

# Trail construction to begin in spring

By **JIM DINO**

jimdino@standardspeaker.com

9-13-03

Construction on the rail trail being built around the Hazleton area will begin next spring, officials believe.

Bob Skulsky, executive director of the Greater Hazleton Civic Partnership – which is working to build the trail by its Rails-To-Trails committee – said he believes all of the funding is in place to build the first quarter of the trail.

Skulsky said the Partnership had received word that the First Federal Foundation had agreed to make a \$10,500 grant toward the trail.

But with construction on the first four miles of the trail – from Route 93 (East Broad Street) to the Ashmore section of Hazle Township – near the former Beryllium plant – estimated at \$150,000, the state Department of Transportation was reluctant to put the project out for bids.

Then Skulsky contacted Adrian Merolli at the Luzerne County Planning Commission, to find out if there were any transportation enhancement funds available.

“He (Merolli) said there was a project that was funded, but was not ready,” Skulsky said. “He said he could transfer the funding – \$100,000 – to our project. That gave us enough.

“That was the best news we could receive.”

Skulsky said he expects the Request for Proposals (RFP) to be publicized by the end of September.

He thought perhaps construction could begin by the end of the year, but said it will probably begin next spring.

“PENNDOT is handling it,” Skulsky said.

A paved parking lot and reception area is planned for the entrance to the trail off East Broad Street.

But Skulsky said the committee is considering paving the first four miles of the trail, and leave the parking lot and reception area in crushed stone.

“If it was paved, the trail could accommodate commercial bikes as well as mountain bikes,” Skulsky said. “It will also be able to accommodate wheelchairs. The first mile of the trail will probably get the most usage. We could pave the parking lot later, or even now – depending upon the bids we receive.”

There is one other obstacle to the first leg of the trail, Skulsky said. Cabot Associates, owner of the former Beryllium plant, cannot give the committee an easement because the firm is restricted by the federal Environmental Protection Agency. Skulsky anticipates the situation to be resolved in 4-6 weeks.

The first four miles of the trail won't be difficult to build.

But Mike Cera of Alfred Benesch and Co., Pottsville, the firm designing the trail, said that isn't the case for the rest of the 16-mile trail to White Haven.

A good portion of the first four miles of the trail, Cera explained, will be along a Hazleton City Authority right-of-way which is already graded into a road.

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.

About halfway to Ashmore, a rest area, with picnic tables, signs and benches, will be built, as it will at the beginning, which will also have a gravel parking lot.

Young people have built the picnic tables and benches, under a program called “Blazing New Trails.”

As far as the rest of the trail goes, Cera said two property owners along the proposed route have voiced their opposition to the trail, so a new route will have to be determined.

The first obstacle is shortly after the four-mile mark.

Near Hazle Creek, Cera said the trail has to cross an active railroad bed. But there are stone abutments that the group is going to try to reuse for a pedestrian bridge.

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.

Sagan said Phase II will go to Eckley Miners Village. The third phase will give the trail access to the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Coordinator. The third phase will be the most difficult, he said, because there are a lot of landowners and some physical obstructions for us to overcome.

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

For more information on the Rails To Trails committee and their work, contact Skulsky at 455-1508.