



Local News

Bike trail expansions coming soon in Van Buren

[Print Page](#)

By BECKY BURKERT - For the Herald-Palladium

Published: Sunday, June 26, 2011 1:06 PM EDT

Bicyclists Joe Reno and Leslie Ivens of Kalamazoo got up on a beautiful, sunny day in June, hopped on their bicycles, rode to the nearby Kal-Haven Trail and peddled 34 miles into South Haven.

From there, they then proceeded north on Blue Star Highway for a 20-mile ride to Saugatuck. After climbing the 282 steps of Mt. Baldy, they returned to South Haven to have their bicycles taken care of at Rock & Road Cycle.

"I come out here (South Haven) once or twice a week on my bike," Reno said. "We have a place in South Haven. I get around on my bike when I'm in town, spend a few days and then return to Kalamazoo."

Reno isn't alone in his love of bicycling.

A growing number of Southwest Michigan residents and out-of-state visitors are using bikes to enjoy the area's scenic back roads. And local and state municipal officials are beginning to take notice.

South Haven Mayor Bob Burr is among them.

He said he envisions a day when the Kal-Haven Trail will be linked to South Haven's downtown and then extend to the Van Buren Trail to the east and a new trail that will lead south to Van Buren State Park in South Haven Township.

"We are trying to position ourselves as a bicycling destination. We have trails leading from all directions," Burr said. "Ridership on the Kal-Haven Trail alone is estimated at 100,000 cyclists a year."

Connections

A connector between the Kal-Haven Trail, Van Buren Trail and the proposed trail from Van Buren State Park to the city's downtown has been the crucial missing puzzle piece for South Haven.

The piece will soon arrive thanks in part to a \$280,000 federal enhancement grant to the city. Coupled with \$189,000 in matching funds, the money will be used to build a 10-foot wide, 1.2-mile trail, along the Black River, leading from the Kal-Haven Trail to the corner of Huron and Kalamazoo streets in the heart of downtown. Construction is expected to begin after Labor Day.

At the same time, the city is working with the Michigan Department of Transportation to secure funds for a trail that leads from Van Buren State Park to the south end of the city, where signs will lead bicyclists downtown. The trail is an abandoned railroad bed.

Revamping abandoned railroad beds into nonmotorized trails has caused Michigan to become a leader in recreational, nonmotorized trails.

"Michigan has the largest number of miles of railroad beds converted to trails in the country," said Darrell Harden, transportation planner for MDOT's Southwest region.

The potential to draw visitors to these trails has not been lost on state officials, who are helping communities create their own trails and connect them to longer ones. MDOT website provides a wide variety of maps geared toward bicyclists.

State, federal push

"The Michigan DNR and the Michigan Natural Resource Trust Fund has made linear trails a priority for many years," said Paul Yauk, director of the Linear Trail Program for Parks and Recreation Division of the Department of Natural Resources. "We see it as an outstanding way of providing outdoor public recreation near rural and urban areas and allow a wide variety of people the opportunity to get out doors."

Michigan has more than 2,000 miles of nonmotorized trails statewide, and plans are underway in many communities to add to that number.

In Berrien and Van Buren counties the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission has been encouraging communities to set up a mapped bicycle route from the Indiana border in New Buffalo, north to South Haven. The route would be part of a larger route - U.S. Bicycle Route 35 - leading from the Indiana border all the way to Sault Ste. Marie.

"The route would use existing roads and bicycle trails," said Paul VandenBosch, South Haven assistant city manager, who is helping in the effort. "It would be a mapped route that bicyclists can follow."

However, each community must agree to approve signs and the safest roads for bicyclists.

"We hope to have all the approvals by the end of summer," VandenBosch said. "The recommendation would then go to MDOT, who will then apply to the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO). If they approve, it will be established as a national route."

