



WEST WINDSOR: Trail provides a bit of wilderness for hikers, cyclists

By Kristine Snodgrass, Staff Writer

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Hikers can explore the wilderness right in the middle of West Windsor, thanks to trail improvements that are being made to the Zaitz Woods Nature Preserve. The trails, which were originally used by farmers, have been fixed up through work by the West Windsor Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance and the Friends of West Windsor Open Space. About a mile and a half of trails are now more user-friendly, with further improvements to come in the spring.

About 30 volunteers have helped over the past year to improve the trails with markers, signs and a parking lot at the trailhead just off of Southfield Road. Volunteers gathered on Saturdays this fall to install a kiosk, built by Eagle Scout Matt Hasling, and a bridge that will help hikers over a ditch. The kiosk will contain a map of the trails and information on flora and fauna located in the preserve. The preserve was established next to Zaitz Park, a 117-acre township park that is home to four soccer fields and the historic Schenck farmhouse, barn and smokehouse.

Ken Carlson, who is a trustee of both groups, said the improvements were funded through an \$18,000 state grant to fund work on trails throughout the township. The community has responded positively to the trails, he said, which he described as flat, easy to hike and "peaceful." "This trail has really opened up the beauty of these natural woods to residents," he said.

Kevin Appelget, a FOWWOS trustee and naturalist, said the area is environmentally unique for its mix of upland and wetland forest in the midst of the township. The forest contains mostly species of oak trees, he said, with gum trees in the wet areas. "You don't really feel like you're in West Windsor," he said.

The property also has vernal ponds, he said, which are bodies of water that appear in the spring and dry up by summer. They are protected by the state as habitats and breeding grounds for amphibians, he said.

"It's fairly unique thing," he said. "You don't get to see those everywhere."

Further improvements to the site are planned for the spring. Elevated boardwalks are planned for some wet areas, and educational signs about the ecology of the site will be placed.

Residents will also be encouraged to "adopt" trails for maintenance, and local Eagle Scouts will be asked to build benches, Mr. Carlson said.

The work is part of an effort by the groups to establish more walking opportunities throughout the township, Mr. Appelget said. Other areas slated for improvement include the Bridegroom Road Parcel, located on Old Trenton Road, and Duck Pond Park, he said.

As part of the effort to encourage hiking in the township, Mr. Appelget will be leading a two-hour, three-mile hike Saturday of the Millstone Preserve. The hike will meet at 9 a.m. in preserve's parking lot, located on Millstone Road north of the Cranbury Road intersection.

Mr. Carlson said anyone interested in volunteering to help with trail improvements should contact the alliance at wwbikeped@gmail.com.