



ELLEN O'CONNELL/Staff Photographer

Werner Freymann, in foreground, along with Nick Miskar, at left in rear, and Bob Klemow ride their bikes along the Rails to Trails while participating the Hazleton Health and Wellness Center's Move It Outside Hike or Bike in conjunction with the 2008 Keystone Active Zone Passport program.

KAZ Passport program adds events, trails

By **JILL WHALEN**

Staff Writer

A program in its fourth year will again offer free and close-to-home outdoor adventures for young and old alike.

This year, though, organizers say the Keystone Active Zone (KAZ) Passport program is bigger and better than ever.

"The goal is to get everybody outside and active at the area's trails and parks throughout the summer. Being active is key," said Carol Husa, an organizer from one of the program's sponsors, Live Well Luzerne County.

It doesn't hurt, either, that program participants will have the chance to win overnight stays, rafting trips and gift certificates.

Here's how it works: Participants download a "passport" that contains information about Luzerne County parks and trails, as well as nearby events happening in the spring and summer. Each place or event listed on the passport has a corresponding scavenger hunt question that can be answered by visiting the locations. Participants find the solution, then revisit the KAZ website to record their answers.

Husa said there are more than 30 places listed on the new passport. Most of them are within an hour's drive of county residents.

"We added a lot of new additions this year," she said.

Places like Louis Schiavo City View Park, Hazleton, and the Susquehanna River Water Trail's North Branch Section will complement previous year's stops such as Nescopeck State Park,

Drums; Lehigh Gorge State Park, White Haven; Hazle Township Community Park, and the Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails path.

Representatives from some of the new stops approached organizers to request that they be added, while others were put on the passport following an evaluation of last year's program, Husa said.

Events include National Trails Day walks at trails throughout the county, Family Fishing Day at Hazle Township Community Park, and a summer reading program kickoff at the Hazleton Area Public Library. New this year are Family Paddling Days at Ricketts Glen and Nescopeck state parks, and Y Walk Wednesdays, a series of guided walks to places like the Luzerne County Courthouse and Wilkes-Barre mansions.

Husa said participants may visit as many stops as they wish. For every stop successfully logged, an entry is earned toward winning awards and prizes like a stay at Split Rock Resort and its H2Oooohh indoor water park; kayak tours on the Susquehanna River; a whitewater rafting getaway, and a family weekend at YMCA Camp Kresge.

Husa said many activities will appeal to families and serve as an enjoyable way to increase exercise. She pointed to statistics from the Pennsylvania Department of Health, which show 63 percent of adults and 36 percent of children in Luzerne County are overweight.

The program also gives young people opportunities to discover and connect with their natural world, she said.

This year, the program is sponsored

by the Wyoming Valley Wellness Trails Partnership, Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails and Live Well Luzerne County. It is partially funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

The program has grown since its inception, and last year more than 900 individuals registered, according to Husa.

Bob Skulsky, executive director of the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership, believes the KAZ program contributed to a boost in visitors to Hazleton's rail-trail. The partnership, which oversees construction and trail activities, reported the number of visitors increased by 8,000 between 2008 and 2009.

Not only does the KAZ program promote being healthy, Skulsky said it boosts the economy where sites are located.

"A person might stop by a store to pick up a bottle of water or a snack bar," he said. In addition to being a site, the local trail will host geocaching and National Trails Day events as part of the program.

Diane Madl, environmental educator at Nescopeck State Park, said the program is doing what it is meant to do.

"It gets people out exploring all the natural areas in the county - and they're exercising at the same time," she said.

The KAZ program runs through Oct. 9. To register or for more information, visit www.KAZpassport.org. The program is also on Facebook and Twitter.

jwhalen@standardspeaker.com