

May 18, 2017

The Commercial Record

Anti-trail letter misrepresented facts

To the editor,

I agree with the title of editor Scott Sullivan's May 4 Blue Star column, "Meanness Needs to End." I appreciate your efforts to cover all sides of issues to "foster healthy debate and decision making." It is a monumental task because it's difficult to know when a letter to the editor misquoted, used quotes taken out of context or created made-up "facts" to support the writer's opinion.

I also appreciate your respect for editorials "voiced with thought and clarity." Editorials are not required to be objective, yet subjective opinions that become inflammatory and disrespectful rarely help support the writer's argument. It's just too hard to sort through negativity to actually "hear" the point being made.

That said, I want to respond respectfully to Daniel Fox's letter to the editor titled: "Blue Star Trail: good, bad and ugly." It is clear that he is passionately against the construction of the Blue Star Trail and has put time and thought into voicing his opinion. I've heard him speak to city council and he seems like a nice man with an opinion differing from mine. However, he chose to make many of his written points with misquotes and sarcasm and I feel the need to clear up any reader misunderstanding.

Mr. Fox claimed that "trail supporters corrupt the language and mislead the public" and that the Friends of the Blue Star Trail are creating "spin."

His first example was that Friends president Jeanne VanZoeren is now choosing to call the trail a linear park. Jeanne did not invent the language, and however unusual the term seems, "linear park" is used all across the country describing non-motorized trails with multiple uses beyond bike riding.

Jeanne did not corrupt language or mislead by using this terminology; in fact, this term is more descriptive because the Blue Star Trail is not exclusively a bike trail.

In response to Mr. Fox's sarcastic comment "as if any pedestrian without a death wish would want to dodge speeding bicycles," the reason linear parks (aka non-motorized trails) are 10-feet wide is to allow enough room for both pedestrians and bikes.

His second example was to discount the state research that supports non-motorized trails as "laughable." Even if that's how he views it, how does he consider Jeanne's referral to documented research as corrupt and misleading?

Mr. Fox then stated that my husband, Clark, had an "unguarded moment" when he spoke at a recent Saugatuck City Council workshop meeting. Clark, a member of the Friends' all-volunteer board, was poorly quoted as saying the reason the trail follows Blue Star Highway is because the vast majority of supporters live along the Lake Michigan shore in South Haven, and want the trail close to them.

I attended that meeting and would like to put his comments in full context. Clark was responding to Mr. Fox's earlier suggestion that the trail would be better moved east into the countryside rather than along

Blue Star Highway. Clark explained that residential and tourism density is along the lakeshore and the Blue Star Highway route connects those communities along the lakeshore.

The trail supporters who live along and/or visit the lakeshore want a trail that allows them to safely walk, run and bicycle along the 20 miles that currently lack even sidewalks the majority of the route. This will enrich safe enjoyment and support of not just South Haven and Saugatuck, but all the lakeshore communities in between.

As for taking advantage of our rural countryside, it was later shared that our annual Lakeshore Harvest Ride fund- raiser (scheduled Sept. 9 this year) includes stops at farms, orchards, vine- yards and art studios along tour routes up to 62 miles. I'm not sure what Mr. Fox thinks was wrong with this information except that it doesn't support his view.

In response to Mr. Fox's comment regarding Saugatuck's 982 feet of trail, "maintenance expense belongs to city taxpayers ... forever," I would like to direct quote from Jeanne VanZoeren's letter to the editor one week prior: "The Friends have pledged to pay for trail construction, associated engineering fees, easement costs and future maintenance expenses going forward, unless a particular municipality elects to fund those ongoing expenses themselves.

"There is not and never has been any suggestion that any millage would be required for maintenance. To date our organization has raised more than \$500,000 in private donations and been granted, via the Allegan County Road Commission, another \$345,000 in federal. We expect our fundraising successes to continue as we plan and build a trailway to and from Saugatuck to downtown South Haven over the ensuing years."

The Friends of the Blue Star Trail have patiently addressed Saugatuck City Council's concerns and understand that more detail is needed for them to confidently make a yes or no decision. The Friends have responded to council requests to provide documents and will continue to attend meetings with all parties to address issues and come up with solutions.

City council wrote they are willing to meet with the Friends and Michigan Department of Transportation/Natural Resources Trust Fund grant administrators, and I'm hopeful they will participate in a respectful give-and-take in these discussions.

If council members demonstrate the responsible stewardship Mr. Fox attributes to them, I believe that years from now, the well-considered, state-engineered result will prove all of their concerns were addressed.

In the meantime, I can only hope the meanness you referred to will end so both sides can "hear" the real issues being discussed and have a healthy debate.

Cathy Carmichael - Glenn