



May 28, 2019

BY eMAIL

The Board of Trustees  
Saugatuck Township  
3461 Blue Star Highway  
Saugatuck, MI 49453

The City Council  
City of Saugatuck  
102 Butler Street  
Saugatuck, MI 49453

The City Council  
The City of the Village of Douglas  
86 W. Center Street  
Douglas, MI 49406

Re: Update on the Blue Star Trail ("Trail")

Dear Board and Council Members,

We write to update you as stakeholders concerning developments with the Trail and our plans for the rest of this year. We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to answer any questions and discuss how together we can meet this need that your residents have identified.

#### Background

Since some of you may not be as familiar with the history of the Trail as others, we start with some brief background. The Trail was conceived in 2008 as a 20-mile, non-motorized, paved trail between Saugatuck and South Haven, connecting to existing trails

at either end. The Friends of the Blue Star Trail (“FOTBST”) was formed as a Michigan non-profit corporation in 2010 as an all-volunteer organization whose mission is to act as a catalyst among the communities along the Trail, including raising funds. Over 150 volunteers have joined in this effort, and we have raised over \$670,000 from over 500 individual and corporate donors.

In the early years there were a number of organizational meetings of representatives of the county and local governments, county road commissions, and MDOT. They decided to build the Trail along the Blue Star Highway (“BSH”) for a number of reasons, including the fact that that is where most residents live, it is the most direct route between the two cities, and would require the least effort to secure land. All of the governments involved expressed their support for the Trail at various times in letters and resolutions.

Many communities in Michigan, and along the lakeshore in particular, have been developing trails. The Trail fulfills stated goals of the State of Michigan, as expressed in MCL 324.72102, which provides for the creation of a statewide system of trails. It is also consistent with MDOT’s Regional Nonmotorized Plan for the Grand Region (Dec. 2017). Closer to home, the Trail addresses needs recognized in your *Tri-Community Master Plan* (Revised 2016), which noted that “Residents placed highest priority on additional bike paths, cross country skiing routes and hiking trails.”

What was stated in Resolution No. 100913-A of the City of Saugatuck (Sept. 13, 2010) remains true today:

- “Non-motorized transportation is an important element for the well being and quality of life for residents and an economic development tool for Allegan County Lakeshore”
- “Non-motorized transportation is a popular recreational activity for visitors to enhance their overall travel experience”
- The Trail is “a critical north-south link in the overall... infrastructure network in Southwest Michigan”
- The Trail “would provide a trail connection to a state trail system known as the Michigan Airline trail that would connect Lake Michigan to Lake Huron”
- The Trail “would connect to over 100 miles of existing trails in West Michigan”
- “a team of representatives from various local, regional and State agencies and municipalities has been assembled to provide technical resources in the development of the Trail.”

In a letter, dated September 28, 2015, the City Mayor stated that “[t]he Saugatuck City Council is in support [of] the Blue Star Trail project,” noted that the Council has received updates from the Friends and met with their engineers, and reiterated that “the City...pledges to continue its efforts to connect our lakeshore communities with this 20 mile pathway.”

The first section of the Trail was constructed in Saugatuck Township in 2016-17. It was funded using a \$355,000 grant from the federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ), combined with \$317,000 in private funds raised by the FOTBST and \$800 contributed by the Township.

The last meeting of all the stakeholders in the Trail was held on August 15, 2017. All three of your governments were represented, as were Allegan County, the County Road Commission, the Allegan County Community Foundation, Rep. Mary Whiteford, South Haven, and FOTBST and its engineering consultant. In addition to construction and maintenance plans, a number of issues were addressed and questions answered.

In 2018 Douglas took the initiative to construct a section of trail along Blue Star Highway (without financial or other involvement of FOTBST).

#### Developments with the City of Saugatuck 2017-Jan. 2019

In the spring of 2017, the City of Saugatuck expressed certain “concerns” about the specific route and design of the Trail through the City, and sought input from its regular engineering consultant, Fleis & Vandenbrink (“F&V”). We were informed that no further letters of support for federal/state grants would be forthcoming unless and until the concerns were resolved. Without formal support from all the communities along the route, the agencies will not approve a grant application.

