



The Luzerne County Commissioners gave the Greater Hazleton Civic Partnership \$6,000 toward the development of the first phase of a hiking and biking trail for the Hazleton area, and \$5,000 to the Mountain Council of Governments (MCOG) for operating expenses. Pictured from left: Luzerne County Commissioner Steve Urban, Bob Skulsky, executive director of the Partnership and MCOG; Luzerne County Commissioner Chairman Tom Pizano, Bob Sagan, "trailmaster" of the Rails To Trails committee and Luzerne County Commissioner Tom Makowski.

Civic partnership, MCOG nets funds from Luzerne County Commissioners

The Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership/Mountain Council of Governments (MCOG) is one group among five greenway and trail organizations getting money from the Luzerne County Commissioners.

The recreational and environmental groups receiving

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funds also include the Tri-Area Recreation Authority, Earth Conservancy, the Pennsylvania Environmental Council and North Branch Land Trust.

During the Luzerne County Commissioners meeting Wednesday morning, the Partnership's Rails to Trails committee received a check for \$6,000 towards a detailed site plan for Phase I of the Hazleton Rails to Trails project. The Hazleton R-T will connect with Eckley miners Village and to the Delaware Lehigh National Heritage Corridor Trail at White Haven.

The \$6,000 will help develop the first portion of the trail, from Route 93 off East Broad Street in Hazleton to the Ashmore section of Hazle Township.

Rails to Trails is an initiative through which abandoned railroad beds can be converted to trails for hiking, biking, jogging, cross-country skiing and a variety of other outdoor recreation activities.

MCOG will be receiving a check for \$5,000 towards operating expenses. The organization has been asking the commissioners for operating funds for some time. The grant, says MCOG and Partnership Executive Director Bob Skulsky, is an important endorsement from the county commissioners on the work the MCOG is doing with many programs including a regional police department, joint bidding, shared services and regional recreation trails.

Tri-Area Recreation Authority is getting \$6,800 for the provision of funds to conduct a feasibility study on the development of an all-terrain/motocross recreational facility in the Greater Hazleton area.

Tri-Area board member Neil Oberto said the authority started to look into developing such a facility because of riding that has been going on around abandoned strip mines. The course Tri-Area is looking at developing would be near the Partnership's Rails to Trails trail.

The five groups are members of the Luzerne County Greenway and Open Space Alliance, formed in 1996, when a wide array of environmental organizations were requested by the commissioners to join forces. This alliance has allowed the groups to concentrate and combine their efforts toward the common goal of preserving and restoring important environmental assets in the region.

In the last six years, the Luzerne County Greenways and Open Space Alliance has shown how much can be accomplished through teamwork, the commissioners said. These groups, each with their own plans and goals, have proven that regionalism is a key concept to approaching environmental projects. The commissioners also said they are proud to support the groups' continuing efforts in the preservation and enhancement of the county's resources.

The other three groups who got money were:

□ The Earth Conservancy got \$20,000 to conduct a study into creating an all-terrain vehicle trail in the Wyoming Valley. The grant will be used to match a similar grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

□ The Pennsylvania Environmental Council got \$27,500 for two projects - \$7,500 to develop a comprehensive watershed-based conservation plan for the Mehoopany Creek, a branch of the Susquehanna River.

□ The North Branch Land Trust got \$3,100 to assist the trust in its ongoing conservation efforts.