

Friends', city manager's trail accounts differ

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A Saugatuck city-organized Blue Star Trail regional stakeholders meeting Sept. 19 adjourned with participants agreeing that managers of the three jurisdictions — Saugatuck and Douglas cities, plus Saugatuck Township — involved in the project's northern section would work on a possible resolution so it might be constructed.

Beyond that, takes of those who attended differed. Because the meeting was closed to media and the public, we rely on secondhand sources here.

Friends representatives claim Saugatuck City Manager Kirk Harrier put a “negative spin” on the meeting notes he presented his city council Sept. 23, four days later. Harrier responded to that not so, “the notes were simply undisputable facts written down at the meeting.”

Attending the stakeholders session Sept. 19, reported Harrier, were representatives of the three northern section governments: Mayor Ken Trester and himself from the city, Douglas Mayor Linda Anderson and City Manager Rich LaBombard, plus Saugatuck Township supervisor Cindy Osman and Manager Griffin Graham.

Also on hand were County District 1 Commissioner Dean Kapenga, Administrator Rob Sarro and Service and Transportation Director Dan Wedge; County Road Commission Managing Director Craig Atwood. Ganges Township Trustee: Dick Hutchins; and Friends of the Blue Star Trail board members Richard Donovan and Clark Carmichael.

The 501c3 nonprofit Friends have been working for nine years to build a 20-mile non-motorized trail, largely on the west side of Blue Star Highway, from South Haven north through Saugatuck. From there it would link to existing trails running north through Holland. Since 2017 the group has sought Saugatuck city approval to build a 0.4-mile stretch through its limits connecting existing trails south of the bridge through Douglas and north through Saugatuck Township. To secure state grants needed to fund building the entire trail, the group needs approvals from individual jurisdictions in which it lies.

Saugatuck officials continue to ask the Friends for more information concerning safety and legacy costs to replace the short stretch through city limits, not expected to be needed for 20 to 50 years.

Council directed Harrier Aug. 26 to set up the Sept. 19 stakeholders meeting over Friends objection. President John Adams called doing so “a waste of time of all involved unless and until the city rejoins all the other stakeholders that have approved the trail.

“Due to Michigan Department of Transportation rules, no progress can be made on the trail until the city formally gives support,” Adams said.

Harrier's synopsis of the stakeholders' meeting presented to council four days later noted:

- The total 20-mile project cost estimate, last updated in 2017, was \$11 million. The Friends propose 75 percent be obtained from state grants, meaning the combined municipalities' match would be \$2.75 million.

No government officials present at the meeting stated they had these funds, said Harrier. Any grant applications would need to be applied for by a governmental entity, as the private Friends group cannot legally apply for grant funds.

“While the Friends welcome any contribution from any of the governments,” wrote Carmichael and Donovan responding to Harrier’s memo, “the plan agreed on by the stakeholders years ago has always been that the 25 percent match would be raised by the FOTBST, not the local governments or taxpayers.”

- The Friends now have \$170,000 on deposit, Harrier apprised council. “If the terms of a conditional \$200,000 pledge are met — approval of a route design by the city in 2019 being the most significant — the FOTBST will have raised close to \$1 million,” the board members said. Some of those funds have already been committed to existing stretches.

- The county commission, per Harrier, last year passed a resolution accepting ownership of the future portion of the trail to be built within Casco and Ganges townships, but specified any expenses relative to the its construction, maintenance and operation be funded by the Friends, not county.

Carmichael and Donovan did not disagree, but described said resolution somewhat differently as “supporting the trail and funding mechanism via FOTBST.”

The commission, Harrier told his council, would still need to act to approve a design and identify the level of maintenance costs the Friends must support before final approval can be granted.

Final county approval, the Friends agreed, again phrasing things differently, “has not been sought or obtained yet because design and construction of that section of the trail is several years away.”

- Douglas, said Harrier, still has sections of trail in its jurisdiction that would need to be completed to make the project a regional trail. Douglas representatives said at the meeting they have not identified the construction as a priority in their capital improvement plan nor appropriated funds for construction at this time.

Saugatuck Township’s new board members and administrative employees have not accepted ownership, appropriated funds for construction or authorized grant applications for further trail

construction, the Saugatuck city manager continued.

