Connecting Michigan with the Iron Belle Trail

Governor Rick Snyder

When people think of Michigan, they most likely think of the Comeback State, the automotive capital of the world, and the phrase Pure Michigan. What they may not realize is that we can also be thought of as the Trails State. Michigan has an abundance of trails that are just waiting to be explored and the Iron Belle Trail helps connect many of them from Belle Isle in Detroit to Ironwood in the Upper Peninsula.

The Iron Belle Trail is an incredible Pure Michigan experience. I proposed this statewide trail in 2013 as a “Showcase Trail” for the state, and it has evolved into thousands of miles and dozens of partnerships between the Michigan Department of Natural Resources and various communities. Michigan has more trails than any other state and we want to showcase them by pulling public and private trails together into one signature Pure Michigan experience.

As the longest designated state trail in the nation, the Iron Belle Trail offers 1,273 miles of hiking routes and 791 miles for bikes. The Iron Belle uses existing trails where possible, along with new construction. It touches 48 Michigan counties and more than 240 townships in the state. At this point, the hiking trail is 69 percent complete and the biking trail is 64 complete. This is great news, but we still have some ways to go. Michigan’s natural resources are first class and being able to explore them on foot or bike is a great gift we can give visitors and residents alike. Michigan’s Iron Belle Trail is so special because it links existing trails, helps fill gaps where needed, and celebrates the partnerships that have developed to create and maintain trails. The trail also creates opportunities for rural economic development, healthy recreation and awareness of Michigan’s natural resources.

The Iron Belle trail would not be possible without the numerous groups who work incredibly hard to support this project. These include the DNR, Michigan Association of Convention & Visitor Bureaus, Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Michigan Department of Transportation, Michigan Economic Development Corporation, Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, Michigan Recreation and Park Association, Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance, Michigan Trails Advisory Council, National Park Service, North Country Trail Association, and Pure Michigan. Our partners are working to fund this project and close gaps in the trail. Currently, the two-mile segment in Roscommon is nearing completion and partners are working with locals to finalize key segments in Warren and Grayling, as well as Washtenaw and Gogebic counties.

We are lucky to live in a state that has so many options for outdoor recreation. From rural small towns to the largest metropolitan areas, the Iron Belle Trail is another great example of how we can connect with one another and explore the beauty Michigan has to offer.

Image: Gov. Rick Snyder and Bill O’Neill, Michigan Department of Natural Resources deputy director review a map in Delta County.
Cycling in the Most Beautiful Place in America

Alyssa Lyen, Intern

The Michigander Bicycle Tour took place from July 15-22, 2017 with stops in Traverse City, Leland, Frankfort and all points in-between. Cycling along the shores of Lake Michigan and through Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, voted the “Most Beautiful Place in America” by Good Morning America viewers, was just incredible. The ride featured Great Lakes beaches, rivers, beautiful trail systems, and vineyards. The tour was blessed with sunny skies, lake breezes and clouds just when the riders needed them. This cycling vacation, now in its 26th year, brought over 750 cyclists and volunteers together from more than 20 different states to enjoy the hidden treasures of Pure Michigan.

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The 2-Day Weekend riders excitedly arrived in Traverse City and set up camp at the Grand Traverse County Center. On the first day, cyclists rode along the beautiful Leelanau Trail, stretching over 15 miles through the last of the Leelanau County railway corridors, a part of the TART Trails network. Riders stopped for SAG 1 at the 145-acre DeYoung Natural Area, which combines a historic farmstead with about a mile of shoreline on Cedar Lake. The riders also had the pleasure to stop at Shady Lane Cellars in Suttons Bay at SAG 2, where wine tasting and relaxing were on the menu. Our new shopping van service was a hit, which meant riders could shop and have their items brought back to camp for them and Shady Lane Cellars provided sharpies, bags and boxes for their purchases. The amphitheater at the Civic Center was home to a fantastic concert with our ride musicians, Detroit Music Award Winning artists, Kubat, Finlay & Rose on Saturday night. Their three-part harmonies, lush guitars and mix of original and familiar songs were the perfect way to end the day. The next morning everyone rode out on the TART Trail and Boardman Lake Trail to VASA Pathway and Medalie Park. The festive finish line on Sunday greeted the cyclists with music, cake and refreshments.

