GOVERNOR’S TRAIL:  
A Potential Icon in Many Ways

Many news articles have been written about it. It’s named in the Michigan Comprehensive State Trails Plan. One man, Chris Hillier, is going to walk it, starting April 26th. But one thing is for certain. The Governor’s Belle Isle to Wisconsin Trail has a long ways to go before becoming an operational cross-state trail on the ground. Governor Rick Snyder, who indicated that he wants Michigan to be the #1 trail state, launched the idea of this “stem to stern” trail after his visit to the Dequindre Cut trail in Detroit. In one 924-mile swoop, the trail will connect Michigan’s most urban areas with the most rustic regions of the state, dishing up varied slices of Pure Michigan all along the way.

Initially, there was confusion about what the exact uses of the trail would be, since the initial route showed a mixture of rail-trails, and single-use hiking trails. While the exact route will be determined by a DNR-led stakeholder committee, the route may end up to be more of a “braid”, a set of parallel corridors that come together where uses may be comfortably shared and then diverge as opportunity dictates to help shape a quality trail user experience. Before an exact route can be confirmed, though, there are many factors to explore, including location of available right of way, existence of willing groups to maintain, alternatives for navigating through congested traffic areas, across freeways and bridges, and identification of nearby trail user services.

The first step will be to approve a process for determining the exact route(s). Templates used by other organizations for securing trail alignment, such as the North Country Trail and the US Bike Route processes will prove helpful. Next will be to line up funding for acquisition of some segments, trail surface and or clearing, signage, trailheads, and other trail-related infrastructure. These steps are slated to continue for 3 years.

Still, there are a number of other issues to be resolved if this is to be a high quality “mega-trail”. Fortunately, the answers lie in two recent reports, “The Future of Michigan Parks and Outdoor Recreation: A Report to Governor Snyder” released by the Michigan Trails & Greenways Alliance is a non-profit organization that shall foster and facilitate the creation of an interconnected statewide system of trails and greenways for recreation, health, transportation, economic development and environmental/cultural preservation purposes.
At some time during this construction season, the city of Detroit will have more miles of trail and bike lanes than any other city in Michigan. While that is good enough reason to celebrate, it’s worth highlighting some benefits beyond simply getting more people biking and walking.

We are seeing planned and on-the-ground trail-oriented development. Entrepreneurs and developers are locating their projects and businesses along these new trails in order to attract customers and take advantage of the trail benefits.

Here are three sample projects along the Dequindre Cut Greenway.

**Detroit Endurance Lab**
This year, Landall Proctor and his wife opened a fitness studio on the Dequindre Cut, just a couple blocks from the RiverWalk. Their studio is providing training and fitness programs for those looking to finish an Ironman or those just looking to shed some weight.

Being alongside the Dequindre Cut was part of their decision to locate their business. “We definitely view it as an asset to be so close to the trail in its current state,” says Proctor.

Some of their group workouts start or end on the trail and they will use the trail to attract new customers. “We’re putting a big banner on the fence that will hopefully attract people who are using the trail who may not know about us otherwise,” adds Proctor.

One additional benefit is that directions to the studio are easier. Not many people know particular street address’s, but a vast and growing number know about the Dequindre Cut and RiverWalk. Proctor tells customers they’re right off the Dequindre Cut where it hits the RiverWalk. “They immediately respond that they know exactly where that is,” says Proctor. “That’s a pretty nice aspect for us as well.”

**Detroit Collision Works**
Shel Kimen moved back to Detroit with the ambitious plan of opening a hotel. Not just a regular hotel, but one built from shipping containers.

And she wants the hotel, called Detroit Collision Works, to be more than lodging. Her vision is for a 36-room hotel that is a gathering place to discuss Detroit, including community development, urban gardening, public art, active transportation, and much more.

Kimen adds: “Everyone loves a good story. Stories make place and bind communities. I wanted to create a project in Detroit that creates lasting and sustainable value for both the people that live here and the people that visit. A combined hotel/co-working space built around stories seemed like the best way to do that. Detroit needs a super cool hotel that helps visitors understand what Detroit is really about and it needs places for people to gather and work beyond coffee shops. It also comes from a belief that great design and rich experiences do not have to be expensive.”

