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[Archives > News](#)

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Improving the trail

Along the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal

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NEWS

- [Front Page](#)
- [News](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Dougherty Trial](#)
- [Out of the Ashes](#)
- [2006 General Assembly](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Editorial/Letters](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Entertainment-Events](#)
- [Features](#)
- [Unsolved Murder](#)
- [Archive](#)
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- [View On Sports](#)
- [Poker](#)
- [Tech](#)

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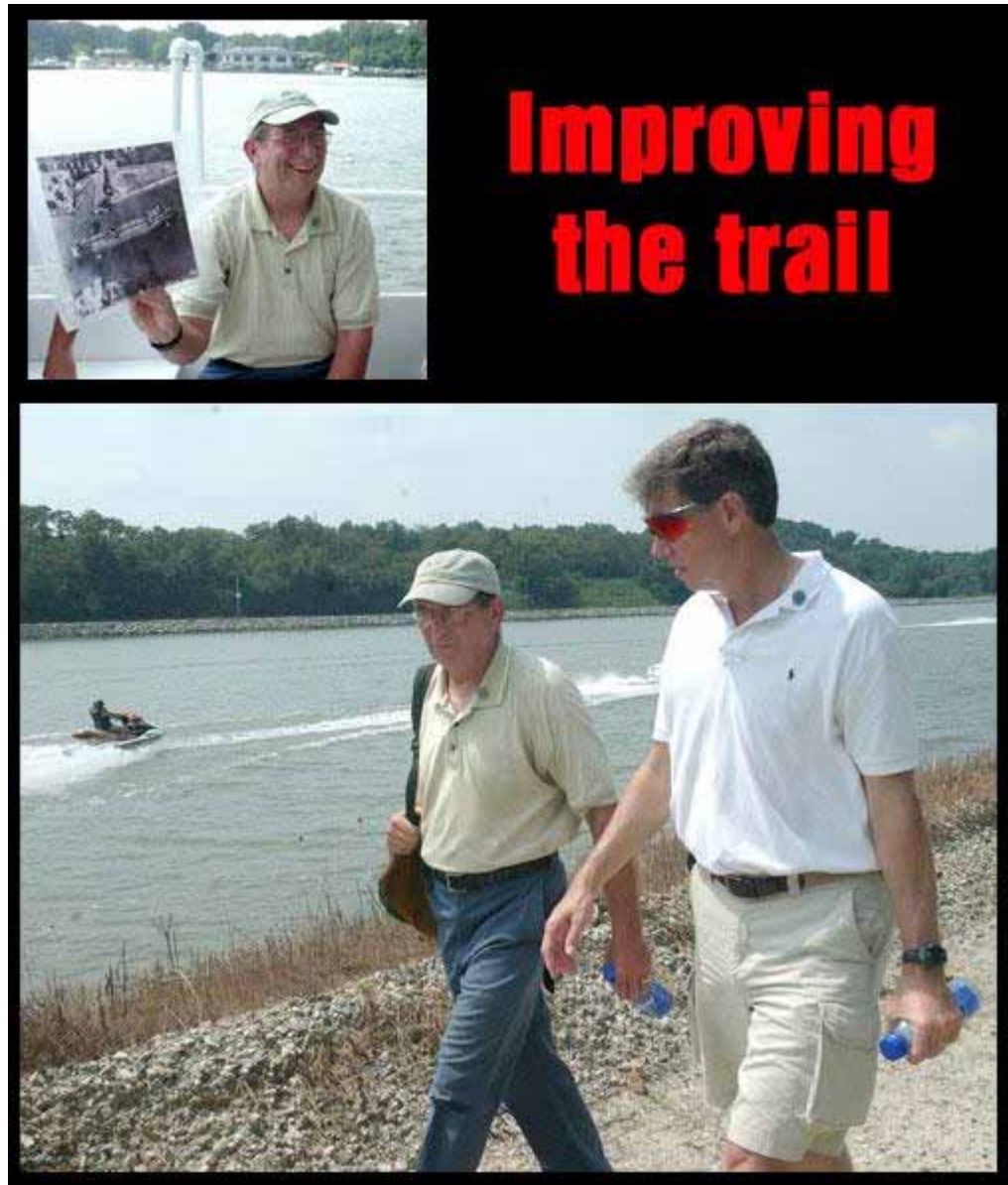
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U.S. Rep. Wayne Gilchrest shows a picture of Chesapeake City while taking a ferry to the north side of town for a walk along the C&D Canal on Monday morning. He supports the effort to turn the 29-mile canal trail into a tourism centerpiece. Gilchrest and Jeff Dayton, state director for U.S. Rep. Mike Castle of Delaware, below, walk along the canal Monday. Dayton said the improvement project would mirror the upgrade of the Cape Cod Canal trail in Massachusetts. PHOTOS BY ADELMA GREGORY-BUNNELL

