



## Summit aims to expand area trails

**By John Liberty | Kalamazoo Gazette**

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**KALAMAZOO** -- Twenty-five years ago, Ron Stolk had an idea.

Using the flat, clear-cut paths of old railroad lines, Stolk envisioned a trail connecting Kalamazoo and South Haven. There were doubters, he said, people who thought no one would use such a trail. But Stolk pushed, and the 33.5 mile **Kal-Haven Trail**, once only a dream, became a reality.

"Sometimes people will say, 'You're just a dreamer; that's never going to happen,'" Stolk said. "Well, I've seen a lot of things that were dreams come true."

Nine-county trail summit

**When:** 6-8:30 p.m. Thursday.

**Where:** **Kalamazoo County Expo Center and Fairground**, Room A, 2900 Lake St.

**What:** The summit includes a presentation from Mark Nettleton, an avid cyclist and an attorney with experience working with Michigan municipalities to finance public improvements, such as trails.

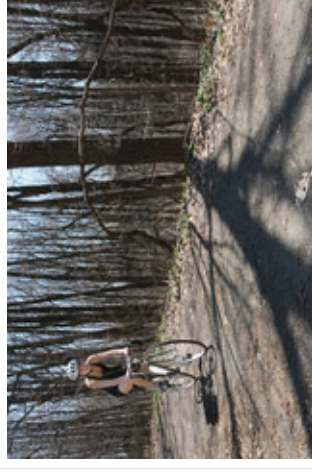
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Twenty-five years later, trail planners in Southwest Michigan aim to fuse the Kal-Haven Trail with trails running through Kalamazoo and Battle Creek to connect Cereal City to the lakeshore.

Stolk thinks it will happen, but some do not want to stop there. Some see the mega-trail from South Haven to Battle Creek as a model for connecting trails and communities across Southwest Michigan.

On Thursday, enthusiasts, advocates, local government officials, community planners and others interested in trails will meet at the Kalamazoo County Fairgrounds Expo Center to plan a system of paved, dirt, crushed-rock, improved and unimproved trails in the nine counties of Southwest Michigan.

At the trail summit, participants will discuss current trails, add new trails to existing maps and plan future trails in the counties of Allegan, Barry, Berrien, Branch, Calhoun, Cass, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph and Van Buren, said Suzann Flowers, assistant planner with the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission.



Tess McEnroe / Gazette

Gabriela Suarez-Starfeldt, of Kalamazoo, rides her bike on the Kal-Haven Trail on April 24.

"(The summit) is just to get all these existing trails connected to one another," Flowers said. "We want people to think beyond their own neighborhood, street-to-street trails and think county and regionwide."

The summit is part of a larger effort by the Michigan Department of Transportation and the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission to update its nonmotorized-trail plan. Darrell Harden, a transportation planner for Southwest Michigan with MDOT, said the plan, which includes wide shoulders along roadways, was last updated in 2001.

MDOT will provide the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission \$65,000 in federal planning funds this year and \$35,000 next year to update maps and identify gaps in the network, Harden said. Harden hopes the process will patch gaps between South Haven and Battle Creek, create a lakeshore trail from the Indiana border to Saugatuck and connect trails in and around Niles with trails in Northern Indiana.

"It is some real big picture stuff going on here," Harden said. "(Participants are) going to see much more clearly what is happening, not just in their communities but in the communities around them. ... They will see the beginning of what the new plan will be. They will have the opportunity to shape that plan."

The goal, Harden said, is not to connect every trail in the nine-county area to a regional network, but to create a few regional trails from existing trails. Connecting communities via trails, Harden said, could stimulate local economies as trailgoers stop for a drink or make a small restaurant along the ride a dinner destination.

The comprehensive plan hammered out at the summit and during subsequent meetings also should help communities secure grant funding to build and maintain the proposed trails.

The completed trail network is years away. Stolk, who worked hard to make the Kal-Haven Trail a reality, said the process will take time but thinks it is a worthwhile plan. He spoke of trails as a right, a right to walk or bike a few hundred yards and lose the noise and hustle of the main streets in wild flowers and farm land.

"All communities, if we can get to them, deserve that right," he said.

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