The 6-Day tour started bright and early in Frankfort with an incredible loop ride to Crystal Mountain Resort on the Betsie Valley Trail. This rail trail is 22-miles long, and took the riders from Elberta and Beulah to Thompsonville where the riders then made their way for a BBQ style lunch and incredible SAG stop with sweeping views put on by the attentive staff at Crystal Mountain Resort. Many cyclists made a day of it by staying at the resort with their friends and family to enjoy the multiple summer attractions. The cyclists also had a wonderful welcome at the Beulah Trail Head SAG that was hosted by the Friends of the Betsie Valley Trail. Later, many headed downtown to Stormcloud Brewing to socialize, while others convened in the dining tent for an Americana Concert with our ride musicians, Kubat, Finlay & Rose.

Tuesday’s ride was filled with scenic views and beautiful hills. The cyclists rode on the new wide shoulder along M-22 to the Village Park & Robert Manning Memorial Lighthouse in Empire and then hopped on the Sleeping Bear Heritage Trail nestled in the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. This 27-mile trail runs between Empire and Bohemia Road connecting to other park attractions and we only broke briefly from the trail to visit the charming town of Glen Arbor for lunch. The next SAG was at the Leelanau School, an excellent academy set in the woods and on the shoreline of Lake Michigan. It was a challenging ride but the scenery was breathtaking. Our last stop of the day was the gorgeous town of Leland where we set up camp at Leland School. We were just a few blocks from historic Fishtown, which is filled with a collection of weathered fishing shanties, smokehouses, overhanging docks, and charter boats. Wednesday, riders rode north for an “out and back” to the tip of the Leelanau Peninsula to Cat Head Bay with stops at Green Bird Cellars & Organic Farms, Northport Village Marina, Downtown Northport and Leelanau State Park.

Thursday had the cyclists headed down to Traverse City on a mix of back roads, hills and trails. The cyclists first SAG was at Tandem Ciders along the Leelanau Wine Trail, which specializes in artisanal hard ciders. The riders also stopped at Suttons Bay Bikes and the DeYoung Natural Area for two more excellent SAGs. That evening, riders were on their own for dinner downtown, while others attended the sold-out Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance Fundraiser for TART Trails at the Hagerty Center on East Bay, an extraordinary waterfront venue.

Continued on page 3...
Remembering Bill Olsen

Bob Wilson, Executive Director

William R. Olsen, MD, 85, of Frankfort, MI, passed away this past June, due to complications from a heart attack while biking his beloved Betsie Valley Trail. He is survived by his wife Joan Jacobsen Olsen, his three children and a bevy of grandchildren, great grandchildren, nieces, nephews as well as his sister, Kristine Olsen Clark. It is important to remember Bill Olsen and his direct contribution to the growth of the Betsie Valley Trail and to Michigan's trail movement.

When the legislature passed the Michigan Trailways Act over 20 years ago, and declared trails a “public good” few anticipated that Michigan would have developed such a significant network of trails, Bill was one of the few. He believed in partnerships for the public good and that is evident from his years of fundraising and hard work, both political and physical as chairman of the Betsie Valley Trailway Management Council. The Friends of the Betsie Valley Trail show us that a trail is indeed a community effort, which is evidenced by the work they do for their families, neighbors and the thousands of tourists that are eager to explore this region each year. This community pride is a reflection of Bill’s leadership and his dedication to the trail to ensure all of the goals that were envisioned were met. What started as a local trail, is now considered one of the top three attractions in Frankfort (Trip Advisor). What a legacy.

What a pioneer. A celebration to honor Bill took place on Saturday, September 16th in Beulah, with a Memorial Dedication Trailhead Sign and Dedication of the Depot as the “Dr. Wm. R. Olsen Memorial Trailhead.” Bill’s family encourages friends to get out and enjoy the trail he loved so much, and to consider a contribution to the William R. and Joan Olsen Endowment for the Friends of the Betsie Valley Trail or the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, visit www.betsievalleytrail.org.

On Friday, the cyclists had loop ride to the charming town of Elk Rapids. The ride along the backroads were filled with cherry trees that were ripe for harvesting. This loop also illustrated the need for a trail between Traverse City and Elk Rapids as traffic picked up along the route, more so than in years past. Fresh fruit and snacks were welcome at the SAGs at the TART Trails Trailhead at M-72, Whitewater Township Park and Elk Rapids Veteran’s Park, which incidentally had a fantastic beach.

