

Indiana-Michigan trail construction expected to begin in 2018

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By Kelsey Hammon Email the author Published 9:26 am Tuesday, February 28, 2017

To protect the threatened northern long-eared bat, construction to the Indiana-Michigan River Valley trail will not begin until 2018 — though bats are only one factor to the delay, experts say.

Last week, the Niles Township Board of Trustees discussed the bi-state trail's progress during a meeting. Trustee Chris Vella announced that she had heard that construction would be impeded due to bats.

During a follow up with Marcy Hamilton, the senior planner for the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission, who wrote the grant for the trail, Hamilton said that bat activity was only one part of the reason that construction will not begin this year.

The grant's potential was announced in December by the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund board. The plan is to create 1.2 miles of trail that would close a gap between the Indiana State Line and the Brandywine Nature Park, just north of U.S. 12. The trail is also planned to join the city's trail at Fort and Third Streets. The trail will be first bi-state trail across Michigan and Indiana.

According to Hamilton, the commission received notice from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife services that, from April 1 to Oct. 31, trees cannot be cut down as to not disturb the northern long eared bats' roosting cycle.

"There is a constraint on when we move trees so that it does not impact [the northern long-eared bat]," Hamilton said.

The northern long-eared bat lives in the forested region of the eastern U.S., according to the Animal Diversity website.

The bat was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act on April 2, 2015, due to declines in the bats' population numbers caused by a disease called white-nose syndrome.

Not disturbing the bats will mean some changes to the trail's construction plan.

"We were going to try to cut [the trees] this summer," Hamilton said.

However, Hamilton said even without the bats to worry about, it would have still been difficult to get everything locked down for construction this year.

"Even if the bats were not an issue, it would be hard to get all that done and still have construction done later this year," Hamilton said.

The township is still waiting on a final signature from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Hamilton said. The contract is expected to be signed in spring.

Without the signature officially granting the trust funds, construction cannot begin.

Additionally, Hamilton said an ecological study would have to be performed on an area of Brandywine Creek, where a bridge is expected to go.

After the grant agreement between the township and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources is signed, a topography survey and final engineering design will take place. If all goes according to plan, construction is slated to begin in February 2018 and trees will be removed in the springtime, as to not disturb potential bat roosting, Hamilton said.