

## **Rails-to-Trails attracting more area residents**

Nov 1, 2010

When a statewide conservation organization honored a Luzerne County program last month, the occasion was recognition for Hazleton's own Rails-to-Trails project.

The Pennsylvania Environmental Council handed out Environmental Partnership Awards to seven conservation initiatives Oct. 14. The awards put the spotlight on several worthwhile projects in this part of the commonwealth.

Awards went to the Field Habitat Partnership at Nescopeck State Park; the Schuylkill County Sportsmen's Association; Susan Gallagher of the Carbon County Environmental Education Center, and Don Miller, technology instructor at Monroe County's Clear Run Elementary Center

The Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership's Rails-to-Trails project actually was honored by taking part in Luzerne County's Keystone Active Zone Passport Program. The project, coordinated by Carol Husa, encouraged residents to visit the county's recreation areas through an innovative "passport" program.

Participants register online and download a passport that lists opportunities for outdoor activities. They earn incentives for every five stops they visit. In 2009, the Passport Program had an impressive 915 participants and currently has 605 people registered for the 2010 program.

The passport program undoubtedly has had something to do with the growing popularity of Hazleton's Rails-to-Trails venue. Throughout the summer and fall, the trail, which leads from West Broad Street, past the Stockton Road and beyond the Dreck Creek reservoir, has been crowded with hikers, cyclists and dog-walkers. On a recent Saturday, the parking lot was nearly filled to capacity.

The success of the Rails-to Trails project shows that area residents are hungry for environmentally-friendly recreational activities. It should send a message to community planners that when it comes to offering a pleasant place to play, greenery trumps asphalt every time.