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Outdoor Adventures

Berrien County dreams of trails, like a link from Niles to Berrien Springs

By Joseph Dits South Bend Tribune Mar 27, 2019



If a trail is extended from Niles to Berrien Springs, would it include a pedestrian bridge over Lake Chapin, using these remnants from an interurban train? Officials say it's too early to know if that will be in the plans.

South Bend Tribune

More than 100 people came to Andrews University on a cold February night — more than anyone expected — to talk about safe routes to walk and bike through Berrien County.

I found a group of real estate agents who said they see a positive effect of trails on property values. I found Frank Beltran, manager of the Candlewood Estates in Stevensville, who runs on trails but also sees them as a draw for his hotel customers.

They came to Berrien Springs to help update a five-year master plan for the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, not just for Berrien but for Cass and seven counties in all. The document should be finished by the fall, a heads-up to others who work on trails and on-road routes and to state road officials — so they can see what else is in the works. Ultimately, senior planner Marcy Hamilton says, “There has to be someone locally who champions it.”



Video: Joe on the GoPro: Conquering Mann Road

They broke into small groups where they hovered over maps of specific locales, and I overheard real estate agent/trail user Chris Marzke say, “I almost got killed.” He explained how he was navigating his way on roads near Hickory Creek — a stretch of water between St. Joseph and Baroda — and his words reinforced why officials want to see a trail nearby: “There was a truck coming. It had nowhere to go. He had no way to stop in time. I had to ditch into a yard.”



Participants study a map of New Buffalo to suggest priorities for walking and biking routes at a February summit at Andrews University.

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At a map of downtown New Buffalo, Paul Billingslea, chairman of the city’s planning commission, said there’s not an “optimal” way to thread the proposed Marquette Greenway through the city, given that there’s a lot of car traffic. The 58-mile Marquette Greenway would link Chicago to New Buffalo, and 30 miles of it have yet to be built. From Whittaker Street in New Buffalo to the south, Billingslea bemoaned the lack of stop signs or stoplights along Red Arrow Highway. It would help to stem the number of car crashes, he says, and give pedestrians a chance to cross the road safely.

New Buffalo city and township councils approved seeking state grants last week for the trail, and Berrien County commissioners gave their blessing this month to seek a \$1.5 million state grant that would need matches from New Buffalo and nonprofit partners.

Now that there’s a trail nearly connected from Mishawaka to Niles — except for a gap just north of U.S. 12 that’s due to be built this year — officials are eagerly looking to the next dream: extending it 9 miles to Berrien Springs. I sensed a great appetite for this at the meeting. One option, using a railroad right of way, proved too expensive since the railroad wanted millions of dollars, Hamilton says. So, officials have just started to talk with American Electric Power about leasing at minimal cost a corridor of land that it owns. There would be gaps of private land that would have to be negotiated, she says. The work ahead may begin with route planning and community engagement this year, then planning and consulting with engineers in 2020 and then engineering and seeking grants in 2021-23.

Here's a link to a good map showing the current trail from Mishawaka to Niles.

A few years ago, someone posed to me the idea of forming a pedestrian bridge across Lake Chapin, a dammed-up part of the St. Joseph River, by using concrete supports that remain in the water from a former railroad bridge to Berrien Springs. Cool idea, eh? Hamilton says it's too early in the planning process to say if that would be an option. The next hope would be to extend the trail to St. Joseph. Michigan 139 would seem the most obvious on-road route, but, as one cyclist said, "It's probably the most dangerous."



Participants study a map of the St. Joseph-Benton Harbor area and suggest priorities for trails and on-road routes at a February summit at Andrews University.

By Joseph Dits South Bend Tribune

One group at the meeting brainstormed for ways to connect Niles and Buchanan, which boasts a cute McCoy's Creek Trail by a wooded ravine and through town. One cyclist drew an arrow to busy Niles-Buchanan Road and marked it as "scary riding."

The Berrien County Parks has just started to pursue a roadside trail that would form a rectangular capital B as it links each of its parks in Niles, Berrien Center, Watervliet, Benton Harbor, St. Joseph and New Buffalo. To start off, officials are focusing on a trail along Red Arrow Highway from Bridgman to New Buffalo. The trade off would be that the highway would shrink from four to three lanes. For now, parks Director Brian Bailey says the county is talking with state Department of Natural Resources officials about a segment between Bridgman and Warren Dunes State Park. No money has been sought yet.

There are many more ideas, from a trail along the Ox Creek corridor in Benton Harbor to a trail along U.S. 12 and other trail ideas, plus 32 priorities for routes directly on the road.

- **More on Berrien plan:** I've posted a document with this column online that lists these and several other suggestions that came out of the summit for both trails and on-road routes and widened shoulders. Also, to see maps of the areas discussed and learn more about the nonmotorized plan for southwest Michigan, visit swmpc.org/berriencosummit.asp.
- **Michigan Mobility 2045:** Apart from Berrien County, the Michigan Department of Transportation is looking for your input on a 25-year plan to cover all modes of travel across the state, from buses to boats to cars and from biking to walking. Fill out a survey via a link in this column online. Results will be compiled this summer, with a final draft expected next year. For disabilities or accessibility needs, call 517-335-4381.



Ladies first. Cyclists line up for one of the waves of Saturday's Melting Mann race in Vandalia with more than 600 participants. See a video of their exploits on Cass County's muddy Mann Road at southbendtribune.com/outdooradventures.

By Joseph Dits /South Bend Tribune

No foolin'

- **Bikes on trains:** On Monday, the South Shore trains between South Bend and Chicago start the fourth season of allowing bicycles onboard. The program will run the same as it did the last two years, up through October. Same schedule, too. Several but not all trains have bike racks on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays. On Mondays through Fridays, only the 6 a.m. westbound train leaving South Bend International Airport

will take bikes, plus the eastbound train that departs Chicago's Millennium Station at 3:57 p.m. CDT. More details are at mysouthshoreline.com under the "plan your trip" tab.

- **New LaPorte trail:** The city of LaPorte will host a walk, bike ride and run after a ribbon cutting at 4 p.m. CDT Friday to dedicate a new 1-mile trail that leads from Kiwanis-Teledyne Park on Pine Lake to NewPorte Landing at 75 Pine Lake Ave., just north of downtown. The park is where U.S. 35 and Indiana 39 meet. This is the first leg of the Chessie Trail, built mostly with federal dollars and a \$232,020 grant from the Healthcare Foundation of LaPorte. The city is now making plans to build the next leg of the trail, extending it south through downtown, then west on First Street to L Street. Friday's event won't follow a set course or require registration. You can also check out the new trail built last fall along Clear Lake Boulevard, on the east side of Clear Lake.

- **Survival skills:** Hike 2 miles through forests in Warren Dunes State Park as you hear how American Indians used to survive Michigan winters at 10 a.m. Saturday with Harbor Country Hikers. Enter the park's main entrance on Red Arrow Highway in Bridgman and take the first right after the gate. Pay at the kiosk if you don't have a Michigan Recreation Passport.



Cyclists try to dodge a puddle along Mann Road in Saturday's Melting Mann race through Cass County. See a video of the challenges on muddy Mann Road at southbendtribune.com/outdooradventures.

By Joseph Dits /South Bend Tribune