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**Westmoreland County**

## **Groups set to work on Pleasant Valley Park**

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By Rebekah Scott, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Murrysville's Pleasant Valley Park isn't much to look at right now as parks go. There are no ball fields, water fountains, swing sets or laughing children.

Still it's a tribute to what conservationists can do once they turn to activism.

At Pleasant Valley Park, the crickets sing a steady background tune, and goldenrod lights up the underbrush. A rutted road snakes through thick woods and weedy former farm fields. Turkey vultures throw long shadows from the sky down to the path ahead, and the season's last praying mantises creep slowly by.

The municipality of Murrysville bought these 265 acres of former farmland in 1999 for \$707,000 with hopes of developing playing fields, parking lots and new roads.

But the land is hilly and spiked with gas wells and wetlands. Access to and from the busy, twisty Pleasant Valley Road is problematic.

It couldn't be transformed for less than \$15 million or \$20 million, said Michele Clarke, the municipality's director of parks and recreation, so the real estate hunt continued.

In 2002, Murrysville bought the Cline Farm, a more usable 305-acre tract. Bulldozers are at work installing six playing fields in what's now called Murrysville Community Park.

"We thought we could just sell [Pleasant Valley] Park to fund the work at Community Park," Ms. Clarke said. "But a couple of groups spoke up and said 'Wait, let's keep it. Let us use it. We'll take care of it.' And so that's what we did."

Hank Kendall was one of those outdoor activists. He's lived for 30 years along Cole Road in Murrysville.

He's watched the community grow up around him and he's fought on several fronts to keep parts of the municipality green and undeveloped.

Mr. Kendall is part of a consortium of four community groups that have joined to keep Pleasant Valley Park in public hands. Council voted a year ago to keep the land, and now the hands-on work is set to begin.

Once the leaves fall, conservation volunteers will mark off three long, looping trails within the wild park, just the start of what they hope will become seven miles of trail. In the spring they'll cut the trails through the forest, underbrush and meadows, following the contours of the landscape.

"It's a great area for running dogs, cross-country skiing, mountain biking and deer hunting," Mr. Kendall said. "It's off on the Penn Township side of Murrysville, so it's a little bit out-of-the-way."

The young mountain-bikers and skiers could be the future of the park, Ms. Clarke added. If they don't use and manage the trails, nature will quickly reclaim them.

Pleasant Valley Park has brought together conservancy-minded groups, too, Mr. Kendall said: Members of Friends of Rural Murrysville, Westmoreland Conservancy, scouts, the Sportsmen's and Landowners League, and "just plain volunteers" all have a hand in it.

The volunteers who already raised funds and installed a 20-car parking lot at Pleasant Valley Park are mostly of an older set who may be seeing their last years of brush-cutting and trail-marking. It's time for a younger generation to step up,

"We have lots more park users than maintainers," Ms. Clarke said. "But I have to say for Murrysville is people here are willing to take land off the tax rolls for preservation. You don't see that in some other neighboring communities, where there doesn't seem to be appreciation for open green space."

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