

Civic Partnership obtains land for hiking trail

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The group seeking to build a hiking and biking trail from Hazleton to Weatherly has obtained a lease on a piece of the land the trail will occupy.

The Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership's Rails-to-Trails committee signed the lease with Butler Enterprises Inc., Hazleton, for the first 2,000 feet of a trail that will eventually be more than 16 miles long.

Bob Skulsky, executive director of the

partnership, said although it is a small part of the entire trail, it is an important one – because it is the first piece of land formally committed to the trail.

“What’s so important about this lease

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(Continued from page 1) agreement is that we actually have rights to the land," he said. "Now, we can go out and get grant money.

"When the grant was turned down last time, we were told it was because the land ownership was ambiguous, that we didn't have clear title to the land. Now, our chances are very good of getting state funding to start construction of the trail in the spring, if everything goes right."

He was referring to a \$120,000 state grant that would be used for actual construction of the trail, which will be 25-feet wide.

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

The civic partnership, through a grant provided by the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and administered by the Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor, has identified the proposed route for the Greater Hazleton Area Rails-to-Trails project.

The trail will start near the intersection of routes 93 and 424, continue to Eckley Miners Village and eventually connect with the Delaware & Lehigh corridor near Rockport.

Skulsky said the \$35,000 DCNR grant - which is a 50-50 matching grant - would be used to plan what will eventually be a 16.4-mile trail. Whatever money is left would be used for any landowner agreements that are necessary.

The trail's development has been divided into four phases of roughly four miles each. The Hazleton City Authority Water Division owns most of the additional land needed for Phase I. Skulsky said the Rails-to-Trails committee plans to meet with the authority this week to talk about a lease.

"We had met previously, and some board members had concerns about opening the land up," Skulsky said.

Finally, he said, the committee has to get a lease for the "last couple hundred



Butler Enterprises and Greater Hazleton Area Civic Partnership officials signed a lease agreement last week for land on which a 16.4-mile hiking and biking trail will begin. Seated, from left, are Sue Nasrani, chairwoman of the partnership's Rails-to-Trails committee; Tom Orgozalek, general manager of Butler Enterprises; and Terry Moran Bauder, partnership board chairwoman. Behind them is Bob Skulsky, the partnership's executive director.

yards" near the former beryllium plant in Ashmore. "We are working with them," Skulsky said.

The lease agreement with Butler Enterprises is for 1.15 acres - 25 feet wide and 2,000 feet long - at \$1 a year for 50 years.

Skulsky said he feels now that one agreement is in place, it won't be long before they all are.

"I think it will be a domino effect," he said. "Once we get the first 4 miles to Ashmore, then Phase II will be to Eckley Miners Village. The third phase will give us access to the Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor. The third phase will be the most difficult, because there are a lot of landowners and some physical obstructions for us to overcome."

The final phase is on Delaware & Lehigh Corridor land, ending at Rockport.

The plans call for a parking lot to be built at the trail's entrance off Route 93, Skulsky said.

He thanked attorney Pasco Schiavo for his work on finalizing the lease.

Skulsky said the partnership is matching the \$35,000 planning grant with \$20,000

from the Luzerne County commissioners, a contribution from the Luzerne Foundation, in-kind legal services provided by Schiavo and the committee's own fund-raising efforts.

Skulsky also noted the efforts of his predecessor, Jo-Ann Yannuzzi, who initiated negotiations with Butler Enterprises for the land access and was present when the agreement was signed last week.