

Grants help repair trail, fund scholarship

BY JIM DINO (STAFF WRITER)

Published: February 3, 2012



The Luzerne Foundation also awarded a \$4,000 grant to the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership's scholarship program. From left are Hazleton Mayor Joe Yannuzzi; state Rep. Tarah Toohil, R-116; Charles Barber, the foundation's executive director; Jack St. Pierre, a member of the partnership's scholarship committee, and Mike Bloom, a VISTA volunteer assigned to the trail.



Charles Barber, third from left, executive director of the Luzerne Foundation, presents a check for \$1,550 to the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership toward permanent repairs to the Greater Hazleton rail-trail. Also pictured, from left, are Hazleton Mayor Joe Yannuzzi; state Rep. Tarah Toohil, R-116; Sue Nasrani, chairman of the partnership's Rails-to-Trails committee, and Mike Bloom, a VISTA volunteer assigned to the trail.

The damage that heavy rainstorms in 2011 did to the Greater Hazleton hiking and biking trail will be permanently repaired, thanks in part to a couple of grants.

Charles Barber, executive director of the Luzerne Foundation, said the organization connected with an anonymous donor who provided \$1,550 for the repairs.

"We typically don't do that type of capital contribution," Barber said. "But the amount was modest, and fix was permanent, which is what we really like to see.

"We understand how important the Rails-to-Trails is for recreational opportunities, but there's also the economic development aspect, bringing people into Hazleton to see what Hazleton has."

That grant, along with a \$1,000 grant from the Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business and Industry's flood relief program, will be used to make the repairs.

Bob Skulsky, executive director of the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership, said that along with donations from individuals, and \$300 from the Klemow Foundation, there is about \$3,000 on hand for the repairs.

The scope of the repairs depends upon two factors - whether the partnership gets a grant from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, for which application was made, and engineer Alfred Benesch and Co.'s recommendations regarding a permanent solution to the flooding, Skulsky said.

Mike Bloom, a Volunteers In Service To America (VISTA) volunteer assigned to the trail, said Benesch is studying the hydrogeology of the trail to draw its conclusions.

Skulsky said for some time, the plan has been to replace one existing drainage system with larger intake pipes, and transplant the smaller pipes to other areas along the trail where flood damage has been detected.

However, if the partnership gets more funds for the project, it may scrap the idea of larger drainpipes and install a small box culvert instead, Skulsky said.

One way or another, he said permanent repairs have to be identified and carried out.

"This is the third time we've suffered a significant washout in the five years the trail has existed," Skulsky said. "We have to do something, because we don't have the money to keep fixing it."

Phase II

Elsewhere on the trail, Skulsky said he is trying to complete the final tasks necessary before construction of Phase II takes place.

Two agreements - one for aerial rights over railroad tracks for a trail bridge - are in the hands of Norfolk Southern Railroad.

"We are also negotiating on an 800-foot section of the trail, either for an easement or to own the land," Skulsky said. "Alfred Benesch also has to complete the engineering design."

When those tasks are complete, Skulsky said the entire project goes to the state Department of Transportation for approval. Once that is received, the partnership will advertise for bids to construct the two-mile segment between the Ashmore and Hazle Brook sections of Hazle Township.

In the meantime, Skulsky said volunteers are getting the land ready for when construction begins.

"Volunteers will be doing some preliminary grubbing of the site," he said. "Coal Contractors has begun to backfill the large hole where the trail will meet the bridge."

Coal Contractors has volunteered to move spoils the Cabot Corp. donated to the trail project that are on Cabot land adjacent to where the trail will be built.

Scholarship grant

Barber said the foundation also felt the partnership's scholarship program is important, and provided a \$4,000 grant.

"We're trying to do the right thing for the kids," Barber said. "They are the future. It is important to provide whatever assistance we can."

Barber said both the scholarship and trail grants are thanks to the "friends and donors" of the foundation.

"Our role is to try to identify needs, and coordinate solutions to them," he said. "We get people interested in projects and ideas outside of their normal realm. It's educating the community on its needs."

Jack St. Pierre, a member of the scholarship committee, said this spring the partnership will be offering at least two scholarships to area students.

The program offers two years of scholarships worth \$6,000 to any local high school student who is going to post-secondary education in a variety of fields for which there are positions available in the Hazleton area, including the health field, industrial maintenance technician and electronics technicians who would work at Tobyhanna Army Depot.

The student has to maintain a 2.0 grade-point average, but must promise to live and work in the Hazleton area for three years after graduation from the post-secondary school. If they cannot find a job locally, they are permitted to pay the scholarship back on very reasonable terms.

For details on the scholarship program, go online to www.civicpartnership.com or [greaterhazletonareacivicpartnership/facebook](https://www.facebook.com/greaterhazletonareacivicpartnership/).

Over the years, Barber said the foundation has financially supported several projects and nonprofit organizations in the Hazleton area, including the Boy Scouts, the Alice C. Wiltsie Performing Arts Center, Serento Gardens, the United Way and the Hazleton Integration Project.

"There are very diverse needs across Hazleton," Barber said.

jdino@standardspeaker.com