

Trail extension work may soon be on track

Officials anticipate work to make trail 2 miles longer to get under way this year.

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HAZLE TWP. — Officials and volunteers with Greater Hazleton Rails to Trails hope that work to extend the trail another 2 miles will begin later this year.

The organization secured about \$540,000 in state and federal grants and raised the remainder of the approximately \$630,000 needed to extend the trail from Hazle Brook to Eckley Miners Village, and design, construct and install a prefabricated bridge to cross a gorge about a half-mile from the end of the current trail.

The plan is to hook up the Greater Hazleton trail to the Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor Trail, also known as Lehigh Gorge Trail, said Bob Skulsky, executive director of Greater Hazleton Civic Partnership, the trails' parent organization.

On their way there, hikers and bikers will see deciduous forest, lakes and beautiful countryside in the first leg of the Greater Hazleton trail, land that's being reclaimed in the second, land with strip mines a little further along and the historic Eckley Miners Village, in which coal miners used to live in the 1800s.

"There's a lot of history and a lot of heritage tied to this trail. ... There will be interpretive signs to explain all of it," said Skulsky, 65, of Hazleton.

The organization already has come a long way, having opened the 4-mile trek through nature to the public in 2005 after investing about \$700,000 secured through grants fundraising to make the trail a reality.

Rails to Trails Committee Chairwoman Sue Nasrani has been working on the rails-to-trails project since the partnership was formed in 1998. She and local environmentalist Drew Magill walked potential

trails in Luzerne, Carbon and Schuylkill counties for years looking for a suitable trail to develop.

Nasrani, 66, who moved from Hazleton to Swoyersville just about a year ago, said the trail itself has become a "wonderful" recreational amenity in southern Luzerne County.

"The parking lot, especially on good days, is always filled. We have about 2,000 people a month going through. Every time I see someone in the community who knows about Rails to Trails, they thank us. It's great for the schools, the area and for people who like to walk. It's a great success and we're excited about it," she said.

Michele Schasberger, project manager for Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails Partnership, said infrared trail counters that track trail usage by monitoring changes in ambient air temperature near the trail head show that usage increased about 40 percent from the period of October 2007 through September 2008 to the period of October 2008 through September 2009.

"Part of the reason we're seeing so much increased use is that Bob's group works very hard to promote the trail. They schedule a lot of events," Schasberger said.

Schasberger, 43, of Kingston, said she occasionally travels to Greater Hazleton with her family to walk the trail. Her children love to use the exercise stations, she said, adding that the group is seeking a grant through Penn State to purchase and install more infrared trail counters to monitor usage of the trail amenities.

Another amenity in the works is an environmental education area where hikers and bikers can stop to learn about the various types of wildlife and vegetation they might see while traversing the trail. The education area is a project of Leadership Hazleton.

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