

Latest Rails-to-Trails const

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It may take a full year for construction to begin on the second leg of the Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails hiking and biking project.

The Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership, which is overseeing construction of the trail, received approval to combine three project grants, said Executive Director Bob Skulsky.

"This is good news," Skulsky said. "We have been trying to get to this point for years. Hopefully, we'll be under contract by the end of the year, and begin to build either late this year or spring of 2011."

Engineers are preparing a request for proposals for the "design-and-build" trails project, Skulsky said Wednesday.

"To get ready for the RFP we have to hire a consultant to develop the bid package," Skulsky said. "It's a complex project for a number of reasons."

The Cabot Corp., the owner of the land where the former Beryllium plant is located, will provide space for the two new miles of trail. Leasing the land would require approval through the state Public Utility Commission because of the railroad, adding "six months to the project," Skulsky said. Another option is obtaining an easement from Norfolk Southern Railroad, for permission to build a pedestrian overpass for the trail over

the active rail line.

Skulsky said because of the presence of the railroad, there are complex regulations that have to be followed.

"We could also get a right-of-way from the railroad, and turn it over to the municipality," Skulsky said.

The all-volunteer Civic Partnership committee, which has been spearheading development of the trail, started the process in 2001. It took about three years to plan and build the first four miles of the trail, from East Broad Street to the Ashmore section of Hazle Township.

Skulsky said the first step includes drawing from grant funds for engineering work.

The Partnership has received a \$220,000 federal Transportation Enhancement Act grant to build the pedestrian bridge, a \$70,000 TEA grant for engineering for the bridge, and a \$295,000 state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources grant to build the trail, picking it up at Ashmore and taking it to the Hazlebrook section of Hazle Township.

The final leg

There are rights-of-way issues on the proposed third leg, but the last leg of the trail — a 16-mile swatch from Hazleton to the Lehigh Gorge State Park near Weatherly, where it will link with the 165-mile Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor trail — is being planned now.

Skulsky said land for the fourth and final leg of the trail, from the Weatherly-White Haven Highway to the state park along the Lehigh River, is being donated by Blue Ridge Realty, and the Partnership is going to develop it before the third leg.

All of the planning is going into the Master Site Plan for the trail, which is complete and under review, he said.

Garden project

On Wednesday morning, partnership members learned details of the Leadership Hazleton

struction may be a year away

project to build an environmental education garden near the foot of the trail.

Pat Korb, Leadership Hazleton's executive director, said the 10-member team building the garden has obtained donations of materials and labor to build the garden, but still needs more.

"There will be grass areas where the different kinds of grasses that grow in this area will be grown," Korb said. "There will be a path and two pedestrian bridges inside it that will be built by students from the Hazleton Area Career Center. They have the materials for one bridge, but need materials for the second one."

Korb explained why the garden is being built, and why the plantings in it are being made.

She said a large butterfly garden will be built within

the larger garden, which will be located about 500 feet from the parking lot at the trail head off East Broad Street in Hazleton.

"The grasses, butterfly garden and other plants in the garden are all native to this area," Korb said. "They are there so people understand what is going on in local nature."

Local school students will be the main beneficiaries of the garden, Korb said.

"Once a year, students will go into the garden and plant annuals," Korb said. "We are still looking for donations of product and money. We are still working on signage for the garden."

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