Volunteers needed for project

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BEAR MOUNTAIN

Hikers who are interested in helping rebuild the Appalachian Trail should get ready to move a couple of rocks on the mountain starting next spring.

The New York-New Jersey Trail Conference, a volunteer organization committed to building and maintaining hiking trails, has been preparing for a major project to relocate a 3-mile stretch of the Appalachian Trail on the mountain. On Thursday and yesterday, a group of experts was on the trail to create construction drawings, measuring the grade of the site step-by-step.

“For several years, we’ve realized that the Appalachian Trail, in particular, one of three or four trails in the mountain, has been getting overused and consequently, significantly degraded,” said G. Gail Neffinger, a volunteer with the trail conference. “We thought it could be rehabilitated.”

After months of discussion, a plan to relocate the degraded portion of the trail was created, and the Palisades park commission tentatively approved it in August.

“The hope is with the route and new design, it would endure for decades,” said Jayne McLaughlin, director of the state Palisades Parks and Historic Sites with the Palisades Interstate Park Commission.

The Bear Mountain portion of the Appalachian Trail is the oldest part of the 2,174-mile path, which stretches from Georgia to Maine. In addition, the portion was one of the most traveled parts of the trail by various levels of hikers, said Eddie Walsh, trail projects coordinator with the trail conference.

“If you’re here on the weekend in the summertime, you see the people who are for the first time exposed to nature in their life,” Walsh said.

To accommodate the popularity, the first half of the new trail would be widened from the standard width, 2 feet, to 5 feet. Also, the trail would be designed to keep hikers from leaving the route, which could be harmful to the natural habitat of the mountain, Walsh said.

Once it’s completed, the trail would give additional views to hikers, said Peter Jensen, a trail designer/ builder based in Massachusetts.
“It’s going to help bring out all the natural features of the mountain,” Jensen said. “It’s going to be a totally different experience than anywhere else on the mountain.”

The new trail would also be more sustainable, thanks to advanced erosion science.

“It’s going to create much more sustainable trail — easier to maintain and better for the park environment,” Jensen said. “Not to mention, easier for people to walk.”

The construction work starting next spring will be by hand, as people did 80 years ago when the original trail was built, Walsh said. He and other veterans will be able to teach techniques to new volunteers, he said.

“The great thing about it is there’s smart ways of doing it. Anyone can do it,” Walsh said. “It’s going to be really valuable experience to come out here to work because you’re getting direct connection to nature.”

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To get involved

The New York-New Jersey Trail Conference is looking for volunteers for its Bear Mountain rehabilitation project. For more information, contact Eddie Walsh at eddiewalsh@nynjtc.org or 201-512-9348.

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