

August 16, 2018

Setting Blue Star Trail facts straight

To the editor,

We write to point out a number of inaccuracies and innuendos in last week's letter from Dan Fox.

First, for those new to this discussion. Friends of the Blue Star Trail — a non-profit corporation made up of local volunteers — has been working tirelessly in partnership with local communities to connect Saugatuck to South Haven via a 20-mile paved, non-motorized recreational trail alongside the Blue Star Highway. The group has raised well over \$600,000 to date to fund engineering and construction. The initial trail segment in Saugatuck Township was completed in 2017.

1) Mr. Fox began by opining that the Friends had tried to “intimidate” the Saugatuck City Council to approve a route for the Trail through the city. This could not be further from the truth.

The Friends have been working with the city and the other municipalities along the planned route from the beginning. Saugatuck City Council has expressed valid safety concerns about the design for the Trail across the Kalamazoo River bridge and the Lake Street intersection.

(Contrary to the implication of the headline to the Fox letter, the city has not opposed the concept of the Trail; in fact, it has previously passed a resolution and written letters in support.)

The Friends share these safety concerns, so at an Aug. 9 council workshop with a representative of the city's preferred engineers, Fleis & Vanderbrink, the Friends agreed to consider funding a feasibility study to recommend viable options for both the intersection and bridge for review by council, key stakeholders and the public.

2) Mr. Fox next asserts that the Blue Star Trail route “was poorly planned from the very beginning,” should have bypassed Saugatuck-Douglas by going east through “rural countryside” crossing the Kalamazoo River at New Richmond, and that this possibility “never dawned on the trail group.”

He is apparently not aware that the trail route was the result of a visionary committee's recommendations. The original group that planned and agreed upon the route years ago included representatives from all of the governments along the route from South Haven to Saugatuck (including former mayor, Tony Vettori), Allegan County, the County Road Commission, MDOT and others with experience in building trails. They certainly considered the possibility of a rural trail.

Both Saugatuck Township and Douglas are in favor of the Blue Star route. Both they and the City of Saugatuck would lose the benefits of the Trail if the route was relocated to the east. Nor has Saugatuck City Council expressed a preference for such a route that avoids the city.

A primary purpose of the Trail is to link the communities along its route and connect with existing trails east to Kalamazoo and north to Holland and beyond. Bypassing Saugatuck and Douglas would be contrary to this purpose.

The planned trail provides a more direct route between towns. This is the route most bikers/walkers/runners — including students — would continue to use if the trail were to bypass Saugatuck-Douglas via New Richmond. This would leave the City with the same safety issues it has now.

Michigan Law 324.72102 provides that it is a public purpose to build trails that link to communities and connect to other trails, and MDOT's latest 5-Year Plan for non-motorized transportation in this area of the state is in accord. That makes it easier to obtain vital grant money for the planned Trail than for a rural route.

The wide right-of-way along the Blue Star Highway corridor makes construction much easier and less costly.

3) Mr. Fox next contends that if the Trail went out through New Richmond, it “would have been completed long ago.” He offers no factual basis for his contention. The truth is that such a route would be about 5 miles longer than the planned route alongside Blue Star Highway through the City of Saugatuck, so it would have taken longer due to the additional design, construction and fundraising that would have been necessary.

4. Finally, Mr. Fox observed that the City Council mentioned his pet peeve — the recent roadwork in Douglas — as another concern, though he concedes that the Friends were not involved in that design. In our view, Douglas deserves praise for taking positive steps to protect bikers and pedestrians and doing its part to connect to the Trail north and south.

The Blue Star Trail — funded almost entirely by private donations raised by the Friends plus matching state/federal grants — provides increased safety, economic benefit, improved wellness, environmentally-friendly recreation and a focal point to connect people and communities with minimal/no investment on the part of the local communities.

It is a well-conceived plan that benefits the people who live in and visit our beautiful lakeshore between Saugatuck and South Haven.

John Adams, President
Friends of the Blue Star Trail