Michigan won't be the only state with a national bicycle route. AASHTO envisions a bicycle route system similar to the interstate highway system. Each route would be numbered, maps would be created and signs would be placed along the roadways. Several national bicycle routes have been established, including Route 35, which will extend south to Mississippi.

MDOT plans to create a nonmotorized trail from South Haven to Port Huron.

"We are calling this the Great Lake to Lake Trail," Yauk said. "It would be a collection of linear rail corridor trails (such as the Kal-Haven Trail) and is funded with both state and federal funds."

Efforts are underway throughout Berrien County to create trails and connect to existing ones, said Suzanne Flowers, associate planner for the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.

"We've been working on nonmotorized projects more in the last two to three years than we had been," she said. "There's a lot of efforts going on right now. People are excited about making the connections happen. I think there's an awareness that's definitely occurring that we have an aging population that wants to bicycle and a young population that doesn't necessarily want to drive all the time."

The Planning Commission is in the final steps of developing a nonmotorized trail that includes Route 35, and routes that roughly follow M-40, from the Indiana border north to Holland, and U.S.-12 that would follow the Heritage Route in New Buffalo and head all the way to Detroit. The route in Southwest Michigan would connect Berrien, Cass, St. Joseph and Branch counties.

"The goal of this region-wide vision is to ensure that communities communicate with one another as they plan their projects," Flowers said. "There is a lot of great work already happening throughout Southwest Michigan and we want to make sure that we don't miss a gap that needs to be filled in."

Communities respond

Some of the work to create and connect trails is occurring in southwestern Berrien County, and is being led by the Friends of Harbor Country Trails.

"Our mission is to develop safe hike and bike paths," said President Arnie Feinberg. The organization began three years ago and hired Landscape Architects to study the best roads and signs for a comprehensive bike path through eight communities in that corner of Berrien.

With the study complete, the Friends works with each government in the area to establish bike paths.

"Every time a local community has a paving project we're talking to them to convince them to put wider shoulders and signage up. So far we've been pretty successful," Feinberg said, noting that parts of Jefferson, Wilson, Townline and Flynn roads have marked bike paths along the shoulders.

"We've also developed a standard sign with our logo on it and will start installing them in July, and we're in the process of developing maps," Feinberg said. "It's estimated there's 30,000 bicyclists that go through Harbor Country each year. People love to bike and come to this area. We want them to bike in the safest manner possible."

Niles and Niles Township are developing bike paths to eventually connect with paths throughout the South Bend-Mishawaka area of Indiana, while Benton Harbor and St. Joseph and surrounding townships are in the process of developing safe roadways for bicyclists.

Other projects under development or already implemented include:

- The Saugatuck-South Haven Blue Star Trail, a proposed trail along Blue Star Highway from South Haven to Saugatuck.
- McCoy's Creek Trail, which will go through Buchanan.
- Dede Howard Recreational Trail in St. Joseph (1 mile).
- Harbor Shores Path, a trail around the Golf Club at Harbor Shores in Benton Harbor.
- Vineland Trail in St. Joseph Township (about 1.5 miles)

For more information or maps, visit Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance at www.michigantrails.org

Economic benefit

Aside from the healthy aspects of encouraging bicycling, towns and businesses also see a potential economic benefit.

"When bicyclists come into town they're captive in a way. They don't have a car or a trunk to put things in. They'll consume what they need in your town," said Scott Zoet, owner of Rock N Road Cycle shop in South Haven.

Michigan has not undertaken a study to indicate the economic impact bicyclists have on the tourism economy, but other states such as Wisconsin and Minnesota have.

In 2010, researchers at the University of Wisconsin estimated that out-of-state visitors traveling to Wisconsin for cycling opportunities generated \$532 million in economic activity. With in-state touring cyclists, the total economic impact was calculated at close to \$1 billion. Academics and advocates in Minnesota recently issued similar studies stating that on-road and off-road bicycling generated \$1 billion in economic development there. Oregon has embarked on a similar study and expects its survey to come out later in 2011.

[x] Close Window