For the last two years, the FOTBST has been engaged in extensive discussions with the City in numerous Council meetings and workshops as well as some individual meetings with Council members and the City Manager. In July of 2018, at the City’s suggestion, the Friends retained F&V to conduct the studies it had suggested and recommend solutions. F&V solicited a list of over 25 “concerns” from the City, conducted topographic and traffic studies, and last December presented initial recommendations of several possible route designs along Blue Star Highway, with associated costs. After meeting with Council again, F&V refined its designs, which were presented at a January 24, 2019 workshop along with digital renderings of the route section. At that workshop, several Council members raised new concerns about the Trail design and the Trail in general.

Also in January, a different route was proposed to the FOTBST and the Council by the City Manager. It would run (northbound) from BSH>Lake St.> State St.> Maple St.>Allegan Rd.>BSH. That route has not been fully evaluated by F&V. In a letter to the City, dated January 23, 2019, the Friends expressed a number of concerns with this alternate route, including that it does not meet MDOT requirements (making it ineligible for grant funding, as was recently confirmed by MDOT) and would seem to require removal of mature trees and approvals from residents along the route.

On February 4, the City Manager organized a conference call with the MDOT TAP grant coordinator for this region. Participating were the City Mayor, myself, F&V, and

our engineering consultant. A number of questions and issues about options through the City were discussed.

### A New Route Design

One of the latest concerns expressed by certain Council members is that while the Trail would be in the nature of a gift to the City, it represents a costly infrastructure for which the City would then be responsible. FOTBST has proposed a plan to assist the City with the modest maintenance costs for this 0.4-mile section; F&V has advised that the useful life of the Trail section is 20-50 years.

Nevertheless, over the last few months the FOTBST has reexamined the F&V route options with a view to reducing the cost of the project. We have developed two variations that would also, according to F&V, meet safety standards and qualify for grant funding, yet reduce the cost almost in half as well as reduce maintenance costs, by utilizing the existing roadway as much as possible.

These options have not yet been formally presented to the Council, but we are prepared to do so as soon as possible. Engineering drawings and renderings will be provided as soon as F&V has completed them.

### A Substantial But Conditional Pledge

A local donor, who wishes to remain anonymous, has recently made a conditional pledge of \$200,000 to the FOTBST. The intention of the pledge is to encourage the timely completion of the northern segment of the Trail 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 in Saugatuck TWP, and then
- continuing northwest to connect with existing trail alongside Holland Street, which ultimately connects to the Beeline Trail through Laketown Township into Holland.

Combining the pledge, funds already raised by FOTBST, and expected grants, there would be enough to cover the costs of constructing these sections; the FOTBST will raise the funds to pay engineering costs. If the terms of the pledge are met by the City approving a route this year, we should be able to file updated grant applications early next year, with construction completed by 2023.

### FOTBST's Next Steps

Progress on the Trail has been stalled for over two years now while the FOTBST has worked diligently and cooperatively to satisfy the City Council's concerns. In the meantime, the section the Township constructed with our assistance remains

unconnected, and the efforts of our many donors and volunteers are being frustrated by Council's indecision.

We are ready, willing, and able to continue to work with Council to find a mutually satisfactory design for the Trail through the City.

At the same time, we are taking steps to address another one of Council's latest comments—that the public has not expressed its support for the Trail. First, we repeat that in recent surveys of area residents, the desire for more trails was strongly emphasized. Second, the large number of our donors and volunteers shows that there is wide support for the Trail. Third, we will nevertheless soon embark on a public campaign to better educate residents, visitors, and business owners about the Trail, the concerns, and the proposed solutions. We will encourage people to communicate their support directly to Council in various ways.

### Conclusion

We welcome your feedback, and stand ready to meet with any of you or to answer any questions.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John Adams". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "John" being larger and more prominent than the last name "Adams".

John Adams, President

cc: Editor, *Commercial Record*