



*Numerous historic homes line Main Street in Port Deposit, MD.
Photo / Dave Harp*

Towns hope that John Smith trail will lead to prosperity

≈ Many believe trail will be avenue to land preservation, tourism and access to the Bay.

BY RONA KOBELL

For Capt. John Smith, Port Deposit in 1608 was the end of the line. But for Erika Quesenbery, the explorer's stopping place just might mark a new beginning.

Instead of "for rent" signs on forlorn buildings downtown, she envisions shops full of historic memorabilia commemorating the captain's epic journey through the Chesapeake Bay. On the waterfront, where a sewage treatment plant now sits, she'd like to see a pavilion for waterfront concerts, a place to rent canoes and kayaks, and open space for visitors to take in a view similar to the one Smith's crew might have seen.

Quesenbery, who has been the unofficial historian of the town she fondly calls "Port" since moving there 10 years ago, has harbored these dreams for a long time. But now, she says, they actually seem possible.

Three years ago, Congress authorized the creation of the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Water Trail. The National Park Service recently

sponsored a series of meetings to ask the public what they want from the nation's first historic water trail, and Quesenbery wants to make sure the government doesn't forget about Port.

"For the John Smith Trail, the whole beauty of it, in my mind, is that it isn't just the story of John Smith. You can spread the story for miles, geographically and politically. You can use it to tell the history of a whole region," she said. "There are not a lot of other places you can go and see the story of our times in one glance."

The Park Service is mulling four different options for the trail. Option one is to keep the trail the way it is now, with limited signage and little public access to the water. Option two would be to make the trail strictly about Smith's voyage, limiting the number of towns that could participate. Option three is broader, focusing on the Chesapeake region in the 17th century and the natural landscapes and historic sites. The fourth option focuses on recreational activities and environmental stewardship.

After input from the public meetings,

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A fisherman fly-casts from the Marina Park Jetty in Port Deposit, MD. The town was once call Smith's Ferry, in honor of the explorer John Smith, who ended his journey up the Susquehanna at this point. Photo / Dave Harp

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the Park Service could also opt to combine multiple options before making a final recommendation next summer. So far, people seem to like options three and four, said John Maounis, the trail's superintendent. Those two give towns the best opportunities to conserve land, promote tourism and improve public access to the Bay.

"What we've heard a lot is the idea of more public access, more places for interpretation, the ability to bring people to special places," Maounis said. "Many see this as a way to protect these special places."

Already, the John Smith Trail has been a powerful tool in land preservation along the waterfront.

Last year, the top natural resources officials in Maryland and Delaware signed an agreement to protect the Nanticoke River—a key part of John Smith's journey. A couple of months later, even as state coffers were already feeling the budget pinch, Maryland officials approved spending open space money to help Vienna, which sits on the Nanticoke, acquire

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Conservation Fund founder

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several properties to help visitors experience the trail.

Earlier this year, Maryland—with the help of The Conservation Fund and The Nature Conservancy—acquired nearly 20 miles of Potomac River and Bay waterfront in a deal worth \$72 million, much of which could become part of the trail. The deal came about because an individual who knew about the property approached the Friends of the John Smith Trail—a nonprofit organization with high-profile board members that includes Conservation Fund founder Pat Noonan, former top aide to Sen. Paul Sarbanes Charlie Stek and former Chesapeake Bay Trust executive director David O'Neill.

"It was a remarkable achievement," Noonan said of the deal. "It was a highly visible, highly successful project. Hopefully, there will be many more...the trail gives us a wonderful opportunity to write a new script for the Chesapeake."

Until now, that script has been one of access largely for the wealthy or well-connected. Only about 2 percent of the Bay frontage is publicly owned. But in response to President Barack Obama's spring executive order recognizing the Bay as a national treasure and charging different agencies with coming up with a plan to protect it, several federal agencies drafted a report urging more public access and the preservation of "treasured landscapes" that protect the Bay's natural and cultural heritage. The report said that the John Smith Trail and other water trails may be the focal point of such efforts, and suggested federal land acquisition funds could be prioritized toward the Chesapeake Bay.

"I think everybody views this as an opportunity," said Meredith Lathbury,

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director of land acquisition and planning at Maryland’s Department of Natural Resources. “Look at how much of the Bay shoreline is privately owned.”

Preserving land in the future will be a challenge, as the funding for Maryland’s open-space funds are tied to a transfer tax built into the price of property. When prices drop and fewer properties change hands, the state has less money to work with. Additional money was cut from the program this year to balance the budget, although it was replaced with state bonds.

Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine came into office four years ago with a goal of preserving 400,000 acres of land. With just a few months to go in his term, the state is almost there, said Gary Waugh, spokesman for the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation. Virginia has generous tax incentives for land preservation, but unlike Maryland, it has no stable funding source for purchasing open space. As for the trail, Waugh said, the state is excited about it and already has John Smith water routes on the James and the Pamunkey.

