

Third Annual Paddle and Picnic Another Great Chamber Success

By Annie Rizzo and Jim Struzzi

Indiana County Chamber of Commerce

Rarely is Mother Nature predictable or boring. The Third Annual Paddle and Picnic in Blairsville was no exception. The more than 50 kayakers who dared brave the rushing waters of the Conemaugh River on Saturday, May 27, were rewarded with an adventure that included everything from exhilarating thrills to breathtaking wildlife and tranquil moments with friends and family! Intense rapids in some sections of the river led to calm stretches of peaceful, placid waters and rising mists creating a truly memorable day and a unique experience for everyone.

The Chamber, in cooperation with the Blairsville Community Development Authority (BCDA), the Conemaugh Valley Conservancy (CVC) and the Pittsburgh-to-Harrisburg Main Line Canal Greenway, created the annual Paddle and Picnic in an effort to highlight the outdoor entertainment and recreational opportunities that are available in Indiana County. The Conemaugh River is a great showcase for kayaking, fishing, biking and hiking and other activities that can be found in communities like Blairsville.

After a brief safety review with the CVC, the kayakers launched into the river at Robinson around 10 a.m. to start the 10+ mile journey back to Blairsville. The Conemaugh River was high due to rain earlier in the week, which created a fast-paced scenic adventure for participants. Unlike last year, the rain held off Saturday during the trip and allowed boaters to have an enjoyable experience on a warm, spring day.

And perhaps in an ode to our nation's finest men and women and their sacrifices on Memorial Day weekend, a bald eagle soared regally over the glistening waters ahead of the kayakers, its majestic call piercing the river valley in a reminder that every moment in life should be appreciated and cherished.

Moments of reflection and respect come hand-in-hand with a sojourn on the Conemaugh River. The trip takes kayakers through the historic Packsaddle Gap, a gorge that runs through the Chestnut Ridge mountains. It offers exceptional views that can only be seen by traveling on the water. It's also one of the best places anywhere to see the historic canals that were used to transport goods along the Conemaugh River from Pittsburgh to Johnstown in the 1800s.

After the trip, the BCDA hosted a picnic sponsored by S&T Bank, First Commonwealth Bank, Indiana First Bank and Northwood Realty featuring tasty food by Chef Alfredo and acoustic music by Anthony Frazier and Colin Varratto. The mini-cheeseburger and pulled pork sliders were a huge hit. Other contributors for the picnic included Blairsville Volunteer Firemen, Blairsville Community Development Authority volunteers and friends of the BCDA, Conemaugh Valley Conservancy volunteers, Blairsville Borough crew, the Lutheran Church, Fredo's Grill, and Wyotech students.

If you'd like another chance to kayak the Packsaddle Gap and other sections of the Conemaugh River, visit www.conemaughvalleyconservancy.org/recreation/skcs. For kayak rentals, visit Saltsburg River and Trail at www.rivtrail.com or Saltsburg Kayak and Canoe at www.saltsburgkayak.com.

If you missed this year's event, plan on attending the 4th annual Paddle and Picnic in May 2018!

