

Getting to beauty a safety concern in Amity

Monocacy Hill Recreation Area trails hard to reach, emergency officials say

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By Stephanie Weaver
Reading Eagle

When she walks her dog on trails at Monocacy Hill Recreation Area, Dee Gruver feels as if she's entering a natural sanctuary.

The 428-acre forest in Amity Township offers peacefulness and beauty that is hard to come by in residential areas.

But the partial seclusion can pose problems for emergency personnel trying to respond to rescue calls.

Amity Township officials have been assessing the Monocacy Hill's 6-mile trail network since April, when Monarch Fire Company members brought up the safety issue at a township meeting.

Firefighters had been called to put out a burning tree on the hill, but had difficulty reaching it because of rocks and narrow paths.

They are concerned about the possibility of an emergency involving an injured or stranded hiker occurring in an even less-accessible section of the recreation area.

While Amity officials don't plan to bulldoze paths across Monocacy Hill, they are looking to clear and widen some of the existing trails.

Perhaps the most challenging, and therefore most dangerous, trail at the recreation area is the Monocacy Hill Trail, a rocky, 1-mile climb to the summit.

Township Manager Charles E. Lyon said work has begun to remove rocks from that trail and widen the path as it stretches into the higher elevations. However, Lyon said the work was halted due to the trail slope and wet weather this month.

Amity also is looking to improve access to the Railbed Trail on the western side of the recreation area but is waiting for permission from the farmer who owns the land before doing anything at that location.

Once those areas are addressed, Lyon said officials will continue to assess the other trails.

"I would think we'd want to base any further work on key location points that might be rescue-oriented," he said.

Rescues are much more likely than fire calls, he said, adding that the township already has had one medical rescue on Monocacy Hill and another incident in which someone was lost.

When emergency access on Monocacy Hill came up at another township meeting in May, several members of the Monocacy Hill Conservation Association spoke out against the work on the trails, concerned about the effect it would have on the natural habitat.

Risa Marmontello, association president, said the group has addressed safety for several years now, previously meeting with state and local officials.

"We have already implemented a number of the recommendations out of those meetings," she said in an email. "We will continue to work with the township to establish adequate and reasonable access at Monocacy Hill Recreation Area."

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Reading Eagle: Tyler Sizemore
Samantha Eigenbrot and Bobby Homan of Amity Township use a trail at the Monocacy Hill Recreation Area.

Recreation Area.

For Gruver, who lives just down the road from the recreation area, the proposed changes don't seem necessary.

She said the majority of the trails are wide enough for a four-wheeler. And even if some paths were widened for larger emergency vehicles, those vehicles still would not be able to access the higher, dangerous points on the hill.

"I don't see why they'd need to widen it," Gruver said. "It's a beautiful environment the way it is now. If they have to take down trees to widen it and open it up more, it would be a shame."

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