

The Commercial Record

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Recreational trails are boons to communities

To the editor,

A local citizen made a comment at a Saugatuck City Council meeting that “we (Friends of the Blue Star Trail) are not building a nuclear power plant, we are building a recreational trail!”

It is sometimes difficult to keep this simple perspective in the face of sensationalistic headlines from another newspaper. The following is a response to some of the comments in these articles.

Trails have been built all over Michigan, now including the mile recently completed in Saugatuck Township. Most have used a similar funding strategy as Friends of the Blue Star Trail have: obtain federal and state grants available for trails, raise matching funds from donors and build the trail in manageable segments.

The Friends obtained a \$355,000 federal grant and raised \$263,000 in matching funds to build the recent segment. No local tax dollars were used. The Friends plan is to repeat this process to build additional Trail segments from Saugatuck Township to South Haven. We are already raising funds for the next phase.

Using what the Friends’ learned from the section recently built, and reflecting the general increase in construction costs, they revised their original 2009 estimates and now project the Trail will cost \$11.1 million. This includes a pledge of \$600,000 for a maintenance endowment. This will require \$3.5 million in matching funds from donors.

Not surprisingly, the cost estimate has risen, but this doesn’t impact the communities in which it will be built. Utilizing government grants, matched by

donor funds, the Friends pledge to pay for the cost of construction, engineering and maintenance.

The Friends recently approached Allegan County to review the ownership plan agreed to in 2014. The plan needs an update as a result of changes to the order of the trail segments that the Friends are constructing.

To address these changes the county is creating a new resolution to review and consider. The county has never been asked, nor did they ever pledge financial support for the Trail. The Friends and their supporters are hopeful they will approve the ownership resolution as they did in 2014.

A 2014 Saugatuck-Douglas parks survey soliciting input from local residents demonstrated significant interest and support for trails. When asked what recreational facilities should be more developed, 80 percent of those who responded indicated they strongly supported or supported development of recreational trails. The plan and survey results are available at saugatucktownship.org

Once built, trails become a valuable asset of the local community. A 2014 survey of trail owners done by Allegan County Parks Department demonstrated communities that embrace trails, love them. A sample of the comments from owners were “The trails are an extremely popular aspect of our township” ... “The linear path is the most used park in our system” ... “Yes, we believe that it has brought visitors to our county” ... “Significantly popular, written up in national publications, races, destination.”

Yes, and here at home, we are having difficulty keeping people off the Trail until the official opening. People want to get out and use it. This is not a nuclear power plant; it is a recreational trail.

A more complete update is available at fobst.org.

Friends of the Blue Star Trail