

# Students learn to make connections

*By Marie McCandless*

*Latrobe Bulletin News Editor*

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Economics students from Derry and Latrobe put their heads together Tuesday to link the two communities.

Along the way, they learned how to map assets; determine strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; create a vision statement, and plan trail connections.

It was all part of the annual Derry-Latrobe Economic Exchange Day, which focused on “Connecting Communities: Trails, Transportation, Land Use and Thoughts.”

About 60 students, along with teachers Jeff Kelly (Derry Area High School) and Kara Olecki-Leeper (Greater Latrobe Senior High School), spent the day with Alexander Graziani, executive director of Smart Growth Partnership; John Turack, educational outreach, Penn State Extension; Andy Stofan, president, Latrobe Area Chamber of Commerce; Randy Strayer of Latrobe Specialty Steel, a member of the Chamber’s Economic Education Committee, and local officials.

They included Derry Township Supervisors Dan Rullo, Dave Slifka and Vince DeCario, along with Ron Weimer of the Latrobe Community Revitalization Program (LCRP). Weimer also chairs the Latrobe Planning Commission. Indiana University of Pennsylvania also provided assistance for the event.

Westmoreland County Commissioners Tom Balya and Chuck Anderson spoke to the students in the morning, noting that the eastern end of the county does not have many trail connections.

School board members and Derry Area School District Superintendent Roberta Kuhns also attended parts of the event.

Also attending was Peggy Pings, National Parks Service outdoor recreation planner with the park service’s Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program.

Pings is working with Derry Area Revitalization Corp. (DARC) as part of a year-long technical services grant the corporation received last fall.

Both the Latrobe and Derry revitalization groups are planning hiking/biking trails, and this year’s Economic Exchange Day zeroed in on those linkages.

The goals for the day included: Introduce students to concepts related to community planning and geography; meet the high school-level micro/macro economics learning objectives; challenge the students with real-world economic problems without black-and-white answers; remove barriers between the two schools, and connect students to the current efforts to improve their communities.

By the end of the day, Graziani noted, “I’m real pleased with what we accomplished. We had seven bona fide trail concepts.”

That was one of the expected outcomes, to have the students come up with ideas to improve the Latrobe-Derry-Unity-New Alexandria-Youngstown-Derry Township community, with special focus on linkages and connections among the communities.

Graziani explained that students completed a “Three P’s” survey of purpose, people and place to rank the importance of each to developing new trails and connections in the area.

“We talked a lot about property owners,” he noted. “It does not happen easily. It’s not a government handout. It’s

neat to see them embrace the concept of getting from one place to another.”

Another positive aspect of the day, he said, was that it ‘blows the myth that things have always been this way and never will change.’ Having the students develop a timeline that extended beyond their own years was an “effective way to show that change happens.”

He commented, ‘This goes back to the community for input. This is real-world stuff.’

Among the trail concepts the students developed was “Leap on Over to Leeper’s Lane,” named after the GLSHS economics teacher. Linking Winnie Palmer Nature Reserve in Unity Township with Legion-Keener Park in Latrobe, it closely paralleled a planned trail to connect St. Vincent College with downtown Latrobe, which Weimer and the LCRP have been working on.

Another concept projected New Derry as the “North Gate to the Laurel Highlands,’ furthering the regional aspect of any trail system.

A map showed the Chestnut Ridge Greenway heading south to connect with the Loyalhanna Gorge Greenway coming west from the Ligonier area.

A “Derry United Trail” indicated walkable routes between New Derry, Derry Area High School, Derry Community Pool, Derry Community Park and biking to the ballfields of Derry Area Youth Athletic Association. Derry students who worked on that concept included Nathan Horner, Mike Kelly, Scott Dixon, Chris Kelly, Dante DeCario, Tyler Leitz and Phil Rosensteel.

“Janoba” mapped a route as a “Journey Around Nature’s Own Beautiful Attractions” between Latrobe and Derry. Among those developing that idea were GL student Alex Johnson and DA students Ashley Kinney, Becca Beeman and Olivia Woods.

“Separated by Boundaries, Connected by Trails” was the Keymore Trail, which included Keystone State Park among its destinations.

The “Trocat Trail” connected Blairsville and Derry. GL student Emily Kralik and DA’s Bree Nemcheck helped develop that idea.

The “Latrobe” route was labeled “Local Access Trails Round Our Borough’s Entities.”

Previous classroom exercises plus the group work during the day reinforced the specific means of bringing such projects into being.

Last year’s Economic Exchange Day dealt with revitalizing downtown areas of Latrobe and Derry. Previous events concentrated on the Laurel Valley Expressway.

Turack noted that, as important as any future concrete development of the concepts may be, the students took away an understanding of the process of planning improvements, “no matter where they go” in life.