

# Where will city trail talks lead?

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Is Saugatuck City Council leading Friends of the Blue Star Trail in a path towards completing an 0.4-mile stretch through city limits or around in circles?

An overflow crowd at last Thursday's council workshop left with mixed impressions after Mayor Ken Trester praised the Friends' latest two cost/safety option prepared by city engineers Fleis & VandenBrink.

"From my standpoint, I think you guys have come miles," said Trester. "These are very positive steps. Other council members voiced safety and future liability reservations.

"I'm really concerned about public safety across the bridge," council member and Saugatuck Township Fire District board chair Jane Verplank said. "Why can't we use the existing sidewalks? Wouldn't they be considered an existing bike path?"

The nonprofit Friends group needs city approval for the short section west of Blue Star Highway through its boundaries to qualify for state grants enabling construction of other segments of the group's proposed 20-mile nonmotorized path from South Haven north through Saugatuck.

The Trail from there would connect with existing paths through Laketown Township on north through Holland.

Saugatuck Township — using a \$355,000 federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality grant, \$317,000 in Friends-raised private donation and \$800 of its own money — completed a stretch from North Street to Allegan Road two years ago.

It is eyeing another grant, contingent on city signoff to meet Michigan Department of Transportation connectivity requirements, to link the township's existing path from Holland Street west to the newly-built stretch on North Street.

The township also supports a short stretch west of Blue Star from Allegan to Maple Street, where Saugatuck city limits commence. Douglas last year built a trail section west of Blue Star, separated by a narrow island from the motorized route, from near the bridge to Center Street without Friends' involvement financially or in design-wise. That stretch has met mixed reviews so far.

No Friends options presented to other jurisdictions resemble what Douglas created. The 501c3 nonprofit Trail group, with an anonymous \$200,000 pledge to help build township and city

sections contingent on Saugatuck city approval by year's end, came to council Thursday, after three years of back-and-forth, voicing extra urgency.

"We've asked MDOT," Friends president John Adams responded to Verplank's question about the bridge's 7-foot-wide existing west-side sidewalk, "many times. They've told us definitively, 'No.'"

"That's a problem for me," Verplank said. "I fear what would happen if someone drives across the bridge texting. I just don't like bikes and cars together."

"They already are," audience member Jane Dickie said during public comments. "What you have now is way more dangerous than what the Friends are proposing."

Verplank wasn't convinced. During more-traffic-congested summer months, and occasional I-196 closures that leave Blue Star used for detours, firefighters have noted narrowed bridge access may be a problem and cause delays for large fire vehicles. Chief Greg Janik spoke at the meetings end about possible ways such concerns may be alleviated, if not eliminated entirely.

The Friends, with grant help, have agreed to pay construction costs and incremental yearly maintenance for the 0.4-mile stretch through the city, but not full replacement costs expected no sooner than 20 to 50 years from now.

Council members Bill Hess and Barry Johnson asked Adams if the Friends had any thoughts about putting money aside for that future replacement.

"In our experience, you can't build a trail and endowment at the same time," Adams answered.

"We need to get someone from MDOT down here to look at the bridge and existing sidewalk," said city manager Kirk Harrier. "It's not unreasonable to ask for exceptions."

"Maybe we could widen and use the existing sidewalk. It's worth a shot," said the manager.

"We agree," Adams said, "that safety and money matter. That is why we continue to want to work with you and address those concerns."

The two latest options unveiled by Fleis engineer Jon Moxie Thursday in response to expressed past council concerns, lower construction costs by about half in addition to maintenance costs, by using the existing roadway and/or sidewalk between Lake Street and the bridge as much as possible.

"These meet stated city safety concerns as well," Moxie said.

Both, starting from Douglas and advancing north, would repaint the bridge with no curb on the south side to create a 10-foot wide bike lane, five-foot striped area between it and motorized traffic, and retain the sidewalk with preferred use by runners and pedestrians.

Option 1D, said Moxie, would take the trail onto the sidewalk, widened from its current 5- to 10-foot, from the north end of the bridge to Lake Street, retaining full traffic width there at the intersection. A striped path, perhaps with an optional seasonal traffic light, would cross Lake and connect north from there to Maple. It would cost an estimated \$678,000 with a traffic light, \$300,000 less without one.



Friends rendering of Thursday's proposed Option 1D, looking south from Lake Street towards the Blue Star Bridge

“Three hundred thousand for a traffic light that is only used part-time seems excessive,” Hess said.

“We rolled our eyes when we heard the cost too,” said Adams.

“If we wanted, could we add a light later?” asked Trester.

“Yes,” said Moxie.

A lower-cost Option 1F would leave the sidewalk as is while keeping the trail, separated by a raised curb with taper on the end, on Blue Star.

“I’m more for Option 1D,” Hess said. Council member Chris Peterson joined him favoring the thought of a light added later, if determined needed.

“I’m still not satisfied with the bridge,” Verplank said.

“I think it’s a real problem.” “I’m still not ready to accept this without more assurance on long-term funding.”

“If every municipality,” Adams has said, “insisted on payment of replacement costs up front, no trail would ever be built.

“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,” he continued. “Requiring this for the Blue Star Trail 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.”

“What are you looking for at this time?” Trester asked.

“A letter of support and reason to move forward with other partners to secure grants and move this forward,” said Adams.

“How detailed does that need to be?” asked Trester.

“It makes sense to include general details about the option you support,” said Moxie.

Which, if any option, might that be? Stay tuned.