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USDA/AmeriCorps

Getting Things Done in Rural America



UNITED
STATES
DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE

Fayette County AmeriCorps Team
First Annual Report
1995-1996



USDA/AmeriCorps Team Makes Headlines

The Fayette County AmeriCorps Team

Creating Solutions Through Partnerships • Their objective: Community. Opportunity. Responsibility

Pennsylvania has had five members of AmeriCorps since October, 1995. Headquartered at the National Road Heritage Park offices in Farmington, the team has made significant progress in a variety of projects.

Craig Kelso
Craig Kelso is close to completing the interpretive development project. He is developing users to include the public.

Jaime Feeck
Jaime Feeck is assisting with the Ramparts I Neighborhood Revitalization Project in Farmington. Ramparts I is being

Team sponsors are beginning to recruit new AmeriCorps Team members for 1997. Next year's proposed job descriptions include:

1. Coordinator of acid mine drainage remediation efforts in Fayette County. Projects include the cleanup of a demonstration site.

TRIBUNE-REVIEW SUNDAY, OCT. 15, 1995

AmeriCorps to work on history, tourism

By Jerry Storey
FOR THE TRIBUNE-REVIEW

A new contingent from AmeriCorps is coming to Fayette County to work on history, historic preservation, and environmental problems. The corps members, who are slated to arrive as early as this week, may be cutting the funding of the nationwide

A-6—HERALD-STANDARD, TUESDAY, APRIL 16, 1996

Yough Trail clean-up project slated

The Frazier School District will participate Saturday in a clean-up project along six miles of the Yough River Trail located in the district and in areas on both ends of the Layton tunnel.

The school district will work with the AmeriCorps Team, Pennsylvania CleanWays and the Regional Trail Corporation to remove garbage and debris from the areas as one of the district's community-service projects.

The project was made possible through a grant sponsored by Fayette County Drug and Alcohol Commission.

Students in grades 9-12 who perform 25 hours of community service during the year will receive credit from the Frazier Community Group indicating the number of hours attained.

Students will also be in their services at a spring break. Volunteers will meet at 8 a.m. at the Frazier High School auditorium for a brief program. Following the safety program, a bus will transport students to the clean-up.

The scheduled rain date for the project is Saturday, April 27. Parents, families and community members are encouraged to participate.

For more information, contact Barbara Rozycki at 736-4427 or Jaime Feeck at 329-1560.

A-8—HERALD-STANDARD, FRIDAY, APRIL 19, 1996

Volunteer Day set to repair center

The Fayette County AmeriCorps Team, community members, and other volunteers will participate in a Volunteer Day on Saturday, May 11, repairing the East End Community Center in Uniontown.

A-6—HERALD-STANDARD, THURSDAY, APRIL 18, 1996

FAYETTE COUNTY AMERICORPS TEAM will host a town meeting at 7 p.m. Monday at the Dawson Fire Hall. A representative from the USDA Rural Housing Service office, formerly the Farmers Home Administration, will be present to explain grants and loans with one percent interest rates that are

Youthful team will try to boost heritage development in county

By MELISSA WILLIAMS SCHOFIELD
Herald Standard Staff Writer

A team of five recent college graduates from all walks of life will be spending the next eight months trying to rebuild Fayette County's economy.

Their goal is to encourage tourism-related heritage development at the National Road State Heritage Park and the Youghiogheny River Trail. The team started working on revitalizing Fayette County in mid-October and is based at the National Road Heritage Park offices near Fort Necessity's entrance along the National Road in Farmington.

The team is comprised of Susan Thagard, who is planner and coordinator; Adam Baacke, historic preservationist; Jaime Feeck, public relations; Craig Kelso, public historian; and Amy Myers, who is an attorney.

and development of sites and resources infrastructure. The program includes fostering a strong partnership among private and public agencies, as well as small community-based groups, working toward rebuilding the economy of Fayette County, said Thagard.

The team intends to complete 1700 hours of service over an 11-month time frame.

Thagard, who hails from Pittsburgh, graduated from the University of Maryland, College Park, in 1990, with a bachelor of arts degree in fine arts and a minor in art history, from the University of Utah at Salt Lake City in 1995 with an urban planning certificate, and from the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, where she learned valuable research skills by documenting historic information for small towns, which she is applying toward her work in Fayette County.

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Assembled from all over U.S., AmeriCorps team takes on variety of projects in county

Tribune-Review

February 25, 1996

AmeriCorps team faces challenge

By Paul Heyworth
Tribune-Review

Five young professionals are offering their skills, talents and caring attitudes to encourage tourism-related heritage development along the Youghiogheny River Trail and the National Road Heritage Park (Route 40) corridors.

