

Root River State Trail Extension Houston-Hokah-La Crescent



Root River Trail Extension - Citizen Exploratory Committee
Adopted Trail Plan
June 12, 2024



HOUSTON COUNTY
MINNESOTA



Growing from River to Ridge

Houston, Minnesota

The Best of Bluff Country

Root River Trail Extension
Houston-Hokah-La Crescent
Trail Plan

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Appendix A – Memorandum of Agreement to Jointly Cooperate

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- Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota
- Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota
- SMART – Southeast Minnesota Association of Regional Trails
- Minnesota Department of Transportation – Active Transportation Program
- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources State Parks and Trails

Plan Partners

There are multiple organizations and entities that contributed to the formulation of this Trail Plan. The primary plan partners are Houston County and the cities of Houston, Hokah, and La Crescent. Each of the entities contributed to the extent they were able with Houston County and the City of La Crescent being able to commit staff resources to the planning effort. All the entities contributed meeting facilities and were committed to exploring the possible extension of the Root River Trail by entering into a formal Memorandum of Agreement to Jointly Cooperate.

Executive Summary

The Memorandum of Agreement to Jointly Cooperate (MOA) signed by Houston County and the cities of Houston, Hokah and La Crescent allowed for the creation of an eight member citizens committee with two representatives from each governmental organization. The MOA called for the creation of a trail plan which would be drafted by the committee. The committee of citizens discussed the name of the committee and came up with the Root River Trail Extension – Citizens Exploratory Committee (RRTE-CEC). The committee had no illusions that a trail would ever be built but that one was generally a desirable thing for the county, the three cities and for southeast Minnesota. The committee specifically used the word “Exploratory” to underscore the 40 years of previous efforts and that if a trail was a certainty, it would have been completed already.

This trail plan is an exploration of the previous planning efforts and a path forward for the possible extension of the Root River State Trail. In reviewing the previous three master planning documents, the most recent in 2011 regarding the specific extension from Houston to La Crescent, the committee noted that an ad hoc group met for 12 years before becoming part of the County Economic Development Authority as a subcommittee. That subcommittee met from 2004 to 2010 when a more formal master planning process was undertaken in 2011 which resulted in a master plan that was approved and one that meets the statutory requirements in Minnesota.

The RRTE-CEC met for a little over a year to formulate a process for preparing the “trail plan.” The trail plan was open-ended under the MOA as to its content and format. The committee determined that the trail plan, under the MOA, need not take 12 years or even seven years and that the 2011 Root River State Trail Extension Master Plan Houston to La Crescent, 2011 was the approved plan and that a committee trail plan would simply augment that master plan. The trail plan updates what has transpired over the last 12-13 years and provides community members and state and federal agencies and other stakeholders with a renewed path forward with the most likely action that the trail would be pursued in phases.

This trail plan acknowledges and confirms that the 2011 Master Plan is approved and there is no need to recreate that plan. The next step for the communities is to move forward on the implementation of the 2011 Master Plan by having conversations with landowners and working in partnership with the three communities and the county.

This plan does not indicate which segment of an extension to the Root River State Trail would be built first, just that there is a concerted effort over the long term to see the project completed. Trail development and construction can take decades. For example, the recently completed Wagon Wheel Trail in La Crescent took 21 years from conception to completion. The final segment was the construction of the bicycle-pedestrian bridge over U.S. Highways 14/61 in 2023. For the Root River State Trail, the original land acquisition from the railroad took place in the late 1970s was born in controversy and concern. Discussions regarding completing the Root River State Trail have gone on for more than 40 years. The RRTE-CEC firmly believes that connecting communities within a region is good for the communities and for visitors.

Introduction

The cities of La Crescent, Hokah and Houston have long desired to connect their communities utilizing the Root River State Trail. Houston County has supported the trail extension in a variety of ways over the years as well. The Minnesota DNR finalized a Trail Master Plan in 2011 for the extension of the trail. However, completion of a trail has been complicated for a variety of reasons including wetlands, floodplain, habitat restoration areas, wildlife management areas, MnDOT right-of-way, railroad right-of-way, federal and state ownership, private ownership, and others. A model for completing the existing Root River State Trail was through a Joint Powers Agreement amongst cities in Fillmore County.