Two states, two counties, two towns and officials from state and federal agencies had the attention of U.S. Rep. Wayne Gilchrest (R-1st Dist.) Monday.

Gilchrest came to Chesapeake City to walk a portion of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal Trail and hear about an \$18 million plan to turn the existing 29 miles of trails into a tourism centerpiece.

"This will be an economic boom to Cecil County," Gilchrest said.

The trail runs along the canal on both sides from Chesapeake City to Delaware City. The concept plan is already in the hands of Congress along with a request for \$1 million, the congressman said.

"We need a million dollars to turn the concept plan into a detailed plan," Gilchrest said. "Hopefully, within the next six months to a year, we'll get the funds for Phase One."

Mark Eberle, project manager with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said the project is composed of five phases.

"That's the Cadillac version," Eberle said.

For now, the project focuses on three phases of construction for the trail, which would target walkers, runners, bicyclers and equestrians. The trail would boast picnic areas, fishing spots and educational features.

"Families will have places to go to get outside just to see nature," Gilchrest said. A former teacher, he said markers along the trail would be educational and informative.

"You'll be able to identify trees and plants and know what kind of butterfly is that," he said.

He also pointed to the health benefits of using the trail system.

"People could just walk and ponder. We don't have enough places to just walk and ponder," he said.

And with all this walking, Gilchrest figured, "The number of people with high blood pressure would drop 90 percent."

The first phase will fill in a few gaps in the trail and improve the trail surfaces. It would also add rest stops and picnic and parking areas. Eberle said the trail would be gated, but would be free and open to the public daily from dawn to dusk.

Gilchrest led a 3-mile trail walk from the north side of Chesapeake City to Guthrie Run in Delaware.

Lisa Gutierrez, director of greenways and blueways for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, said Gilchrest is a firm supporter of the trail project. She said this was the first time he had seen the trail up close.

"He was really impressed. Hearing about a trail project is different than when you put your feet on the ground," Gutierrez said. "I think it's great he came."

Jeff Dayton, state director for U.S. Rep. Michael N. Castle (R-Del.), said the project would mirror a similar trail in Massachusetts.

"We want to emulate what they have in Cape Cod," Dayton said.

The Cape Cod Canal, by comparison, sits on 1,200 acres, as opposed to The C&D's 9,000. The Cape Cod property is only seven miles long, whereas the C&D is 14 miles long. On the other hand, Dayton said Cape Cod annually has more than 1 million visitors.

"We were blown away by what they have there," Dayton said. "We know the possibilities of what we have here."

Dayton said with the support of Gilchrest and Castle, the project has the momentum it needs to gain full support of Congress.

"We're trying to keep this moving one step at a time," he said.

Gilchrest said funding could come from a variety of sources including public and private money.

"Transportation money is available from the federal government to the states," Gilchrest said. "The states decide the priority and this is one of (Maryland's) priorities."

Delaware and New Castle County are also seeking funds.

Dayton said the first phase could be completed by 2008.

"We hope that in one to two years we will be cutting the ribbon and you'll be able to say there go the bikers, there go the hikers, there go the horseback riders," Dayton said.

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