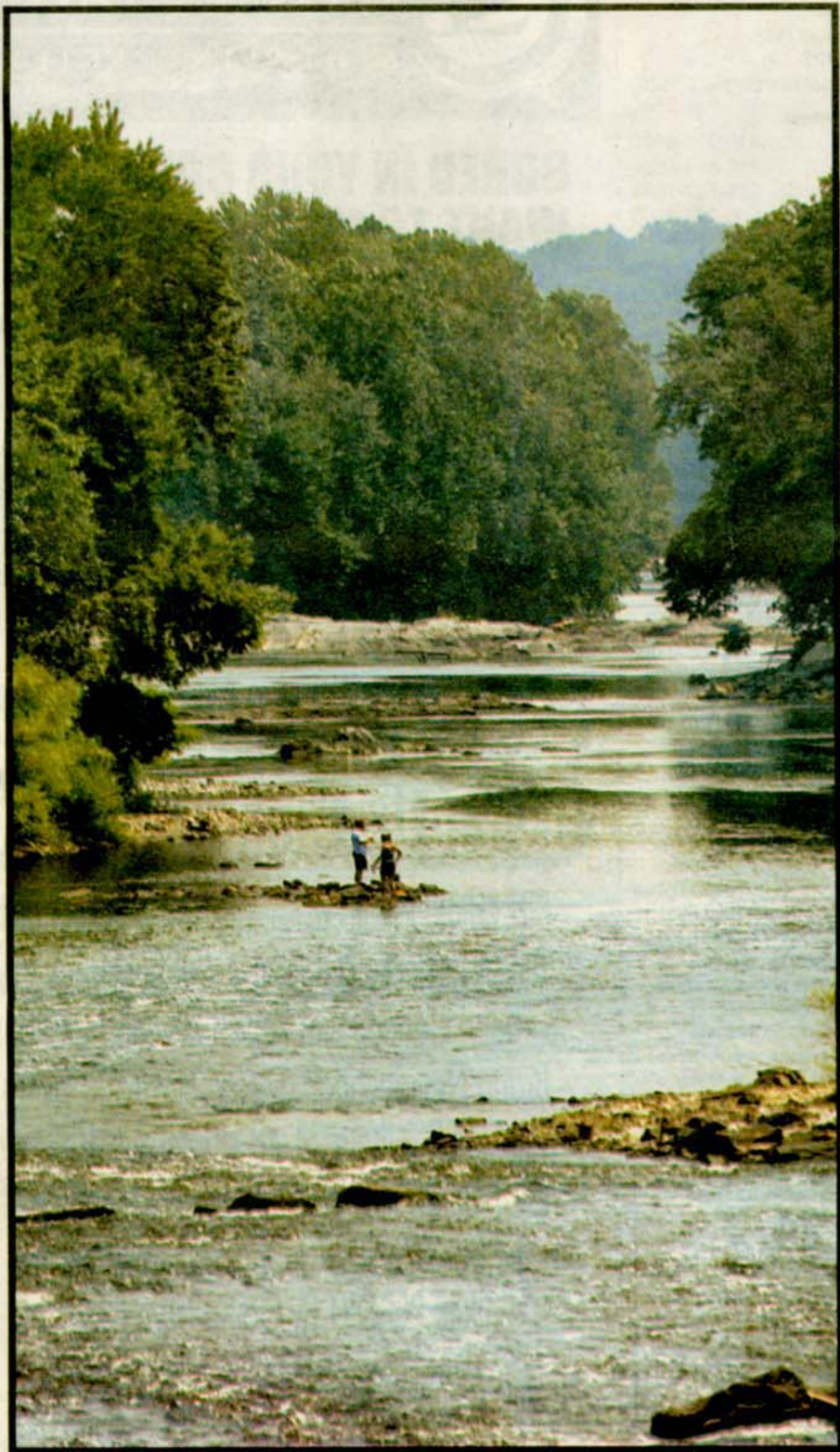


# Neighbors Montgomery County



# HOT ON THE TRAIL

## Lower Merion approves project along Schuylkill.

### Page 3.

## Cover Story

# A trailers' park in Lower Merion

Approval was given for a path along the river from West Conshohocken to the City Avenue Bridge.

