

Land group eyes 2 trails

BY JIM DINO (STAFF WRITER)

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A trail that begins at the old entrance to Hazle Park off North Broad Street in West Hazleton, and an "off-shoot" trail along the Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails network, are being envisioned because of the purchase of land by a conservation group.

Rick Koval of the North Branch Land Trust and Kevin O'Donnell, president of CAN DO Inc., met with the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership recently to discuss the potential development of trails on two parcels of land the land trust has purchased with the aid of state grants.

"When we buy land for conservation, it can never be developed," Koval said. "It can only be used for passive recreation, like a trail."

The 60 acres the land trust purchased in the southwestern tip of the Valmont Industrial Park is a cranberry bog, and aside from containing sandy soil deposited by a glacier during the last ice age, it also contains white-fringed and yellow-fringed orchids and Hartford fern, which are uncommon plants. It is also home to damselflies called sleeping dancers, the day-flying buck moth, the bog copper butterfly, and other rare species of plants and animals.

"This is one of the highest-ranking (conservation) sites on the Luzerne/Lackawanna open space plan," Koval said.

But O'Donnell said the land is also home to an abandoned WB&H, or Wilkes-Barre and Hazleton, rail line that could be used for the trail, which he envisioned would be used by people other than environmentalists.

"There are about 10 rare species on the site," O'Donnell said. "I can understand why environmentalists want to experience it firsthand. But the trail would also give workers a chance, on their lunch breaks, to take a hearty walk. And they would see something interesting."

O'Donnell said the first step to developing a trail, which would be almost 2 miles long, is an engineering design plan.

"I know people from West Hazleton and Hazleton already walk and bike out there," O'Donnell said. "You can access the trail from (the Babe Ruth field) behind the West Hazleton school. But I think the trail might begin at the old monument sign for Hazle Park."

Bob Skulsky, executive director of the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership, said he'd like to link the Valmont trail with Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails, which the partnership is developing just east of the city limits.

"We could link them up via the Oneida Junction Park (at Route 309 and Route 424) and Louis Schiavo City View Park (along Route 424 on Hazleton Heights)," Skulsky said. "That new trail will give people in West Hazleton a way to hike or bike to work."

Skulsky also envisions a "loop" trail off the main Rails-to-Trails path that could highlight the rare plants, animals and other attractions. This is possible after the land trust purchased 120 acres from Butler Enterprises on the Stockton Mountain adjacent to the trail. "It would be a biking trail, which is a little more challenging," Skulsky said. "It would go off the (main) trail, loop around, with an attraction like the outcrop of rocks on the top of the mountain, and loop back around to the main trail."

The land purchase will also ensure that nothing will be built too close to the trail, which will eventually extend for 16 miles, from East Broad street, through Ashmore, Hazlebrook and Eckley, to Lehigh Gorge State Park, where it will link with its big brother, the 165-mile Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor trail that runs from Bristol to near Wilkes-Barre.

Problem solved

A drainage problem along the rail-trail has been remedied, thanks to UGI Gas Corp. and Team Supply.

Tom Ogorzalek, a member of the trail committee, said a drainage problem almost 3 miles into the first leg of the trail was causing the surface to be washed out during heavy rain.

"We had a drainage problem at mile mark 2.9, which is about a quarter-mile from the (Dreck Creek) reservoir," Ogorzalek said. "PPL rights-of-way criss-cross there, and the water was coming down the road from the power line and pooling there. It was washing out the trail."

Ogorzalek said UGI sent a crew with the necessary equipment to install 16 feet of 16-inch diameter pipe 4 feet under the trail to divert the water.

But the project was not without a hitch.

"We had to dig a 40-foot trench to get from flat land to a slope where the water could run down," Ogorzalek said.

But now, the drainage problem is solved. The trail did not wash out during heavy rain that came after the work was completed.

"It's working great," Ogorzalek said of the new drainage system. "It's doing what it's supposed to do."

Sue Nasrani, chairwoman of the civic partnership's Rails-to-Trails committee, said she is grateful to UGI for the volunteer work and to Team Supply, a Hazle Township supplier to construction companies, for donating the pipe.

jdino@standardspeaker.com