

Friends unfurl campaign to ‘sell’ city trail

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BY SCOTT SULLIVAN EDITOR

The Friends of the Blue Star Trail continued efforts to demonstrate to Saugatuck City Council there is strong support to connect their proposed non-motorized trail through city limits by rolling out a “Let’s Connect” campaign last week.

The nonprofit group has been working for eight years to build a 20-mile recreational trail from South Haven to Saugatuck, where it would then connect with existing trails north through Laketown Township and Holland. Portions last year were completed through Saugatuck Township and Douglas. An 0.4-mile stretch through Saugatuck city lies between them.

City Council members have voiced concern that, although the trail would require no upfront investment of local tax dollars nor ongoing maintenance expense, the city would become its owner, therefore responsible for any future replacement of the segment’s components.

City manager Kirk Harrier wrote Friends president John Adams June 14 that council has been committing monies each fiscal year for park replacement work due to the significant amount of existing park infrastructure for which the city is responsible.

“Council,” said Harrier, “started doing this after a park inventory and capital improvement plan was completed in 2016 which identified the city had a significant amount of aging recreational infrastructure to contend with and no new revenue sources.

“In 2010 the entire 20-mile Blue Star Trail project (South Haven to Saugatuck Township) was estimated to cost \$5 million to build,” wrote Harrier. “A couple years ago the new estimate exceeded \$11 million.

“To my knowledge that number is still growing as your plans are refined with more accurate construction costs. However, those detailed financial figures are no longer available on your website so the public doesn’t know what the actual ‘total’ true cost of the project is from point A to point B, including final costs for the completed areas.

“Even though this project is being described as a gift,” said Harrier, “the reality is it will ultimately become public controlled infrastructure and be the financial responsibility of all taxpayers within the impacted jurisdictions in perpetuity.

“That doesn’t mean there should never be any more public improvements because it will cost money but government leaders should plan accordingly to balance the needs and wants of the public against financial resources and taxpayer capacity.

“This is exactly the exercise the Saugatuck City Council is currently executing and are unfortunately, in my opinion, being demonized for.

“This is also why other trails in nearby communities have dedicated millages approved by voters to fund this type of infrastructure. Many of these communities have recently realized their obligations to plan for the future and have developed detailed asset management plans.” wrote Harrier.

Friends president John Adams replied that the group had agreed to provide funds to cover engineering costs and the local match required to obtain state/federal grants designated to support trails.

“This means construction of the trail will require no upfront investment by the city,” said Adams. “We believe this makes the BST unique among all projects in the current city parks and recreation plan in that no local tax dollars are required to build the trail.

“A recent pledge for \$200,000 puts us in a strong financial position to meet this commitment if we obtain council support in 2019.

“The Friends have agreed to pay incremental annual maintenance costs for the 0.4-mile section of trail in the city. We anticipate that a detailed maintenance agreement will be part of formal approval of a route plan by council.

“We provided to council last week two new route options which utilize existing infrastructure where possible and so reduce the project cost by approximately 50 percent from the West Side (of Blue Star Highway) Option we previously presented.

“(City engineering firm) Fleis & VandenBrink has opined to council that the major components of these routes will last 20-50 years. In other words, these new routes will substantially reduce long-term ownership costs.

“The Friends have *not* (emphasis his), however, agreed to pay the future replacement cost of the trail. Requiring a guarantee of replacement cost upfront would add substantially to the cost of this and every parks project.

“The engineers advise that it would also be highly unusual as a matter of municipal finance. If every municipality insisted on payment of replacement costs up front, no trail would ever be built,” said Adams.

“We have not been able to identify in the city’s parks plan that replacement funds are being set aside up front for any other proposed park projects. Requiring this for the BST would unfairly penalize this project when, in fact, private funding of the upfront costs means local tax dollars will be available for other projects — a major advantage.

“We understand that council should consider the future cost of an infrastructure project, even when the cost to build it is zero. It is difficult to predict over the 20- to 50-year life what it will

cost at any point to replace a particular component of the Trail. We also note that grant funding has increasingly become available for restoration of trails.

“What has been missing from council’s statements is any acknowledgement of the benefits to be gained by the community in exchange for the future costs. These commitments by the Friends mean that city residents will enjoy the significant benefits of the trail, without cost, for many years.

“The trail is a valuable asset and a legacy investment. It is not unreasonable for the city to accept some responsibility in exchange for these benefits. From the conversations we have had with city residents, they would gladly accept this gift.

“The Friends view this as a long-term partnership to build and maintain the trail. We hope city council will agree to join this partnership and make the trail a reality,” Adams said.

The campaign theme rolled out last week contains verbiage “The Blue Star Trail will connect us all, now let’s connect the Blue Star Trail.” Designed to run throughout summer, it will stress both the trail benefits as well as rationale for timely city approval.

It will include Friends visibility at events around town (look for volunteers in white t-shirts), communications via local publications, social media, email, direct mail and more, Adams said.

