



ELLEN O'CONNELL/Standard-Speaker

**Phil Jeffries** of Weatherly talks to his 6-year-old granddaughter, Olivia Winheld, while cross-country skiing last week on the area's rail-trail.

# Trying out the rail-trail

## Cross-country skiers lay fresh tracks on four-mile trek

By **MARK KATCHUR**

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**P**hil Jeffries was able to stay almost on top of a fresh foot of snow, thanks to an early March sun.

The snow had moistened just enough – only hours after last week's storm ended – so that when Jeffries planted his cross-country skis, they sunk only 3 or 4 inches.

His diminutive 6-year-old granddaughter, Olivia Winheld, barely cracked the surface.

Jeffries forged a new path through the snow, leading his granddaughter down the trail converted from rail-roading to recreation.

The first leg of the local rail-trail won't officially open until May 15, when a ribbon-cutting ceremony will be held to dedicate the four-mile path through the woods.

Still, some hikers, bikers and skiers have been using the trail, which winds through Hazle Township's southeast corner, from Route 93 to the Stockton Road.

"No one's going to stop people

from using the trail in the meantime," said Bob Skulsky of the Greater Hazleton Civic Partnership, the group behind the Greater Hazleton Rails-to-Trails project.

That is, unless they are riding snowmobiles or all-terrain vehicles, which are prohibited there.

"They will be prosecuted if they are caught," Skulsky said.

Snowmobile tracks were laid when Jeffries and his granddaughter took to the trail Tuesday, but they are much too bumpy for cross-country skiers to use, he said.

He would much rather ski on fresh snow, even though pushing through it the first time requires some extra muscle.

"You need a minimum of 5 to 6 inches so you can glide without going through the surface," Jeffries said. "It's a harder workout, but once you cut the tracks, it's great."

Signs at both ends of the trail ask walkers to be mindful of cross-country ski tracks. Footprint holes are akin to missing railroad ties on

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## Rail-trail

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train tracks, Jeffries said.

Jeffries is from Weatherly, and often uses a recreation trail in nearby Rockport along the Lehigh River, but sometimes drives to the Hazleton rail-trail for a change of scenery.

"It's a great ski, about an hour-and-a-half round trip," he said. "It's fairly level, no real steep slopes. And you get an extra inch of snow up there on the mountain, so it's a workout."

Jeffries, though, hopes to one day get to the trail without taking his SUV.

### 'Spur'ring growth

Jeffries believes Hazleton's rail-trail can eventually connect with other trails in and around Weatherly.

The four-mile Route 93-to-Stockton Road portion is just the first phase of the local Rails-to-Trails project. When completed, the path along an abandoned railroad bed will run another 12 miles through Ashmore, near Eckley and to the Lehigh River.

Like Jeffries, Freeland Mayor Tim Martin hopes his community can link through spurs, or secondary trails, along the way.

"There are a lot of coal roads (just south of Freeland near the proposed trail) that we could use to connect," he said.

Martin pitched the idea to Skulsky, who will attend an upcoming borough council meeting to talk more about it.

"It would be good in two ways," the mayor said. "It would let people from Freeland jump right on the trail, and it would allow anyone who wanted to take a break to stop in Freeland and get a bite to eat or something to drink."



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**Phil Jeffries** and his granddaughter, Olivia Winheld, ski the Greater Hazleton Civic Partnership's rail-trail last week. Skiers, as well as hikers and bikers, have been trying out the trail, which will officially open May 15.

Freeland does not own the roads and would not be in a position to buy any land. Rather, borough officials would try to forge an agreement with the landowners to open the paths for recreational use, Martin said.

"Right now, as long as you sign a release form, most coal companies allow people to walk or bike their land," he said.

Skulsky hopes folks from Freeland and Weatherly can,

for now, take the lead on such proposals.

"It's really too early for us to look at that," he said. "Our goal right now is to get to the river. Once that happens, then we can look at possible spurs."

Meanwhile, Martin said the borough's streets department might help out when work begins on the portion of the trail near Freeland.

Other work closer to Hazleton has kept the civic partnership busy.

### Sprint to the finish

Some people have volunteered in recent weeks to help clear tree limbs snapped during January ice storms.

Skulsky organized a group to cut and clear the wood on a recent weekend, but found an anonymous helper had already started.

"Someone opened the trail enough so you could get through," he said. "It was a pleasant surprise; they cut our work in half."

Volunteers are taking cut sections of wood from the trail and leaving it at the parking area at the Route 93 end, free for anyone to take.

When the snow clears, they will plant warm summer grasses, wildflowers and other native plants at each end of the trail and in a few open areas in between.

"We're looking to enhance wildlife, with deer or wild turkeys coming down to the trail," Skulsky said.

The first part of Hazleton's rail-trail will officially open May 15. At 11 a.m., hikers will start out from the Stockton Road, while bikers will begin a round trip from Route 93. Everyone will meet at the Route 93 parking area at 12:30 p.m. for a ribbon-cutting ceremony and a free picnic.

With the opening little more than two months away, the partnership is "starting to think about maintenance issues," Skulsky said.

The Delaware/Lehigh National Heritage Corridor offers a Trail Tenders program, in which local groups sign up to help maintain a part of a recreation trail, similar to Pennsylvania's Adopt-A-Highway program.

Those interested can contact Skulsky at 455-1508.