Douglas and/or the township doing so, said Carmichael and Donovan, would be moot pending Saugatuck city approving a plan for its portion as needed to apply for future MDOT grants.

- Township representatives, reported Harrier, said they do not have funds available within their budget to maintain the trail infrastructure in place now.

The township manager and parks commission, countered the Friends, “have confirmed that this is not accurate. The township has of course been maintaining and will continue to maintain its existing trail infrastructure (mowing, snow removal, etc.). The funds to do so come from a general parks budget, not a specific line item for each task at each park.

- It was clearly identified and agreed upon by all attendees, Harrier said, that the City of Saugatuck alone is not holding up or preventing the trail from moving forward. The project is much more complex.

Trail proponents did not deny it’s complex. They did say the township and Douglas have publicly supported the trail (e.g., the newly- constituted township board approved a 5-year parks plan that designates the trail as a priority).

Saugatuck city, they argued, is the only one to have formally withheld its support by declining to provide written approvals to the grant agencies when requested. “In light of these actions, why would the township or Douglas spend significant time and effort on the next section of the trail until they know that the city is on board?” the two men said.

Harrier called that inaccurate.

“Everyone at the meeting,” he said, “including reps from the FOTBST, agreed that the City of Saugatuck alone is not holding up or preventing the project from moving forward since multiple jurisdictions will need to give approval, commit taxpayer funds, staff, etc. in order to move forward.

“Plus,” he continued, “there is still the issue of reducing traffic lanes on the (Blue Star) bridge, which has been proven would be a safety issue if executed.”

How can something not executed be “proven?” “Speculated” may be a better word, said trail advocates, adding there are safety issues with the bridge as is and a well-planned nonmotorized area might lessen them.

The city has called for MDOT, Saugatuck Township Fire District, Douglas and Saugatuck city and Friends planners to meet and address those concerns before moving forward.

- The Friends are proposing Douglas and Saugatuck cities, plus Saugatuck Township, complete the northern 4.5-mile section of the route from Douglas to Holland Street as one project, noted Harrier.

Therefore, all three would need to pass a resolution making the project a priority, dedicating enough of their own staff and funding, and approve applying for grant funds to construct the project.

Based on (its representatives’) comments at the meeting, said Harrier, it is unlikely that Saugatuck Township will have the fiscal and human resource capacity to do so.”

The Friends — brace yourself — disagreed with this. “First,” the two board members said, “the FOTBST will have the funds to build the next section of trail if terms of the pledge are met.

“Second, while some time will be required from township staff, this has not been a problem in the past and indeed much of the grant applications have already been drafted (the ones that could not be pursued last year) and just need to be updated.

“We submit that this project is well worth some of the staff’s time, and the hundreds of township residents who signed our petition would agree,” the two men said.

“City of Saugatuck representatives,” noted Harrier, “identified between \$5 million and \$10 million in existing capital improvement needs that do not have substantial funding in place.”

“One of the benefits of the trail,” the group countered, “is it requires no funding by the City to build. Note: The city just spent over \$100,000 on new boat docks that will benefit far fewer residents than the trail.”

- “The proposed Ganges Township trail,” observed Harrier, “has significant issues as the public right-of-way is limited and many private easements must be obtained by some governmental entity in order to build it.

“Ganges trustee Hutchins said property owners there did not want to grant easements because trees on their parcels would need to be removed.

Friends representatives stated board members have solicited project donations from their personal friends, thus have an obligation and commitment to them to make this project a reality,” the city manager continued.

“We now have over 2,000 signatures of support on our petition from local residents, neighbors and visitors to the tri-communities,” said Friends president Adams.

“We need the city to pass by year- end a resolution with sufficient specificity (specific trail route, commitment to grant applications and ownership of the trail asset) to meet the requirements of the grant agencies and the conditional pledge.

“With that in hand, we are optimistic that the Township and Douglas will follow in short order,” Adams said.

“The fact of the matter,” Harrier said, “is this regional project can’t be completed and then maintained without a considerable expenditure of taxpayer funds and the public is purposely being kept in the dark,” he said.