



ELLEN O'CONNELL/Standard-Speaker

A sign showing the beginning of the future site of Greater Hazleton's Rails-To-Trails was erected on Route 93 near the Arthur Gardner Parkway. The trail will eventually be 16 miles long and lead to Rockport and the Lehigh River. Construction is expected to begin in the spring.

## Sign erected to mark beginning of future civic partnership trail

By **JIM DINO**

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People wondering where the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership's Rails-To-Trails trail will begin don't have to wonder anymore.

A sign has been installed along Route 93 to show where the trail, which will eventually be 16 miles to Rockport and the Lehigh River, will begin.

Construction on the rail trail will begin next spring, officials believe.

But first, the area had to be cleared of debris.

Volunteers from Alcoa/Kama in Hazleton Heights donated part of their Saturday on Sept. 27 to clean debris and open drainage on the first four miles of the trail.

"We got a dump truck load of debris," said Bob Skulsky, executive director of the Greater Hazleton Civic Partnership. "We had 21 people, about half of them were from the Rails-To-Trails committee. We had a picnic at the plant afterwards."

The Partnership is working to build the trail by its Rails-To-Trails committee.

Skulsky said he believes all of the funding is in place to build the first quarter of the trail – from Route 93 (East Broad Street) to the Ashmore section of Hazle Township, near the former Beryllium plant.

Skulsky said First Federal Foundation had agreed to make a \$10,500 grant toward the trail, along with \$100,000 from the Luzerne County Planning Commission, which has completed the funding puzzle.

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

But Skulsky said the committee is considering paving the first four miles of the trail, and leaving 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.”

About halfway to Ashmore, a rest area, with picnic tables, signs and benches, will be built, like the one at the beginning.

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

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 that 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 Stockton Road.

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 two objecting property owners live.

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 corridor. The third phase will be the most difficult, he said, because there are a lot of landowners and some physical obstructions 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.