

# County gives go-ahead for bike trail's southern stretch

BY RYAN LEWIS STAFF WRITER

Allegan County Commissioners agreed again last week to own a southern section of the proposed Blue Star Trail.

The county had previously supported owning trail sections in Casco and Ganges townships, but rescinded it last fall after a nonprofit group fundraising for the trail reorganized its plan. The county's prior resolution no longer referred to the correct phase.

The proposed 20-mile non-motorized path is planned to run on the west side of Blue Star Highway from Saugatuck to South Haven. Friends of the Blue Star Trail have pledged to provide the grants, matching money and endowments to provide for its building, maintenance and repair, but Casco, Ganges and Saugatuck city have balked at assuming ownership within their boundaries.

State and federal grants the Friends plan to continue pursuing require a local government to own the path and be responsible for its upkeep, which is why the group continues to seek the county's pledge for the Casco and Ganges sections.

At the meeting Jan. 11, county board chair Dean Kapenga said the Friends had more than 100 members giving money to enhance their area.

"They're putting their money up for this," said Kapenga. "It's not going to cost us anything initially, but maybe 50 years down the road, who knows? So why are we not moving ahead? I'm very much in favor of this."

"We can't get *every* question answered — no trail system could. Our risk is minimal; we know trails like this bring economic development. It's a very positive, low-risk decision."

Commissioner Max Thiele said no one was attacking the plan.

"We know this is not just a parochial proposition," he said. "It's a potential benefit across the board, but it presents some liabilities. This resolution, if properly constructed, will address that and take care of items we're not aware of today and cannot address."

Commissioners voted unanimously in passing a resolution designed with broad protections to ensure the county does not end up owning any section of trail without first signing off on aspects such as its design, location and making sure funding is provided for its maintenance.

The southern sections of trail are slated for work in approximately 2022 or 2023.

The new plan estimates the total cost of the trail at \$11.1 million, which includes \$600,000 for a maintenance endowment.

“I think this is as encompassing as possible given what we know now,” commissioner Gale Dugan said.

Friends president John Adams said he was thrilled at the commissioners’ decision and appreciated the work the county had put in to understand the issue.

“I think it’s a good option to have this trail owned by the county,” Adams said. “We’re glad they agree.”

He said the group is continuing to focus on the next trail section it hopes to build, a connection from what was built in Saugatuck Township last year. It would run from where the path leaves off at North Street to the existing trail at Holland Street. He said that connects to the Beeline trail, which runs north through Laketown Township and connects to Holland and beyond.

“There’s an undeveloped park in Saugatuck Township, and we’re working with the them to go through that,” said Adams. “There’s a river back in there; it’s a pretty area. We’ll build some nice boardwalks and maybe work with the township parks department to put in a picnic table.”

He said the group would apply for grants this spring to help pay for that.

Commissioner Jim Storey said the trail segment that would pass through Saugatuck city remains an issue.

“Right now, the path stops at the city limit,” he said. “They’re not enthused with the project. That needs to be settled.”

“What difference does it make to us?” asked commissioner Tom Jessup. “We’re only concerned about the south end of this, just the two townships.”

Commissioner Don Black expressed doubts that hang over the project. “By my math, (the county’s eventual section of trail) is going to cost more than \$4 million,” he said. “I don’t want to rain on anyone’s parade, but I want to be financially responsible. These people have this dream, but it can’t fall on taxpayers’ shoulders.”

County executive services director Dan Wedge said there would always be some risk involved, but that “the group has committed to, prior to construction beginning, having the maintenance funds in hand.” That would be in addition to having secured the cost of the construction, including matching funds for grants.