

Partnership sees sign as potential income

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An illuminated sign soon may mark Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails.

Not only is the trail hard to find for some because the sign there now is not illuminated, but Robert Skulsky, the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership's executive director, believes advertising on such a sign can generate a lasting income for the partnership, which relies on donations and government grants to build and maintain the trail.

"We had discussed the possibility of looking into trying to get some type of permanent fundraiser for the civic partnership," he said.

"The sign will cost approximately \$7,000 to be erected. The sign will have revenue potential of \$1,000 per month. We would charge \$100 a month to advertise. It would have a good potential payback, if we can keep it rented out. We could pay it off quickly enough, and it's easy to program. You can do it from a laptop. It has four variable colors."

Skulsky said he got the idea for the sign from one he saw in Lehigh.

"They have been using it to great success in Lehigh," Skulsky said. "It not only advertises for business, but in slow times, we can advertise the Rails-to-Trails, all of the nonprofits in the area that have things going on, the Boy Scouts or church sales. We don't know about permitting or any problems that might arise."

Donna Palermo, president of the Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce and partnership chairwoman, said she was concerned Skulsky and Mike Bloom, the VISTA volunteer helping with the trail, would have to add soliciting advertising to their current overload of duties.

The Rev. Jim deRamus, pastor of Apostolic Faith Church in West Hazleton, said its electronic sign generated interest from advertisers.

"If you put it up, they will come to you," he said.

Whether or not the partnership gets the sign, Skulsky believes it should get a weather-resistant television and put it on the kiosk in the trail parking lot.

"We could do something like that for \$700 or \$800. It's one heck of a good way of getting the message out, for a lot of things," he said. "With 35,000 visits to the trail each year, we can inform people about a lot of different things happening in the community, on the trail and still get some advertising in."

But before the partnership does anything, Skulsky said it has to get electricity to the parking lot.

"If we can get power to our parking lot at a reasonable rate, that would solve a lot of problems," he said.

A landowner

For the first time in its history, the partnership owns land.

Skulsky said the organization has an agreement with Blue Ridge Realty for the company to donate the land for a right-of-way for the trail from the Weatherly-White Haven Highway to Lehigh Gorge State Park, where it will meet with the 165-mile Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor trail.

"We are now formal owners of that land," Skulsky said. "All of our agreements to this date have been

lease agreements. That was very good news. It took years to do that."

Skulsky said the partnership can use the value of the land - \$38,000 - as a match for grants to develop the land as a trail.

Skulsky said local realtor Robert Pachence helped the partnership get the land.

"I'd like to publicly thank Bob," Skulsky said. " He researched the Blue Ridge property, and got an appraised value for us for the grant process for Phase 4. We had to have that done just about overnight recently. He helped us within a two-day time frame, and allowed us to close the deal with Blue Ridge Realty."

Sue Nasrani, chairwoman of the Rails-to-Trails committee, said that thanks to attorney Pasco Schiavo, the partnership has finalized new lease agreements and deeds with the Hazleton City Authority for Phase I land, Cabot Corp. for Phase II land and Blue Ridge Realty for Phase IV land.

Skulsky said an agreement is still needed for Phase II, including the aerial easement needed with Norfolk Southern Railroad, which is coming soon.

As the new year begins, Skulsky and the committee are getting ready to build Phase II, a two-mile extension from Ashmore to Hazle Brook in Foster Township.

"We are getting the Phase II permits together," he said.

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