

Riverfront property beckons to expanding outdoor group

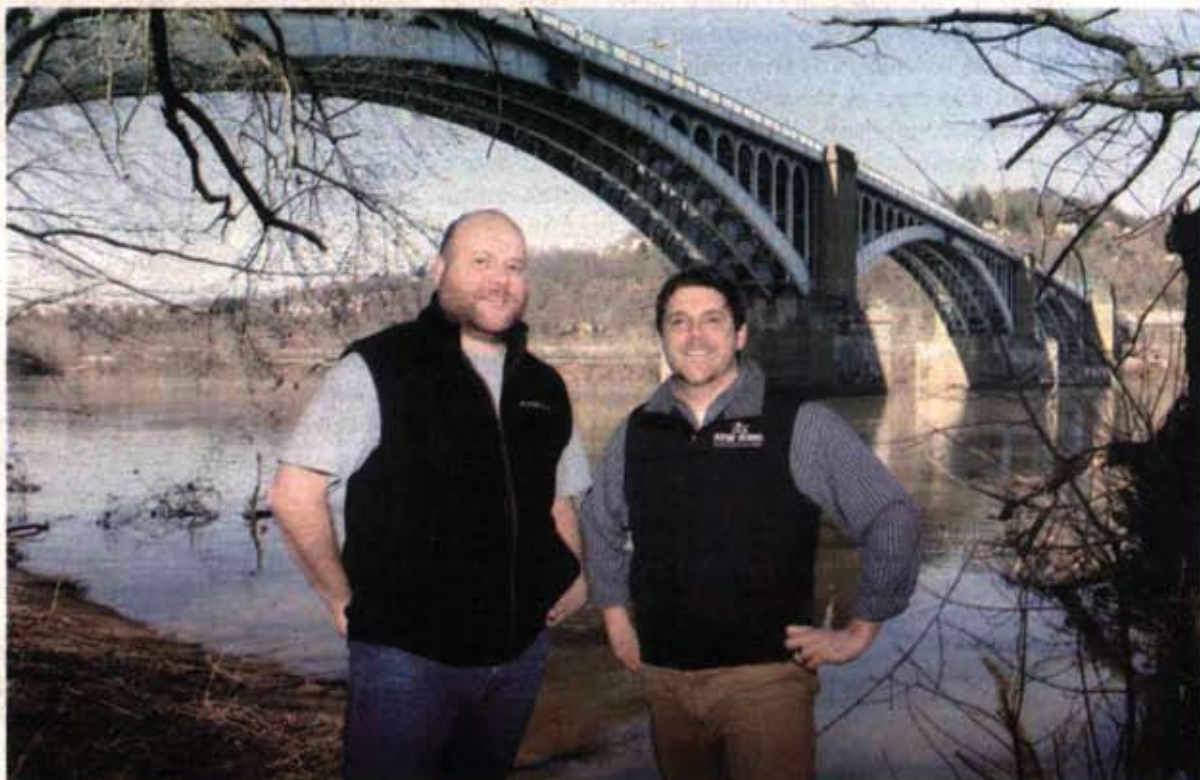
BY TIM SCHOOLEY

For a nonprofit organization dedicated to celebrating the region's great wide open of parks, trails and rivers, Venture Outdoors and its staff of 15 have been as crowded into their 1,200-square-foot office as a ninth-grader crammed into a high school locker.

"When I worked for the Boy Scouts, we gave kids more space than that when they were in a tent," said Executive Director Erik Lingren.

After a few years of considering locations, the organization's quest for a new facility may dovetail with the city's Allegheny River Visioning plan, a master plan for the six-and-a-half-mile stretch of riverfront property that extends from 11th Street in the Strip District to Highland Park.

Last week, Venture Outdoors hired Friendship-based EDGE studio to perform a feasibility study on a five-acre parcel of property between 36th and 40th streets that sits between the Allegheny Valley rail line and the Allegheny River, and includes a riverfront trail. The property was donated to Pittsburgh by CSX Corp. and designated for a



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Venture Outdoors Executive Director Erik Lingren, left, and Membership Director Rob Walters stand along the banks of the Allegheny River under the 40th Street bridge in Lawrenceville, near a five-acre parcel the organization is looking to purchase from the city.

recreational use, and the Urban Redevelopment Authority has an informal agreement allowing Venture Outdoors to study the property.

The group is interested in building a facility in which it could operate its headquarters,

as well as store equipment, offer classes and access the trail and a nearby boat launch.

Through the feasibility study, Venture Outdoors expects to learn if it's feasible to build on the site, what it might cost, how big a property could be built there

and how to best use all five acres. Lingren expects the study to be completed in four to six weeks.

Offering a full calendar of events, including hikes, bike rides and kayak rentals, Venture Outdoors has grown from 1,000 members in 2006 to 7,000 now,

Lingren said. He expects the organization will be better poised for more growth if it can move to a riverfront site.

If it moves forward, the project could call for a campus of small buildings rather than a single facility, Lingren said. In fact, he said Venture Outdoors has been in discussions with a few other nonprofit organizations that would consider being tenants at the new facility.

"Venture Outdoors could serve as a catalyst for community development," said Assistant Executive Director Sean Brady. "We seek to energize and empower local businesses to capitalize on the city's beautiful natural amenities. This would be a huge step for Venture Outdoors."

Kate Dewey, a principal with Downtown nonprofit consulting firm Dewey & Kaye, which has worked with Venture Outdoors on its strategic plan, expects the organization will need to take its time to make such a major decision. But Venture Outdoors has earned her confidence.

"That organization has just made phenomenal leaps in terms of being a regional asset," she said.