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Students dig up priceless state history

Restoring canal is feasible but funding is questionable

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John Manna took a step back more than a year ago to look at the bigger picture for Wharton's quarter-mile stretch of the Morris Canal.

He saw not only its potential to be a historic marvel for Wharton, but also as a means to bring visitors -- and life back to the quiet borough.

Manna's fear was that this buried treasure would fall victim to development or old age like other sections of the canal had after it closed.

After bringing in archeologists over the past year to see if the restoration could happen, Manna and the Canal Society of New Jersey were to present this week an initial plan to restore the old waterway.

"From the archaeology recommendations, the lock is in good condition," said Manna, a financial analyst who has lived in the borough for more than 20 years.

Upon completion, it would be the state's only functioning historic lock, and one of only a few remaining in the country, according to the Canal Society of New Jersey.

Aside from the historical elements that would be preserved, the site could be used as an outdoor classroom to educate the public and schools.

Children from Wharton's Alfred C. MacKinnon Middle School have already taken advantage of the lock's educational value over the past year, digging through soil with archeologists and pulling artifacts from the lock. Since then, the schoolchildren have retold their experiences through a working scale model of the lock and sketches of what they saw there.

Archeologists had found many artifacts in their study of the canal as well, one of which was an iron gate. These gates were used to essentially let water in and out of the lock, and raise the water level for boats to pass through.

Brian Morrell, president of the canal society, said they could make a mold of the preserved gate rather than having to measure a new one from scratch, which will do wonders for the restoration. The president added that findings such as these make it a "marvelous opportunity" to restore and enhance a rare survivor of the Morris Canal.

"There's no restored lock on any 102 miles of Morris Canal, and there's not many opportunities to restore," he said. "About a quarter mile length that's intact, that in it self is remarkable," he said.

When it was completely intact, the 102-mile Morris Canal climbed nearly 1,700 feet across the state -- some 600 feet higher than the Empire State Building and a greater elevation change than any other canal in the world, according to the canal society. The waterway shut down in 1924 after a century of bringing coal from

Phillipsburg to New York Harbor.

After the canal was closed in 1924, Morrell said, the state had taken over ownership and dismantled most of the canal. The locks were filled, drains were cut into sections so water wouldn't collect, and parts were sold off.

Since the study has now showed that a full restoration is feasible, the next obstacle is funding, which may prove difficult since preliminary estimates show it may cost \$2 million.

Manna has already raised funds from a variety of sources, including a \$49,000 grant he won for Wharton from the Morris County Historic Preservation Trust Fund last year and more recently, \$37,000 from the New Jersey Historic Trust, pending approval by the legislature and governor.

The Wharton resident is currently applying for a number of other grants, but hopes that private companies and members of the community also will see the value of restoring the historical landmark.

"(I'm) walking through there thinking 'nobody's thought to restore this?' Manna said. "It's a no-brainer, and a worthy project begging to be done."

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