

Roaring Run Trail project gets \$780,000 federal boost

By [Chris Foreman](#)
TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Monday, April 13, 2009

Like most rails-to-trails advocates, Rich Dixon touts the importance of finishing a portion of his community group's recreational path so it will link to another trail.

And that trail will lead to another.

And another, until bicyclists can zoom from Lake Erie to Pittsburgh's three rivers, from the City of Champions to the nation's capital, or along the Conemaugh River in the tiny Indiana County borough of Saltsburg to the Susquehanna River near Harrisburg.

But all of that takes money, which Dixon's Roaring Run Watershed Association was seeking to bond its Roaring Run Trail along the Kiski River, near Apollo, to the West Penn Trail near Saltsburg.

Until PennDOT announced a \$780,000 grant last month through the federal stimulus package, the association's 600 members weren't expecting to have the cash on hand to resurface and widen a one-mile section in the village of Edmon and to build a restroom facility in Kiski Township.

Now, the Armstrong County group intends to add to the four-mile trail this summer.

"It would have been years coming," said Dixon, vice president of the group, which paved the first 1.5 miles with private money in 1991.

"It just all happened so quick," he added. "We're real fortunate."

The Armstrong County association has had better luck this spring than other trail project organizers, who say matching grants through the state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources have become more competitive.

Before the stimulus package, the traditional transportation enhancement grants funneled through PennDOT from the federal government — through an average \$433,900 award in Pennsylvania, according to the National Transportation Enhancements Clearinghouse — hadn't been awarded for the past two years.

The stimulus package is boosting the Roaring Run Trail and providing \$1.2 million for a \$3.2 million half-mile link on the Three Rivers Heritage Trail in Allegheny County, but some other Western Pennsylvania groups say they're still trying to raise money for their projects.

In Indiana County, two prefabricated bridges will be installed this summer just west of Dilltown on the Ghost Town Trail. But the county's grant funding to cover the \$1.2 million cost dates back to 2006.

"Everybody's just trying to finish what they have," said Ed Patterson, director of the county's parks and trails department. "This bridge project, I can't wait to get it done because I must get three or four e-mails a week: 'When is it getting done?'"

PennDOT already committed \$1 million for the Westmoreland Heritage Trail, according to Malcolm Sias, Westmoreland County's parks planning coordinator.

The five miles of the trail follow coal and salt mines from Saltsburg to Slickville, and construction of the next five miles from Slickville to Route 66 near Delmont is expected next year.

Groups like the Butler-Freeport Community Trail Council are eyeing an April 22 deadline by DCNR for a chunk of the department's annual Community Conservation Partnership Program grants. They won't be announced until the fall.

Chris Novak, the agency's press secretary, said about \$6 million has been designated for trail projects in the past several years, but this year it's expected to be a little less.

Among the funding sources is real estate transfer taxes through the state's Keystone Fund. With the housing slump, that funding is down some, Novak said.

The grants require a 50-50 match, which Novak said, "I guess, anecdotally, people are having trouble with that."

Chris Ziegler, president of the Butler-Freeport council, said they've raised about \$95,000 of the \$250,000 they'll need for maintenance, security, signs and the addition of 4.5 more miles of crushed limestone to the 16 existing miles of Butler-Freeport Community Trail.

"We put our name in the hat, but we haven't heard anything yet," she said of stimulus funding. "It seems like the whole grant process is: hurry, get it in and sit around and wait."

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"This section is really an integral part, and it's hard to get everyone to see your vision when they're handing out the money," Ziegler added.

Organizations in Northwestern Pennsylvania are hearing that state grant sources are more competitive, said Debbie Frawley, Oil Region greenways and open space coordinator through the Franklin Industrial and Commercial Development Authority.

Frawley, who has attended meetings of the Erie to Pittsburgh Trail Alliance, said state departments are looking for connectors along trails and groups working regionally.

A spokeswoman from the national nonprofit Rails to Trails Conservancy said the group is hoping for more transportation enhancement funding from PennDOT, but says trail groups are fortunate to have some funding sources.

"We're very lucky in Pennsylvania to have funding available through DCNR for planning and construction of trail projects, but they certainly have been very competitive, and every year they become more competitive," said Pat Tomes, the nonprofit's Northeast Regional Office program coordinator.