

Organizers change course of Valley marathon

Race has new start; flatter path should increase speed.

By Sarah Fulton

Special to The Morning Call

Organizers of the Lehigh Valley Health Network Marathon for Via are changing the race course to make it flatter, more scenic and shaded for runners' comfort and are relocating the start of the September race.

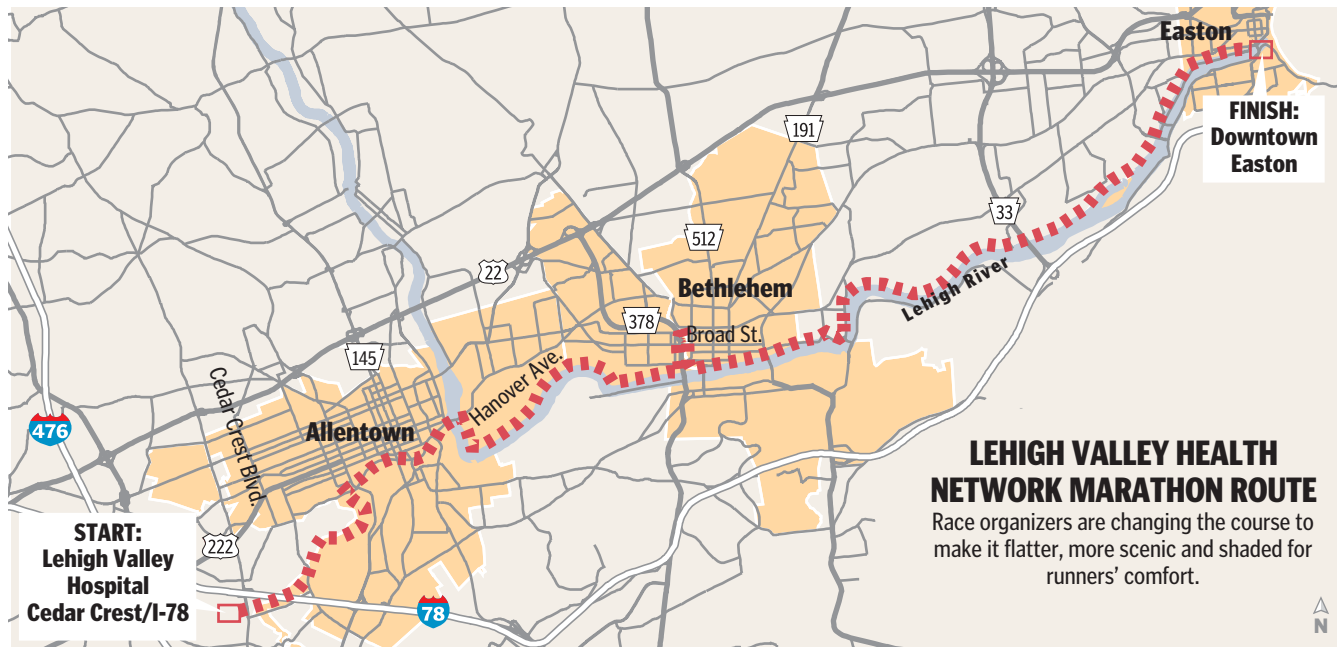
The Valley-wide event will also include a half-marathon this year that is expected to quickly sell out.

The biggest change is the race will begin at Lehigh Valley Hospital's Cedar Crest campus and send runners along Fish Hatchery Road and into the scenic and wooded Lehigh Parkway, race officials announced Tuesday at the hospital.

"It's one of the prettiest places I've ever run, and I've run all over the world," said race director Bart Yasso, a marathoner and chief running officer of Runner's World magazine. "We have a world-class marathon right in our own back yard."

The 26.2-mile course will also be changed to eliminate the lengthy hill at mile marker 16 along Hope Road in Bethlehem Township.

Yasso said the course changes will be an improvement. The course is now 70 percent shaded, keeping



runners cooler and helping them conserve energy. The race follows the Little Lehigh Creek and the Lehigh River, from the Parkway and along the Canal Trail, keeping runners on a fairly even course with an overall descent from Salisbury Township to Scott Park in Easton.

"It's just going to make it faster," Yasso said.

Last year, 22 percent of runners in the race qualified for the Boston Marathon. Yasso said usually only 10 percent of runners in a given marathon can qualify for Boston, considered the marathoner's "holy grail." The marathon offers runners a chance to set their personal record.

This year, the event will include a half-marathon. Yasso said the 13.1 mile

event is the fastest growing race among runners. The race will also include chip timing to allow more runners and ensure accurate race times.

With the course changes, the five-person marathon relay legs now vary from 3.7 to 6.3 miles.

More than 1,650 competed in the marathon, marathon relay and 5K walk last year. Organizers hope to nearly double the number of participants and raise more money for Via's Community Connections program, which helps people with disabilities connect with their neighborhoods through recreational and volunteer activities.

In 2007 — the first year of the event — the race raised \$30,000 and last year the race raised

\$90,000.

"It's definitely a nice cause, it keeps the money in the Valley," said Linda Cornman, a clinical educator at the hospital who participated on a marathon relay team last year.

Paul Pierpoint, the marathon's committee chairman, said the race is unique because it attracts runners, walkers and volunteers.

"It engages our community on many different levels," he said.

Roughly 400 volunteers help make the race happen from the Allentown area, through Bethlehem and into downtown Easton. Volunteers hand out water and energy bars to runners and provide encouragement.

Lehigh Valley Hospital

Craig Kackenmeister The Morning Call

will again provide medical services along the course. Susan Hoffman, the health network's director of public affairs, said the race is a natural fit for the health care provider.

"Our goal is to be here when people are sick, but we also have a mission to encourage people to lead healthy lifestyles," Hoffman said.

Yasso started the Marathon for Via in 2007, giving the Lehigh Valley its first 26.2-mile race since the last running of the Prevention Marathon in 1983.

The event will be held Sunday, Sept. 13. To register, volunteer or donate, visit www.ViaNet.org.

Sarah Fulton is a freelance writer