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Laurel Highlands trail bridge to reopen

"Outdoor recreation continues to get bigger and bigger, and this is just another great amenity." RON ALDOM,
SOMERSET COUNTY
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

A little more than two years after safety concerns closed the Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail bridge over the Pennsylvania Turnpike, a new span will open soon.

The 184-foot-long, 10-foot-wide span is about halfway between the Somerset and Donegal turnpike exits.

The 70-mile Laurel Highlands trail follows the ridge from Ohiopyle to Seward.

The state Department of Conservation and Natural Resources closed the 40-year-old bridge after a Dec. 17, 2009, inspection found deterioration that could threaten people on the bridge as well as motorists beneath.

Now, after a \$1.3 million construction project, the only thing holding up the opening is the installation of protective fencing.

Mike Mumau, Laurel Hill State Park operations manager, said he expects the fencing will be completed within a few weeks, allowing the bridge to open. A formal dedication will follow in the spring. "As soon as (the fencing) is done, it will be opened," Mumau said.

That's good news for the 80,000 to 100,000 hikers who use the trail every year in addition to the thousands of snowmobilers who use the bridge to connect the northern and southern sections of the Laurel Highlands multi-use trail system.

"I didn't think it would happen quite this quickly," Mumau said.

"I think a lot of people spoke out on the importance of this project and really elevated it to the top." Among the most vocal supporters of the new span were area snowmobilers who use the 120 miles on the multi-use trail system – most of which is located in Forbes State Forest.

"The three snowmobile clubs in the Laurel Highlands were very supportive and very instrumental in raising the importance of this project," Mumau said.

The operations manager said the bridge was "very popular."

"It's a huge economic engine for our region ... bigger than many people realize."

He said the region's variety of year-round recreational opportunities is a big draw for visitors.

"Many areas are not as active in the winter, but we are quite the opposite," Mumau said.

Ron Aldom, director of Somerset County Chamber of Commerce, agreed.

"Outdoor recreation continues to get bigger and bigger, and this is just another great amenity," he said.

He called the bridge "a great billboard" for the region.

Aldom believes that, with the trail name engraved on the front of the bridge, travelers on the turnpike may take notice.

"It's so easy to pick up your phone and Google it," he said.

Mumau and Aldom will be happy to have the bridge open once again.