On our final evening, everyone gathered in the Civic Center to say a farewell to our very own “King of the Finish Line,” Sam Kennedy. Sam has been with the Michigander for 25 years and is planning to move to Florida with his wife Rita later this year. Veteran rider/writer Ron Campbell led the event as he spoke eloquently about Sam on how and why he created the finish line festivities, the friendships created over the years, and his deep influence on the ride. Sam gave a touching speech recalling his first Michigander-riding a Huffy mountain bike, about how he and his incredibly patient and understanding bride Rita, had their honeymoon on the ride over twenty years ago, his admiration and love for the people on the ride and what it meant to him to be the dubbed “King of the Finish Line.” The crowd applauded jubilantly, many with tears of joy pouring down their cheeks to honor both Sam and Rita.

The final day brought us to Homestead Farms, Lake Ann State Park, Saint Ambrose Cellars and the Beulah Trailhead. The ever-enthusiastic Sam Kennedy waved his checkered flags one last time, with fellow riders and volunteers rooting on the riders as they passed the finish line. The last day of the ride is always emotional for everyone as we realize the ride will come to an end, but that didn’t stop the cyclists from taking the time to congratulate and cheer each other on with enormous grins on their faces from their collective sense of accomplishment. The cyclists also received ride certificates, cake, fresh fruit and lemonade. After an incredible ride with strangers that became friends, and friends that became family, the 26th Michigander came to a remarkable close.

As an intern, the Michigander Bicycle Tour has been one of the most incredibly challenging and eye-opening experiences I have ever had. I am so humbled to have been your intern and assistant ride director. I sincerely thank all the cyclists, and especially our outstanding ride director Mary McGuire Slevin, for touching my life in ways I didn’t understand was possible.
In the early 1990’s, Senator Bob Geake from Northville was a huge proponent of trails for one specific reason—he was an ardent fan of horseback riding and wanted more trails for equestrian users in the state. That passion translated into support with several other Senate Republican caucus members for fashioning the bill package that eventually became the Michigan Trailways Act.

Over the years, several changes have been made to the Trailways Act, some driven by the need to expand trailways for more consideration of horseback riding and some driven by the need to help provide branding for our trails—hence the pending designation process of “Pure Michigan Trails.” The most recent change came in the form of a bill sponsored by Rep Cole that will help to clarify and designate a system of trails that provides for both motorized and non-motorized use.

The legislature is the principal policy-making body of our government. They are the most directly accountable body of the three branches and citizens have an important role in holding them accountable to their constitutional charge which is found in Article IV, Section 52 and clearly requires them to take the steps necessary to protect our natural resources from “pollution, impairment and destruction.” It also requires them to develop our natural resources presumably in such a way that allows for a conservation based approach to public access.

The actions of the legislature are shaped by many forces—in district concerns, powerful state interest groups, the interaction with the Executive and Judicial branches, actions at the federal level and sadly often the least-likely force is the voice of the citizenry.

One important action that we as members of the Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance can take is to take steps to present a more consistent, educated and impactful voice to help balance the impacts of the other policy making forces. Over the last few months we have taken steps to help in this reconnection with the legislature by taking stands on issues like the pending forest road designation process, arguing for the importance of maintaining the integrity of the Natural Resources Trust Fund spending process and hosting a series of trail events around the state to help familiarize legislators with the multiple benefits of both our land and water trails.

Soon, Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance will be joining forces with lawmakers to help launch a new legislative effort to draw attention to our trails with a multi-bill package that will help in managing our trails, help to promote historical aspects of our trails, and provide clarity for how local trail groups or units of governments can fund trail amenities. All timed in accordance with the upcoming Michigan Trails Week.

We look forward to this reconnection with the legislature and the opportunity to display the significant voice of trail users all over the state. We need your help in filling out this role and no time is better than the present to remember the most important force in our government comes from you, the people!

Get Involved
To ensure you stay up to date, sign up for email news here: www.michigantrails.org/getinvolved.
In keeping with the mission of the Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance, we seek Board members who demonstrate and confirm the vision for an interconnected statewide system of multi-use trails, preserve the integrity of the organization and provide financial sustainability.