The four-month-old Fayette County AmeriCorps Rural Development Team now realizes it faces a massive, complex challenge in an atmosphere of considerable uncertainty. If the political winds continue to blow as they have been recently, AmeriCorps might go out of business by the end of the year.

"We knew from the outset that it was going to be difficult to complete projects and make deadlines," explained Susan E. Thagard, team

coordinator and planner. "So, the difficulty lies in getting people involved, starting the project in such a way as to ensure they will PLEASE SEE TEAM/A4



COMPUTER REVIEW

Susan Thagard, AmeriCorps team coordinator and planner, reviews computer information with Adam Baacke, historic preservationist

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1996 Fayette County AmeriCorps Team

Adam Baacke
Jaime Fecek
Craig Kelso
Amy Myers
Susan Thagard

Acknowledgment

Dr. T Allan Comp of Southwestern Pennsylvania Heritage Preservation Commission conceived, developed, and supervised the Fayette County AmeriCorps Team and Mr. Robert Grenoble of National Road Heritage Park provided office, staff, and supervisory support. This first annual report is dedicated to their contribution.

What is AmeriCorps?

AmeriCorps is President Clinton's domestic national service program - passed with bipartisan support from Congress - that engages 20,000 Americans of diverse backgrounds in performing service that meets critical community needs in return for an educational award which may be used to pay for college, job training, graduate school, or to pay back student loans. The majority of AmeriCorps members work in partnerships with states, local governments, and non-profit organizations. The U. S. Department of Agriculture runs three types of AmeriCorps teams in 38 states, composed of approximately 1,200 members: an Anti-Hunger Team, a Public Lands and Environment Team, and a Rural Development Team. Many of the AmeriCorps projects are sponsored by community-based organizations and all projects are designed to get things done, while building community, opportunity, and responsibility. In exchange for 1,700 hours of community service performed within nine months to one year, AmeriCorps Members receive a living stipend, health insurance, and an educational award.

Why did Fayette County receive an AmeriCorps Team?

Fayette County qualified for a USDA AmeriCorps team because its 145,000 residents live almost exclusively in rural areas and they face some of the harshest economic realities in Pennsylvania. Since 1980, the county has experienced a 9% decline in population while the unemployment rate has remained over 10%. Income levels rank last in the state with 20.7% of the county's residents and 17.6% of the county's families living below the poverty level. Nearly one-fifth of the county's population is over age 65 and more than 14% of the elderly live below the poverty level. Over 27% of the county's residents receive some form of public assistance. The U. S. Department of Agriculture sponsored the Rural Development Team that was applied for and supervised by the Southwestern Pennsylvania Heritage Preservation Commission (SPHPC), Fay-Penn Economic Development Council, and Penn's Corner Resource Conservation and Development Area.

Report Summary

This report documents the accomplishments of the five members of the Fayette County AmeriCorps Team managed by the Southwestern Pennsylvania Heritage Preservation Commission, Fay-Penn Economic Development Council, and Penn's Corner Resource and Conservation District in the 1995-96 year of AmeriCorps. It was the first and only USDA Rural Development AmeriCorps Team in the state of Pennsylvania.

The team's primary objective was to encourage tourism-related heritage development within the National Road Heritage Park and Youghiogheny River Trail corridors.

The National Road Heritage Park (NRHP) was established to foster economic and community development through the promotion of heritage tourism in the National Road corridor. The National Road corridor is defined as one-quarter mile from the center line of the National Road in both directions. The present U. S. Route 40 follows the National Road in Pennsylvania for 90 miles through Somerset, Fayette, and Washington Counties.

During the program year, the Fayette County AmeriCorps Team achieved the following results within two geographic corridors.

Within the NRHP corridor:

- Completed and submitted nominations for two taverns and two towns to the National Register of Historic Places
- Created a \$400,000 low-interest loan program for owners of historic buildings
- Eliminated 100 tons of abandoned vehicles and screened two junkyards
- Developed a brochure for the Flat Iron Building Visitor Center in Brownsville
- Created events for the National Pike Festival

- Developed art and essay contest to educate students about local history
- Initiated screening three junkyards located along the National Road

The Youghiogheny River Trail (YRT) is a 67 mile limestone surfaced trail being built along the abandoned Pittsburgh and Lake Erie and Western Maryland railroads between McKeesport and Confluence. It is a non-motorized, shared-use recreational trail for cycling, walking, fishing and canoe access, horseback riding, cross country skiing, and picnicking. The YRT parallels the Youghiogheny River and is the largest single visitor use attraction in the region and a key connection in the planned Pittsburgh to D. C. trail.

