

President Of Friends Of The Blue Star Trail Responds To “Mistruths” About The Project’s Plans & Funding

Observer - March 24, 2017

Jeanne L. Van Zoeren

Friends Of The Blue Star Trail

As president of the Friends of the Blue Star Trail I must clarify the many mistruths that were stated as fact in two of the Letters to the Editor (Commercial Record March 9, 2017) .

The Blue Star Trail since its inception has been a concerted, cooperative project. Planning for the trailway began in June 2008, when a 16-member Visionary Task Force began meeting to develop a conceptual plan for the creation of a 20-mile trailway extending from Saugatuck Township to South Haven. Members of this committee included representatives from each of the local government entities including Saugatuck Township, the City of the Village of Douglas, and the City of Saugatuck.

Participants were either staff or elected council members working alongside local and state transportation planners and engineers. Leading the group was the Allegan County Road Commission (staff director), which owns Blue Star Highway and myself.

Over the next 18 months the task force developed visionary guidelines. They determined that the Trail must be an off road 10 ft. 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 10 ft. Wide 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 501-c-3 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 5 year development map.

The trail project is not an isolated one. It is a piece of a larger vision that the State of 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+ miles to Grand Haven.

To the south of Saugatuck Township there are preliminary plans to ultimately connect to downtown South Haven and another (6) just completed miles directly south of South Haven to Van Buren State Park.

When the vision is completed there will be (3) east-west pathways across the state from Lake Michigan to Lake Huron and (2) north-south pathways connecting New Buffalo to the Straits of Mackinaw and on the other side of Michigan connecting Detroit to the Straits.

Two more east-west connecting trails are also in process in the UP. Just last month Governor Snyder has asked the State legislator to appropriate \$5 million more dollars to trailways 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 5-7 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 Historical Society many slides are already in place.

The cost of the trailway is minimal when compared to its many, many benefits. The Blue Star Trail offers the prospect for raising tourism in each of the communities.

Presently four million people visit annually, estimates the Saugatuck-Douglas tourist bureau.

The trail is certain to attract even more visitors who will eat, rest, play and shop along the trail way.

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

Currently the State of Michigan obesity rate is upwards of 35%. Ranking us among the top 5 in the USA. Note that morbidity and mortality are directly linked to obesity.

And lastly, none of us who live or visit the shoreline along the proposed trailway 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 and grandchildren, and generations to come.