The following nominees are running for a three year term beginning January 1, 2018 through December 30, 2020.

**Harry Burkholder**
Harry was appointed as the Executive Director of Land Information Access Association (LIAA) in October 2015, following 11 years on LIAA’s community planning team. Working with the Board of Directors, Harry helps to set the strategic direction and policies for the organization and leads the organization in corporate planning, project management, program design and development, and day-to-day operations.

**Ann Conklin**
Ann has been involved with the Michigan Recreation and Park Association as an active member since 1979; she served as Association Vice President in 1988 and 1993, and as Association President in 1989 and 1999. A 30 year veteran of the park and recreation field, she assumed an administrative role with mParks in 2011 following ten years as the Director of Canton Leisure Services. She holds a Bachelor’s Degree in Community Recreation from Central Michigan University, as well as the Certified Parks and Recreation Professional (CPRP) designation.

**Brad Garmon**
Brad Garmon is the Director of Conservation and Emerging Issues at the Michigan Environmental Council where he oversees the organization’s policy work on natural resources protection and enjoyment, land conservation, and place-based economic development strategies. Over the last decade, he has served on the Michigan State Parks and Recreation Blue Ribbon Panel, Department of Natural Resources’ Public Land Strategy Steering Committee, Office of the Great Lakes’ Water Strategy Cabinet, Pigeon River Country Advisory Council, Michigan Sense of Place Council, Michigan Tourism Strategic Plan’s Resources Environment Working Group and the Michigan Heritage Leadership Council.

**Andrea Ketchmark**
Andrea is the executive director (and former director of trail development) for the North Country Trail (NCT) and provides guidance to chapters, members, volunteers. With a degree in Natural Resources Recreation and Tourism from Colorado State University, Andrea is happy to translate her love of the outdoors into a committed stewardship of our public lands and advocacy for trails. She is an appointed member of the Nonmotorized Advisory Workgroup for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

**Toni Thompson**
Toni is a former banker and President of the Friends of the Kalamazoo River Trailway. She is also the Vice President of the Kalamazoo County Parks Foundation, whose mission is to assist the County of Kalamazoo by raising funds to be used for development, improvement, maintenance, and promotion of the parks. She has served as chair for Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance for over 15 years and can be found volunteering her time on the Michigander Bicycle Tour and for many events that take place on the Kalamazoo River Trailway.

**Paul Wiklanski**
Paul is the Assistant Director of Marketing and Strategic Planning for the University of Michigan Office of Development. He received his B.S. in Communication Technologies with a secondary concentration in Fine Arts from Eastern Michigan University. He brings his extensive experience in data mining and analysis, design, marketing and fundraising. Paul believes that Michigan’s trails and greenways trails are amongst our state’s finer jewels. An avid cyclist, he is also a board member of the Huron Waterloo Pathways Initiative.

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**Our Board**
To learn more about our Board of Directors, visit www.michigantrails.org/about-us/board.
Michigan Trails Week: September 23-30, 2017

Bob Wilson, Executive Director

The state’s celebration of trails starts with the legislature and the Governor both recognizing September 23-30 as Michigan Trails week. Michigan Trails Week is a refreshing reminder that we can all take part in conserving natural resources and public health. Building and maintaining trails for public health, greenways and open space, preserving our sense of place of history and culture are all benefits of this multi-faceted effort to build trails. The Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance is committed to this mission of protecting and conserving our natural resources through the active support and maintenance of thousands of miles of trails and greenways in communities all over the state.

Join us in celebrating Michigan Trails Week and the significant successes of Michigan’s trail builders! With more than 12,500 miles of state-designated trails that connect communities, provide health and economic benefits and attract outdoor enthusiasts, it’s no wonder Michigan is known as “The Trails State.” Get out and enjoy our trails, take a walk on a familiar trail, go hiking a more challenging Upper Peninsula trail, run a hilly course or get out on your bicycle on a paved linear trail. We know you’ll find plenty of opportunities to enjoy our state’s outstanding trail system.

As members of our communities build trails, they in turn then help to build our communities! Trails have become “America’s front porch”, and we hope you will take the time to say hello to your friends and neighbors during Michigan Trails Week.

More: www.michigantrails.org/events/michigan-trails-week