By Bonnie L. Cook  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

On a clear day, Christopher Leswing can stand on a rock jutting from the Schuylkill in Gladwyne and see all the way downstream to Manayunk.

What the Lower Merion Township planner would really like, though, is to hike there. Chances are, he will.

After five years of study, Lower Merion's Board of Commissioners voted Aug. 1 to build a trail along the township border at the river's western edge. It will extend from West Conshohocken to the City Avenue Bridge.

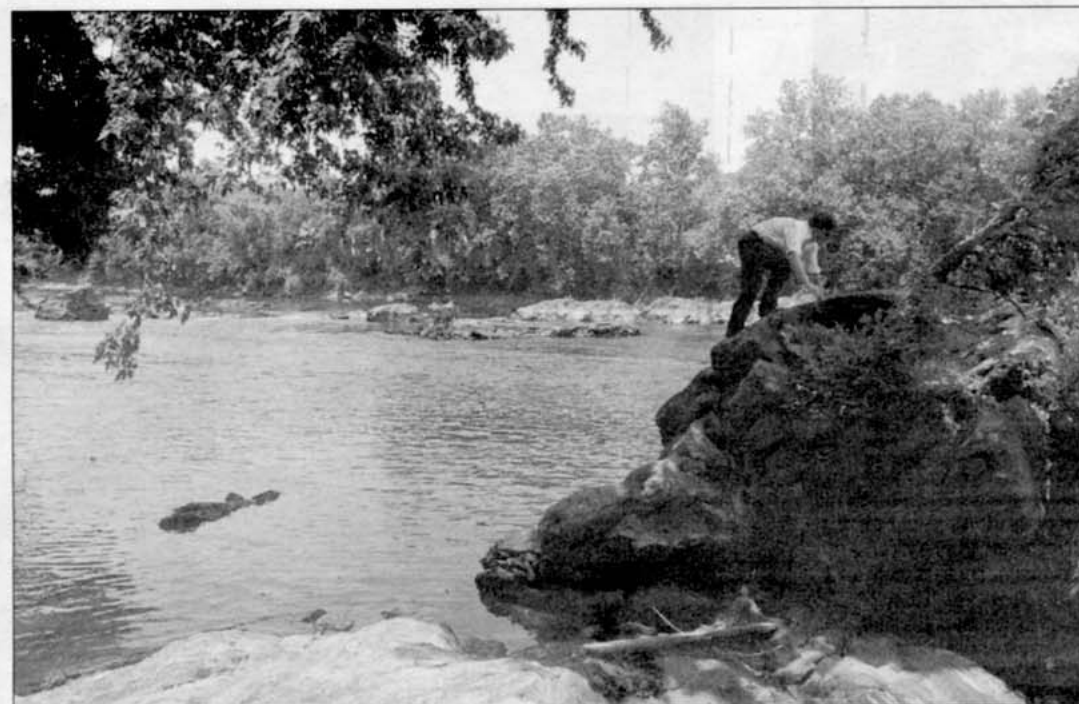
The Schuylkill River Trail will link at its upper end with Montgomery County's trails network, and at its lower end to the hiking and bike paths in Fairmount Park.

A decade from now, if Lower Merion can acquire the rights to the needed land, a hiker, biker or Rollerblader might set out from Valley Forge at dawn and reach Manayunk in time for an afternoon ice cream break.

"You're in the forest. It's a beautiful, vital part of the region," Leswing said. "The real wow is the river. You feel like you're in Upstate New York or out West."

Leswing, 42, who is overseeing the trail project, believes the path will function like "an emerald necklace," linking parks and bridle trails within Lower Merion. That's attractive to young families who want to settle there.

"It's silly for our residents to have to drive to the city to connect with recreational



Lower Merion Twp. planner Christopher Leswing scrambles up a rock along the planned path of the river trail.



