

Root River Trail Extension - Citizens Exploratory Committee
Meeting minutes.

Date: March 8, 2024

Location: Houston Nature Center, 215 W Plum St, Houston, MN 55943

1. Call To Order, Roll Call

The meeting was called to order at 10:00 a.m. by Larry Kirch, City of La Crescent, Community Development Director.

Members Present: Jay Wheaton - Houston, Ben Horn – Houston County, Jason Kraft – Houston County, Larry Stryker – La Crescent, Jake Olson – Hokah, Dick Wieser – La Crescent (remote)

Members Absent: Kevin Walther – Hokah

Others Present: Kent Skaar, Minnesota DNR, Louise Thompson, MnDNR, Tim Miller, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Hein Bloem, Kris Lee, Brian Lee, Kristina Peterson

2. January 10, 2024 Minutes - Acceptance

Larry Kirch asked if there were any changes or corrections to the minutes. There were no changes or corrections and the minutes were accepted by consensus.

3. Committee and Guest Introductions

Each of the committee members introduced themselves and the community they represent. The DNR and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff members introduced themselves and their role at their agencies. Audience members introduced themselves.

4. Discussion Items -

- a. Minnesota DNR Staff/Committee Discussion
 - i. Corridor Aerial Photo/Ownership Review
 - ii. DNR land ownership-WMAs/SNAs discussion
 - iii. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Ownership
 - iv. MnDOT Ownership
 - v. Possible funding sources
 - vi. RRT Extension Houston to La Crescent DNR 2011 Master Plan
 - vii. Ongoing DNR interaction on project
 - viii. Other

Larry Kirch opened the discussion and reviewed the discussion topics. The items on the agenda were not discussed in the order listed on the agenda, rather, the discussion flowed in a broad discussion that included questions for DNR and U.S. Fish and Wildlife staff. All of

the items were discussed. Kent Skarr said that the state is working on 10 active trail projects. Those projects are typically funded through the state's capital budget process also known as the "bonding bill" funded by the legislature. Kent said that a project starts next week from Harmony to the Iowa border that will connect to trail in Iowa. The DNR is still researching some of the lands that were purchased for Wildlife Management Area (WMA) purposes that have the former rail corridor through the property. Locals involved with the trail effort strongly believe that the original landowners preserved a trail corridor through their property prior to sale to the State of Minnesota. The committee may also want to do their own research at the county recorder's office.

Kent said that generally, WMA does not allow state recreation trails through the property. A trail could skirt the edge of a property and the source of funds that originally purchased the property had to be taken into consideration. Any trail through a Scientific Natural Area (SNA) is very highly unlikely. Again, it is not impossible, but highly unlikely depending on the resource and what is being protected and whether a trail directly impacts the resource or if the trail was at the edge of a property and avoided the resource. Avoidance of the property and resource is the first order of business. In discussing this with U.S Fish and Wildlife property, the same is true. There is a trail up in Winona that is being reviewed and that trail is at the edge of the refuge, not through the middle of it. It is connecting the Great River State Trail in Wisconsin with the Flyway Trail. There is a public process that must be undertaken to propose and evaluate and approve or deny a proposal. In the case near La Crescent and Hokah, federal land is along Highway 16 and Highway 26 and County Road 7. There were also questions on lands that have NRCS easements on them or CRP enrolled acres. Lands owned by the state are managed by different divisions within the DNR and Parks and Trails managed lands are different than those managed by Forestry.

Kent said that it may be worth it to evaluate the alternatives and propose something that is the preferred alternative that can then be evaluated for feasibility with individual property owners.

Trail projects are funded with federal Transportation Alternatives (TA) funds, several trail programs through the Minnesota DNR and federal trail grants as well as bonding bill funding.

Kent reiterated that the DNR can be supportive and will assist but they can't do a lot until there is funding for the trail. Kent reiterated that group that have regular meetings make more progress. The trail efforts are locally led and not led by the DNR. Kent also reiterated that that DNR has limited funding for acquisition if there are willing sellers. The DNR only works on a willing seller

Kent offered that the 2011 trail plan is the approved plan and meets all statutory requirements and that there is no need to update that plan. The committee can create a document under the MOA that provides the current status of the committee's work.

