

Foster Twp. residents voice concerns over Rails-to-Trails growth

By **AMANDA CHRISTMAN**
Staff Writer

Foster Township residents concerned with extensions of the Hazleton Rails to Trails entering their communities had a chance to question the trail organizer, Monday.

The township supervisors held a public meeting over the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership's plans to extend the Greater Hazleton Rails to Trails hiking and biking trail.

Right now the trail is only in Hazle Township and begins on state Route 93, near state Route 424. It extends through Stockton. The organization is working to develop a portion of the trail in Ashmore and hopes to complete it this spring. It also plans to move into Foster Township eventually.

But not all Foster residents are sold on the idea.

Bob Senick of Hazle Brook said he found out about the partnerships plans to extend the trail when he saw trees in the woods marked with orange ribbons. He said the concept for the trails are good but land outside of abandoned railroad beds are being used for the trails. He said the railroad bed in Hazle Brook was abandoned in 1920 and vegetation has grown over it naturally restoring the landscape and making the trail unnecessary. Senick said though the community needs recreation, natural woodland shouldn't be destroyed for it.

A man asked if there are any provisions set forth for portions of the trail that carve out state game lands. Skulsky said hunters will still be allowed to hunt on the land as per state regulations and non hunters will be advised to wear bright colored clothing during hunting seasons.

Another concern was for people using the trail getting hit by quads. A man from Foster Township said the community has a problem with quads being operating in places they shouldn't be. Skulsky said the organization, which is all volunteer, does its best to ensure quads don't become a problem on the trails. He also said the trails are fully insured.

Residents also asked to see the trails proposed plans and Robert Skulsky executive director of the partnership, said he could furnish the municipal building with a copy of a map. Supervisor Chairman Jerry Brogan said the supervisors board wants to protect residents in the community and their way of living.

For now, the partnership plans to finish developing Ashmore, which is near where the Beryllium plant was. A bridge in Ashmore will extend over an active railroad track operated by Norfolk Southern Rail-

road. Skulsky said the 121 foot long bridge will have to be strong enough to support emergency vehicles to pass through.

The next leg of the trail to be developed is called phase four and will begin at the Weatherly-White Haven Road and head east into Lehigh Gorge State Park in White Haven, Skulsky said. The partnership applied for a \$300,000 state grant to build that portion. If funding is approved that portion will be done this year and will stretch through state game lands, he said.

If that money isn't granted, Skulsky said the organization will pursue the portion in Foster Township, earlier than it had intended to. The partnership wants to build a two mile segment from Ashmore to Hazle Brook. That segment, Skulsky said, would end at Hazle Brook Road. Tom Orgorzalek, of the partnership, said the trail would stop about a ¼-mile away from Hazle Brook Village.

A portion from Hazle Brook into Eckley is planned but the route hasn't been established. Skulsky said the organization has two options for the route but hasn't signed an agreement with property owners yet.

The organization hasn't applied for zoning, land development or for permits from Foster Township yet. Township Solicitor Donald Karpowich said all those steps will have to be completed before the organization can break ground.

Skulsky said the trails are a "good thing" for area, noting they deter drinking parties that were once held on wooded land. He said the Ashmore portion underwent a significant cleaning from debris that was scattered on the land by parties and "we don't have that anymore." He said 400 to 500 foot deep abandoned coal stripping pits there were filled in during a mineland reclamation project and the organization plans to plant vegetation there to get the property back to its original condition.

Using trail counters, the partnership found that between September 2007 and September 2009, 52,000 visitors entered the trails at the state Route 93 entrance. Skulsky said that amounts to about five or six people visiting the trail each hour. He said primarily local people visit the site. Hasn't had any "incidents" at the site yet. Said will amount to economic benefits for local businesses. He said a study was done that found people visiting Pennsylvania trails will spend \$8.60 on average, each visit on water, energy bars or at local restaurants.

The trails are paid for out of federal, state and local grants. Skulsky said there are over 100 trails in Pennsylvania.

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