

# County OKs licensing pact for interurban trail

By Amy Smith Union staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, February 11, 2015 9:45 am

JEFFERSON — The Jefferson County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday approved a licensing agreement with Wisconsin Electric Power Co. for the purpose of constructing a segment of an interurban bicycle trail that would connect Watertown and Oconomowoc.

After almost six years of negotiations, Parks Department director Joe Nehmer said, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and Wisconsin Electric, doing business as We Energies, were able to come to an agreement this month on a 15-year lease, allowing the rest of the project to move forward.

The Jefferson County Parks Department plans to place a recreational trail for hiking, biking and cross-country skiing on a right-of-way owned by We Energies. The 11-mile trail would be located between Humboldt Street in Watertown and the City of Oconomowoc. The off-road, paved trail connection will be built on the former interurban rail line, which at one time connected Watertown to Milwaukee.

The American Transmission Company operates the electric transmission facilities on the corridor. Previous meetings between the two parties made it clear that all sides favored a recreational use for the land; however, some concerns were voiced about the cost of repairs to electrical lines running through the area after the trail had been constructed.

Negotiations between the DNR and power company hit a snag when the state agency attempted to seek a license giving it use of the land, however. The DNR requested a 25-year agreement for the land, but We Energies said its policy is to offer municipalities a five-year renewable lease for recreational purposes.

Nehmer noted that he is aware of many surrounding counties that have entered into 15-year agreements with We Energies without any issues.

Before approving the agreement, Supervisor Amy Rinard questioned the need for the board's approval before the Parks Department has raised the funds for the project.

The cost of developing the entire trail, from Waterloo west to the county line, is proposed through available state grants. However, Nehmer has said that most grant awards would not consider the project for funding before the entire project area was available as a package.

“We would like to have this in hand to be able to say, ‘Yes, we are ready to go,’” Nehmer said.

The Parks Department also has approved the allocation of the remaining Carol Liddle bequest funds to be used toward the proposed interurban bike trail.

The project carries an estimated pricetag of \$1.4 million.

This year, a \$700,000 DNR grant was awarded to the City of Platteville rather than Jefferson County after that city was able to pledge \$200,000 toward its project.

Nehmer said the Parks Department hopes that with the pledge of \$81,000 from the Carol Liddle funds, the county will be successful in acquiring the grant in 2015.

With the backing of the grant, the county hopes to fund- raise the remaining \$500,000 that would be needed to complete the trail without using any county tax levy dollars.

“The entire proposal is contingent on raising the funds,” Nehmer added.

The application for the DNR grant is due May 1 and would be awarded sometime next fall.

But even if a grant for the project is approved, it is likely that construction on the trail would not begin for several years until planned construction in the area had been completed.

The Parks Department, working jointly with the Glacial Heritage Area group, also is developing a trail to run between Waterloo and Watertown, although some uncertainty remains about the exact route it will take.

That trail, a key link allowing bikers to ride continuously from Madison to the shore of Lake Michigan, likely will develop in stages from each city toward the center of the county, allowing the route to change as it develops.

Other business

Also, Tuesday, the board:

- Approved a three-year exclusive signage marketing partnership agreement with Miller/Ott Schweitzer Distributers Inc.

According to the Jefferson County Fair Park staff, about \$105,000 in revenue is generated each year from the sponsorship.

The resolution first was introduced to the county board at its Dec. 19, meeting, but was referred back to the Fair Park Committee for changes.

- Approved an amendment to the personnel ordinance to comply with changes to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.
- Authorized an application by the Jefferson County Parks Department for Outdoor Recreation Aid Grants.