

# Proposed Collaboration Between Saugatuck Township & Douglas Over Bike Trail Issues Is Needed As Group Behind Effort Seeks State & Federal Grants

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“Collaboration” and “partnership” are the operative concepts in a proposed memorandum of understanding between neighboring municipalities Saugatuck Township, Laketown Township and the City of Douglas related to a 20-mile, in-progress, non-motorized path known as The Blue Star Trail.

The Saugatuck Township Board approved the agreement at last week’s Wednesday meeting; Douglas City Council approved it this week.

“The TAP (Michigan Transportation Alternatives Program) and DNR (Michigan Department Natural Resource) Trust Fund grants are extraordinarily competitive,” said Jeanne Van Zoeren, a prime mover in the project and member of Friends of the Blue Star Trail, who told the Saugatuck Township Board during the meeting about the advantages of municipalities working together.

Friends is an all-volunteer group that works in partnership with local communities to promote and fund the trail.

“The more we can demonstrate connectivity and cooperation, the better we all are,” said Van Zoeren.

“This does not obligate one jurisdiction to pay for trail improvements in other jurisdictions,” Douglas City Manager Bill LeFevere told his council on Monday.

Laketown Township’s Bee Line non-motorized trail at 64th Street, completed in 2010, is not related to the Blue Star Trail project, but plays a major role in connectivity and extension of the Blue Star Trail. In fact, Saugatuck Township’s next proposed phase is to extend north to the existing trail along Holland Street, then Blue Star Highway to connect at 64th Street.

The City of Saugatuck, a neighboring municipality where the trail is also being proposed to traverse through, is conspicuously missing from the memorandum agreement, particularly as a big part of earning points towards state and federal grants to complete the trail hinge on demonstrating connectivity.

Saugatuck officials say a pre-condition for their endorsement must address the pressing safety and traffic impact at the Lake Street and Blue Star Highway intersection.

Saugatuck officials also say they do not see the justification or the merits of endorsing a temporary, interim route because that presents its own safety problems. “Saugatuck is welcomed to join when the section in their jurisdiction is done,” said LeFevere.

Taking their cues from the Michigan Department of Transportation grant representatives, the bike group has proposed an interim route to Saugatuck officials as a way to enable Saugatuck to endorse the trail while providing time to develop a more long-term solution.

Other misgivings on the part of Saugatuck officials relates to legacy maintenance costs for the proposed trail.

Friends ascertain they have a created a sufficient maintenance fund to alleviate such worries, but a prior Saugatuck-paid-for engineering study estimated the cost of repairing and replacing the bike trail from South Haven to Saugatuck Township could cost more than \$19 million within the next 20 years or sooner, an amount Van Zoeren and her group do not have, according to statements earlier provided Allegan County officials and others.

Saugatuck officials say the possibility of the group obtaining state or federal grants in the future does not guarantee it will receive any grant money or come anywhere near the millions of dollars in legacy (repair and rehab) costs that local taxpayers would then have to pay.

In the meantime, the delays in any solution could also delay grant application approvals as well as near-term construction, the Friends have conceded.

Still, Saugatuck officials and the Friends group say they will continue to work jointly to develop a possible permanent solution.

In May, the trail section that runs along Blue Star Highway from Old Allegan Road north past the fire station to North Street was completed and which Friends leaders called a major accomplishment for their group, an all-volunteer entity that works in partnership with local communities to promote and fund the trail.

A section of the trail in Douglas was also completed this summer, from Center Street to just south of the Blue Star Highway bridge.

The agreement—which will next go before Saugatuck Township’s counterparts in Laketown Township for their review—talks about collaboration on such items as funding and development efforts, general maintenance of the trails, sectional replacements, signage, and promotes optimizing staff and private contractors through partnerships.