

Stearns County could join national trails trend with a proposed extension

BY KIRSTI MAROHN • KMAROHN@STCLOUDTIMES.COM • FEBRUARY 4, 2011

The Lake Wobegon Regional Trail already covers 62 miles of Stearns County, giving bicyclists, walkers and snowmobilers a traffic-free route from Osakis to St. Joseph. But there's a critical missing piece, a 7-mile stretch from St. Joseph to the St. Cloud metro area, that many — including Stearns County parks director Chuck Wocken — would love to see completed.

Wocken is hoping to jump-start efforts to finish those last seven miles, nicknamed the "Saintly Seven." He hopes to take advantage of a transportation corridor that already links the two cities: an active railroad line.

"Rails with trails" projects — where a recreational trail runs adjacent to a railroad — are becoming increasingly popular across the United States. Although they sometimes raise questions of safety, advocates say there is no evidence of an increase in accidents or trespassing along such trails.

Extending the Lake Wobegon Trail into St. Cloud would provide 135 miles of continuous separated blacktop trail, the longest in Minnesota and possibly in the nation, Wocken said. It also would give urban St. Cloud residents a connection to the outdoors, he said. The project has the support of the St. Cloud Area Planning Organization's bike/pedestrian advisory committee.

"It incorporates so many cities together and it just would benefit everyone economically," said Michelle Musser, a planner with the APO. "What I hear most is that's the biggest project that people want in the area."

Growing trend

Rails to trails projects converting abandoned railroads to recreational trails have been common for decades. That's how the Lake Wobegon Trail was developed in the 1990s. But with a renewed interest in train transportation nationwide, fewer railroads are being abandoned, said Eric Oberg, manager of trail development for the Midwest regional office of the nonprofit Rails to Trails Conservancy.

"For the first time in 80 years, there's actually an expansion of rail corridor and use in this country," Oberg said.

As a result, local government officials and planners are turning to active railroad lines as possible routes. In congested urban areas, they are the most natural — and often the only — place to put a trail, Oberg said.

"It really opens up the possibility of greater connectivity throughout metro areas all over the country," he said.

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There are 163 rails with trails projects nationwide, Oberg said, with about 1,230 miles that run along active railroad tracks. In Minnesota, they include the Silver Creek Trail in Rochester, the Lakewalk in Duluth and the Cedar Lake Trail in the Twin Cities. Along some, like the San Clemente Beach Trail in California, bicyclists and pedestrians share a corridor with high-speed trains.

Addressing safety

The concept of people walking and bicycling near railroad tracks might sound hazardous, and railroad companies are often cautious about such projects because of liability concerns. About 500 people per year are killed while trespassing on railroad tracks, according to a 2002 U.S. Department of Transportation study.

But trail experts say rails with trails have resulted in very few incidents and may actually improve safety by giving people a place to walk instead of the tracks.

“We believe these are creating a safer environment within that corridor than without the trail,” Oberg said.

The Three Rivers Park District in the Twin Cities operates about 10-15 miles of trail that run along active railroad tracks, said Boe Carlson, the district’s associate superintendent. One is the popular Cedar Lake Trail, which is being extended in downtown Minneapolis from Target Field to the Mississippi River.

Safety features were added to some parts of the trail when it was built, including fencing or elevation changes to separate it from the railroad tracks, he said.

“We’ve had no issues whatsoever,” Carlson said.

Starting the process

On Feb. 15, Wocken plans to ask the Stearns County board for permission to start negotiating with BNSF Railway for a lease or easement along the existing railroad grade.

He acknowledged that could be a difficult process that could take at least a year.

SRF Consulting Group recently completed a study outlining a proposed trail route starting where the trail now ends at County Road 133 and heading eastward. It would run mainly along the southern side of the railroad to avoid the numerous spurs that branch off the north side. A new bridge would need to be built for the trail to cross the Sauk River.

The 10-foot-wide paved trail would be at least 28 feet from the center of the railroad tracks. A fence would provide a barricade between the two.

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The trail would be open for bicyclists, pedestrians and snowmobiles from St. Joseph to Waite Park. Snowmobiles would be allowed no further east than River's Edge Park in Waite Park.

The trail would join the new Harold P. Nelson Trail along Third Street North in Waite Park, cross Waite Avenue, go under Minnesota Highway 15 and end at 33rd Avenue North. Eventually, Wocken hopes the Wobegon Trail can connect with the Scenic River and Beaver Islands trails.

St. Cloud supports the project, but finding local funding is a challenge, city park director Scott Zlotnik said. The project isn't in the city's capital improvement plan until 2013-14. Wocken is optimistic about the project's chances of getting state or federal grants. He believes funding agencies will like it because it meets many of their goals — connecting existing trails and providing year-round recreation and an option for commuters.

"A decent pedestrian-bike trail could make a lot of difference in getting people out of cars," he said.

One possibility for funding is the Legacy Amendment, the sales-tax increase that provides money for the arts and outdoors. Others include federal or state recreational trail grants or state bonding money, Wocken said.

Oberg hopes the next federal transportation bill will contain funding for trails. The current bill expired in September 2009 and has been temporarily extended by Congress six times.

The defeat of U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar, R-Minn., in the last election was a major loss for trail supporters. As chairman of the House transportation committee, Oberstar helped secure funding for numerous recreational trails in Minnesota.

His loss has spurred trail supporters to work even harder, Oberg said. He said they are talking to new members of Congress on the importance of trails.

"It sharpened everyone's focus," he said.



Jim Otte of Waite Park rides his snowmobile Thursday into St. Joseph on the Lake Wobegon Regional Trail from Albany. Stearns County wants to extend the trail from St. Joseph to St. Cloud. (Jason Wächter, jwachter@stcloudtimes.com)