It’s a new and interesting approach, and one which recently inspired 200rooms.com to write, “Detroit Collision Works is the Most Important Hotel in America.”

While Kimen originally wanted the location in a historic area, that “didn’t feel right.” What did feel right is locating directly on the Dequindre Cut near Eastern Market – two great selling points. She appreciates the trail’s transportation aspect but also loves its graffiti artwork.

Not only does the trail connect hotel users to the city, it also serves as the hotel’s gym. More ambitious hotel guests can also travel to Detroit Endurance Lab on bikes that the hotel will likely have available for guests.

**2000 Gratiot LLC**
The city of Detroit owns a significant amount of land. The surplus property is constantly being sold. One parcel was next to the Dequindre Cut and where the Greater Riverfront East Environmental Network (GREEN) had planned to build a trail connector.

Before the sale, MTGA met with Detroit Planning and Development, Councilman Ken Cockrel Jr., and the
Throughout 2012, The Friends of Fred Meijer River Valley Rail Trails have diligently stayed on course to pursue the development of the 37.5 mile trail section from Greenville to Ionia along the Flat River and the Grand River. The Friends group has been assisted by the National Park Service Rivers and Trails Program and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to develop a collaborative process and a master plan to determine recreational uses for the corridor, establish development and management guidelines, and prioritize project phases. One of the most exciting aspects of this plan is the tremendous water trail potential alongside the railtrail, which was incorporated into the master plan. Locations of both trailheads and canoe/kayak launch and take-out sites along both rivers are included. The 18-month planning process was finalized with public input in early March.

Two segments of the Fred Meijer River Valley Rail-Trails will begin construction this year while the construction of the final 27 miles are slated for 2015 and 2016. The first segment will begin at M-66 to the west through the City of Ionia and the Ionia Recreational Area and on to Saranac. The second phase of M-66 to Prairie Creek will be under construction next year with a bridge to be built over M-66 to provide safe passage through this traffic-congested area.

The second segment will be a 2.2 mile paved section of the Flat River Valley Rail-Trail, a segment of the corridor which crosses the Flat River with three long bridges. The Flat River is designated by the State of Michigan as a “Natural River”. The purpose of this natural river designation is to preserve and enhance the area for water conservation, its free flowing condition, its fish, wildlife, boating, scenic, aesthetic, floodplain, ecologic, historic, and recreational values and uses.

Imagine: a “Natural River” - free flowing, scenic, alongside a rail-trail on a sunny mid summer June day? Hmmmm .... Should we go for a relaxing bike ride or a nice leisurely float down the Flat River? Hmmm ... Hey, guess what? You can do both! You can satisfy both your urges at the 3rd Annual Paddle to Pedal Adventure tour just south of Belding on Saturday, June 22nd hosted by the Friends of River Valley Rail-Trails. Starting at the Double RR Ranch, the friends will transport you up to Belding to paddle down the scenic waters of the beautiful Flat River for a 1-2 hour Kayak/Canoe trip. This section of the river is an easy paddle with lots of scenic variety.

After the float, participants will transition into their choice of bike routes. Each route brings you across one of two historical covered bridges, one at Fallasburg Park and the other on Whites Bridge Road. Many rest stops will offer you snacks, drinks and spectacular views of the covered bridges and the Flat River. Routes include a 12 mile Mountain Loop, both 19 and 25 mile Roadie Loops and an easy 6 mile Family loop, all starting and ending at the Double RR Ranch.

Alternatively, if you are into mountain biking, you can participate in the 1st Annual 12 Mile River Valley Mountain Bike Challenge also happening the same day as the Pedal and Paddle. That event consists of wide horse track trails, long scenic single track and Double RR Ranch access roads.