The City of La Crescent and Houston County have allowed their staff to co-lead the coordination of trail planning efforts. The Root River Trail Extension-Citizens Exploratory Committee works alongside La Crescent's Community Development Director and Houston County's EDA Director. An eight-member citizen committee makes up the RRTE-CEC and represents the three cities and county all working toward developing a plan and strategy to complete the trail.

The value of the Root River State Trail to the region as a recreation corridor and economic driver is well known. In the short time since the opening of the Wagon Wheel Trail Bridge in La Crescent, there has been a visible and dramatic increase in people biking and walking in the community. The business community has confirmed that the increased bicycle and pedestrian use has had a positive impact on their businesses. Through careful planning and project management, it is hoped that an agreed upon Root River Trail corridor can be identified and pursued over a number of years. **The committee has stressed emphatically that any property acquisition or property interest be handled entirely through a willing seller/willing buyer approach.**

This "trail plan" is a requirement of the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to Jointly Cooperate executed by and between the County and the three cities. More information on the MOA is included in other sections of this document and a copy of the fully executed MOA is attached as an exhibit to this trail plan. The content of the trail plan was undefined by the MOA. The RRTE-CEC determined that there was not a need to recreate the 2011 DNR Trail Master Plan as that plan meets the Minnesota statutory requirements for preparation of state trail master plans. This planning document summarizes previous planning efforts, describes alternative routes within the corridor as well as provides an evaluation and recommendations for trail routing options. The trail plan presents options for funding the trail and working with property owners who are interested in seeing the trail come to fruition.

The idea of a trail extending from Fountain to La Crescent has been around for more than 40 years. The trail exists in Houston heading west. Positive impacts and negative feelings of the trail are well established. Previous trail planning efforts have included much public outreach over the last four decades.

This plan reaffirms the strong commitment to the willing seller/willing buyer approach to working cooperatively with any property owner who is interested in working with the three cities and county to bring a trail to reality. The trail plan also outlines the next steps for moving the plan forward.

Exploratory Committee Origin/Purpose/Function

The most recent effort to explore the possibility of extending the Root River Trail began in 2020 with a meeting between the City of La Crescent, Houston County and the Minnesota DNR. At that meeting there was discussion of past efforts and the best way to move forward. The outcome of the meeting was that a Joint Powers Agreement should be drafted and pursued by the communities. The City of La Crescent offered to commit staff resources to the project.

Tragically, the City of La Crescent's Community Development Director, Terry Erickson, passed away in a mountain biking accident in Winona in June of 2021. Terry's passing was a loss to the Winona community, Southeast Minnesota, La Crescent, and this project. Terry was involved for several years in La Crescent and assisted the city in many projects including obtaining funding for the Wagon Wheel Trail. With the loss of Terry, the Root River Trail extension project stalled until mid-2022.

In 2022, Houston County and the City of La Crescent began discussions to create a Joint Powers Agreement. The discussions were primarily between the County Attorney and City Attorney. The result of the discussions was the formulation of a Memorandum of Agreement to Jointly Cooperate. The MOA was executed in September of 2022 by the City of Houston, City of Hokah, City of La Crescent and Houston County. In October of 2022 each entity appointed two members to serve on a committee to create a "trail plan." The committee began meeting monthly in the Fall of 2022.

Early on, the committee reviewed the MOA and conducted a tabletop workshop to create a game plan for creating the trail plan. The committee agreed to work by consensus, did not create a chair or vice chair and did not create bylaws. The committee felt that time was better spent on the trail plan rather than administrative process. The task at hand was the trail plan. The committee agreed to name the committee the Root River Trail Extension – Citizen Exploratory Committee. The committee chose that name because the committee felt that the creation of a trail was not a forgone conclusion and that the committee was simply exploring the completion of a trail system. That exploration would come through drafting a trail plan.

