

Diane Banta:

POWER in the Partnership

By Ted Villaire

In her role as an outdoor recreation planner with the National Park Service, Diane Banta likes to call herself a “convener.” Working throughout Illinois for the park service’s Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program (RTCA), she specializes in rallying disparate groups of people and helping—sometimes prodding—them to join forces building trails and preserving green space.

Banta’s talent lies in marking out a course of action and identifying the individuals and resources needed to reach the goal. Like an orchestra conductor, she keeps an eye on the larger objective while coaxing participants to work together harmoniously. This expertise was a key factor in the great success of the Calumet-Sag Trail (or Cal-Sag), a 26-mile trail currently being built along an urban/industrial corridor in Chicago’s south suburbs. When complete in 2012, the trail will connect 14 communities in an area sorely in need of trails and outdoor recreation options.

Recently, we sat down with Banta in her Chicago Loop office to talk about her role as a go-to person for local trail projects, the challenges and ultimate triumph of the Calumet-Sag Trail, and how to launch a trail project at the grassroots level.

What does RTCA do?

We like to call ourselves the community assistance arm of the National Park Service. With 30 offices around the country, we help communities and nonprofits preserve open space, build trails and do restoration work. Sometimes our most important contribution is helping build the organization that will make the project happen, such as a friends group or a special coalition.

What’s your main task when working on trail projects?

I’m the person who asks, “Who are the people who need to be called together?” and “How do we make it work?” I help people see that the power is in the partner-

ship. People involved with a trail project are sometimes tied to the interests of their community above all else. I’m able to bring a different perspective. I build consensus and help them see the larger picture so that they can work with each other. When you pull in individuals who have different strengths to contribute, it puts all the pieces of the puzzle together.

What needs do urban trails fulfill?

In a fast-paced world, trails offer a place where people can slow down and get in touch with the important things in life. People are recognizing that trails are a quality-of-life amenity, providing alternative transportation routes, economic development and a great place to be healthy.

This is particularly important in heavily populated areas.

Are there special challenges when building trails in an urban area?

Funding is always the major hurdle no matter where the trail is. In urban areas, there usually will be a greater number of communities and landowners to work with. This often complicates the process because it’s more likely you’ll encounter the NIMBY [“not in my backyard”] attitude. The communities involved with an urban trail project may include people from a variety of backgrounds. Sometimes getting everyone to work together is a long and slow process.

What excites you about the Calumet-Sag Trail?

This trail has the potential to serve a huge number of people in an area where there are few trails. Nearly 200,000 people live within a mile of the trail corridor.

The trail also can help people understand the important role the region played in the development of Chicago. Local steel mills and meatpacking companies employed many thousands of workers until the 1960s and ’70s. Some of the steel mills are hanging on. This still is a working corridor, but we want everyone to understand it’s a place to play as well.

What has been the major challenge with the Calumet-Sag Trail project?

In the beginning, I helped set the vision and mission—some of those organizational things that are easy to *not* do. This



Before becoming a recreation planner with the NPS, Diane Banta, pictured with her dog Charlie, spent 20 years leading tours and overseeing campgrounds in national parks.

was an important step because initially there were different ideas about how the trail should be developed. Not all the communities have been equally involved in the trail project. As a result, there was strife at times because some communities wanted to focus only on their section of the trail. This would have meant a much smaller trail that connected fewer communities.

How did the agreement among the communities come about?

I helped people understand that the goal must be development of the entire trail,

not just sections with the strongest community support. I wanted them to see how much better the trail would be with all the communities involved and connected.

The “rolling dedication” all along the Cal-Sag Trail on National Trails Day [2009] was a watershed moment. Each of the 14 communities had a shovel in the ground, and each had representation from, if not the mayor, then someone high up on the mayor’s staff. Nearly 100 people—many of them elected officials and government administrators—showed up at the final trail location. I

think that event helped demonstrate the enormous size of the project and the positive effect it would have on all the communities involved. Boy, was I grateful it didn’t rain that day!

What other factors contributed to the success of the Calumet-Sag Trail?

If it weren’t for a hard-working group of enthusiastic supporters, this trail would not have gotten very far. People like Steve Buchtel, the Southland coordinator for the Active Transportation Alliance, and Mike Leonard, director of the Palos Heights Parks & Recreation Department, have been instrumental in the project.

When pursuing a trail project at the grassroots level, what are the first steps a community needs to take?

Gather a group of dedicated advocates. Start by laying down a vision and mission. Consider creating a small budget, a strategic plan and talking points. This helps establish agreement among all the people around the table.

The next step is developing the advocates as leaders. These are the people sending out the e-mails, writing press releases and talking to community groups. This core group must also help with building the larger coalition. Seek out guidance early on from people like me who can help with the process. With grassroots support behind you, it’ll be much easier to enlist the support of government officials.

When the time comes to look for funding, it helps to have a basic plan in place for the trail. Also, funding will come more readily if you can articulate why the trail is important and what the benefits are. When the funding is secured and the project is moving ahead at full steam, be sure to thank everyone for their support—and have a party! There’s nothing like recognizing the success of a job well done.

Freelance writer Ted Villaire works part-time as a writer/editor for the Active Transportation Alliance in Chicago. His books, *Best Rail Trails Illinois*, *Road Biking Illinois*, *Camping Illinois* and *Easy Hikes Close to Home: Chicago*, will be published this spring. Visit www.tedvillaire.com to learn more.