

Volunteers carry load on rail trails in Michigan

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Dick Granse is a good example of constructive, grassroots volunteerism. Just a few weeks ago, the 64-year-old doctor from Belmont was busy patching potholes and pavement and carting away blown-down trees.

It's not like he doesn't have anything better to do. But Granse has a passion. It's called the White Pine Trail.

Now that budgets for state park trails have declined, its care has become a virtual crusade for him and many others. Granse is one of the founders of the Friends of the White Pine Trail. The 400-member group has committed to mowing the entire 92-mile trail from Comstock Park to Cadillac, wherever its community partners like Rockford or Plainfield Township are not doing the job.

It was but a few years ago that the very same group raised more than \$100,000 to help fund bridge construction over West River Drive. But where fund-raising and cooperating with state government was once job enough, they now need to get involved with heavy lifting.

Volunteer labor

You may recall that two weeks ago, in a column about a proposal to create a state tax checkoff for state parks, I wrote that volunteer labor will play an increasingly large role in the upkeep of Michigan state parks. Right or wrong, it's the way things are.

"We now have about 2,000 hours in on the trail this year," said Granse, whose recent efforts helped prepare the trail for 1,100 cyclists who were arriving for the 13th annual Michigander ride which concluded last weekend.

That ride, sponsored by the Michigan Rails to Trails Conservancy in Lansing, started in Evart and went 328 miles to Big Rapids, Cadillac, Beulah, Traverse City, Harbor Springs and Mackinac. Nearly 100 miles of the route was made up of rail trails like the White Pine Trail.

"It was amazing how many people were out biking in the towns we went through," said Nancy Krupiarz, state director for the conservancy. "These are towns where we didn't see so many biking before the trails were built."

The value of rail trail conversions is incontrovertible -- just look at the state's obesity problem. They provide an outlet for recreation in urban areas, a corridor into quiet rural areas and boost area economies.

Consolidating resources

It's a shame the DNR has had to cast off these trails to reckon with budget realities. State park officials are consolidating their resources at the more traditional parks like Hoffmaster, Ludington and Hartwick Pines.

One can argue that the vacuum created by this staffing contraction creates great opportunities for local government. And it does. But there are more miles of the White Pine than are communities by far. More miles of maintenance than it is reasonable to expect volunteers to assume.

Paving on the trail has come to a screeching halt. Cedar Springs has agreed to contribute \$10,000 toward the local match needed to get federal money to pave the trail from Russell Road north to Sand Lake. Nelson Township will also contribute \$5,000. But that brings the total to only \$46,000 of the \$125,000 the Friends are trying to raise. Another 50 to 60 trail miles

remain to be paved. Which is why Dick Granse hopes that the legislation proposed to create a tax checkoff for state parks will provide earmarked fund for linear state parks.

"Something really needs to be done," he said. "We need to see more (state) money coming to linear trails."

While the tax checkoff is expected to be discussed in the House this fall, the idea of earmarking funds for linear state parks is a good one. Volunteers are clearly getting involved. Communities along the trail are, too. So why not the state, who did after all, build them.

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