

## End nears for interstate trail

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NILES -- The dream that was once the 34-mile recreation path linking Niles to Mishawaka took another step toward reality Monday at the Niles Township Hall, where officials gathered to break ground on the Indiana-Michigan River Valley Trail's last link in Michigan.

Little by little, segments of the ambitious project that marks the first interstate improved non-motorized paved trail in Michigan have taken shape. If a prediction offered by Niles Township Parks Board Chairman Harry Thibault proves to be accurate, the trail will be completed in two years or, at most, three.

Although Thibault termed the township's initial 3.3-mile link "a small piece of the puzzle," it's no doubt a key piece. The \$842,000 project, funded by grants and donations primarily from foundations and private individuals but supplemented by a \$25,000 contribution from the pipeline company Enbridge Energy, will provide the link between the state line and Brandywine Creek Nature Park, just north of U. S. 12.

After that work is completed, attention will turn toward a roughly 1.25-mile segment linking the trail from the park to the city of Niles' trail at South Third and Fort streets. Work is expected to be completed on that phase by 2016 or, at the latest, 2017.

Certainly, there have been "challenges" along the way, as stated by Matt Wiitala, grant coordinator for the Michigan Department of Transportation. Niles Township didn't even have the project in its five-year recreation plan until five years ago, when a task force was formed to exchange ideas.

Two years later, a breakthrough was achieved when American Electric Power offered a long-term lease to right-of-way along an abandoned railroad line.

"Two days before we had to get our grant application in, we got the signed lease," Thibault recalled.

There also was the issue of how to safely transport trail users across busy U. S. 12. That problem was resolved a year ago when Niles Township officials were informed pedestrian-crossing signs, pavement markings and a traffic-signal button pedestrians will push to activate 32-second crossings would do the trick.

As for opposition from residents in the vicinity of the trail, Niles Township Supervisor Jim Stover indicated he doesn't expect it.

"I've already had neighbors ... talking about setting up concession stands," he said.

Rory Robinson, a representative of the National Park Service, was among those touting the trail's benefits, ranging from health to economic. Dining, lodging and shopping options will be available at various points along the trail, as will access to the Notre Dame campus.

"It'll be used by everybody," Robinson said.

Thibault agreed obstacles remain, in both Indiana and Michigan, but argued none is insurmountable. In Niles Township, for example, the link between the park and the city of Niles' trail will need a bridge to get over Brandywine Creek. A donor has indicated a willingness to provide it, however, perhaps another indication that Monday's celebration involved "something special," as Thibault said.

Stover said he anticipates work on the 3.3-mile segment will begin May 1 and be completed near the end of July. The second phase is expected to cost \$611,000 and include a \$178,000 local share.

That might sound like a lot but of the \$842,000 for the first phase, only about \$25,000 still needs to be raised.

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