

Non-agenda trail safety dominates fire board talk

The Commercial Record

August 22, 2019

BY SCOTT SULLIVAN EDITOR

A Saugatuck Township Fire District board meeting Monday expected by many attending to address Friends of the Blue Star Trail - proposed Blue Star Bridge lane reconfigurations didn't.

Formally, at least.

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.

The Friends for more than a year have 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.

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

Saugatuck city fire board representative Dan Fox Monday apologized for his Aug. 1 Commercial Record letter to the editor, which claimed the meeting agenda would include public-safety perspectives of first responders plus board peers from all three district municipalities. Douglas and Saugatuck Township are the others. Several Friends leaders and other trail supporters attended as a consequence.

"I wrote as an individual," Fox said of his letter, "not as an official board representative. The other Saugatuck city representative (board chair Jane Verplank) made it clear such issues are not this board's responsibility and the item would not be on the agenda.

"I was in my rights to write, but not to put it on the agenda," Fox said, proceeding nonetheless to discuss anecdotal cases wherein first responders were slowed by bridge traffic.

A video, taken from the driver's seat of a fire truck, showed it slowed by a car ahead, whose driver was uncertain where to turn off or move aside to get out of the way on the Douglas side. The highway there was rebuilt last year, replacing one traffic lane with a non-motorized trail separated by curb-ringed islands.

"This is the real deal," said Fire Chief Greg Janik of the video. "This is what can happen.

"It's not the Friends' fault," he continued, "they have restrictions." (Paved non-motorized trails must be at least 10 feet wide, plus have four more feet of buffer/separation from motorized surfaces, to qualify for Michigan Department of Transportation grants. Nor was the group responsible for the Douglas design, which that city's fire board representative Kathy Mooradian conceded had issues.

"But it's something we have to work through," Janik said.

Both Mooradian, who read a statement, and fellow Douglas representative Aaron Miller, not present but via email, complained that Saugatuck city representatives were using the district and its board as "pawns" in a political debate.

“This is for the chief and his guys, not this board, to work out with the Friends,” said Mooradian.

“I’m not opposed to bike trails,” Fox said. “I’m concerned about issues doing it.”

“Why this and not other road delays?” asked Mooradian. Others in attendance asked where Saugatuck city’s concerns about narrow and sometimes-congested Perryman and Park streets was.

“We’re stuck,” said Deputy Chief Chris Mantels, “with Perryman, Park and other issues and infrastructures as they are. What we want to do is make sure things are done right for everyone moving forward.”

“We received a lot of good information today from the Friends,” said Janik. “We’re going to talk with MDOT also.

“Please give my staff a chance to look at and sort this out. We’ll figure it out. We will find a way.”