

Partnership's Rails-to-Trails Committee looks to gain final parcel for hiking, biking trail

Right-of-way over Hazleton City Authority land is the final hurdle in the Greater Hazleton Civic Partnership's quest to build a trail on an abandoned railroad bed between New Coxeville and Ashmore.

By **JIM DINO**
Standard-Speaker

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The Greater Hazleton Civic Partnership has one more hurdle – literally – in its quest to build a hiking and biking trail along an abandoned railroad bed between New Coxeville and Ashmore.

Members of the Partnership's Rails-To-Trails Committee will meet with Hazleton City Authority officials in an attempt to secure a 25-year right-of-way over HCA

land that is near the Dreck Creek Reservoir.

Some HCA members have expressed concern for potential pollution of the reservoir, and perhaps vandalism, if the public is allowed to walk on land there.

Rails-To-Trails Committee members – who spent many of their Saturdays looking at potential trail sites – have stated although the public is not invited onto the land now, people still use it – particularly drivers of all-terrain vehicles (ATVs).

Jo-Ann Yannuzzi, the Partner-

ship's executive director, said she has some proof that granting the easement won't create a problem.

In a letter, Dennis Mihoci, assistant park manager for the Pymatuning State Park in Jamestown, Mercer County, said 1.5 miles of an abandoned railbed was turned into a trail that parallels Pymatuning Reservoir.

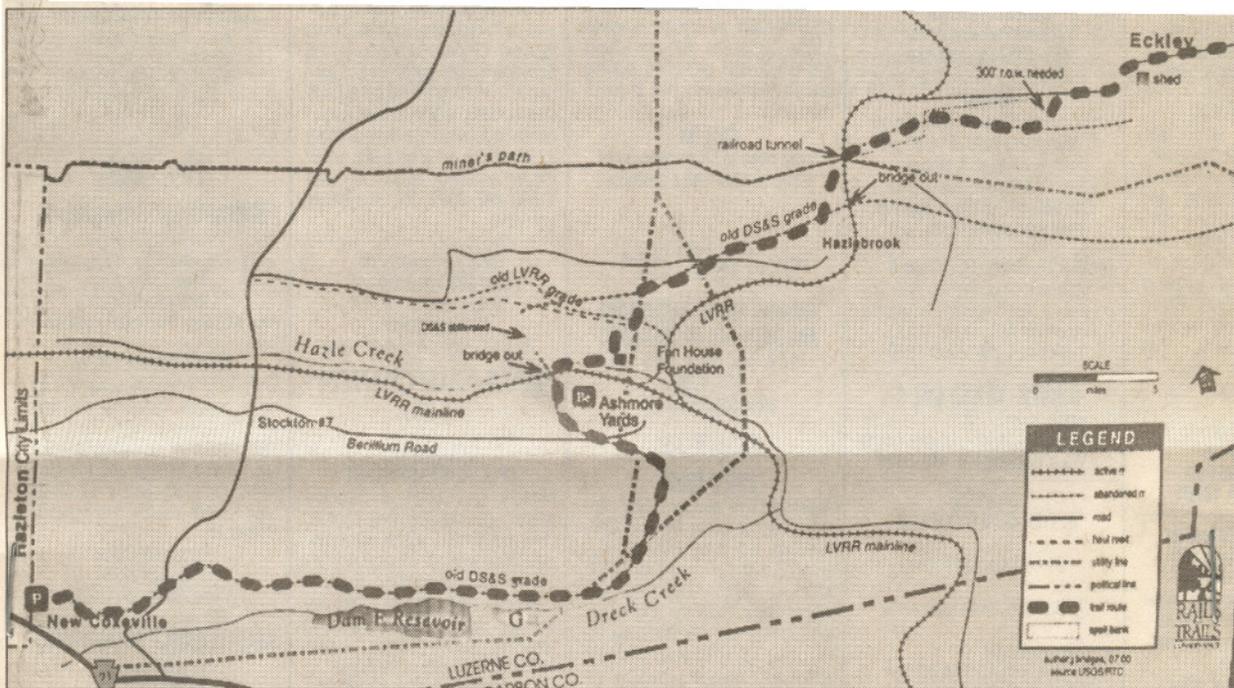
The distance from the trail to the water varies from a few feet to 20 yards. The trail is used mostly by fishermen, hunters, joggers, walkers, snowmobiles and some bicyclists.

“We have experienced very little vandalism or any security problem as a result of the trail,” Mihoci wrote. “At times we do have problems with ATVs, which are prohibited. Litter is a small problem, mostly by fishermen.”

While there may be drawbacks, the Partnership feels the benefits the trail would provide are more numerous.

Those benefits include increased tourism, education, increased prop-

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Trail

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erty values, as well as creating a safe place to walk, hike, jog, ski or ride a bike.

The goals of the Rails-To-Trails project include providing a safe, family-friendly environment for individuals of all ages to enjoy, providing nature lovers with hiking trails through miles of forests and wetlands, and establishing a link between the greater Hazleton area, the Eckley Miners Museum, and the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor.

Yannuzzi said the other two landowners along the proposed trail, Butler Enterprises and Cabot Corporation, have given their approval. Part of the trail enters a buffer of land Cabot owns

near the former beryllium plant at Ashmore, but does not enter the land of the former plant itself.

If the HCA gives its approval, the Partnership is going to apply for a state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) grant to build the first leg - two to three miles - of what is hoped will eventually be a trail that goes to Eckley. The grant deadline is Nov. 3, Yannuzzi said.

Yannuzzi is asking area municipalities and municipal officials to write letters of support for the trail. For more information, contact Yannuzzi at the Partnership office, at the Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce, at 455-1508.

Already, a number of entities have thrown their support behind

the trail: Hazleton Mayor Louis Barletta, Mountain Council of Governments Chairman Robert Stanziola, Hazle Township Supervisor Chairman Andy Benyo, PPL Community Development Director Martha Herron, Greater Hazleton Health Alliance President Bernard Rudegear, Greater Hazleton Chamber of Commerce President James R. Boyle, and Tri-Area Recreation Authority Chairman Neil Oberto.

Yannuzzi said Rails-To-Trails is an extremely popular activity throughout the United States, covering over 10,000 miles. Pennsylvania has the distinction of being the most active state with 111 open trails throughout the state.