Within the YRT corridor:

- Identified and developed interpretive text for 35 historic sites along 40 miles of trail
- Surveyed 60 rail-trail organizations across the U. S. to develop and disseminate maintenance and management standards for future trail development
- Documented trail usage to obtain additional funding for YRT

During the program year, the Fayette County AmeriCorps Team performed the following direct service projects throughout Fayette County:

- Repaired the East End Community Center in Uniontown
- Organized an illegal dumpsite cleanup with the Frazier School District
- Conducted two town meetings to inform residents of USDA housing programs
- Initiated and obtained a five member Anti-Hunger AmeriCorps team
- Implemented housing rehabilitation programs in Brownsville

National Road Heritage Park Corridor

National Register of Historic Places

In order to aid in the development of the NRHP as a tourist destination, one team member nominated two taverns located along the National Road to the National Register of Historic Places: the Josiah Frost House in Menallen Township and the Dougherty Tavern in Donegal Township. Since the team member identified the building as historically significant, the owners of the taverns have committed to the preservation and conservation of their buildings. Two towns were also nominated to the National Register of Historic Places. Since the nominations have been submitted, members of both communities have expressed interest in establishing neighborhood associations, as well as enacting local zoning and regulations to help preserve the historic character and identity of their communities.

Community and Building Revitalization Program

In an effort to promote tourism and increase community pride in Fayette, Somerset, and Washington Counties, a team member created a low-interest loan program for owners of historic structures located along the National Road. Historic properties within five miles of the National Road which are listed on the National Register of Historic Places individually or as contributing resources in a historic district are now eligible for loans ranging from \$5,000 to \$30,000 at an interest rate 2% below the National Prime Interest Rate. Participating lenders include Fayette Bank, National City Bank of Fayette County, National City Bank of Washington County, and Washington Federal Savings & Loan. Each lender agreed to contribute \$100,000 to the program.

Education

To increase student awareness about Fayette County's rich heritage, an art and essay contest was held during the National Pike Festival for elementary and junior high school students in schools located along the National Road. Over 100 entries depicting life along the National Road in the 1800's were submitted. Winners of the art and essay contests received monetary prizes and their entries were published in the NRHP's newsletter The Milepost. Teachers now include Fayette County history in their lessons as a result of the contests created by a member.

Junkyard Removal

In a highway beautification project, one team member worked with new property owners to remove a junkyard that had scarred the National Road's landscape for more than 30 years. The site, located in Brier Hill, was an eyesore and environmental hazard. Over 140 junked vehicles were removed and 100 tons of scrap metal was recycled. The site is now the home of Heritage Motors, an automobile dealership. With the removal of one junkyard along the National Road, there is now a clean site, a new business, and a pleasant view for neighbors and travelers along the National Road. As a result of this project, other junkyard owners have indicated their willingness to cooperate with remediation efforts such as screening and removal.

Flat Iron Building Brochure

One team member created a brochure for the Flat Iron Building located in Brownsville. The Flat Iron Building is a 160 year old building renovated by the Brownsville Area Revitalization Corporation in an effort to promote tourism in the area. The building will serve as an interpretive and welcome center for the NRHP. The brochure contains information on Brownsville and other historic sites in Fayette County.

Business Survey

To assist the NRHP in implementing community and economic development programs, all team members surveyed over 500 businesses located in Somerset, Fayette, and Washington Counties along the National Road. The survey results provide the NRHP with a baseline for economic and community development activities, and a ready avenue for improved communication.

National Pike Festival

To attract more visitors to the National Pike Festival, one team member organized two evenings of entertainment for the festival at the Great Meadows Amphitheater. The underutilized amphitheater provided a great forum for a storyteller who told Early American and Pennsylvania history folk stories and a four member musical group who sang tavern songs and told stories about the National Road. This type of entertainment was the first of its kind during the Pike Festival. The same team member also designed the first National Pike Festival flag and proceeds benefited the NRHP.

Junkyard Screening

One team member reached agreements with three junkyard owners to screen their properties located along the National Road. The properties are located in Henry Clay and Wharton Townships in Fayette County and Malden Township in Washington County. The screening will consist of a combination of live screening, such as trees and shrubs, and wooden fences. Area businesses have agreed to donate supplies needed to build the fences.

Youghiogeny River Trail Corridor

Interpretive Sites

A historic resources survey was conducted along 40 miles of the Youghiogeny River Trail to determine appropriate sites for interpretation. With the assistance of local historical societies and community members, a team member located 36 historic sites along the trail between Connellsville and Boston. Interpretive signage will be placed at several sites in Fayette, Westmoreland, and Allegheny Counties. The signage along the YRT will tell the history of southwestern Pennsylvania and will create a unique experience for the more than 10,000 people per week who are expected to use the trail when it is completed.

