

Settlers Cabin plot could grow into tourist spot

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During the last century, an underground mine, a strip mine, an oil field and a chicken farm all occupied the same 450-acre plot that now sits unused on the southern tip of Settlers Cabin Park in Oakdale.

Lindsay Toffen says the next century can be different.

Toffen, president of the Horticultural Society of Western Pennsylvania, asked the Allegheny Regional Asset District board on Wednesday for \$50,000 to help turn that blighted plot into the region's first outdoor botanical garden.

Toffen told the board that 10 years after it opens in 2008, the park could pump \$38 million into Allegheny County's economy through tourism, research and employment. Similar parks have helped Philadelphia.

The RAD board, which decides each year which cultural, recreational and sports facilities get a cut of the county's extra 1 percent sales tax, expects to have about \$75 million to divvy up. The 93 groups looking for RAD money in 2005, however, have requested \$82.9 million.

The money comes from the RAD board's half of the tax; the other half goes to county and municipal governments. This year, the board spent \$75.7 million on 84 groups and debt service on the two North Shore stadiums and Mellon Arena.

"We're probably one of the only groups asking for money without having a program up and running," said Toffen, who appeared before the RAD board for the first time. "It's a stretch. We realize that. But we need to get on (the RAD board's) radar screen."

The African-American Cultural Center, which also doesn't have its facility built yet, asked the board for \$400,000, a sharp increase over this year's \$275,000 allocation. The organization hopes to break ground on an 80,000-square-foot facility on the corner of Liberty Avenue and William Penn Place, Downtown, in about a year.

To build an audience, the group plans to begin a series of art and dance exhibitions this year using other Pittsburgh theaters, cultural center President Neil Barclay said. The extra money will be used to hire more staff for the expanded operation, he said.

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