

# Officials ponder new partner for civic partnership

BY JIM DINO (STAFF WRITER)

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The Tri-Area Recreation Authority and Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership have a lot in common. They are both nonprofit organizations responsible for building recreational facilities in the area. And they both struggle to operate without a lot of money.

It's why officials are considering an idea for Tri-Area to join the partnership.

Tri-Area Chairman Neil Oberto said the authority has been plagued throughout its history by a lack of operational funding.

"One of the problems the authority is facing is that we don't have any steady flow of income to do whatever administrative (work) we need to do," Oberto said. "Because we're an authority we fall under certain restrictions from the state and federal (government). It really has limited us in a lot of different ways."

When the authority was formed, its member municipalities did not promise to provide funds for its operation, he said.

"The member municipalities have been really good to us through in-kind services, but when it comes back to the financial piece, it has been a challenge," Oberto said.

In fact, Oberto said state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources officials have cited lack of support from the municipalities as one of the reasons why its state funding has decreased.

Civic partnership Chairwoman Donna Palermo said that organization is suffering from the same malady. She said the partnership struggles to find enough money to pay its director, Bob Skulsky, whose duties include overseeing the Greater Hazleton rail-trail.

"This organization is really in dire financial straits. We put out the annual appeal, and some monies are coming in from that. We're looking at a deficit again this year," Palermo said.

Palermo said if the partnership was not housed in the Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce, it would not exist.

"We need that money to help Bob stay. It's not a lot of money, \$12,000 to \$15,000 a year. Right now, it's falling back on the chamber. We have to find some kind of source to help with that problem," she said.

## Two parks

Like the partnership, which developed the trail, Oberto said the authority has developed City View and Oneida Junction parks, both along Arthur Gardner Parkway, in its 20-plus-year history..

"People make use of that 22-acre facility," Oberto said, referring to City View Park. "The Scouts are there overnight for their jamboree. A dog park was developed. The Relay for Life now calls it their home."

A regional race will be held at the BMX track the second week in July, Oberto said. At least 1,000 people will be camping and staying at motels throughout the area for the race.

Palermo said the BMX track is an area economic development asset.

"With 1,000 people coming to the area, they are gassing their cars here, eating at our restaurants, and staying at our hotels. It benefits the whole area," she said.

Oberto wonders who would become responsible for the parks if Tri-Area disbands.

"One of those parcels (City View Park) would revert back to member municipalities," he said. "The other parcel (Oneida Junction Park), which is 12 to 13 acres, we own. (Hazleton City) Authority turned it over to us. We wouldn't want (the parks) to be a burden."

Oberto said Tri-Area would like to change its status from an authority to an association to take advantage of the partnership's nonprofit status. That would require permission from its member municipalities, Hazleton, West Hazleton and Hazle Township.

It would be named the Hazleton Area Park Development Association, and would be responsible for the development and ongoing maintenance of Oneida Junction Park.

Oberto said the authority and partnership have been talking about being linked together, via its trails.

"The original vision was to connect Rails-to-Trails to City View Park and Oneida Junction," Oberto said. "It's an easy mile to City View and another mile to Oneida Junction."

Partnership committee member Tom Hood, president of MMI Preparatory School, said taking over the authority may be the thing to do, despite the partnership's own problems

"It seems to be in our wheelhouse for quality of life," Hood said. "I understand the financial considerations. But when we look to expand and improve quality of life, this might be an area to look at."

Palermo said the partnership wants to help different types of organizations that are struggling, but that its officers have to discuss the idea because there are drawbacks.

For example, she said if the Black Creek Alumni Association, which already is under the partnership's umbrella, applies for and receives a grant from the Luzerne Foundation, the partnership cannot apply for another grant for five years.

jdino@standardspeaker.com