

Officials: Trails project completion hinges on state funding

By JIM DINO
Staff Writer

Two more legs of the Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails hiking and biking project hinge on state funding, officials said Wednesday.

The Rails-to-Trails committee, which is part of the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership, received word this month that a \$245,000 state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources Community Conservation grant has been obtained for the fourth leg of the trail. The final leg stretches from the Weatherly-White Haven Highway to the Lehigh River at Lehigh Gorge State Park, where the local trail will merge with the 168-mile Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor trail.

The partnership and Blue Ridge Realty, which is donating the land for the final leg of the trail, recently finalized contract language for the land donation. But Skulsky said the organization won't receive the grant for at least six months.

"Their next round of funding won't happen until October or November, and if the (state) budget is late again, it may be more like January or February," Skulsky said.

Until the organization gets the grant, the trail cannot be built.

Meanwhile, the partnership has also secured funds

to build the next two miles of the trail, from Ashmore to Hazlebrook in Hazle Township, including a pedestrian bridge over an active Norfolk Southern rail line.

Skulsky said because of that overpass, Norfolk Southern must first review and approve the plans.

"I want to move dirt this year," Skulsky added. "This is the second year we are ready. Now there is so much paperwork and red tape you have to go through. It takes longer."

Skulsky said he has received permission from Cabot Associates to move mine spoils to fill a large void along the trail, near the proposed bridge.

The fourth leg of the trail is being planned ahead of the third leg, a six-mile segment between Hazlebrook and the Weatherly-White Haven Highway because of some right-of-way issues which may cause the route to be changed. The Rails-to-Trails committee has not yet decided on a final route.

Trails Day

The Rails-to-Trails committee is putting the finishing touches on preparations

for the seventh annual National Trails Day celebration on June 5.

The day will begin with the dedication of 30 memorial trees. The red maple and flowering crabapple trees were purchased with a grant from the federal economic stimulus package.

A new environmental education garden built by half of the Leadership Hazleton Class of 2010 will also be dedicated. The garden will include grass and trees native to Hazleton that will be planted annually by local students.

After the dedications, a hike-and-bike event along the trail will begin. At noon, a free picnic-style lunch will be served.

A walking contest will be

held by the Hazleton Health and Wellness Center, which will distribute free pedometers to the first 50 participants. The Wellness Center will also provide free health screenings.

Creation Station will be on hand with snakes, frogs and other critters.

Cedar Bike will provide basic bike maintenance and tips. Free bike helmets will be distributed to kids, while supplies last.

The Greater Hazleton Board of Realtors will also give away a "house," which

is actually a playhouse for children.

To get ready for the event, Sue Nasrani, a member of the Rails-to-Trails committee, said students from MMI Preparatory School helped clean brush and other debris off the trail. Committee members will do more before the June 5 event, she said.

"The continuing support from MMI is very important to us," Skulsky said.

He also said the Hazleton YMCA/YWCA has adopted one of the exercise stations along the trail, and will maintain it. Other stations are available for adoption.

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