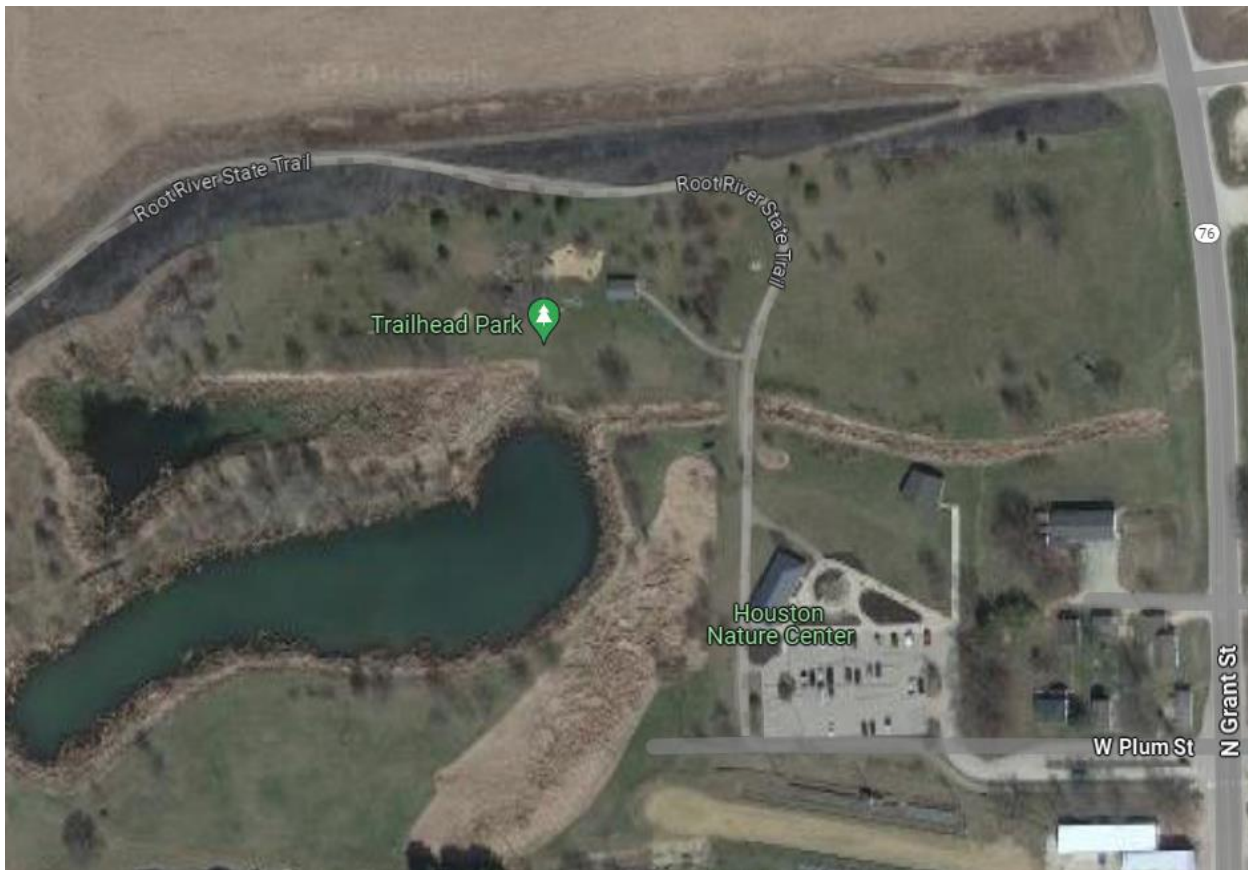
The committee approved a Project Charter which spelled out the role of each community, the role of the committee and the role of staff. The committee next worked on a Fact Sheet and the City of La Crescent created a web page on the city's site to post information and resources for the project. The Committee spent several meetings looking at aerial photos and ownership information in the trail corridor. After meeting for approximately 18 months, the committee decided on the table of contents of the trail plan and to have staff draft a planning document. This document serves as the "trail plan" that is a requirement of the MOA.

History-Background of Trail/ Previous Trail Planning Efforts

The Root River State Trail was authorized in 1971. In 1979, the Chicago, Milwaukee, Saint Paul and Pacific Railroad was abandoned and therefore the trail planning could be undertaken. The DNR ultimately acquired 49 miles of the 100-mile corridor. Fifteen of those 49 miles were designated as a Scientific and Natural Area. Thirty-five miles were made into the Root River State Trail from Fountain to the Money Creek Woods. The balance of the abandoned rail corridor was transferred to the abutting property owners.

