

# Officials to tout increased trail use to restore funds

By **KENT JACKSON**  
Staff Writer

Forty percent more people walked, ran, biked and skied along the Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails this year than last year.

An automatic counter at the start of the trail detected 28,900 people as they passed by this year compared with 20,500 the year before.

Donna Palermo of the Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce plans to mention those numbers Thursday when she and others from a trails association speak to the Luzerne County commissioners about the benefits of recreation.

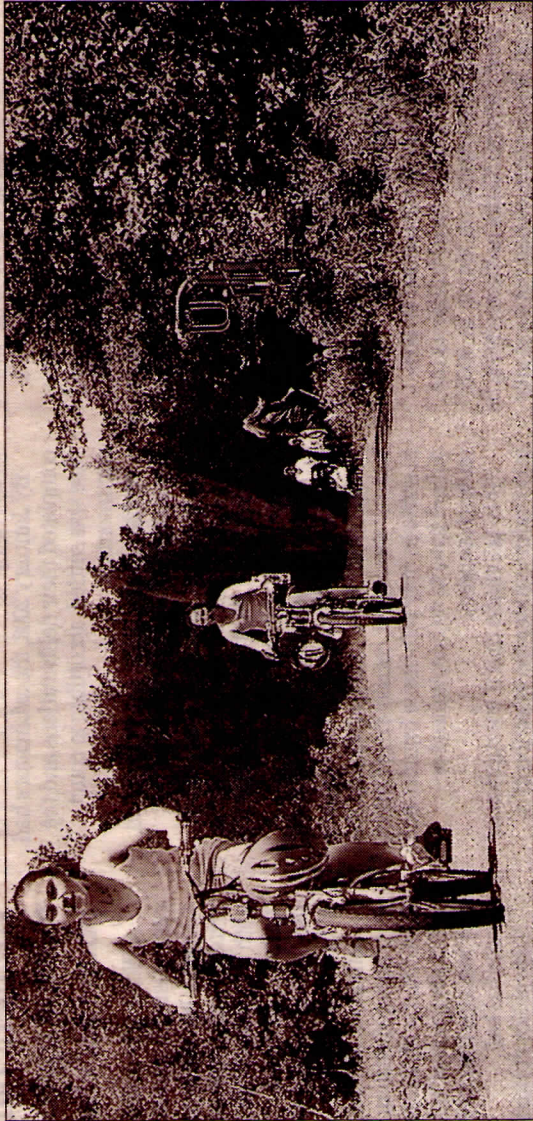
Facing a \$16 million hole in the budget last month, the commissioners eliminated the county's recreation program from the \$124 million budget that increases property taxes by 10 percent.

Representatives of the Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails Partnership understand the commissioners have to make cuts while revising the budget this month, said Bob Skulsky, who oversees Hazleton's four-mile trail as executive director of the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership.

But Skulsky hopes the commissioners will restore some funds for recreation.

"You can't zero it out. It might take years to get back to where we are now as far as building trails and getting people outdoors," he said.

Eliminating the recreation budget disrupts the system of parks, hubs and connecting trails where county residents can go to enjoy



STANDARD-SPEAKER FILE PHOTO  
Local residents bike and walk along the Rails-to-Trails off Route 93 on National Trails Day 2009.

## BY THE NUMBERS

### Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails

**53,200:** Total visits from October 2007 to Nov. 17, 2009

**28,900:** Visits from October 2008 to September 2009.

**20,500:** Visits from October 2007 to September 2008.

**1,329:** Visitors during the week of June 1, 2009 — the trail's busiest.

**\$8.86:** Amount visitors reported spending on beverages, snacks and other items after using a similar path, the Schuylkill River Trail.

**\$240,390:** Estimated spending by visitors to the Hazleton rail-trail in the past two years based on trail counts.

Source: Greater Hazleton Rails to Trails.

STANDARD-SPEAKER FILE PHOTO

Local residents bike and walk along the Rails-to-Trails off Route 93 on National Trails Day 2009.

themselves and stay healthy. Skulsky said. Funding cuts raise questions of whether county-owned parks like Moon Lake and the soccer fields at Forty Fort will close or whether anyone will spray mosquitoes and flies this summer.

At a work session with the commissioners on Thursday Palermo is scheduled to discuss the dollars spent by the people who use the trail. A survey of people using the Schuylkill River Trail, being built to connect Philadelphia and Reading, found that 51 percent made purchases in the area, and they spent an average \$8.86 apiece between November and December 2008. Assuming those figures apply to Hazleton, the 53,200 people who used Hazleton's rail trail during

the past two years spent \$240,390. The economic potential of trails increases when they attract visitors from other areas, which the Pine Creek Trail does. On the 65-mile Pine Creek Trail in Tioga and Lycoming counties that takes in the Grand Canyon of Pennsylvania, about 86 percent of users spend money. Those who do spend plunk down an average of \$30.30. The trail is longer so they stay longer, often paying for overnight lodging or multiple meals.

Hazleton's trail could become a destination after it is expanded to reach Eckley Miners' Village and the Lehigh Gorge Trail.

Julie McMonagle, vice president of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, will tell the commis-

sioners how volunteers help the county get the most out of each dollar spent on recreation.

McMonagle said municipalities and nonprofit groups that received \$332,000 in grants from the county leveraged the money to obtain \$9 million for recreation.

"Those dollars were raised largely through nonprofit organizations with a lot of volunteers," McMonagle said. Local governments assigned workers to write grants and help with construction on those projects, she added. The money raised paid local companies to build and supply trails and parks.

Parks, trails and sports fields offer places for county residents to enjoy themselves without vacationing far from home, McMonagle said.

"In these difficult times, 'staycation' has become a buzz word. Instead of taking their money out of the county, people go to Moon Lake to camp. They gas up their car, buy supplies at the mini-market,"

McMonagle said. The trails partnership hopes Moon Lake and other county facilities will stay open. Ken Powely will talk to the commissioners about how soccer tournaments and leagues at county fields in Forty Fort put money into the economy each year.

Carol Husa of the YMCA will describe the health benefits of the recreation program.

Meanwhile, members of the trails partnership seek to cut their expenses, too.

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