After the events, relax and refuel with a free hot lunch - ready when you are and take home this year’s event T-Shirt, included in your fee. You can even plan to make this a full family weekend with horseback riding, canoeing, tubing, fishing and camping at the Double RR Ranch, who is offering special pricing for campers in 2013. Both the River Valley Mountain Bike Challenge and Paddle to Pedal raise dollars for the development of the trail, and registrations can be found online at www.rivervalleyrailtrails.org or www.runsignup.com. Many thanks to the sponsors of the 2013 events, including Friends of the Fred Meijer River Valley Rail Trails, On The Move, Cindy Sew Cool, Freewheeler Bike Shop and Double RR Ranch.

For ongoing trail news, check out the Fred Meijer River Valley Rail-Trail Facebook page or the web site www.rivervalleyrailtrails.org.
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Michigan State Parks and Outdoor Recreation Blue Ribbon Panel and the “Michigan Comprehensive Trail Plan” a report soon to be released by the Michigan Snowmobile and Trails Advisory Council. Several key guidelines in these reports bode well for the future success of Michigan trails, and they should be exemplified in this trail project.

When the trail exists, will the people come? One of the key improvements needed for Michigan trails as a whole, is to market in a way that trail users can easily plan their trail adventures. They want to know how long is each segment, how difficult it is, where can they access food, lodging, what particular features about the area they should not miss, etc. Towards that end there is an interagency committee of state agencies and nonprofits, including MTGA, collaborating on what the marketing package for all trails looks like, i.e., what information is needed, who will host the information, how to engage potential trail users in an exciting, interactive way and how to leverage potential entrepreneurial partnerships. Both reports call for an extensive trails marketing package, especially in the form of an electronic “concierge service” for all trail information.

How will the trail be sustained? Both reports call for a stronger emphasis on development and support of volunteer efforts to help maintain trails. Perhaps this high profile cross-state trail could receive support from volunteers along 100% of its route. And volunteer efforts could be publicized in order to encourage more citizens to be involved in this vital role as stewards of our natural resource and recreation assets.

How can investment into this trail ensure significant economic return? The concept of encouraging “trail towns” appear in both reports. The process for developing a trail town, as exemplified by the Great Allegheny Passage trail between Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania is that each town a trail passes through takes a “main-street” style approach to developing the infrastructure and nurturing the customer service needed to welcome trail users into town, where they will spend time and money. The Great Allegheny Passage folks have indicated that their trail brings them an average of $40.8 million annually from direct spending, and business owners attribute 25 percent of their revenues to their proximity to the trail. Both the state and regional economic development councils will need to embrace their trail assets by incorporating the trail into their downtown development plans and comprehensive economic development plans. This will leverage funding for trail town improvements and drive collaboration among economic developers and trail partners.

The above are just a few of the hurdles that lie along the way of making the Belle Isle to Ironwood trail become the best it can be. Meanwhile, Chris Hillier is “getting his boots on”. He says that “the rail-trails are the sweetest parts of the route he will follow.” You can follow Chris’ journey through his blog at www.wolverinehikesmichigan.blogspot.com. Happy trails, Chris!
The sun is shining, the birds are chirping, and the weather is finally warming up. You know what that means: the Michigander Bicycle Tour is right around the corner. In its 22nd year, this year’s ride will prove to be better than ever as we travel through Michigan’s northern Lower Peninsula, taking scenic routes and exploring some of the best trails and towns Michigan has to offer.

With the popularity and positive feedback of the daily gourmet coffee and tea truck provided last year, we’re delighted to announce it will be returning this year. Riders can once again start each day with a hot cup of fair trade coffee or organic tea before heading out on each day’s ride. Same as in years past, you can rent a tent and, for a fee, have it set up for you. All riders will receive breakfast and dinner, and the shower trucks are back, as well. Nothing is better than a nice hot shower after a long day’s ride before starting the evening’s activities.

