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NEWS AND TOPICS: THE GREAT OUTDOORS; A New Trail Through the Wilderness (Both Public and Private)

By ANDY NEWMAN

Blazing a path through virgin forest is one thing. Threading a new 100-mile hiking trail around developments and highways in a scenic but not quite uninhabited part of New Jersey is another undertaking altogether.

But when the state's longest hiking trail is completed, its architects say, it will have been worth all the planning headaches. The route, called the Highlands Trail, will run from the Delaware River near Phillipsburg to Storm King Mountain on the Hudson River in New York State, crossing some of the region's most rugged terrain. Of the trail's 150 miles, 100 are in New Jersey.

The Highlands physiographic province, as defined by geologists, is a thousand-square-mile band of mixed-oak forest, upland and lowland marsh, sparkling streams and lakes and lumpy granite hills that runs like a beauty queen's sash across the northern third of the state.

The Highlands are home to New Jersey's oldest rocks and greatest diversity of plant and animal life, including black bear and bobcat and endangered orchids. The Highlands are also home, however, to about 665,000 human beings, and therein lies the challenge of building the Highlands Trail.

The first 10 miles, running through Passaic County Park, Long Pond Iron Works State Park, Wanaque Reservoir land and Norvin Green State Forest, opened in May, and the trail will eventually include about 35 miles of existing trails in county and state parks. But the trailmakers still need to get permission from nearly 50 private landowners whose property lies along the proposed route to allow hikers to pass through. Not all of them have expressed interest.

"Some people have these wild fantasies of gangs of youth coming up from Newark and wrecking the trail and leaving it full of trash and litter," said Bob Moss, president pro tem of the Highlands Trail Committee, a network of about 60 environmental groups, government agencies and private companies.

Some developers, however, recognizing the trail as a potential selling point, have been happy to participate, even though the trail committee

offers nothing more than gratitude and liability insurance in exchange for access.

"If you can tell people your property hooks into a 150-mile wilderness trail, that's pretty impressive," said Wilma Frey, senior projects coordinator for the New Jersey Conservation Foundation. The organization is one of the two main driving forces behind the trail, along with the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference.

Of course, the trail committee would rather not see any new development at all along the trail route, but rather than antagonize property owners whose hospitality is essential to creating the trail, the committee leaves the fighting to others.

In places like Washington Township in Morris County, where development is proceeding faster than the committee can update its maps, the committee has been asking the planning board to require prospective developers to grant easements for the trail. "That's really all we can do," Mr. Moss said.

In other spots, the proposed trail route is literally a minefield. "We have to figure out what to do at Picatinny Arsenal," Mr. Moss said, referring to the heavily wooded military installation in Morris County. "They have this problem with unexploded ordnance."

Another major question is whether hikers will be able to camp on the trail.

"I can't imagine many private owners wanting to make their property available for camping," Mr. Moss said. "Maybe bed-and-breakfasts would open up." At the start, at least, hikers who want to walk the whole trail will have to do it in chunks. The trail committee hopes to have 70 miles completed by the end of the fall, with the rest to be finished within two years.

The Highlands' billion-year-old rocks are part of the same formation that underlies the much younger Appalachian Mountains to the north and west. While New Jersey's 70-mile segment of the Appalachian Trail may contain the highest point in the state, experts say the Highlands make for more interesting hiking.

"The rocks in the neighboring Valley and Ridge region have only been folded once," said Richard Volkert, a geologist for the state who has been mapping the Highlands for a dozen years. "The rocks in the Highlands, on the other hand, have been folded three or four times, so that instead of linear ridges, you have folds that have been folded and refolded back on themselves. You don't just hike up on a ridge and walk along it seeing nothing but the ridge crest."

Anne Lutkenhouse, projects director for the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, which maintains more than 1,200 miles of trails, said: "You're up and down and up and down on ridge after ridge. It really can be quite demanding." She described the trail's 1,000-foot Wyanokie High Point in Norvin Green State Forest as a "blow-your-socks-off summit" with amazing views.

Indeed, Mr. Moss said, part of the trail's charm is the vistas it offers despite its proximity to civilization. "With a lot of these views, you don't see the houses or the sprawl," he said. "It's really amazing how much it looks like Vermont or New Hampshire."

Last week, a group of interns from Senator Frank R. Lautenberg's office went to clear a segment of trail belonging to West Milford Township. They lopped branches, cut down saplings and painted blue diamond-shaped blazes on tree trunks.

During a lunch break on a sunny boulder surrounded by dense forest, Mr. Moss said that while West Milford has made a commitment to support ecotourism, the township has been talking about building a golf course nearby.

"We may have to have a pleasant little path through a golf course," he said. "Some of this trail may not look exactly like wilderness, but we hope it will all be pleasant."

The Highlands Trail Committee needs volunteers to clear and blaze sections of the Highlands Trail. To volunteer or for information about hiking the trail's completed sections, call the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference at (212) 685-9699, or Bob Moss of the trail committee at (201) 743-5203.

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