

# Trail pledge terms not met, Friends say

The Commercial Record

January 9, 2020

**BY SCOTT SULLIVAN EDITOR**

A \$200,000 pledge isn't chump change. But Friends of the Blue Star Trail have all but written that off towards building a recreational path here after a joint local government study plan failed to meet year-end deadline standards.

Saugatuck City Council Dec. 23 approved its part in joining Saugatuck Township and Douglas forming a committee to study and set terms for said construction.

But its resolution fell shy of conforming to state and federal grant requirements specified by the anonymous donor needed to fulfill the pledge.

The 501c3 nonprofit Friends have been working for nine years to build a 20-mile non-motorized trail from South Haven to Saugatuck.

Douglas and the township have built portions, but the 0.4-mile Saugatuck city stretch has not been constructed due to council safety concerns at Blue Star Highway and Lake Street, plus the number of motor vehicle lanes on the Blue Star Bridge. The city has long-term fiscal reservations also.

The Friends need support of all three governments — including for specifics required for Michigan Department of Transportation and American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials grants — to receive the pledge.

The group announced the private offer and conditions May 28 last year. The three governments “are in the process of meeting the first condition” — cooperating on construction of the trail’s proposed North Section — said the Friends board in a Jan. 2 statement. More is needed to get the money though.

Saugatuck city and the Friends have been exploring a mutually acceptable route design for more than two years, the board statement said. At council’s suggestion, the group hired city engineering firm Fleis & VandenBrink to assist in the task.

“One of donor’s intentions,” the group went on, “was to break the logjam by providing additional incentive to the City to finally approve a design.

“That has been complicated by the fact that the route proceeds over the Kalamazoo River bridge, which is half owned by Douglas, since the inherent constrictions of a bridge limit the possible options.

“Reaching agreement on the design,” the board statement said, “is further complicated by the stated preference of the (Saugatuck Township Fire District) to maintain the current emergency center lane over the bridge.

“The (Friends have) presented an option that would preserve the center lane and seem to comply with MDOT/AASHTO guidelines by using the existing raised sidewalk for pedestrians while creating a 10-foot lane on the roadway for bicycles.

“(There are two other options that do not preserve the center lane but ensure emergency access across the bridge corridor in other ways),” the statement noted.

“The City Council did not engage in any serious discussion of the pledge or Trail route options since July, and never took action to approve a route option through the City,” it went on.

“Thus, the first of the two main conditions of the pledge is expected to be met within 2-3 weeks when the Township and Douglas approve the joint resolution. However, the second condition was not met and there is no telling when it will be met.

“Accordingly, the pledge expired by its terms as of midnight Dec. 31. “The Friends spoke several times with the donor,” said board statement, “about extending the time within which the pledge conditions could be satisfied.

“While the donor was willing to extend by a few months the time within which to finalize certain details of the design, the donor understandably insisted that the City had to address the original condition announced in May: approve a basic route plan by year-end.

“In addition to the loss of the \$200,000 pledge, the City’s failure to approve a route plan has negatively affected other fundraising opportunities. For example, the (group) had to cancel its main fundraiser, the Toast to the Trail party, in 2019, and has suspended active solicitation of individual and corporate donations for almost 18 months.”

“We are very disappointed,” said Friends president John Adams, “that our communities lost this opportunity for funding such a worthwhile project.

“The leaders and citizens of the tri-communities owe thanks to this anonymous donor for such a generous and community-minded offer,” he went on.

“The conditions of the pledge — announced last May — could easily have been satisfied, following a 16- month study that generated several options that addressed all of the many concerns expressed by the City Council.

“The pledge funds would have funded the local match required by the state grants, avoiding any need for local tax dollars to build the North Section of the trail. That grant money will now go to other towns who truly embrace trails and will have to be replaced by other private donations.

“The Friends,” Adams went on, “remain committed to the Trail. We are encouraged that on December 23 the Saugatuck City Council passed the joint resolution of support, and that it recently restored the Trail to its list of Parks & Recreation priorities.

“We fully expect Saugatuck Township and Douglas to pass the joint resolution in the near future. We look forward to working with them on next steps.

“Meanwhile we will be working with South Haven to explore building sections of the Trail there,” Adams said.