Riders can expect plenty of activities to be offered during the tour. Two-day riders travel up the Little Traverse Wheelway from Charlevoix to Harbor Springs where they will have a gorgeous view of Lake Michigan the entire ride. Six and seven-day riders have many activities to look forward to, as well. On Sunday, July 14, we’ll end in Bellaire where riders can visit the Grass River Natural Area and walk through a mile of boardwalk trails that loop through cedar swamps and aspen and maple forest. On Tuesday, July 16, we’ll spend the night in Indian River which will be hosting its 33rd Annual SummerFest. Then we’ll spend Wednesday and Thursday in Mackinaw City where riders will be given the chance to take the ferry to Mackinac Island. All Michigander riders will receive a discount on Arnold Line Ferry tickets and bike rentals if they wish to take the opportunity to visit Michigan’s beloved island. There are many other activities to do while in Mackinaw City, such as mini golf, swimming at the local beaches, a free, nightly laser show at the Mackinaw Crossings Mall, and touring the trails along the city by bicycle. On the last day we will take the enchanting “tunnel of trees” route back to Harbor Springs. Each evening will have entertainment options for all to enjoy, and we will provide daily shuttles to local attractions at each overnight site.

Of course, one of the biggest attractions of the Michigander is the beautiful scenery riders will see along the way. We’ll travel along the shores of Lake Michigan. The North Central State Trail travels along the pristine waters of the Sturgeon River and Mullett Lake where riders can stop and swim. Many parts of the trail offer a tree canopy overhead and the surrounding miles offer spectacular vistas.

One of the most exciting and important parts of participating in the Michigander is the rewarding opportunity to meet fellow bicycle enthusiasts and other people who understand the value of Michigan trails. Each person and family has their own story about why they love cycling and what they enjoy most about the great outdoors. Here at Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance, we love that the Michigander gives people the opportunity to come together and enjoy everything Michigan trails and towns have to offer. There is no better place to be in the summertime than Michigan. We hope you’ll join us on the 22nd Annual Michigander. We know you’ll find exactly what you’re looking for and more. The tour runs from July 13th-19th, 2013.

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purchase, 2000 Gratiot LLC. We explained the importance of the proposed trail connecting with the Dequindre Cut. We sought a win-win-win solution for the city, the purchaser and trail users.

Since the land had already been appraised, it was too late to request a trail easement, so the city modified the land sale agreement stating that all three parties would work to make the trail connection a reality.

There was initial concern with the land owner. Requiring a trail to bisect the property would scare prospective developers. We suggested they seek developments that could take advantage of the nearby trail access. In return, we would advocate that the city reduce the required on-site parking. If people can get to the property by walking or biking, it should not require as much motor vehicle parking.

That seemed to change the conversation with the purchaser. Reducing the parking minimums means more of the property was developable.

It’s certainly too early to say how the trails will affect this development, but we hope it becomes a model for other trail-oriented development in Detroit.
Now in its eighth year, the Lucinda Means Bicycle Advocacy Day offers a chance for all bicycle-related groups and advocates to unite together with the common goal of making positive changes for Michigan’s bicycling conditions, including on-road and off-road facilities, safety initiatives, and law enforcement. This year’s event on Wednesday, May 22, 2013 from 8 - 2 p.m. is hosted by the League of Michigan Bicyclists, Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance, Michigan Mountain Biking Association, and the Program to Educate All Cyclists. It is a major opportunity to have a big impact on issues that can affect your enjoyment of your sport and active lifestyle.

The event starts with an optional bike parade down Michigan Avenue, Michigan’s “Main Street”, from Michigan State University to the State Capitol, follows with an update on the latest policy issues and the important opportunity to meet with legislators, and then ends with a nutritious and delicious lunch. There is even a post-event bike ride around the Capitol area for those who can stay a little longer to enjoy the day.

Nothing helps more to make positive policy changes than having bicyclists show up from across the state to show how much they care about these issues. Talking to legislators is easier than you think, you will be paired with others for your visits, and the result is you will feel inspired from being engaged in the Michigan democratic process and giving input on issues that are near and dear to your heart. It is an enjoyable day, and you will receive abundant gratitude from your Michigan bicycling organizations for playing an ESSENTIAL role in shaping bicycle policy. For more information and to register see the League of Michigan Bicyclists website: www.lmb.org.