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New section of hiking trails connects Pennsylvania to New Jersey and New York

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RIEGELSVILLE, Pa. | Trail blazers are planning a ribbon-cutting for a section of the 150 miles of hiking trails that will connect Pennsylvania to New Jersey and New York.

Volunteers hope the ceremony, scheduled for noon Saturday at Delaware River Road's Roebling Bridge, where the trail crosses into Pennsylvania, will get people interested in using the existing trail and in planning a future section of the Highlands Trail, which has reached the Pennsylvanian border after decades of work.

The approximately 30-mile extension is the result of about three years of labor, says Brenda Holzinger, of the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference. Planning began about 15 years ago.

"It's all done by volunteers and whenever they have time, they'll work on it," Holzinger said. "Some people take vacation time and we also get corporate volunteer dates so they can do work as well."

The Highlands Trail connects a series of trails through the hills and steep ridges of the Highlands, an elevated section of land extending from the Delaware River to the Hudson River in New York. More than 25,000 acres of the Highlands area have been protected since a congressionally mandated study of the area was published in 1992, according to the USDA Forest Service Web site.

Volunteer Michael Helbing, of Washington, said he hopes Pennsylvanians can enjoy the trail that he helps maintain. He hikes 15 to 20 miles of the trail every Sunday.

"It's our backyard paradise," Helbing said.

Some of these trails are broken up with road sections, but Bethlehem resident Jennifer Heisey says their progress has been substantial and will be vital to the region's outdoor recreation.

"It's important for the Highlands Trail to be developed," Heisey said. "It's getting very densely populated and development is increasing, and as that's happening there's going to be less opportunity for trails and open spaces."

The trail expansion won't stop at the Pennsylvania border. Volunteers want to extend the trail south to Quakertown and eventually through the 13 counties of Pennsylvania Highlands, which extend beyond Harrisburg into Cumberland County.

Heisey, who is the recreational planner for the Appalachian Mountain Club, has visited about 16 municipalities in Upper Bucks and lower Northampton counties to ask communities to become involved in the trail-planning process.

Part of that outreach begins at the ribbon-cutting. Heisey said although they've faced some opposition from private landowners in opening up their land to a trail, most responses at open houses have been favorable.

"Ninety-nine percent were positive and intrigued about the project," Heisey said. "We want the community to be a part of it because that is where they live."

Heisey said they are still looking for representatives to be part of a steering committee for the trail.

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