Maintenance Guide

Throughout the region and the nation, maintenance and management of rail-trails are the two greatest concerns trail groups have about their trails. With support from the PA chapter of Rails-to-Trails, one member conducted a maintenance study to enable both new and experienced rail-trails to better plan for future budgets and stewardship of their trails. As a result of the survey, a database was created that is compatible with the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy system as well as most trail groups. The collection holds maintenance, greenway, and economic impact resources that is helpful to trail groups throughout the country.

Trail Count

All team members assisted the Regional Trail Corporation (RTC) to determine the number of people who use the YRT daily and on weekends. The numbers obtained will be used by the RTC to better determine maintenance costs and schedules. The numbers will also help the RTC obtain private and public funds to maintain the trail.

Direct Service Projects

East End Community Center

The East End Community Center, located along the National Road in Uniontown, provides a safe haven for children to learn social and academic skills through one-on-one tutoring and mentoring programs for approximately 285 students each year. Both the interior and exterior of the center desperately needed repair. Most of the rooms contained dark, paneled walls which did not provide adequate lighting for tutoring sessions. The exterior of the building was dirty with peeling and chipping paint. A team member organized a Community Volunteer Day to rehabilitate the Center. All five team members and over 30 volunteers cleaned and painted 10 rooms and the exterior of the building. The volunteer day sparked other organizations to become involved in the project, such as the Welfare-to-Work program and community service work programs. As more people learned of the project enough donations were received to repair the leaky roof and replace broken ceiling tiles.

Illegal Dumpsites

To help the Regional Trail Corporation (RTC) clean-up sections of the Youghiogheny River Trail, two team members organized a clean-up in cooperation with the Frazier School District, PA Cleanways, and the Perryopolis Area Heritage Society. To encourage student participation at the clean-up one team member organized a school assembly where the state geologist explained the detrimental effects of illegal dumping on the environment. All team members and over 50 students and 25 adults participated in the clean-up. Volunteers picked up over 15 tons of trash from six miles of the future site of the YRT and from 60 acres of land surrounding the George Washington Grist Mill. During the course of the clean-up students were overheard saying they would never again throw another piece of trash on the ground. Students also received community service credits from the Frazier School District.

USDA Housing Programs

Two meetings were held in the towns of Dawson and Vanderbilt to help assist homeowners apply for the USDA's Rural Housing Service grants and loans. A representative from the local USDA office attended the meetings to explain eligibility requirements and help citizens fill out applications. As a result of the meetings, five people filed applications to receive grants and/or loans to make improvement to their houses.

Summer of Gleaning

Two team members submitted a proposal to obtain an additional five member USDA AmeriCorps team for summer 1996. The Anti-Hunger Team gleaned excess food from area restaurants and distributed it to soup kitchens in Fayette County for twelve weeks. Pennsylvania was one of only 17 states in the country to receive an Anti-Hunger AmeriCorps Team for the summer. The team provided an additional 8,000 meals during the summer for patrons of Fayette County soup kitchens and established linkages with food donors that remain today.

Picnic in the Park

Several team members organized a "Picnic in the Park" for patrons of Fayette County soup kitchens during the USDA's National Week of Food Recovery. All of the food for the picnic was donated from area restaurants and businesses. Team members coordinated with the Anti-Hunger AmeriCorps team and served food while a local band provided entertainment for the more than 100 people who attended the picnic.

Housing Rehabilitation

A major housing rehabilitation project is being implemented in a neighborhood in Brownsville to improve housing conditions and make housing more affordable to low-income residents. The project is being implemented in partnership with more than 10 agencies, including non-profit housing and federal agencies. Projects include surveying neighborhood needs, holding training sessions on home ownership and landlord/tenant relations, developing a neighborhood crime watch program, and helping residents access USDA and state assistance programs. In addition to housing rehabilitation, the project also includes improving other aspects of the neighborhood, such as building community centers and playgrounds, and improving roads and sidewalks.

USDA Mini-Grant

One member applied for and received a mini-grant to rehabilitate a home located in the Ramparts I neighborhood. The mini-grant covered the costs of cleaning and painting a two story brick home. Three team members worked closely with volunteers from the community to paint the house and supervise volunteers.

Getting Things Done

The AmeriCorps ethic is "getting things done" by improving communities and meeting their education, public safety, human, and environmental needs.

AmeriCorps strengthens communities, expands opportunities for its members, and encourages responsibility.

AmeriCorps members come from different cultures and backgrounds with different missions to unite in an effort to improve **communities** across the United States.

AmeriCorps provides **opportunities** for its members to receive education awards. It also provides members with invaluable service experience, specialized training, and life skills.

AmeriCorps encourages members to be **responsible** for their communities, themselves, and their families during their terms of service and throughout their lives.

In addition to their project accomplishments, during 1995-96 the Fayette County AmeriCorps Team helped to strengthen over 10 communities in Fayette County with more than 420 volunteers who provided over 2,300 hours of direct service to their communities.