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Rails-To-Trails committee gets grant to build bridge

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One of two major obstacles to the completion of the hiking-biking trail from Hazleton to Weatherly has been overcome.

The Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership committee working to build the 16-mile trail, much of it along abandoned railroad beds, received news that a grant was on the way to build a bridge.

Bob Skulsky, the Partnership's executive director, said the Luzerne-Lackawanna Metropolitan Planning Organization has awarded a \$210,000 grant – from federal TIP transportation funds – to help build the bridge, using an existing concrete bridge abutment in Ashmore.

A bridge was needed over an active Norfolk Southern railroad line, to continue the trail on its planned path near Hazle Creek.

"Without that bridge, the project would have been shut down," Skulsky said. "The MPO made it their number one priority project. That's why it got enhancement funding."

The bridge was one of two obsta-

cles the committee had to deal with in the last 12 miles of the trail.

The other obstacle is that a few property owners have indicated they will not allow an easement through their properties for the trail. So the trail will have to be rerouted in those areas.

Skuysky said the Rails-To-Trails committee has received draft feasibility studies from the Alfred Benesch and Co. engineering firm, which is designing the trail, on two alternate routes. Those are now being studied.

Construction on the first four miles of the trail is scheduled to begin this spring.

Sue Nasrani, a member of the Rails-To-Trails committee, said a study of the trail by the Benesch firm has estimated the cost of segments of the trail which indicate that the entire trail will cost around \$1 million in total to build.

The first four-mile segment of the trail, which is already designed, has been estimated at \$160,000. The Partnership has raised the money to build the first portion, which will begin near the intersection of Route 93, East Broad Street,

and the Heights Beltway, to the Ashmore section of Hazle Township.

Nasrani said the second segment – from Ashmore to the Village of Eckley – will be the most costly, because of the bridge. That segment is estimated at \$600,000.

The third and final segment, from Eckley to the Lehigh River at Rockport, near Weatherly, has been estimated at \$250,000.

Skulsky said there are two packs of drawings for the first phase, which will be included in a Request For Proposals (RFP) for construction of the first segment that will be advertised for bid soon, anticipating construction beginning in the spring.

The trail will begin about 500 feet west of the intersection with Route 93. It goes north to a haul road, and then goes east, where it crosses the Stockton Road.

The trail will then follow a Bell Telephone right-of-way into Hazlebrook, where it will pick up an old railroad bed to get to Eckley. It is in this section of the trail where the two objecting property owners are located.

The trail could be moved south

into state gamelands. If the trail goes that way, it could possibly be connected to a trail in the White Haven area.

The trail then goes northeast to the Hazlebrook section of Hazle Township, and then to the Foster Township line.

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 Rockport, where it ends at the Lehigh River.

Phase II will go to Eckley Miners Village. The third phase will give the trail access to the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage coordinator.

Other rest areas – with a parking lot and benches – will be created near Eckley, and at the end, at the Lehigh River.

The committee has raised funds to develop the trail in various ways, including such pursuits as garage sales. The group is now conducting a pizza sale.

For more information on the pizza sale or on the Rails to Trails committee and their work, call 455-1508.