

For more than a decade, Rails-to-Trails panel has overseen one of area's most popular places

BY JIM DINO (STAFF WRITER)
Published: August 31, 2011



People ride bicycles along the Greater Hazleton Rail-To-Trails route. For more than a decade, the Rails-To-Trails Committee of the Greater Hazleton Civic Partnership has worked to maintain and develop walking trails around the city.

A hiking and biking trail just outside Hazleton wouldn't exist without a group of dedicated volunteers.

Some couldn't imagine being without what the trail affords - the walks and rides in the warmer months, the blueberry picking in the heat of summer, the snowshoeing and skiing in the winter.

The Rails-to-Trails Committee of the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership has spent more than a decade of their lives developing what has become a popular place for people in the Hazleton area to exercise, meet other people and enjoy the fresh air.

Sue Nasrani, chairwoman of the committee, remembers when she joined the cause.

"There was the Zogby survey, which was about what could be done to improve the area," Nasrani remembered. "One (recommendation) was to get groups together like the Mountain (Council of Governments) but also other committees to improve the area. All community leaders and interested people were invited. One possibility was Rails-to-Trails or some kind of hiking committee to make a trail available to the community."

The search for a spot

Nasrani and Drew Magill, a well-known area outdoorsman, teamed up to begin the task of finding a route for a trail.

Nasrani said committee members would meet at Dubatto's Restaurant in Hazleton every Saturday morning and go hiking to look for the best trail route.

"We spent the next two years, including two weeks every summer, hiking all over Luzerne, Schuylkill and Carbon counties," Nasrani remembered. "We got the Pennsylvania Conservancy to do a feasibility study and they came up with (possible routes)."

During the trail search, Magill left the committee and Bob Sagan joined.

"I saw this thing in the (news)paper," Sagan said. "I liked hiking, so I went over one Saturday morning and became a part of it."

Nasrani said Sagan came at the perfect time.

"When Drew left, Bob became the trailblazer," Nasrani said. "Drew knew the trails and Bob did, too. He stepped right in."

In all, there were five possible routes. But two of them proved to be impractical.

"We thought we might get the old Miners' Trail from Ninth Street in Hazleton over the ridge and into Eckley," Nasrani said. "But we found out we'd have to go through some neighborhoods and the quarry was dead center, so that idea was killed."

Bob Skulsky, the partnership's executive director who joined the cause when he assumed that position in late 2001, said two other routes were rejected.

"Another route went through Beaver Meadows and included the Weatherly dump," Skulsky said. "That was rejected, and there was one along the interstate, and that one was rejected because it was too noisy. That's when we went back to the drawing board and came up with the current route - the first four miles to Eckley and to Lehigh Gorge."

Karl Bergamo, another long-time committee member, signed on in 1998 at the Top of the Mountain seminar at Penn State Hazleton - "the original fundraiser for the Civic Partnership," Skulsky said.

Bids for the design of the first four miles of the trail were solicited in 1999, Skulsky remembered.

"The design was funded by the national Rails-to-Trails Conservancy," Skulsky said.

Once the route was decided, Skulsky and committee members went looking for land donations.

"Tom Ogorzalek joined when we started the campaign to get the land," Nasrani remembered. "He was a big help with Butler Enterprises."

Finally, in 2003, all the land was acquired and the project went out for construction bids.

"That was the year we had our first hike-and-bike event at Lehigh Tannery," Bergamo said. "We had the people hike from White Haven to the Tannery, bike from Rockport to the Tannery, and had the picnic at the Tannery. By the third year, we were in our own parking lot. We just had our eighth annual."

Soliciting support

To inform the public of the Rails-to-Trails effort, so money could be raised, committee members spread their message.

"We spoke to many different organizations, like Rotary, Kiwanis and Weatherly Borough Council," Bergamo remembered.

"We were able to get an \$18,000 match for one grant that helped Sister Cities and helped us build the Rails-to-Trails display we still have," Skulsky said.

Sagan remembered one interesting development.

"We got a grant for chainsaw training for the volunteers" who helped cut wood on the trail, he said.

The committee didn't rely just on grants. They held garage and various food sales over the years.

"We used to have those garage sales," Nasrani said. "And Karl (Bergamo) has a really big garage."

The dedication of the volunteers is what built the trail, Skulsky says.

"These volunteers are dedicated," Skulsky said. "Some of them, like Sue (Nasrani), Bob Sagan and Karl (Bergamo), have been involved for 12 years. Then, we have newer volunteers like Steve Stamantopolous and Tina Fiorani who jumped right in."

Skulsky said Nasrani provided the leadership the trail needed.

"Even though Sue is now out of town, whenever I need something, I call Sue and she does it," Skulsky said. "Volunteers give more than their time. They open their pocketbooks, too."

Some of the volunteers use their skills to enhance the trail experience.

"Ray Youngblood and Carl Frankel are two volunteers we depend upon a lot because they're our environmentalists," Skulsky said. "They do nature walks on the trail."

Committee members credit Skulsky and Mike Bloom, the Volunteers in Service to America, or VISTA,

volunteer dedicated to the trail, for their work to help develop the trail.

"We wouldn't be able to function without these two people, who are paid a pittance for what they do," Nasrani said. "They spend hours and hours of volunteer time. They put in 50, 60 hours a week, and are paid for about one-fifth of their time."

"Mike (Bloom) has brought us into the space age," Skulsky said. "He has been meeting with (the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources) on Phase IV of the trail. He has completely updated our website. He started using Facebook to reach the younger generations and a mailchip program to send out mass emails. Anyone who wants to hear what we're doing and can't make it to meetings can sign up on the website."

Beyond the paid employees and the regulars, work crews comprised of volunteers do a great job maintaining the trail, and local industry has mobilized to help, Skulsky said.

Committee members, however, said the true success of the trail rests with the public that supports it so greatly.

"The community always backed us," Nasrani said. "So many people in the community come up to me and say 'thank you' for the trail. There's a lot of goodwill about it."

"It is so much a part of the community now," Skulsky said

jdino@standardspeaker.com