

Rails-to-trails usage declines in 2011

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ERIC CONOVER/Staff Photographer
Phyllis Seliga, left, and her friend, Bob Kegolis, both of Hazleton, take advantage of the nice weather to enjoy a bike ride on Saturday at the Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails.

Fewer people used the Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails this year than in 2010.

Mike Bloom, a rail-trail volunteer from the Volunteer in Service to America (VISTA), projected the number of people who will use the trail this year will drop because of "substantial" damage that weather has caused to it.

"There might be a thousand less than last year," said Sue Nasrani, chairperson of the Rails-to-Trails committee. "Last year 36,673, and he (Bloom) is projecting 35,673 (for this year)."

Robert Skulsky, executive director of the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership, which oversees the rail-trail, said a few other things contributed to the decrease.

"Inclement weather, road construction, and the big sign is down. We had been going up each year for the last four years. All those

factors, I'm sure, have contributed to that decrease," he said.

Grants extended

Skulsky said a \$70,400 grant to design and engineer the pedestrian bridge over an active rail line in Ashmore has been extended until Nov. 30, 2012. The one-year extension will allow the grant to be used.

Skulsky said \$26,193 has been paid out to Alfred Benesch and Co., with whom the civic partnership has a contract.

And a grant to build the next two miles of the trail now has an ending date of June 30, 2013.

"But we are on schedule to build it in 2012," Skulsky said.

Ten more trees have been planted along the trail. Skulsky said there are now 50 trees along the trail, and memorials have been sold for all of them. Memorials now cost \$125 a tree, and Bloom said there is a waiting list for them. More trees will be planted as more of the trail is built.

Skulsky said the two main problems at the trail are the damage and maintenance, which cost money, and volunteers.

Dan Guydish, executive director of the Mountain Council of Governments, asked if its member municipalities could get together and bring in the necessary equipment on one day to do all of the work necessary to make the trail flood-proof.

Bloom said at least five more drainage pipes are needed at various points along the trail. And where there are pipes, larger ones are needed.

Paul Oswald, a local Boy Scout official, had a possible solution to getting volunteers and funds.

"There are QRC codes, which you can take a picture of with a smartphone," Oswald said. "You take a picture of a code, which drives you to a video. On the video, we could say we need funds, or another video appealing for volunteers."

Skulsky said the Rails-to-Trails Committee had looked into an audio setup like Oswald suggested, but didn't do it because of cost.

Skulsky had a similar idea.

"Lehighton has a 3-foot-by-6-foot electronic sign," he said. "They advertise all of the businesses, and all of the events down there. It would cost about \$10,000. We could possibly get sponsorships for it."

Thomas Hood, president of MMI Preparatory School and a civic partnership board member, suggested Skulsky contact Jim Thorpe to see how much the sign cost and what it costs to operate.

"Your electronic sign never sleeps," said the Rev. Jim DeRamus, a partnership member and pastor of Apostolic Faith Church in West Hazleton.

"Since we put the one on the church, it works continuously. It's unreal the activity we get from it."

Skulsky said the sign doesn't flash one advertisement, but six or seven.

Apostolic Faith Church made a donation to renovate the entrance to the trail along East Broad Street. The sign has been temporarily taken down, and shrubbery around it removed, for the Broad Street Corridor Project.

The state Department of Transportation will reinstall the sign, and three or four of the new trees being planted along the corridor will go to the trailhead.

Skulsky said the donation will be turned over to the Hazleton Garden Club, which had decorated the entrance previously.

"We have the opportunity out there to develop a couple of mini-parks," Skulsky said. "Now, we're looking for a frisbee/golf area. They're pretty popular along trails now."

Last month, the NEPA Environmental Council honored Skulsky for his work on the trail.

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