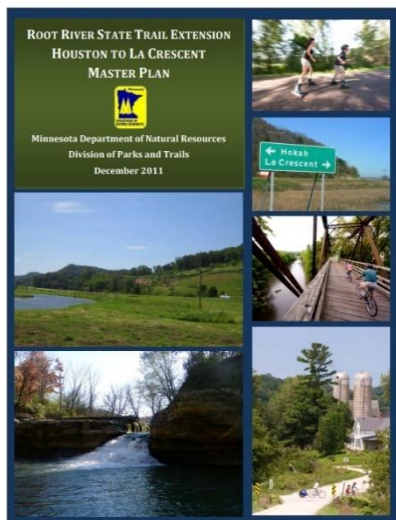
A 6.7-mile extension of the Root River State Trail to Houston was made part of a subsequent planning effort in 1998, nearly 27 years after the original authorization of the trail (Houston Extension of the Root River State Trail Master Plan, 1998). The trail was constructed in 1999 to the Houston Trailhead Park and Houston Nature Center. This extension brought the trail to a total of 41.7 miles in length and when added to the Harmony-Preston Valley trail brought the total trail length to 59.2 miles.

The Root River State Trail was constructed where the state kept ownership and was not completed east of Houston where the property was transferred to abutting property owners.



Root River State Trail Extension Master Plan – Houston-to La Crescent, 2011

In December of 2011, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources approved the Root River State Trail Extension Master Plan. The master plan fulfilled the requirements of Minnesota Statutes, Section 86A.09 for the administration of the extension of the Root River State Trail. The plan covered the distance from the existing trail terminus in Houston to La Crescent. The trail extension was authorized in Minnesota Statutes, Section 85.015, Subdivision 7 in 1992 as one part of the Blufflands Trail System. As noted in the plan, groups in Houston County began working with the Minnesota DNR in 1992 to extend the trail. In 2004, the informal group was formed as a committee under the county's Economic Development Authority (EDA). That committee (the Houston County Trails Subcommittee) met for five years. The 2011 planning process and resulting plan evolved from that 5-year effort by the Houston County Trails Subcommittee and was folded into the Master Plan.



The 2011 Master Plan for the extension of the Root River State Trail consists of seven chapters. Chapters are devoted to the planning process, purpose and scope; potential trail uses; trail alignment in segments/subsegments; trail management, natural resources, history and cultural resources; and implementation. This document intentionally does not try to recreate the existing approved Master Plan and the reader is encouraged to peruse the 2011 Master Plan which can be found on the City of La Crescent's RRTE-CEC webpage as well as on the Minnesota DNR trails website.

Throughout the last forty years, there has been both positive and negative viewpoints to the extension of the trail system. As the plan notes "Concerns were addressed regarding many issues with trails on private property: liability, trail maintenance, wildlife

management, hunting, and safety issues. Other topics included avoiding displacement of rare species and whether a trail would bring economic benefits to the area." The central issues remain, trails on private property, liability, hunting, trespass, and safety. Displacement of rare species or more aptly, habitat loss, will be mitigated as it is a requirement of any trail construction.

The economic benefit of trails is undisputed. Minnesota now has 588.5 miles of paved state trails. Nation-wide there are 25,000 miles of these types of trails with another 9,000 miles being planned. A coast-to-coast 3,700-mile-long Great American Rail Trail is coming closer to reality. Communities are still clamoring for trail extensions to their communities. Rampant crime does not happen on the trails. Community members who did not want the trail eventually say that they were wrong. A good example is a high school class-project video from the community of Lanesboro where an outspoken trail critic, comes around to facts not fears. The trail is a good thing for their community.

How does a private property owner then co-exist with a trail and avoid liability, possible trespass issues and safety concerns? The answer lies along those 588.5 miles of existing paved trails, 41.7 of which are in the Root River Valley. The issues are real but the answer is that, the issues are manageable or not as

bad as feared. The 212-page Root River Trail Master Plan from 1983 also provides a detailed illustration of the careful consideration that was given to abutting property owners to evaluate trail impacts to properties along the trail. The 1978 plan gives ample illustration how the state worked closely with private property owners to relocate trail sections to both the benefit of the property owner and trail user.

