

First part of activity trail expected to be finished by winter

Starting leg of project won't open until spring

By **JIM DINO**

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Construction on the first quarter of the new Rails-To-Trails hiking, biking and cross-country skiing trail that begins in Hazleton should be complete by winter.

But the first leg of the trail will not open until spring, a member of the volunteer committee helping to build the trail said.

Sue Nasrani, a member of the Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership's Rails-To-Trails Committee, told the entire Partnership committee there's long-awaited progress to see on the trail.

"We should finish construction by the end of November," Nasrani said. "Everybody in the community is really excited, and keeps asking when it will open.

"But we won't open it until the spring. We have to put up the signs, and the only thing you can do in winter on it is cross-country skiing."

Skulsky said the committee has won an environmental award for the work its members have done on the trail.

"I'm excited for the committee to get recognition from the state with this, because of all of the hard work they've done," Skulsky said.

But Skulsky said as with any

construction, some unknown things have popped up, causing three change orders.

First, some material along the trail thought to be suitable for backfill proved to be unsuitable.

"It is like a silt-type material, and it will not meet state requirements," Skulsky said. "We will purchase 1,000 yards of fill."

Second, in an area of the trail where there are springs, a French drain field is needed, because a swail there cannot handle the flow of water, as first thought.

Finally, a gate had to be added to a fence separating the trail from the Hazleton City Authority property.

As the first leg is built, Nasrani said the committee will continue to plan to build the other 12 miles of the proposed trail to the Lehigh Gorge State Park at Rockport near Weatherly.

But Nasrani said she feels the enthusiasm created by the first leg being built will create enthusiasm to build the rest of the trail.

"We will now try to work on the next phase," Nasrani said. "Just to get the first four miles done, the community knows it's here. There's a lot of community spirit. It will give us the momentum to march on with the next 12 miles."

Police looking into several vandalism acts at trail

By **JIM DINO**

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The commencement of construction of the first leg of the hiking and biking trail from Hazleton to Weatherly comes as welcome news for many local residents.

But apparently, it isn't good news to all.

Recent acts of vandalism at the construction site – including severe damage done to heavy equipment there – have officials upset, and state police investigating.

Even as the first part of this new asset to the area's recreational facilities becomes a reality, Bob Skulsky, the partnership's executive director, said someone is making it difficult to proceed with the work.

"We've been having trouble with ATVs," Skulsky said. "They knocked down a Job Johnny, and knocked down survey stakes twice. They feel like it's their land."

The vandalism took an evil twist this week when, on successive nights, a pick-up truck got onto the trail, and did damage.

"On Wednesday night, a pick-up truck got

onto the trail, and dug it up with its tires," Skulsky said. "The contractor fixed that Thursday.

"And then Thursday night, apparently another pick-up truck got onto the trail on the Stockton side, and could not get out the other side on Route 93, because the road is blocked by heavy equipment," Skulsky continued.

"So they smashed the windows on a payload, and drove around the equipment anyway to get out."

State police Trooper Gary M. Silkowski said five windows were smashed on the tractor owned by Don Bower Inc. of Berwick. He said the incident happened between 5 p.m. Thursday and 6:45 a.m. Friday.

Anyone who may have seen anything unusual in the vicinity is asked to call state police at 459-3890.

"Anyone who saw a pick-up truck out there should call the state police," Skulsky said.

Steps to secure the area are being taken, and police patrols in the area will be increased.

Skulsky said volunteers have done numerous cleanups around the trail, and Waste Management, Inc., has provided a dumpster to collect all of the debris – free of charge.

"They are providing the dumpster, and are taking care of the tipping (dumping) fees, too," Skulsky said. "That's about \$600 or \$700 we saved."

Skulsky also said the com-

mittee is applying for a \$16,750 grant that would pay for paving the parking lot at the trailhead off East Broad Street, and for exercise stations along the trail.

The partnership has received an environmental award for the trail's development.

The project received the Environmental Partnership Award at the 14th annual

Northeast Pennsylvania Environmental Partnership Awards and dinner held recently in Wilkes-Barre.

Environmental Partners said the partnership is achieving its vision of a "family-friendly trail that will enhance our area's recreational, educational and heritage values."

Nasrani said the committee will be again walking the trail Nov. 21.