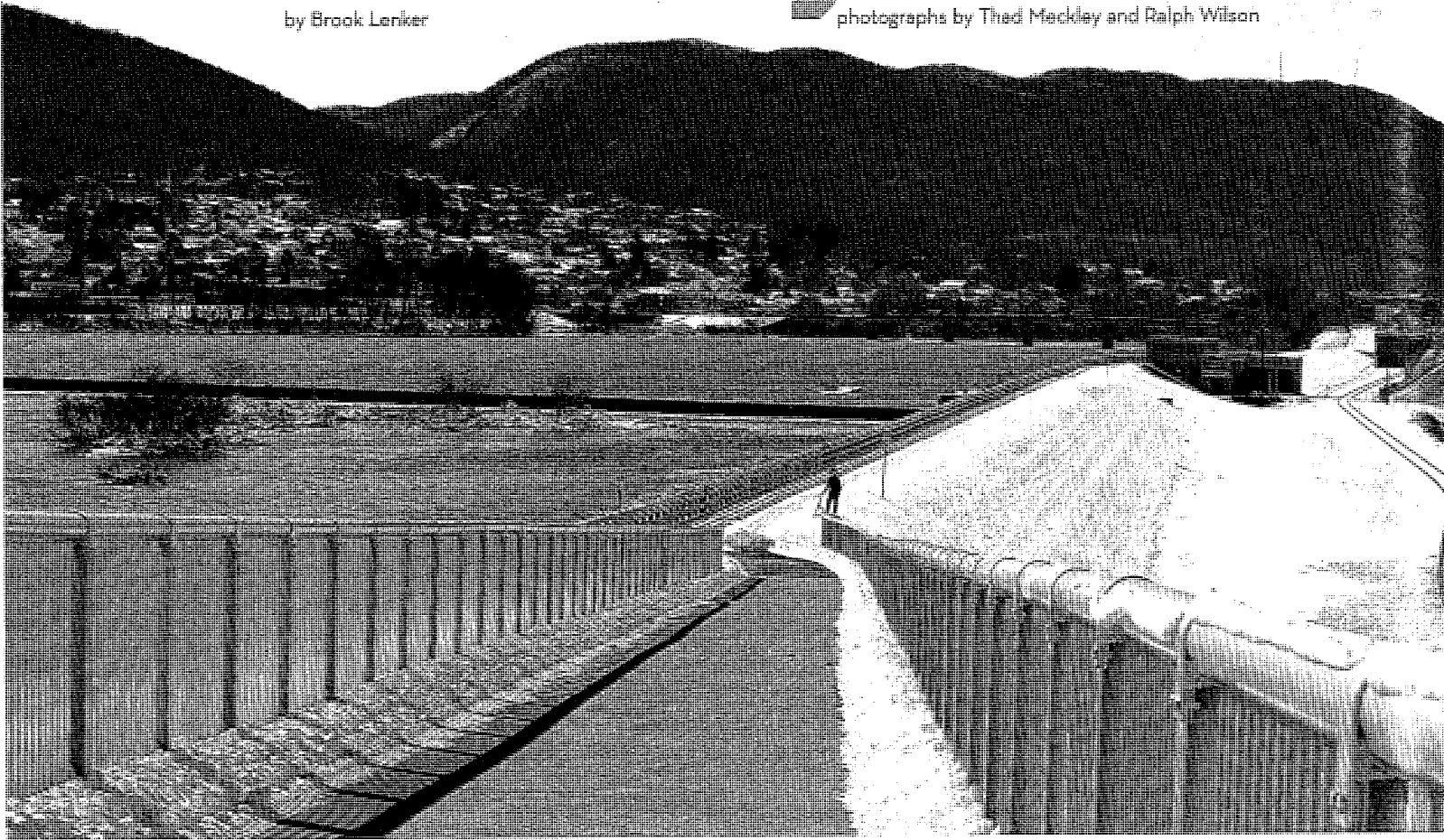


Levee's Eye View

by Brook Lenker

photographs by Thed Meckley and Ralph Wilson



Williamsport has hit a home run with the completion of the River Walk, a four mile walking and biking path atop the levee system alongside the West Branch of the Susquehanna River.

After 10 years and \$2.3 million in the making, Williamsport's River Walk is open for business and pleasure—one of seven demonstration projects on the Susquehanna Greenway, a project of statewide significance linking water, land and people along the entire course of the Susquehanna River system through Pennsylvania.

The River Walk "advances core strategies of the greenway, like revitalizing river towns, improving access and environmental stewardship," explained Gary Bloss, executive director of the Susquehanna Greenway Partnership. "It is a key project that is getting on the ground early in the life of the greenway, and its land component is providing a thread helping to bring the entire greenway together."

Connecting to the river

Lycoming County's Planning Commission and Board of Commissioners proposed the River Walk more than a decade ago, reinforced by the findings of a visioning process, Our Towns 2010. The number one need identified in the visioning was for the community to be better connected to the river. When planning for the Susquehanna Greenway commenced in 2003 and 2004, the River Walk was seen as an ideal part of the system. Bloss called it "conjunction junction," referring to the timely synergy between the projects.

