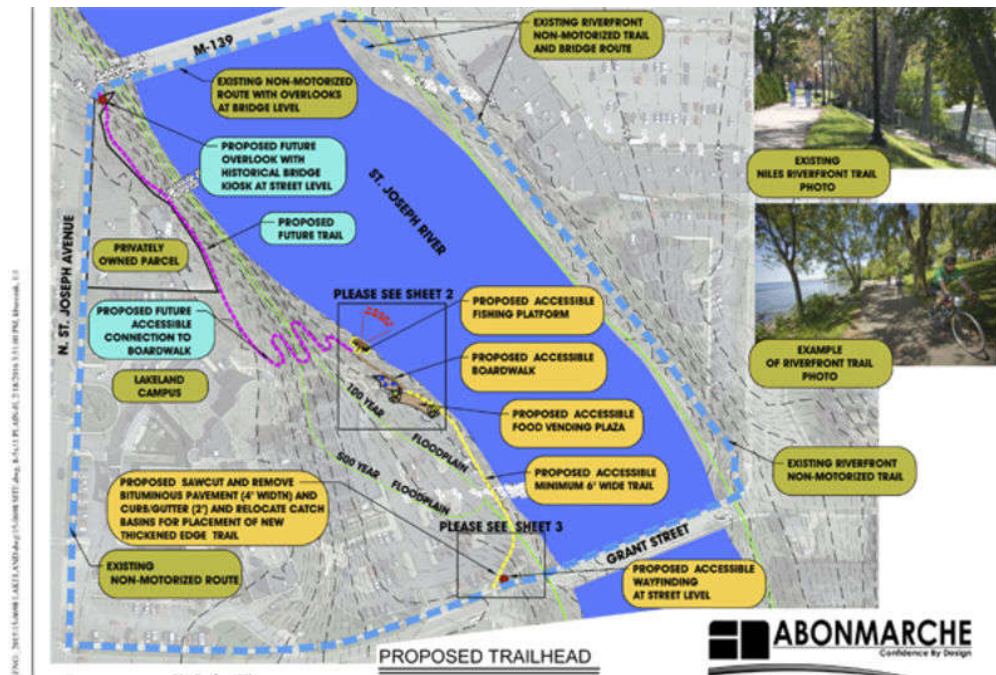


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State funding infuses River Valley Trail projects

DNR grants to benefit initiatives in city of Niles and Niles Township

By Debra Haight Tribune Correspondent Updated 20 hrs ago



This rendering shows highlights of a proposed trailhead in Niles that is expected to break ground late next year. Image provided

NILES — It looks like two Niles area trail projects connected with the Indiana-Michigan River Valley Trail will be getting state funding after an announcement Friday from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

The Niles city trailhead project and the River Valley Trail extension project in Niles Township are both expected to be funded through the DNR's Natural Resources Trust Fund grant program next year. The trust fund board's recommendations are expected to be accepted and funded by the Legislature early next year.

That board is recommending more than \$47.6 million worth of projects in 2017, including \$19.9 million in development projects like the two in the Niles area and \$27.7 million in land acquisition projects.

Southwest Michigan Planning Commission Senior Planner Marcy Hamilton worked with both the city of Niles and Niles Township on their grant applications. She reported that the two projects received the top numerical scores of all development project applications around the state.

She said both projects were helped by the fact they are in urban areas, have good local funding matches and partnerships with other entities. In the case of the city of Niles, it is a partnership with Lakeland Health.

The city's trailhead project was the top scoring project statewide. It will extend the riverfront trail from the east to the west side of the St. Joseph River in a project that partners with Lakeland Health. The state is expected to give \$220,000 toward the project with the trust fund grant, while Lakeland and the city will provide another \$280,000.

The trailhead will offer users more opportunities to enjoy the river in the downtown area of Niles. The project calls for the creation of a new walking trail, a fishing platform and outdoor gathering spaces on the west side of the river. The fishing platform will be similar to a platform that's on the east side of the river but with more accessibility.

The trail will include some switchbacks off the Main Street bridge, which is at a higher elevation than the Broadway bridge. The switchbacks will take the elevation down to the level of the lower Lakeland parking lot off of Grant Street. Outdoor gathering spaces could include a seating area and space where food vendors could set up.

Both the trailhead project in the city and the trail extension in Niles Township are designed to capitalize on people's interest in the River Valley Trail, which will extend 34 miles from Mishawaka to the north side of Niles when completed.

Hamilton said the trail is getting closer to completion on both sides of the state line. The Michigan side of the trail will be complete from the state line to the northern city limits of Niles when work is completed on the final leg of the township trail, she said.

The new trust fund state grant for Niles Township will complete work on that last leg, which is 1.2 miles from the Brandywine Creek Park to the southern end of the existing city trail at Fort and Third Streets. That project was the second highest-rated project statewide in terms of points.

The state is expected to award \$300,000, which will be coupled with \$300,000 from the Michigan Department of Transportation and another \$135,000 from local sources. Niles Township Supervisor Jim Stover said the local match will come from either the township general fund or private donations.

"This is definitely good news," Stover said of the news of the grant recommendation. "We're glad to see it all come together with the MDOT grant and the local match. We were able to capitalize on the fact that we already have part of the trail in place. I'm really impressed how it all worked out."

Hamilton reported that work is also continuing on the Indiana side of the state line, with plans worked out to take the trail across Cleveland Road and then pick a route to link up to the end of the Michigan trail at Stateline Road. A portion of trail was built this year between Cleveland and Darden roads, including a HAWK crossing signal, activated by trail users, at Cleveland. St. Joseph County officials hope to extend the trail to Stateline Road within the next two years.

Construction on both trail projects could start later next year after funding, engineering plans and contracts are approved. The township trail extension will wind around Brandywine Creek Nature Park and then cross the creek before turning back west toward South Third and then north on South Third.

Amenities of the new project include a pedestrian bridge and fishing pier as the 10-foot wide paved trail crosses Brandywine Creek, as well as picnic tables, benches and bike racks on the edge of the Niles Township Community Park off of South Third Street. The project will also pay for trail signs and a pedestrian crossing.

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