As the 2011 Master Plan states, the recommended trail uses are the same as the rest of the Root River State Trail and include; bicycling, hiking, walking, running, X-country skiing, and similar uses. These user groups are recreation enthusiasts and good stewards of outdoor recreation facilities. Hunting will be allowed except where regulated by community ordinances. Snowmobiling will be allowed between Houston and Miller's Corner. Snowmobiling is generally not viewed as compatible with winter silent sports like cross country skiing, snowshoeing, fat tire biking, walking and could only be done if speeds were regulated and policed. Horseback riding will be accommodated on portions of the trail where sufficient right-of-way is available.

Public Outreach – 2023-24

The extension of the Root River State Trail to Hokah and La Crescent had its origins in 1992 with a Houston County subcommittee of the Economic Development Authority in 2005. That subcommittee met for approximately five years. Meetings were posted and open to the public. The 2011 master planning process for the extension of the Root River State Trail had two public meetings to gain input on the master plan. The summary of public comments is included in the appendix to the 2011 master plan.

2011 Root River State Trail Extension Houston to La Crescent Master Plan Process Chart

Trail Planning Process Chart

Who's Involved

- Houston County EDA Trails Subcommittee
- National Park Service
- US Fish and Wildlife Service
- University of Minnesota
- DNR Resource Managers
- Community Leaders
- Scenic Byways
- Elected Officials
- Other Agencies
- Citizens
- Adjacent Landowners
- Trail Users

The 2011 approved DNR approved master plan involved the list of communities, agencies, community leaders, landowners and the general public presented in the chart.

Under the MOA for this Trail Plan, it was understood that public outreach continues to be a basic requirement of any trail planning process. Early in the planning process, during a roundtable discussion, the following stakeholders were identified: Houston County, the three cities, townships, landowners, Southeast Minnesota Association of Regional Trails (SMART), Minnesota Parks and Trails Council, Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota, Harmony Trails Commission (Gabby Kinneberg, President – Preston), Root River Trail Towns, Bluff Country Scenic Byway, MnDNR, MnDOT, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Rails to

Trails Conservancy, CPKC Rail, snowmobile clubs, landowners, Houston County residents, County Engineer, La Crescent Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, Houston Chamber Commerce, Houston Nature Center, National Owl Center.

The City of La Crescent created a resource page on the city's website under the City Government Tab, and under the Root River Trail Extension-Citizens Exploratory Committee: [Root River Trail Exploratory Committee \(cityoflacrescent-mn.gov\)](http://cityoflacrescent-mn.gov) for the work of the committee and a repository of information related to the Root River State Trail. Information includes the agendas and minutes from the committee meetings, copies of the 1983, 1988 and 2011 DNR Master Plans, the MOA, a Frequently Asked Questions information sheet, and committee member information.

The draft and final Trail Plan will be posted on the committee webpage. Public input from the general public and stakeholders will be summarized in the document. The MOA requires that the Trail Plan be presented to the County Board and the city councils of the three cities.

Alternative Routing

The 2011 Root River State Trail Master Plan to extend the state trail from Houston to Hokah to La Crescent broke the 18 miles of possible trail into five segments. The segments include connections between La Crosse and La Crescent and connections within La Crescent as Segment 1. The Wagon Wheel Trail from the West Channel Bridge/Sportsman Landing to downtown La Crescent took over 21 years to complete with multiple funding sources and years of grant writing. Segment 2 is the segment between the Wagon Wheel Trail/Bridge and Miller's Corner. The master plan recommended the trail be placed between Highway 26 and the Kansas City and Southern Rail Road (now CPKC) tracks along the east side of the highway.

The City of La Crescent has completed four phases of the Wagon Wheel Trail and the City of La Crosse, with federal money, is building a bicycle-pedestrian bridge across the West Channel of the Mississippi providing a safer and more direct route from/to Wisconsin's state trail system and La Crosse's city trail system. The City of La Crescent completed an Active Transportation Action Plan in 2023 to assist in determining a safe route from the Wagon Wheel Bridge to Miller's Corner. That plan confirmed the route identified in the 2011 Master Plan, a route between the highway and the rail road tracks with a separated path. The city then sought funding at the end of 2023 to build a portion of the path from the Wagon Wheel trail to S. 14th Street with federal Transportation Alternatives (TA) funds. That project was not funded but the city will continue to seek funding for a multi-use path to Miller's Corner. Segment 2 can be broken down into one or two phases depending on funding availability and coordination between the CPKC railroad and the County, City of La Crescent and the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

Segment 3, between Miller's Corner and Hokah, does not have a preferred trail alignment identified. The three options remain the same, use of the former rail corridor for most of the route as well as Minnesota Highways 16 or 26/County Road 7 in the state or county right-of-way. Close coordination with Houston County, the state DOT, property owners, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the DNR will be needed to acquire and construct a trail. Connections within Hokah are part of Segment 3.