But, he added, “I can’t say that there has been a direct link between our land conservation efforts and the lands we’ve selected in Virginia for the trail.”

Unless the states and the federal government work to provide more public access, the average citizen won’t experience the Bay, and won’t be invested in preserving it, Stek argues.

“When I came here, I asked, ‘if this is supposed to be a national treasure, why can’t we get out and use it?’” Stek said. “The best way to engage citizens is to get them out there. I really don’t think we’ll ever succeed in restoring the Bay unless we do that.”

Unlike other preservation efforts, the first national water trail has friends in high places. In addition to Stek, O’Neill and Noonan, the Friends’ board of directors includes Ann Swanson, executive director of the Chesapeake Bay Commission, and Gilbert Grosvenor, chairman of the National Geographic Society’s



Erika Quesenbery, unofficial historian of Port Deposit, believes that the John Smith water trail will help to revitalize the town. Photo / Dave Harp

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 board, and several land conservation veterans. The group is active in Annapolis and on Capitol Hill, and is expected to advocate for land preservation along the trail.

How that push to preserve land for public access could play out is not yet clear, but many towns see the same opportunities that Vienna recently

discovered. Both land preservation advocates and town officials hope that, in protecting the Bay’s natural beauty, they will draw in visitors—such as history buffs and kayak enthusiasts—that wouldn’t have come but for the John Smith Trail.

In Virginia, Deltaville leaders are talking about a publicly owned place for camping and kayaking, while Yorktown would like to tie the trail into its Watermen’s Museum. In Maryland, Perryville has built a public pier, and hopes to make Garrett Island, which is now part of the National Wildlife Refuge system, an important part of the trail.

Whatever option the park service chooses, Port Deposit is already on all of its maps. John Smith ended his journey here when he saw the rocks near what is now the Conowingo Dam and realized he could go no further.

The town could certainly use the help. Wedged between the

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Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Water Trail Options

Continuation of Current Management

The “no-change” option, required on all National Park Service studies, would keep the trail the way it is, with some signs and “interpretive media” at certain sites to teach about John Smith’s journeys. States and counties would be encouraged to develop their own programs, with possible federal help.

Exploratory Voyages of Capt. John Smith

If John Smith slept there, ate there or searched for precious metals in your town, it will be on the map for Option 2. But if he didn’t, you’re probably out of luck. This literal interpretation of his journey emphasizes the history and largely leaves it up to the “partners” to create the narrative, although the Park Service might offer technical and financial assistance.

Chesapeake Region in the 17th Century

This option would teach visitors about the history of the region and Native Indian communities as well as Smith’s voyages. It focuses on protecting the natural landscapes within the trail’s “viewshed.” The Park Service would develop visitor centers on the trail with “appropriate partners,” and said there is potential for “some federal land acquisition.”

Recreation on the Historic Trail

This option focuses on recreation and environmental projects along the trail. It stresses the need for public access, but offers little potential for federal land acquisition. Instead, the Park Service would work with counties and states to protect “significant resources.”

Susquehanna River and huge granite cliffs, Port Deposit can’t grow. Its greatest economic asset is the former Bainbridge Naval Training Center, which employed 55,000 in the Korean War years. The center closed in the 1970s, and while the town annexed the property in 1999, redevelopment has been slow.

Residents hoped that Bainbridge would usher in a new era of prosperity. Out-of-town investors spruced up downtown properties. A bed-and-breakfast, Granite and Lace, opened across from the railroad tracks. A developer planned townhouses. But recently, the bed and breakfast closed. The townhouse land, still empty, is for sale. Many downtown properties look like they have seen better days.

At Main Street Station, 58-year-old

Richard Watters still brews his John Smith coffee blend every morning, even when hardly anyone comes in to drink it. By mid-October, he still hadn’t scraped together enough to pay his rent—even though at \$250 a month, the former car salesman acknowledges it’s a bargain.

Watters got a preview of what the trail could do for the town a year ago, when a replica of Smith’s shallop came to Port Deposit for a weekend of celebration.

Quesenbery, who organized the event, planned for about 2,000 visitors; 7,000 came. “That festival was the best thing to happen to Port Deposit in years,” Watters said. “It put the pride right back into the town.”

Federal and state investment could do the same for the town so tied to its

most famous explorer that it was once called Smith’s Ferry. Port Deposit has good bones—after all, granite from its hills was used to make the tunnel tubes for Interstate 95. From its hills, a visitor gets a wonderful view of the highway bridges and the railroad. But other than those modern touches, the Susquehanna does not look so different from what Smith would have seen—the trees in the distance are part of Susquehanna State Park, and the view upriver is remarkably undisturbed.

As she looks out over the water, Quesenbery, who is now the marketing coordinator for Cecil County, sees all the possibilities.

“We don’t need to reinvent the wheel,” she said. “We just need to pump in the air.”

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