From the Interstate 180/Faxon interchange, the River Walk traverses the north side of the river on the levee to the Maynard Street Bridge where it uses the side-



walk to cross the river. In South Williamsport, it follows the levee to the Market Street Bridge and returns to Williamsport—creating a core loop about 3 miles long. The 10-foot-wide trail also connects to the Loyalsock and Montoursville bikeways and eventually it will head west toward Jersey Shore, the terminus of the premier Pine Creek Rail Trail, and east to Montoursville, Muncy and Union County. It is a major recreational enhancement touching many bases—health and wellness, history, art, and culture—and a hub of a regional trail system.

History and art

Another identity for the River Walk is the Timber Trail. A century or so ago, Williamsport was the gritty crossroads of the lumber industry brandishing a river choked with logs awaiting the saw mills. The city bore witness to the pillaging of natural resources and the amassing of great fortunes. It is a notable American tale filled with hardship, fortitude and ingenuity; a story for the ages. The Pennsylvania Lumber Heritage Region provided Lycoming County with a grant to create 12 kiosks to interpret the industry's role in the area. The kiosks can be enjoyed while exploring the River Walk.

The River Walk is also an art walk to view and contemplate public art related to the lumber heritage theme. The first piece to be installed was Pam Barner's life-size sculpture of a "wood hick," the workers who prodded and separated logs on enormous floating rafts. The goal is to place five more pieces, but it may be a 10-year process. "Public art is an expensive, complicated process," according to Judy Olinsky, one of 12 members of Public ARTWORKS, a non-profit organization and subcommittee of the Williamsport-Lycoming Arts Council.

Public ARTWORKS strives to enhance the quality of life in Lycoming County through public art and their first big effort is the River Walk. Olinsky, a co-owner of a downtown art gallery, is optimistic about its impact. "It will make it feel even better to live here." She speaks proudly of all the cultural opportunities to be enjoyed in Williamsport, acknowledging that "visual arts are the signifier to the outside world that you have a rich



Winter view of downtown Williamsport from the South Williamsport section of the Susquehanna River Walk Timber Trail, showing one of the historical placards which depict the famous Saw Dust Wars. This labor relations "uprising" was instrumental in setting the wage standards for working class lumbermen across Pennsylvania during the lumber boom heyday.

Visitors to campus will find much to see and do!

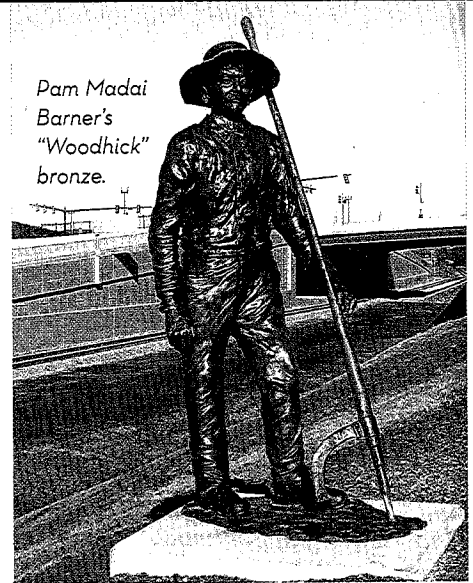


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Pam Madai Barner's "Woodhick" bronze.



cultural life." She is convinced the River Walk will become a tourist attraction.

Celebration of team effort

Mark Murawski is Lycoming County's transportation planner and the project manager for the River Walk. "I've done dozens of community and transportation projects," he said, "but this one has been the most satisfying. It is gratifying to see the response from the community and the use of the facility. It's a great project." A grand opening is planned for the spring. "It will be a lot more than a ribbon cutting," Murawski assured. "It will be held late April or early May and include races, biking events and more." There is much to celebrate.

From its inception, the River Walk has been a team effort. PennDOT's transportation enhancement funds, federal earmarks, and grants from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources provided the funding. The Lycoming County Planning Department delivered a comprehensive plan that embraced the trail and the people to facilitate its completion. Public ARTWORKS is infusing a compelling art component (and has worked out a legacy gift program enabling a piece of public art to be given in memorial or donated by an artist). Regional initiatives, from the greenway to the interpretation of the legacy of the lumber industry, create what Gary Bloss describes as a "whole greater than the sum of the parts." And the River Walk is some part!

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If you go

Official access points for the Susquehanna River Walk include: the Market Street Bridge on the Williamsport and South Williamsport sides; the Water Tower Square parking lot and trail parking off the Faxon Exit; and the Maynard Street Bridge on both the Williamsport and South Williamsport sides. Others are being developed. For a map of the River Walk, go to lumberheritage.org/TT_brochure.pdf. For more information about the upcoming celebration, call Rachelle Ricotta, community development planner for Lycoming County, at (570) 320-2134 or rricotta@lyco.org. **SL**

Brook Lenker is a freelance writer based in Camp Hill.



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