

Saugatuck council supports its version of trail plan

The Commercial Record

October 17, 2019

BY JIM HAYDEN - CORRESPONDENT

Saugatuck City Council voted Monday to back a multi-use path along Blue Star Highway that could also include Douglas and Saugatuck Township in construction and maintenance planning and costs.

“It’s good to hear the word ‘support’ from this group,” said Friends of the Blue Star Trail board president John Adams. The 501c3 nonprofit group advocates for the trail from South Haven to Saugatuck. “We look forward to more discussion.”

Saugatuck city has held back support over safety concerns and long-term infrastructure maintenance costs.

Joint Agreement

The resolution passed Monday now goes to Douglas and Saugatuck Township. If those boards approve the joint agreement, the three will set up an intergovernmental agreement covering engineering and maintenance of the path.

Douglas and the township are expected to take up the resolution in November, according to Saugatuck City Manager Kirk Harrier.

Saugatuck’s support opens the doors for grants to pay for the project that could cost the three municipalities \$1.3 million, with three-quarters paid by grants and the remaining \$325,000 to be covered locally according to the city.

The joint agreement stemmed from a Sept. 19 stakeholder meeting organized by Saugatuck City that included representatives from the city, Douglas, Saugatuck and Ganges townships, Allegan County and road commission.

The meeting was not open to the public.

Douglas and Saugatuck Township have built portions of the trail but they are not linked because a 0.4-mile stretch through Saugatuck city has not been constructed. The latter has held back support over safety concerns and long-term infrastructure maintenance costs.

Saugatuck City and the Friends have been studying for more than two years how to get trail users safely across the Blue Star Highway Bridge over the Kalamazoo River and through town. The Friends have proposed two options, both requiring traffic signals at Lake Street.

Saugatuck city officials raised safety concerns in August 2016 when the Douglas submitted a grant application to make changes to traffic flow on the bridge to accommodate the trail. The city eventually rejected those plans.

The path's Douglas portion on the west side of Blue Star Highway remains controversial in part because it narrowed the road through the city to Center Street, making it difficult for emergency vehicles to maneuver in heavy traffic. Others have complained about aesthetics and bicyclist behavior on the Douglas portion.

The Friends have been working for nine years to build a 20-mile trail along Blue Star from South Haven to Saugatuck, where it would link to trails running through Holland.

The total cost of the entire trail is estimated to be \$11 million.

Public Comment

Monday's joint resolution was approved after about 20 minutes of public comment by a dozen people. About 50 people filled the council chambers to standing-room only.

"Thank you for taking a good, hard look at it," Sherry Tedaldi told council, noting she doesn't want Saugatuck's portion of the trail to look like the Douglas section.

"It would be great if Saugatuck completed that four blocks to connect two portions," said John Porzondek, who walks and bikes the surrounding portions. He described the Saugatuck crossing at the Kalamazoo River Bridge as "dicey."

Some felt the joint resolution would set the project back and delay completion of the Saugatuck section.

Cynthia McKean called the joint resolution "curious indeed" by setting what she called "ridiculous" requirements.

The resolution says the Friends will pay all expenses for engineering, construction and maintenance with "the intent of the communities that their funds will not be used for these purposes" and that all applications for grants must be approved by each of the three communities. Also, the resolution states the "number of existing traffic lanes" on the bridge will not be reduced. The bridge is a three-lane crossing now.

"We have to have an emergency lane," said councilman Barry Johnson.

The word "support" did not appear in the original resolution on Monday, rankling the Friends and supporters.

Johnson amended the resolution to specifically use the word "support" of the trail.

"That makes it a resolution of support," he said.