

Niles Trailhead, trail extension recommended for state funding

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By Kelsey Hammon Email the author Published 9:22 am Thursday, December 15, 2016

Thanks to a grant recommendation announced by the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund board Friday, the Indiana Michigan River Valley Trail could be the first bi-state trail to connect Michigan and Indiana communities. Trail goers could also soon enjoy a brand new Niles trailhead located along the St. Joseph River in downtown Niles. The proposed 1.2 miles of trail would close a trail gap between the Indiana State Line and the Brandywine Nature Park, just north of U.S. 12 and the City of Niles trail at Fort and Third Streets. This would create 34 total miles of natural beauty connecting Niles to South Bend and Mishawaka. The grant was proposed by Niles Township and written by Southwest Michigan Planning Commission Senior Planner Marcy Hamilton. The grant tied for second in recommendations.

The township formerly applied for the grant to complete the trail in 2015 for 2016, said Niles Township Treasurer James Ringler.

“This is real good news,” Ringler said in response to Friday’s announcement. “It will allow us to finish out the trail connecting to the city.”

Hamilton also wrote the grant for the Niles City Trailhead — a partnership with the Lakeland Foundation. The grant proposal scored the highest in the state for development projects.

Hamilton said she has never seen a grant recommended that was not approved for funding and said it was likely the projects will be funded.

If approved by the state legislature, Niles Charter Township could receive \$300,000 from state funding, \$501,300 from the Michigan Department of Transportation and a local match of \$132,900.

The City of Niles could receive state funding for the trailhead in the amount of \$220,000, as well as a contribution from the Lakeland Foundation in the amount of \$250,000.

The board recommended a total of \$47.6 million worth of land acquisition and recreational development projects for 2017, according to a news release.

The city of Niles Trailhead project could include such amenities as a fishing platform over the St. Joseph River, space for a food vendor, improved parking and bike racks as well as signage. The trailhead would be located downtown near the St. Joseph River.

The Niles Township grant for 1.2 miles will connect users to communities as well as four downtowns, 16 parks, two YMCAs and five hospitals, as well as businesses and shopping areas. The 10-foot wide paved trail will also be handicapped accessible.

Indiana will need to complete roughly two miles of trail.

Hamilton said the project’s intentions to connect communities, the scale of the trail, as well as its universal design were among the qualities that helped the grants to earn the top rankings from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund board.

Ringler said completing the Indiana Michigan River Valley Trail would offer even more advantages to what is already a very popular trail.

“It offers a tremendous amount of recreational use,” Ringler said. “There are a lot of people that use that trail right now — walkers, bikers [and] runners.”

The Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund board also recommended a \$214,400 grant for the development of a 5,000-foot pathway connecting Elizabeth Park, Veterans Park and Village Park West and trailhead areas located in Veterans Park.

Watervliet was also recommended for a grant in the amount of \$296,000 for phase 1 of Watervliet County Park, located on the Paw Paw River in Watervliet.