

\$20,000 raised to build first leg of hiking-biking trail

■ The Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership's Rails-To-Trails Committee has raised more than \$20,000 to kick off the project. Another group is moving ahead with plans to preserve the Drums Creative Playground.

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A group acting to connect old railroad beds and turn them into a hiking and biking path between Hazleton and the Lehigh River has raised money to develop the first portion of the hiking and biking trail.

The Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership's Rails-To-Trails Committee has managed to raise over \$20,000 to develop the first part of what will eventually be a 16-mile trail between the eastern end of the Heights Beltway at Route 93 and the Lehigh River at Rockport.

Sue Nasrani, a committee mem-

ber, said the committee has received grants from the Luzerne County Commissioners, Luzerne Foundation, state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and other sources to help develop the first portion of the path, from the end of the beltway to the Stockton Crossroad, near the former beryllium plant at Ashmore.

As with the other Civic Partnership committees, Nasrani said this group not only needs money to achieve its goal, but also needs volunteers to help raise it. The committee has constructed a booth that will be manned at various public events, to publicize the committee's cause and to solicit donations.

Bob Sagan, the "trailmaster" member of the committee, said the trail will begin one-tenth of a mile west of the end of the beltway, off Route 93 in New Coxeville, then about 1,000 feet north to the old DS&S railroad bed and another 2,000

feet to the Stockton Crossroads.

Then, Sagan said the trail turns east for two and half miles along the Hazleton City Authority's Dreck Creek. There are some scenic aspects to this portion of the trail, Sagan said.

"Going past the (Dreck Creek) reservoir is a great accent to the trail," Sagan said. "At Ashmore, there are huge rocks and stone walls. We plan to build a bridge about 130 feet over an active railroad bed."

The trail then goes northeast to the Hazlebrook section of Hazle Township, and then to the Foster Township line. Here, there is another scenic view.

"At the top of the Hazlebrook Ridge, you can see Freeland," Sagan said.

The trail then goes through historic Eckley, and along the Hayes Creek line, to an area known as Owl's Hole. Then, it goes to the Weatherly-White Haven Highway, and to Rock-

port, where it ends at the Lehigh River.

"There are portions of the trail that are easier than others," Sagan said. "We can accommodate any kind of walker. There are easy portions, and there are more challenging portions."

Nasrani said the committee toured five different sites, before deciding on the trail.

"Four years ago, we started out," she said. "We walked hundreds of miles before we decided on New Coxeville."

Nasrani said the committee and the Civic Partnership signed a lease with Butler Enterprises for the first portion of the trail to be developed, which Sagan said is about one-tenth of the entire trail.

Meanwhile, Barbara Franzosa, of the Drums Creative Playground group, said it is dedicated to preserving the playground, which was built by volunteers to the rear of the for-

mer Drums Elementary School in 1990.

When the former school was sold by the Hazleton Area School District the new owner, Rex Bognet, told the committee he would give the playground to the committee.

"It was very generous of him to do that, so we can preserve it for the community," Franzosa said.

The acquisition hasn't been finalized, but Franzosa anticipates that will happen soon. Once the committee - which became an arm of the Partnership late last year - gets ownership, it will be up to its members to raise funds to preserve the facility, update and improve it, and acquire and train new committee members to carry on the work of the committee into the future, so the playground can be a community asset.

Franzosa said the playground is public and open to everyone. She

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said it helps to increase property values in the area and encourages the development of additional recreational facilities.

She said Boy Scouts from Freeland made some minor improvements and students from the Keystone Job Corps Center in Drums have agreed to power wash the playground in the near future.

C.P.