

Residents irked by town trail project

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
Wednesday, 18 April 2012 18:49

Petitioners cite concerns with safety, littering, intrusions on private property in asking board to change recreation plan

More than a year after the Town of Grafton began constructing a multi-use trail for hiking, dog walking, horseback riding and other recreational activities, the project has raised the ire of some local residents.

Citing concerns with safety, littering and intrusions onto private property, a group of more than 20 residents presented a petition to the Town Board on April 11 asking for changes to the trail plans.

“We just don’t see the need for this trail. It’s a waste of money because people can’t use it the way it’s being described,” said Mary McIntosh, a Lake Shore Road resident who signed the petition.

“There’s got to be a better way to use the land and to spend money.”

McIntosh and other petitioners — most of whom live in Blank’s Crossing, a conservancy subdivision near the first completed segments of trail — asked the board to amend the town’s Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, which includes proposed trail uses.

The board took no action on the petition, instead referring it to the town’s Open Space Commission for consideration at its 7 p.m. meeting Wednesday, April 18, at the Town Hall.

Construction of the trail began in 2010 as part of a plan that calls for it to eventually extend 15 miles through the length of the town. Linked by segments that would be completed in phases, the trail is designed to connect public parks, open spaces and equestrian centers.

Last July, the town unveiled the first segment, a one-mile stretch along the south side of Falls Road between Highway C and Lake Shore Road and south of Falls Road through an easement acquired from Beach Grass LLC. In addition to land easements, parts of the trail lie in road rights of way.

Signs posted along the route indicate the trail is for hiking, horseback riding, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing.

Marjie Tomter, chairperson of the town’s Open Space Commission, said the trail is designed to preserve open space and rural ambience while recognizing the community’s strong equestrian interests. Many of the town’s open spaces exist because of the 20 or so stables and families that keep horses on their properties, she added.

“We’re very much an equestrian community, and the trails are designed to allow use of horses,” Tomter said.

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“Promoting horseback riding and other trail uses can enhance the value of properties. In general, people have been really enthused by this project.”

Tomter said the cost of trail work is not being paid using tax dollars, but through park impact fees from developers and matching money from the Department of Natural Resources Stewardship Fund. Easements have also been donated to the town for the trail and other open-space uses, she noted.

However, petitioners said parts of the trail are unusable because they are too narrow and pass through drainage ditches that frequently collect water. Trail sections are also overgrown and filled with litter, McIntosh said.

“I don’t see many people using it for horseback riding or hiking. It’s too close to the road in many places,” she said. “All it’s attracting right now are kids and garbage.”

McIntosh said she and other petitioners are also concerned about plans calling for easements to provide large parts of the trail route.

“Most of us don’t want people hiking in our back yards,” she said.

Town Chairman Lester Bartel said he and other board members appreciate the petitioners’ concerns but voiced support for the trail project.

“There are some problems, but by and large it’s a good plan,” he said. “I believe in this plan. One of the best ways to preserve open land is to make property more valuable, which is what this has the potential to do.”

Bartel said the town’s outdoor recreation plan supports Ozaukee County’s parks and open space plan, which is also designed to provide recreational opportunities. In lieu of easements, the town is prepared to continue extending the trail along rights of way, he said.

“It’s not an overnight thing, it’s long term,” Bartel said of the project. “I think we could modify it a bit to address the concerns of residents.”

Tomter said the commission is also prepared to consider residents’ requests.

“We don’t want anybody to be unhappy, so we will work with them. But people need to remember that this is a long-term project that is just starting,” she said.

“There are probably going to be a lot of changes along the way.”

McIntosh said she doesn’t expect the town to remove the completed trail segments, but petitioners want town officials to reconsider where and how to construct the route.

Changes in the outdoor recreation and trail plans require commission review and board approval.

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