

# Setting record straight on planned Blue Star Trail

**BY JEAN VAN ZOEREN ,  
PRESIDENT , FRIENDS OF  
BLUE STAR TRAIL**

I returned home from a Florida vacation a few days ago to read misinformation I would like to correct regarding the Blue Star Trail.

## **Engineer's Talk**

The March 2 Commercial Record ("Blue Star Bridge bike path: Link or wall?") reported Douglas city engineer replying to Saugatuck City Council members' questions regarding the trail Feb. 23.

On behalf of the organization I have represented since its 2008 inception, allow me to offer more information.

The trail extensions in Saugatuck Township and Douglas, to be constructed this year, will add more

visitors to the area, especially in the autumn and spring months. It will also improve air quality in our communities by offering a healthy alternative to driving.

Both have been awarded grants through the Allegan County Road Commission, the legal applicant and beneficiary of these federal awards. The specific purpose of these federal dollars is to mitigate the polluted air that has been detected specifically along Allegan County's lakeshore by using alternative transportation, not to improve traffic congestion, a concern raised some Saugatuck council members.

Like all federal and state grants, community matching dollars are required based upon mandated formulas. For Saugatuck Township, where the existing trail will be extended from Holland Street to Blue Star Highway, then Blue Star Highway south to Old Allegan Road this coming spring, our Friends raised more than \$245,000 to match the CMAQ grant (\$345,000) percentage requirements.

The bulk of these dollars came from our friends and neighbors who look forward

to biking, walking, running and cross country skiing on the trail while enjoying some terrific views of our lakeshore.

Additional funding came from corporate foundations such as Perrigo, Consumers Energy and Chemical Bank, plus from area foundations including the Allegan County Community Foundation (our designated fiduciary), Mignon Sherwood Delano, West Michigan Trails and Greenways. Further donations came from Saugatuck-Douglas and South Haven Rotary clubs.

Is there research showing demand for such trails? Yes! A Rice University study a decade ago determined the market value of homes generally rises 10 percent on average if they are located within 1,000 feet of a park, including linear parks (bicycle pathways).

In our state, an extensive study conducted in 2015 by the Michigan Department of Transportation calculated measurable health and economic benefits for non-motorized paths in six specific target communities, including the City of Holland.

Holland alone empirically

demonstrated \$6.4 million in benefits, thereby unequivocally confirming the economic and health benefits of trailways in our area.

Two years ago the Allegan County Parks Department conducted a survey of 25 Grand Rapids area jurisdictions which had developed trailways in the last 25 years. All directors emphatically agreed that such paths were valuable assets to their communities.

Maintenance costs were relatively cheap in comparison to the benefits of more taxpaying residents moving into their respective communities, they said. No accidents and no liability issues were reported.

The Friends of the Blue Star Trail have pledged to pay for future maintenance expenses going forward, unless a particular municipality elects to fund those ongoing expenses themselves. The Friends expect to continue operating in perpetuity and likewise retain their fiduciary relationship with the Community Foundation. We will continue placing maintenance funding with the ACCF's either existing development fund and/or a separate endowment

fund. Proceeds for future maintenance will come from our two key fundraisers: our annual bike tour, now in its fifth year, and our annual Toast gala.

The Blue Star Trail is an enduring gift to the lakeshore community, not a political football game among the three local government units. It's a legacy for our children and grandchildren. Our 100-plus volunteers and donors hope that all elected officials in the tri-area will work corporately to make it so.

### **March 9 Letters**

Two March 9 letters to the editor also deserve addressing.

The Trail since its inception has been a concerted, cooperative project. Planning began in June 2008 when a 16-member Visionary Task Force started meeting to develop a conceptual plan to create a 20-mile trailway extending from Saugatuck Township to South Haven.

Members included representatives from each of the local government entities including Saugatuck Township plus the cities of Douglas and Saugatuck. Participants were either

staff or elected council members working alongside local and state transportation planners and engineers. Leading the group was the County Road Commission, which is responsible for Blue Star Highway, and myself.

Over the next 18 months the task force determined that the trail must be an off-road, 10-foot-wide paved pathway as much as practical to ensure safety for all riders, especially children and the elderly. Secondly, it should be on the west side of Blue Star Highway to ensure views of Lake Michigan wherever and whenever possible. And thirdly, there would be no motorized vehicles such as snowmobiles to protect the asphalted trails mandated by government standards.

The group conducted an initial study that examined funding opportunities, local government interest, organizational linkages, demographics and geographical factors. They determined that there was sufficient interest to proceed with the project and directed that a 501c3 organization be developed as quickly as possible, which occurred in

2010.

A preliminary trail design connecting Saugatuck to South Haven was also created and has evolved into our current five-year development map.

The trail project is not an isolated one. It is a piece of a larger vision that the Michigan has created over the last 25 years. The Blue Star Trail is officially part of that long-range plan.

When construction is completed this spring, our pathway will conjoin to the existing Blue Star Highway trail (1.7 miles), which in turn connects north to the existing Laketown Township (Beeline Road) trail (6.5 miles) and beyond 30-plus miles to Grand Haven.

To the south of Saugatuck Township there are preliminary plans to ultimately connect to downtown South Haven and another six just completed miles directly south of South Haven to Van Buren State Park.

When the vision is completed, there will be three east-west pathways across the state from Lake Michigan to Lake Huron and two north-south pathway: ones connecting New Buffalo to the Straits of Mackinac, the

other, on the other side of Michigan, connecting Detroit to the Straits.

Two more east-west connecting trails are also in process in the Upper Peninsula. Last month Gov. Snyder asked the legislature to appropriate \$5 million more to expedite trail development in Michigan.

Our Blue Star Trail is expected to cost \$6 million in its entirety once completed. A variety of funding sources are being utilized over the next five to seven years as the trail continues south to South Haven and beyond. The bulk of the funding will come from state and federal dollars matched by community dollars according to formula.

As an added benefit, this trail will tell the story of the West Michigan Pike using smart phone technology. Thanks to the Saugatuck-Douglas History Center, many slides are already in place.

The cost of the trail is minimal compared to its many benefits. It offers the prospect for raising tourism in each of the communities. Presently four million people visit annually, estimates the Saugatuck-Douglas

Convention & Visitors Bureau. The trail is certain to attract even more guests who will eat, rest, play and shop along it.

Besides adding an asset for visitors, Saugatuck-Douglas residents will improve their health.

Michigan's obesity rate is upwards of 35 percent, ranking us among the top five in the USA. Note that morbidity and mortality are directly linked to obesity.

None of us who live or visit the shoreline along the proposed trail can deny the extraordinary beauty of the environment that surrounds us, or the precious nature of the rich, fertile farmland created by the lake's tempering effects.

By encouraging adults and children to connect with the natural environment along the shoreline through recreational activities or for the daily commute to school and work the Blue Star Trail is certain to foster a deeper appreciation for this special region, while helping to protect one of our most valuable resources.

All who use the trail will help reduce carbon emissions, decrease road traffic,

increase our air quality and serve as good stewards of the earth. It's hard to imagine a more important or lasting legacy for our children, grandchildren and generations to come.

