

\$200K pledge may spur finishing north trail

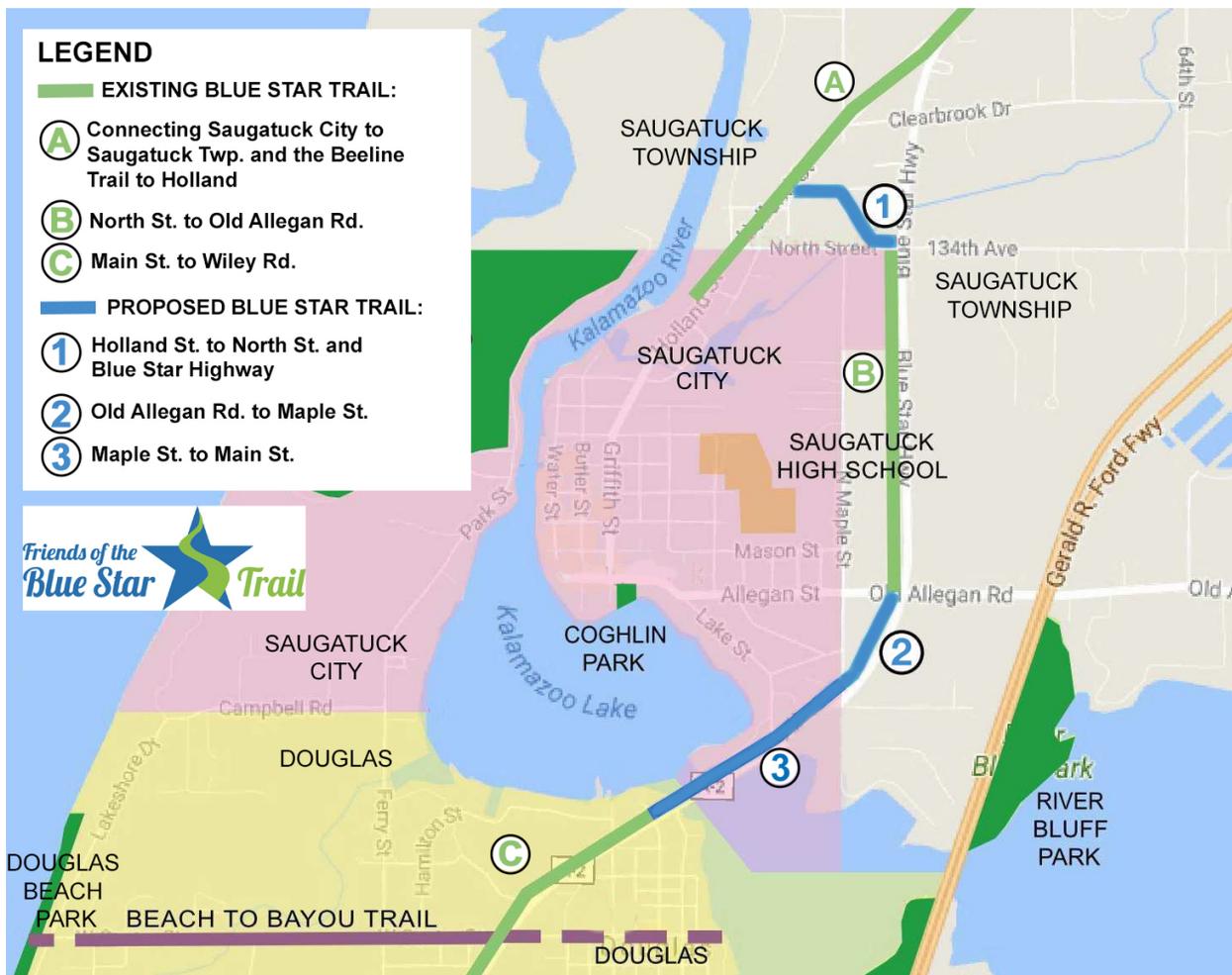
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BY SCOTT SULLIVAN EDITOR

A local couple who wish to remain anonymous have made a conditional \$200,000 pledge to the Friends of the Blue Star Trail towards completion of the non-motorized path's northern section.

Their goal is to connect, in one phase:

- From the trail recently completed by Douglas north over the Kalamazoo River bridge through the City of Saugatuck alongside Blue Star Highway.
- Continuing north to encompass the previously completed section from Allegan Street to North Street in Saugatuck Township.
- Continuing northwest to connect with existing trail alongside Holland Street, which ultimately connects to the Beeline Trail through Laketown Township north to Holland.



To build this section, Saugatuck City Council must renew its support for the trail this year by approving a safe, cost-effective route through the city. Without that approval, Friends spokesmen said, state agencies will not consider a grant application to fund construction.

The Friends, a local 501c3 nonprofit, raises money through private donations to pay for engineering and the local match required to obtain a share of state/federal grants designated to build such trails. The private funding provided by the Friends enables local communities to receive and own Trail assets with little or no upfront investment of local tax dollars.

When this \$200,000 pledge is combined with funds already raised, the Friends project they will have the money on hand to pay the local match required for state/federal grants to cover the estimated construction costs for the northern section. Though competition for these grants is strong, group leaders are optimistic their proposals will be approved.

“If we are able to obtain approval from the City of Saugatuck in 2019,” said Friends president John Adams, “we should be able to file the grant applications early next year, and if all goes well, construction of this segment could be completed in 2023.”

This, Adams added, would provide a safe connected trail (Douglas to Holland) for walkers, bikers, track and cross-country teams, families and students, residents and visitors within Douglas, Saugatuck City and Saugatuck Township.

It would also ease the burden on motorists concerned about the number of bikes and pedestrians using the roadway, he said.

To be eligible for state/federal matching money to build any Trail segment, all communities along its route must formally express support. All have done so with the recent exception Saugatuck city, which was involved in its planning stages before withdrawing support in early 2017, due largely to safety and design concerns regarding the Blue Star Highway/Lake Street intersection and crossing over the Blue Star Bridge.

To address those concerns, said Adams, Friends leaders have met with the council and retained the city’s engineering firm, Fleis & VandenBrink, to study the matter and recommend solutions.

Fleis has presented to council several safe route options running alongside Blue Star which address members’ concerns, he continued. But they have not yet approved a route through the city that would enable completion of the northern section of the Trail, Adams said.

He expressed hope that the tri-community governments (Douglas and Saugatuck cities, plus Saugatuck Township) will work together to take advantage of the pledge so all their residents can enjoy the Trail’s benefits.

This segment, said Adams, would mark a significant step towards the Friends’ goal of making the Trail a reality for all lakeshore communities from Saugatuck Township to South Haven.