

Officials break ground on River Valley recreational trail

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River Valley trail will connect Niles to Mishawaka when finished

Just weeks away from beginning construction, state and local officials gathered Monday to celebrate the groundbreaking for a portion of a 34-mile recreational trail that will one day connection Niles to Mishawaka, Ind.

It will be the first interstate paved non-motorized trail in Michigan, according to Matt



State and local officials ceremoniously break ground on a 3.3 section of the Indiana-Michigan River Valley Trail in Niles Township Monday afternoon. Leader photo/CRAIG HAUPERT

Wiitala, of the Michigan Department of Transportation.

“We have come together for something special,” said Niles Township Park Commission Chairman Harry Thibault, who acted as master of ceremonies Monday at Niles Township Hall. “It really was a regional wide effort to get to where we are today. It is kind of a miracle of community spirit and endeavor and a real accomplishment for Niles.”

Construction is scheduled to begin May 1 on a 3.3-mile portion of the trail stretching from just north of U.S. 12 in Niles Township to the Indiana/Michigan state line. The portion could be completed by late July, depending on weather.

“I’ve talked to a lot of folks who live along the trail and they are very anxious for it,” said Jim Stover, Niles

Township Supervisor. "I've even had neighbors that have talked about opening up concession stands."

The majority of the project's \$842,000 price tag is being covered by state and local grants. Niles Township is responsible for about \$140,000 of that, but Thibault said supporters of the trail have raised all but \$25,000 of the township's matching portion.

"Our local foundations have been very supportive," he said. "More than half of it was covered by five different Niles area foundations."

Thibault was especially complimentary of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission for its role in the project. He said the commission set up meetings, networked and applied for grants on behalf of Niles Township.

"It never would've happened without the ongoing innovation of the Southwest Michigan Planning Commission," he said.

Rory Robinson, outdoor recreation planner for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, called the project one of the best things that has ever happened in Niles Township.

"It will be able to be used by everybody and I mean everybody," he said.

Monday's groundbreaking concerned the first of two phases of the project planned for Niles Township. The second phase would stretch about one mile from Brandywine Creek Nature Park north to Fort Street in Niles.

Thibault said that portion could be completed as early as 2017 depending on several factors, including the ability to secure state funding. The entire trail, including two unfinished portions in Indiana, could be finished within the next 2-3 years, Thibault said.

Hoffman Brothers, of Battle Creek, will be doing construction for Phase 1.

The township will maintain its portion of the trail.

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