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Town to Trail

Connecting communities with recreation

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When Sunnie Capelle looks at Verling Park in Gordonsville, she sees all it has to offer and all it could become. As a member of Town to Trail, a working group organized by the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC), she is committed to helping raise money to renovate the little park that area residents have enjoyed for many decades.

Capelle grew up in northern Virginia, where she made full use of recreational opportunities readily available to her. The former lifeguard and pool manager said, "I love outdoor recreation."

Over the past several years, Town to Trail has been working with the Town of Gordonsville to consider ways to expand and improve Verling Park, home of Orange County's only public swimming pool. Among the group's recent achievements is its contribution of \$35,000 toward the town's purchase of 112 Linney Street at the corner of Piedmont and Linney streets. After the house on the property was demolished, the park laid claim to a whole block.

According to Peter Hujik, a mem-



PHOTO BY HILARY HOLLADAY

Families cool off in the Dix Memorial Pool at Verling Park in Gordonsville. The pool is the only public pool in the county. A grassroots group is hoping to improve the park and pool area to promote recreation and enhance the neighborhood and community.

ber of Town to Trail who also works for PEC, "It's pretty transformative to be able to expand the park to an entire town block. From some of the input we've received from the community, it was really important to get that [parcel] and open it up. It just better connects some of the neighborhoods in that area."

For everyone with a stake in improving the park, located two blocks from Main Street, replacing the smallish, 1950s-era pool with one of regulation size is high on the list of priorities. Capelle said her two stepchildren learned to swim at the pool, which remains a popular draw throughout the summer.

"My kids and I swim at the pool a lot. It is loved," said Hujik, a Gordonsville resident. "It remains one of the only public pools between Charlottesville and Fredericksburg. It's a really important feature to have an affordable place for kids to learn how to swim."

He said some of the contractors who cleared the lot at 112 Linney Street shared happy memories of swimming in the pool, and Capelle said in her conversations with longtime residents, many fondly recall going to the pool in their youth.

The town's plans for the park, including a bigger and better pool, are a work in progress. What town

leaders and members of Town to Trail know for certain is that a new pool and other enhancements will involve grant applications and fundraising partnerships, since the town doesn't have the resources to pay for a complete facelift on its own.

Drawing on his work at PEC, Hujik said "friends of parks" groups are a common way to raise awareness and funds for a park in need. There is evidence of that in Orange, where Orange resident Julie Sherman and her network of park supporters recently have completed a \$20,000 fundraising drive and refurbished Hazel Sedwick Community Park.

Hujik explained that during the summer of 2017, Town to Trail and town leaders hosted three community meetings to brainstorm about the park. Town to Trail also was involved in sending out a survey to gather thoughts on the park from local residents, and it paid for a consultant who worked with Gordonsville last year to devise a design concept plan for the park. The town is now refining that plan and figuring out how to fund it.

While Town to Trail doesn't have a formal relationship with Gordonsville, Town Manager Debbie Kendall said, "Once Council adopts the Verling Park concept plan, there will be opportunities for greater coordination between us for fundraising and implementation of park improvements. Grassroots efforts like Town to Trail can really help garner public support for projects the town hopes to implement."

Hujik said there are three main ways an improved park could help the town and Orange County. First of all, he noted, expanded recreational opportunities will encourage children to exercise and socialize—and step away from the electronic devices that mesmerize old and young alike. He said an updated park also will aid economic development: "Businesses are attracted to quality of life and families are too. If we have a really good park infrastructure in town, it will help revive all the neighborhoods around there. "

Finally, he said improving the park could contribute to Orange County's tourism efforts, since the park already attracts visitors from outside the county.

Looking beyond immediate plans, he said he would like to see a walking path surrounding the park and another one going through it. The goal is to give residents and visitors more options for walking around a town that already boasts a large number of recreational walkers.

On the Town to Trail website, the group offers a petition local residents can sign if they want to express support for "a network of connective trails and parks in Gordonsville and Orange County."

For now, Town to Trail's 10 members—Hujik, plus a group of his friends and PEC colleagues—are concentrating their efforts on raising money to replace the playground equipment. Next on their list will be an upgrade of the shelter area near

the playground.

The fundraising goal for these two projects is about \$200,000, according to Hujik, who explained that some of the funds will go toward grading the land and landscaping around the shelter and playground.

Town to Trail does outreach in the community to spread the word about its activities and connect with possible donors. The group staffs a table at Gordonsville's Fried Chicken Festival in May and the Fall Festival (to be held this year on October 5). It also hosted a walking tour around Verling Park during last fall's annual PEC meeting.

"We are excited about the progress made and the businesses and citizens who have stepped forward to support this effort," Capelle said.

"We're fortunate to have the park and [fire company] fairgrounds in the center of town. A lot of communities don't have that. We have so much to work with," Hujik said, adding, "I continue to be amazed by how community-minded people are. I think we've got a really good opportunity, the more people learn about the initiative and get involved."

With a grateful glance back at the citizens of Gordonsville who got the park started in the mid-20th century, he said, "It's our generation's turn to update things and improve things."

For more information on Town to Trail, go to www.towntotrail.org or email Peter Hujik at pdhujik@pec.va.org.