

## Cass County grants funding for first phase of an extension to bring Paul Bunyan Trail into Walker

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Ever since the Minnesota Design Team (MDT) visited Walker last June, the Walker Area Partners (WAP), city of Walker and dozens of volunteers have been studying MDT's recommendations on how to improve the Leech Lake area. One suggestion was to create connector trails into Walker for the Heartland and Paul Bunyan Recreational Trails. Volunteers from a cross section of the community immediately formed a Trail Committee and began working on MDT's ideas.

### Cass Board OKs funding request

At the June 6 Cass County Board meeting, buried in the consent agenda's fine print, was an item that provides funding for the first phase of those critical connections.

Shingobee Township, on behalf of the township and WAP, requested the county allocate \$165,000 from Conservation Trust Fund 73 to construct part 1 of a four-part trail link that will bring bicyclists and snowmobilers to Walker and the Leech Lake area. The request was approved as part of the consent agenda.

The project is tentatively called the Lothrop Extension of the Paul Bunyan Trail with total costs estimated at \$890,000.

### Phase 1

Phase 1 will construct about 2.1 miles of new trail starting at the point on the Paul Bunyan (about 7 miles north of Hackensack) where the trail jogs west through Chippewa National Forest toward the Heartland Trail.

The new segment will end at an abandoned Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT) gravel pit off Highway 371 east of Shingobee Bay. A proposed trail head will be built, with a parking area for unloading bikes and snowmobiles.

The proposed trail will be built on the original railroad grade from its starting point until it crosses Christmas Point Road.

From there it will follow a part of the township road right-of-way to where the existing snowmobile trail crosses the road. At that point, it will enter the gravel pit-future trail head area. The \$165,000 grant should be enough to fund phase 1.

### What is Conservation Fund 73?

Conservation Fund 73 was created in 2000 when the Legislature directed Cass and other counties to sell former state lakeshore lease lots. In Cass, proceeds of about \$4 million were reserved permanently with interest earnings to be used to improve natural resources.

First priority goes to projects that "provide access to presently inaccessible public land." Second priority is for "permanent ownership and development of year-round destination trails," like this project.

Other priorities include individual sewage treatment system audits and purchase of critical habitat.

Projects must be submitted by the affected township or city. The Lothrop Extension runs through Shingobee Township, so they made application.

### Phases 2

Looking ahead, Phase 2 of the trail extension would start in downtown Walker near the Chase Hotel. It would run to the south intersection of County Road (CR) 163 (Dogtown Road) and Trunk Highway 371/200, via Walker Boulevard and a 2,000 foot section of abandoned railroad bed.

This 2.4 mile length is estimated at about \$150,000. This includes some new trail construction and some striping of city streets to create designated bike lanes. Phase 2 also would include a connection to WHA Schools.

### Phases 3 and 4

Phase 3 and 4 of the Lothrop Extension will be a little trickier.

Phase 3 continues the trail from the intersection of CR 163 and Highway 371 to the trail head just off Highway 371 that was built during phase 1.

This 1.7 mile stretch will require the most difficult work, since it runs along heavily-traveled Highway 371-200 near Pumphouse and Shingobee bays. Estimated cost is \$300,000.

Phase 4 would construct a bike-only bridge across Pumphouse Bay of Leech Lake. The bridge would be located close to but separate from the existing bridge that carries vehicle traffic across the bay. That project is estimated at \$275,000.

### Importance of Lothrop Extension

When complete, the Lothrop Extension would provide area and visiting bicyclers and snowmobile riders with a premier trail loop that includes the Heartland, Paul Bunyan and Lothrop systems. It will create a direct link between Walker and Hackensack and points north and south.

"This will lead to expanded visitation to the area and an expansion of the area economy," the proposal states. "The plan is in keeping with recent MDT recommendations for the Walker area that emphasized the value additional recreational trails, especially bike trails, can add to local economic developments."

According to the proposal, the goal of the committee and volunteers is to obtain grant dollars from numerous sources, if necessary, to complete the project.

They believe that ownership and other issues related to trail construction, right of ways, etc., can be resolved and are manageable; and that there is sufficient support from local and state agencies "to ensure that the project will result in a high quality, safe addition to the existing bike and snowmobile trail system.

"The challenge is to locate the first funding agency for the project," they state. "Once this happens, the trail committee believes it can leverage the dollars from that first grant to access additional dollars from other sources."

#### Looking ahead

Steve Bilben of Walker is an active member of the Trail Committee. With funding approved, he says it may be possible to get phase 1 completed this year.

The project is in the hands of the Cass County Land Department. Bilben said Land Commissioner Norm Moody will report to the board in July with details and a time frame.

As for phases 2, 3 and 4, "It all depends on availability of funds," he said. "But if phase 1 can be used as our 'local match,' we can leverage funds from other sources."

June 7, Bilben, WAP chair John Fjelstul, Leech Lake Area Chamber Director Cindy Wannarka and others attended an informative meeting in Bemidji on bike trails, hosted by Mn/DOT.

"Mn/DOT is doing a lot of things to accommodate bicycles," he reported. "We got several ideas for funding sources and how to make application."

A progress report on the bike trail extension and Mn/DOT meeting will be given during the next WAP meeting, June 21 at noon at Hope Lutheran Church in Walker.