Segment 4, connects Hokah and Mound Prairie. The most desirable, from a trail user perspective and natural area perspective is to use the abandoned rail corridor. Segment 5, lies between Mound Prairie and Houston. Potential alignments include the general corridor of the abandoned rail corridor, to highways and along the Root River.

As noted in many other sections of this trail plan, working cooperatively with landowners, local government and state and federal agencies is a necessary component of finalizing any of the segments. Routing will be determined by evaluating the 2011 Master Plan and informal conversations and formal discussions with all the property owners whether private or publicly owned. The challenge here is to align the desire by some to create a complete trail system and landowners seeing a benefit. Benefits could be looked at in terms of health and wellness, social connections and economic impact. Impacts or imposition to landowners include possible trespassing, loss of usable land, intrusion near homes, among other perceived or real negative impacts.

Method for Acquiring Property

At the outset of the committee meetings, the committee participants unanimously agreed that any property acquisitions would be done without condemning property. The committee was adamant in this fundamental parameter or principle. The committee reflected on the past use of condemnation in the Root River Valley to acquire property and the committee unequivocally rejected the notion that condemnation would be used. While condemnation is typically associated with government overreach, there may be tax advantages to a property owner whose property is condemned in terms of acquiring a replacement property. Regardless, the committee decided to take this off the table and any property acquisitions for trail purposes would only be done with willing buyer/willing seller approach.

The committee also discussed the history of property acquisition discussions/activities in the Root River Trail corridor. In previous discussions, if there was opposition to the acquisition of a piece of property in the corridor, it seemed to put the entire trail project on indefinite hold. The committee determined that if there were willing sellers in the overall corridor, the acquisition should move forward. The completion of a trail will never occur if the project is stopped because of 1 or 10 property owners not wishing to participate. For example, if there were 100 parcels to acquire and 10 property owners were not interested in selling, the committee stated that the other 90 properties should be acquired through the willing seller/willing buyer approach. In this way, the committee felt that alternative properties such as road right-of-way would then be pursued for acquisition. Just as there is highway right-of-way used from Houston to Rushford, that may have to be the case with segments from Houston to La Crescent.

Typically, property acquisition starts with a conversation. Is a property owner interested or not? Perhaps they are not interested in selling now but maybe someday? Or yes, I will sell if my neighbor sells or, sure, if you can get that strip from DOT, I will work with you. If you can go around at the edge of my field, then I will think about it. Regardless of the positive or negative interest, an outright purchase may not be necessary. Maybe the owner will give a right of first refusal that would give the buying entity the first right to match an offer if the property is ever sold. Property owners also have the ability to donate or sell permanent easements for trail segments. An easement or outright sale of land gives the property owner assurance that they are not liable for accidents or injuries on the trail as an easement can provide for recreational immunity to the underlying property owner. Each property owner has to decide for themselves if they are a willing seller or not. There may be tax benefits for an owner who donates property or donates an easement for trail purposes.

Readers of this Trail Plan should know that the Root River Trail Extension – Citizens Exploratory Committee would like to hear from landowners of their interest or non-interest in selling a parcel or selling an easement for trail purposes.

The committee discussed ways to purchase or obtain an “interest” in a property.

- 1) Granting a Right of First Refusal to a buyer
- 2) Entering into an Offer to Purchase with a buyer
- 3) Executing a Purchase Agreement with a buyer
- 4) Granting a permanent easement to a buyer

The actual transfer of the fee title to a property is typically done via a Warranty Deed or Quit Claim Deed. Some land is purchased/sold on a “Land Contract or Contract for Deed” where the transaction is completed once the final payment is made.