Larry Kirch rolled out the aerial photo of the corridor that he colored with different ownerships of state and federal lands only with different colors. Orange is for federal land, purple is for Minnesota DOT Land and green is for Minnesota DNR land that is part of a WMA. Larry Kirch stated that he had to finish coloring the map as he did not include the SNA lands further west. Minnesota DOT has both right-of-way along the highways and also lands recently purchased along County Highway 21 that are for wetland mitigation purposes. Larry Kirch will update the coloring on the map for the next meeting.

Discussion occurred on whether it was productive to have preferred route or alternative since there are now so many acres owned by state and federal agencies. Although the state no longer uses eminent domain, there remains a great mistrust of the DNR from 30 years ago. Also, it was expressed that landowners may have reservations in selling their land for a trail, when the state itself wont or may not be able to.

- b. Memorandum of Agreement – “Trail Plan”
 - i. Draft plan, engaging stakeholders
 - ii. SMART, Root River Trail Towns, Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota “Friends Group”

Larry Kirch walked through the draft plan that was emailed to the committee members and he handed out a copy at the meeting to all attendees. Larry Kirch provided a broad overview of the document. The trail plan will be more thoroughly discussed at the April meeting. Some of the discussion pertained to naming the document in a way so it is not confused with the 2011 DNR Root River State Trail Plan. Some members said they had some ideas for edits to certain sections. Larry Kirch stated that he would take any comments before the next meeting. Once the plan is vetted through the committee, it would be presented to the three cities and the Houston County Board of Supervisors. This might happen in June. Larry Kirch noted that the City of La Crescent is a member of the Southeast Minnesota Association of Regional Trails and also the national Rails to Trails Conservancy, and the Minnesota Parks and Trail Council. Larry Kirch has reached out to the Root River Trail Towns group several times without answer via their on-line email address. Perhaps others can contact other trail towns members. Larry Kirch is suggesting that Hokah and La Crescent join that organization. As noted in the next item, perhaps a trail has feasibility more so from La Crescent to Hokah in the next five years and longer from Hokah to Houston depending on the ownership interest and answers to whether a trail corridor was preserved on state-owned lands.

- c. Update on La Crescent’s MnDOT/City Active Transportation Action Plan – MnTH 16 to Miller’s Corner – Adopted on December 11th
 - i. Additional Technical Assistance from MnDOT - status
 - ii. Transportation Alternatives Grant – \$1,040,650 Federal request, multi-use path on S Chestnut to Hwy 16 and 14th Street and Kistler Court MHP – not awarded
 - iii. MnDOT State Funded IJJA Technical Assistance Program - \$30,000 - scope

As previously mentioned, the City approved the MnDOT funded Active Transportation Action Plan back in December. Larry Kirch submitted a Transportation Alternatives grant for a trail along south Chestnut from the base of the Wagon Wheel bridge to S 14th Street then to the Kistler Manufactured Home Park. The grant was not funded. Projects in Wabasha/Kellog and Goodhue County were funded. The city is pursuing getting an understanding of why the grant was not ranked very high. The city is finalizing the scope of work for an IJA Technical Assistance grant for \$30,000 that the city received from MnDOT. With the TA grant not being funded the scope is expanding to include the entire corridor from the Wagon Wheel Bridge to Miller’s Corner. The purpose of the grant is to position the city for future federal applications. Larry Kirch will provide updates at future meetings and this Active Transportation Action Plan is referenced in the MOA “trail plan.”

5. RRTE-CEC membership status – City of Houston

The City of Houston still has not appointed a new member. The committee recommended that the city’s representative on the Root River Trail Towns be asked to serve on this committee. Jay Wheaton stated he would think about some possible candidates.

6. Public Comment – None

7. Next Meeting – April 3rd, 2024 at 3:30 p.m. – Hokah Fire Department

8. Lunch and RRT Corridor Tour – Houston to Hokah to La Crescent

With the length of the meeting and discussion along with other obligations of the participants, the tour did not occur. The meeting was adjourned and many attendees ate a quick lunch.

9. Adjourn – the meeting was adjourned at 11: 55 a.m.

Meeting minutes drafted by Larry Kirch, City of La Crescent, Community Development Director