

Ridge releases \$1.35M for two rails-to-trails projects

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THE TRIBUNE-DEMOCRAT

Gov. Tom Ridge released \$1.35 million in capital budget funds Monday for two rails-to-trails projects in Somerset County.

Once the projects are completed, hikers and bicyclists will be able to travel from Southeastern Somerset County to Pittsburgh without interruption.

Maryland officials also are working on rail-to-trails projects and the finished product will enable hikers and bicyclists to travel from Pittsburgh to Washington.

"We are well on our way to completing one of the nation's most spectacular regional trail systems," Ridge said in a news release. "Imagine, sometime very soon,

visitors will be able to travel - by foot or by bike - from Pittsburgh to Washington. Along the way, they'll pass through small towns, see some of the nation's best scenery and make memories that last a lifetime."

About \$1.1 million released Monday will be used to construct six miles of the Allegheny Highlands Trail from Confluence to Fort Hill in Southern Somerset County as part of Allegheny Trail Alliance system.

The remainder of the funds will be used to study alternative ways to rehabilitate Big Savage Tunnel, near the state line in Somerset County. The tunnel will be the longest rail-trail tunnel in the state. It was last used by a railroad in 1975.

Brett Hollern, trails and greenways coordinator for

Somerset County and Allegheny Trail Alliance, said he is pleased with the release of the funding.

"We can't say how much we appreciate the state's involvement, especially with a big project like the Big Savage Tunnel," he said in a telephone interview.

He said the project from Fort Hill to Confluence will link Somerset County to an existing trail system that runs from Pittsburgh to the Somerset County line. Work on the Fort Hill-Confluence section is expected to start in the spring and be completed next summer.

Hollern said the section from Fort Hill to Confluence also will connect an already completed section of trail from Fort Hill to Salisbury Viaduct, just west of Meyersdale. Funding already is allocated for the trail from the

viaduct to Meyersdale and that work should begin in the spring, he said.

Hollern said funding also is allocated for the section of trail between Meyersdale and Big Savage Tunnel. Maryland officials, he said, currently are designing a trail from the state line to Cumberland.

Hollern said the trail will be an economic boost to the areas they go through.

The existing trail in Somerset County already has seen hundreds of thousands of visitors in the past several years.

Visitors, he said, add to the economy by stopping at restaurants, service stations, bed and breakfasts and other businesses.