As part of the discussion of ways to acquire property, the following general real estate transfer methods were briefly mentioned. The project is a very long way out from acquiring any property and it was noted that the Trail Plan had to be approved by the County and the three cities before the project moves along. There is no funding for acquiring any property at present and one of the Trail Plan’s next steps is the identification of possible funding sources for the acquisition and construction of the trail.

Trail Implementation Funding Options

The 2011 master plan does not provide a list of possible funding sources but simply states that “State trails are typically funded through a variety of sources that include state bonding appropriations, federal Transportation Enhancement (TE) funds and federal trail grants.” The landscape for funding has improved in recent years with the advent of Federal Transportation Alternatives (TA) funds, and federal discretionary transportation programs such as RAISE funds, Safe Streets 4 All funds, and Connected Communities funding. Additionally, the Federal Highway Administration has launched the Active Transportation Infrastructure Investment Program (ATIIP) which funds projects that have to have a minimum application of \$15 Million dollars.

For many state trails, the most likely source for trails has been through the State of Minnesota Capital Budget process either as a request by state agencies or local government. This funding source is known as state bonding appropriations or “State Bonding Bill” funding approved by the state legislature every other year. The Minnesota DNR also has several trail grant programs and grants for park improvements that could be used in a city park for trail head improvements. Federal trail grants (through the MnDNR) are now available through the reauthorization of Land and Water Conservation Fund (LAWCON), funding which hadn’t been funded for over a decade.

With funding for trails being a competitive process along with funding constraints, it is likely that land acquisition for the trail will take several years. Funding for the construction of a trail will take multiple years and will very likely have to be done in phases. Most trails now are funded in phased segments as projects are generally too big to fund all at one time. This will be the case with the extension of the Root River State Trail. The trail can logically be broken down into phases with funding coming over multiple years.

The committee will collectively work to seek funding for land acquisition and construction over the next several years.

Trail Plan - Next Steps

The draft plan will be presented to the governing bodies of Houston County and the cities of Houston, Hokah, and La Crescent. Once that step is complete, it is recommended that Houston County, the City of Houston, the City of Hokah, and the City of La Crescent enter into a Joint Powers Agreement. This is the method that is most commonly (routinely) used in Minnesota by many communities who wish to work together to complete a multi-use recreational trail between their communities.

The 2011 Master Plan outlines nine next steps.

1. Complete the master plan.
2. Explore feasibility of each alignment (alignment within each segment).
3. Initial informal landowner contact.
4. Formal landowner contact; complete acquisition process.
5. Seek funding.
6. Trail engineering and design.
7. Construction on one or more segments, while the processes of negotiation and design continue on others.
8. Ongoing maintenance and stewardship.
9. Orientation and Interpretation (signage and kiosks).

Some of these next steps are complete while others are part of the design and construction phase and considerations for long-term maintenance and installation of wayfinding and cultural and natural resource informational kiosks. Item #1 is complete. Items #2, 3, and 4 are really one step. The feasibility of any trail alignment begins and ends with landowner conversations. Item 5, funding can be sought for land acquisition now and funding for construction can be applied for as property is secured for a particular phase. For item #6, this item tends to precede funding as funders want to see that preliminary engineering and design is already complete for a particular phase. Items 7 and 9 are typically done in tandem as construction must include signage for safety and funding can be sought for installation of wayfinding and kiosks for interpretive signage. Ongoing maintenance and stewardship (Item #8) will primarily be a state responsibility (DNR/DOT) for portions of a trail segment that are owned and operated by the state, whereas there may be some trail segments that are city or county maintained.

Other recommendations to keep the plan moving forward include:

- Continue regular meetings of the RRTE-CEC under the Joint Powers Agreement
- Proactively support La Crescent's efforts to obtain Federal funding to complete a trail segment from the Wagon Wheel Bridge to Miller's Corner
- Work on steps 2,3, 4, and 6 while seeking funding
- Continue to engage with all divisions within the Minnesota DNR, MnDOT and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- La Crescent and Hokah should become a member of the Root River Trail Towns organization
- Each community should join and maintain membership in the Southeastern Minnesota Association of Regional Trails (SMART)
- Each community should join and maintain membership in the Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota

Appendix A
Memorandum of Agreement to Jointly Cooperate