

# Blue Star Trail ‘collaboration’: on whose terms?

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Collaboration is great on your terms. When others have different views, achieving it is more difficult.

The Saugatuck Township Board set the stage when it tabled a Saugatuck city-pitched joint resolution “supporting” the Blue Star Trail — one opposed by trail advocates — Nov. 6, deferring collaboration to a committee comprised of representatives from itself, the city, neighbor Douglas and Friends of the Blue Star Trail.

Efforts to link the neighbor communities with a bike trail have sown divisions not seen here since a petition to consolidate their governments died in 2014.

The 501c3 nonprofit Friends have worked for nine years to raise funds for a 20-mile non-motorized path, 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 Blue Star bridge built by Douglas and north through the township.

To secure state and federal grants needed to build the entire trail, piece by piece as funds are procured, the group needs support from individual jurisdictions in which it lies.

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

Council directed city manager Kirk Harrier to set up a stakeholders meeting of representatives from involved governments. His summary of that closed session Sept. 19 differed from how Friends representatives remembered it.

Council voted unanimously Oct. 14 to back a resolution drafted by Harrier that, with verbiage added by member Barry Johnson, expressed “support” for the trail but based on conditions the Friends viewed as unacceptable.

Harrier noted the resolution had been reviewed, although not necessarily supported, by new Douglas and township managers. It was meant, he said, “to confirm consensus of the three units of governments regarding this approach” (one project, one government as lead, an intergovernmental agreement as to roles and responsibilities.)

“We agree with that approach and a joint resolution to that effect,” responded Friends president John Adams. “The problem is the city’s resolution went significantly beyond that to impose conditions on the FOTBST without its input.” Among group objections are the resolution does not:

- Reflect a role for the Friends going forward,
- Requires a “fully funded endowment or similar arrangement for maintenance” before any work can begin,
- Mandates that the trail design “not reduce the number of existing traffic lanes,” even though, the group argues, the city’s own engineering firm has identified other safe designs,
- Purports to rescind all prior agreements and letters of support.

Backers of the city resolution claim it imposes responsible fiscal stewardship and safety concerns. The Friends agree both are imperative, but its terms pose a poison-pill test that’s impossible to pass.

Their announced Oct. 28 the Friends would withdraw their support for the path’s north section should the city’s proposed joint resolution be made effective. The township and Douglas would both also have to pass it for that to happen.

Council members Bill Hess and Johnson represented last Wednesday’s township meeting, held on the one-year anniversary of a recall election that has resulted in all five of township board members being new.

“The result of the stake- holders meeting,” Hess told the board, “was to have the proposed north section be a collaborative project of Saugatuck, Douglas and township managers.

“You can approve, reject or modify this. But only through collaboration can we make the trail a reality,” he continued.

“This is the first attempt at a collaborative efforts,” added Jonson. “It makes the trail fully funded with an endowment and doesn’t reduce (motorized) traffic.

“The Friends have responded, so we all know after two years we’ll be left holding the bag (for future trail maintenance). We have to reserve a way for emergency vehicles to get across the bridge.”

Parks commission members Jim Searing and Dana Burd noted the township had built its first trail section (1.7 miles from 64th Street south along Blue Star, then spurring southwest on Holland Street to North Street) in 2007, before the Friends effort existed, and maintained it at minimal (average \$3,400 per year) cost in return for its value as infrastructure.

The tri-communities have many roads narrower than the bridge that emergency vehicles have managed for years to negotiate, Searing added.

Cyclist and former Saugatuck City Council member Cynthia McKean called the city resolution’s requirements “ridiculous” and meant to stonewall the trail’s construction.

“The good news,” McKean said, alluding to the city passing the resolution three weeks before an election that guaranteed to seat at least two new members, “is the two new council persons (Garnet Lewis and Holly Leo) both support the trail as a first priority.”

“We request you (the township board) table the city’s resolution and work with the Friends and cities to develop a valuable asset to all with minimal investment,” Adams said.

“It’s interesting,” said trustee Brenda Marcy, “that the word ‘collaboration’ was used pretty often, but the city’s proposal did not have our or the fire department’s input and was passed just before the election. I don’t support it.”

“Previous township boards passed 14 resolutions, some very specific, supporting the bike trail,” said treasurer Jon Helmich. “There’s a lot of history here, plus the timing of the resolution is awkward. We’ve had less than two weeks to review it.

“Personally, I’ve supported the trail from the beginning,” he continued. “But maintenance and legacy costs are important.

“I’m in favor of tabling or rejecting this proposal to instead work in a truly collaborative way with the Friends and cities to make this happen,” Helmrich said

“I think there’s a huge desire here to collaborate,” said clerk Abby Bigford. “I’d like to understand better specifics about the trail’s maintenance. We need more fiscal information.

“This is the first time the trail has been on our agenda since we were elected. We need more time,” Bigford said.

“I love the bike trail and use it almost daily,” said trustee Stacey Aldrich. “I suggest we reject the city’s resolution and form a committee with all partners to collaborate to complete it.”

“I think it’s important,” said supervisor Cindy Osman, who is also Saugatuck city zoning administrator, “not to send a message to either the city or friends by rejecting or accepting this resolution.

“I think we should table this and work to create a new resolution. This could be done relatively quickly.”

The Friends, with an anonymous \$200,000 donation offered pending a support resolution to complete the north section by Dec. 31, have been eager to expedite that process.

The township board voted 5-0 to table the resolution and named Osman, Marcy and manager Griffin Graham to a proposed committee with representatives from both cities and the Friends charged with moving trail efforts forward by year’s end.