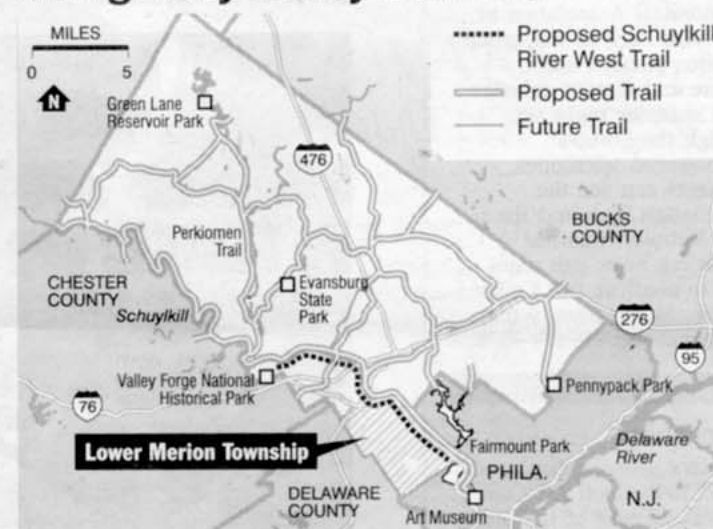
Geese at Flatrock Dam. "The real wow is the river. You feel ... you're in Upstate N.Y.," Leswing said.

amenities," Leswing said. "The trail will start near the Matsonford Bridge and cross land owned by the Riverbend Environmental Education Center in Gladwyne. It will bend southeastward, pick up the abandoned bed of River Road, and end at an unused Norfolk Southern rail yard near the City Avenue Bridge.

William C. Wermuth, board cochair of the Riverbend Environmental Education Center, said a trail "brings neighbors and communities together. People walk, run, jog, ride their bicycles, walk their pets, socialize, talk. Radnor Township's trail is an example."

Thomas Blomstrom, Radnor director of parks and recreation, said that ever since Radnor's two-mile trail parallel to Conestoga Road opened on April 16, 2005, it has been jammed with hikers. "There are people on the trail at all times of the day," Blomstrom said. "I went out there for a meeting recently, and saw 40 to 50 people walk by — and that was 7:30 in the morning."

## Montgomery County Trail Plan



SOURCES: Lower Merion Township; ESRI; TeleAtlas

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Sensing Radnor's success, Lower Merion Township Manager Doug Cleland has said his township will look to the Radnor trail as a model. But there are challenges.

In the 1940s and '50s, contractors hacked the Schuylkill Expressway out of

rock, isolating slivers of land between the highway and the river. Some are only a hundred feet wide, but together, they form the trail corridor.

The orphaned parcels are owned by private parties, all of whom must be identified and approached about selling their

land or arranging an easement through it. It's legwork that could take years. The matter is further complicated because Norfolk Southern, SEPTA and PennDot all hold titles to property in the corridor. SEPTA, for instance, owns the unused R6 commuter rail line between the Cynwyd Station and the river.

Felipe Suarez, SEPTA spokesman, said talks continue between the transit agency and Montgomery County planners about turning the spur into a shorter trail. The R6 trail would intersect the Schuylkill River Trail in Bala Cynwyd.

The idea for a trail through Lower Merion didn't pop up just recently. It has been nurtured by the Montgomery County Planning Commission, which urged municipalities to collaborate.

"Why don't we all work together in seeing if we can make this one long, continuous trail," Beth Pilling, senior open-space planner for the county, recalled thinking.

West Conshohocken Councilman Bernie Couris took the bait. "We're married to the idea 100 percent," he said.

No one knows how much the trail will cost. Money will come from federal, state and county grants. Landowners already have donated parcels, Leswing said. Civic groups might contribute labor.

"It's not that hard; we can do this," Leswing said. "It could be a huge regional amenity."

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### ON THE COVER

A view down the Schuylkill from a point along the proposed trail. Inquirer photograph by Ron Tarver.