

Friends of the Riverfront sprang from a realization—emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s—of a once-in-a-century opportunity to reclaim much of the city’s 35 miles of riverfront for continuous public access and greenway/recreational use. While initial official planning documents and efforts settled for nodes of riverfront access to the water for boating, Friends of the Riverfront championed a more far-reaching and transformational vision: continuous public access to the water’s edge as multi-use public space.

The Friends’ early efforts were led by a small cadre of activists and writers, galvanized by State Representative Tom Murphy. The group included Edward Muller, urban geography professor at the University of Pittsburgh; John Stephen, a young environmental lawyer; R. Todd Erkel, a magazine and policy writer; and Sierra Club member Martin O’Malley.

O’Malley had been active with Friends of the Earth and Save Mono Lake in California, and lobbied for the “Friends” name based on his Friends of the Earth past. The Friends did not wait for official sanction or for slow-moving bureaucracies to respond, pushing forward with clean-ups and other shovel-ready activism.

First drawn up in a meeting at Tom Murphy’s North Side office, the Three Rivers Heritage Trail concept was unveiled in December of 1990. Murphy, meanwhile, worked official channels as a key and vocal member of Mayor Sophie Masloff’s Working Group. Murphy also supported early Rails to Trail efforts (Montour Trail and Allegheny Highlands Trail) underway in Allegheny County and elsewhere.

Clean-ups and plantings on the North Shore and South Side Riverfront Park jolted city officials into action, such as on April 19, 1991 when city crews indiscriminately cut a swath through the natural tree canopy between 10th and 18th streets.

In 1993, the Friends moved toward wide-spread credibility when it secured transportation enhancement funds for the Three Rivers Heritage Trail under the new federal transportation funding act (ISTEA). In November 1993, Tom Murphy was elected Mayor and he quickly made riverfront access and recreational trails a priority.

The organization proceeded to play a major role in acquiring more land, collaborating with municipalities, completing more sections of trail and incorporating programs for stewardship and care. The first major trail project constructed with funds raised by FOR was the Herrs Island Bridge. This \$700,000 project opened in 1999 and completed the link from the Washington’s Landing development to the North Shore.

Friends became a charter member of the Allegheny Trail Alliance, a coalition of seven trail groups formed in the late ‘90s to spearhead the development of the Great Allegheny Passage from Pittsburgh to Cumberland Maryland. The organization, now almost 20 years old, set an early example of ground-up activism in a town not known for that impulse, and later inspired such groups as the Sprout Fund, PUMP and others.