

Wednesday, September 22, 2010



GREATER HAZLETON



ELLEN O'CONNELL/Staff Photographer

Two legs of the Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails may be built simultaneously.

By JIM DINO
Staff Writer

Next year may be a pivotal one in the history of the Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails — because two legs of the trail may be built simultaneously.

Bob Skulsky, executive director of the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership, which is overseeing construction of the 16-mile trail from Hazleton to Rockport, said logistics to build the second leg, from Ashmore to Hazle Brook, and the fourth and final leg, from the Weatherly-White Haven Highway to Rockport, are falling into place for construction to happen in 2011.

Skulsky said the money to build the second leg — two miles of trail, and a pedestrian bridge over an active Norfolk Southern Railroad line — has been in hand for some time.

The partnership has received a \$200,000 federal Transportation Enhancement Act (TEA) grant to build the pedestrian bridge, another \$70,000 TEA grant for engineering on the bridge, and a \$285,000 state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources grant to build the trail.

So money hasn't been the holdup to getting construction under way, but completing preliminary work has, Skulsky said.

Now, a lot of that legwork is getting done.

"We have two contracts in place with Norfolk Southern: \$7,500 for engineering services and \$2,500 for legal work," Skulsky said. "We are also entering into a contract with Alfred Benesch and Co. to develop a bid package to build the next two miles, including the bridge."

Skulsky said this project will be "design and build," which means one contractor will design and build the trail and bridge.

But first, there is a large void near the bridge's location that has to be filled in.

"We have permission from Cabot Associates (the owner of the land where the trail will go, and the operator of the former Beryllium plant) to push spoils into the void. But we have to hire a contractor to do that."

Civil engineer volunteers time to project

Michael Bloom is a civil engineer who received his degree from Penn State University.

Since he couldn't find a job, he decided to pursue a position as a VISTA (Volunteers In Service To America) volunteer.

One of his interests is acid rain, and that attracted him to Hazleton, where he's working with the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership.

He will be assisting with all of the partnership's activities, including the Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails project, as well as other environmental issues with Friends of the Nescopeck.

Bloom, a native of Clearfield in central Pennsylvania, graduated from Clearfield High School in



Michael Bloom

2004 and Penn State in 2008.

"I wasn't finding anything out of school," Bloom said of his pursuit of a first job. "I applied everywhere. But no one was hiring anyone coming out of school."

"I knew this position involved acid mine drain-

age, which I did a lot of in school."

Bloom will perform his duties for the next year, and is the second VISTA volunteer in the civic partnership-Friends of the Nescopeck position.

—Jim Dino

build the trail and bridge.

"We have to be under contract for the design-and-build by December 2011, but we hope a lot sooner than that," he said. "We are hoping to build it next spring."

Fourth leg

Skulsky said the partnership has applied for a second grant to build the fourth and final leg of the trail.

Last spring, the partnership applied for a state Growing Greener grant. It now is applying for a Pennsylvania Community Transportation Initiative federal grant.

"We are confident about the Growing Greener grant, but we are not taking any chances," Skulsky said.

If construction on the second and fourth legs begins next year, that would leave the third leg, about six miles from Hazle Brook to the Weatherly-White Haven Highway.

Skulsky said a route was suggested when the first feasibility study for the trail was done in 2001. But the

trail committee has failed to come to agreement with some landowners along that route, meaning it would have to be changed. That would change the length of the entire trail.

If the other two segments do begin in 2011, Skulsky said the committee would revisit the issue, and will either see if the landowners have had a change of heart or pick an alternate route.

On the first leg of the trail, Skulsky said an Eagle Scout project to encase the environmental area within a fence is substantially complete.

The environmental education area, built by half of the

Leadership Hazleton class of 2010, is meant to teach students about the local environment, and contains grasses and plants native to Hazleton.

jdino@standardspokesman.com