

County nets \$178,850 DNR grant for interurban trail

By Ryan Whisner Union regional editor | Posted: Friday, October 9, 2015 10:36 am

Funding for construction of a multi-purpose interurban recreation trail between Watertown and Oconomowoc took a step forward Thursday.

The Jefferson County Parks Department received notice from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources that it has been awarded a \$178,850 grant through the Acquisition and Development of Local Parks grant program.

Jefferson County Parks Director Joe Nehmer said the off-road, paved trail connection will be built on the former interurban rail line, which at one time connected Watertown to Milwaukee.

Nehmer said Jefferson County 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 Roosevelt Park in the City of Oconomowoc.

The grant is for the construction of a recreation trail from Watertown to Oconomowoc on the We Energies-owned old electric rail line. When successfully completed, this project will make it possible to ride a bike on designated trails from the lakefront in Milwaukee all the way to Watertown.

“It would be a fabulous opportunity for this entire part of the state,” the county parks director said. “Trails like this expedite economic development, and they are good for the environment and good for our health.

“Jefferson County has actually identified outdoor recreation as a major component of our local economic development activities,” Nehmer added. “Simply put, people and businesses want to be near these types of projects.”

The trail would be completed in phases, with the first phase costing approximately \$1.4 million. Jefferson County is attempting to raise additional funds to complete the project.

Nehmer said the rail line was abandoned nearly 70 years ago and now is a utility corridor which has electric transmission towers and lines owned by the American Transmission Company.

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.

After almost six years of negotiations, Nehmer said, the DNR and We Energies were able to come to an agreement on a 15-year lease, allowing the rest of the project to move forward.

“We’re there now and we are trying to build a package to complete phase I of the interurban line which would reach out from the east side of Watertown across the Rock River and get us out to River Road,” the parks director said.

Nehmer said the project is aligned to be completed in a phased approach to build the 11 miles of trail.

“We are working with the City of Oconomowoc and Waukesha County with hopes they will put in the complimentary DNR grant application to begin at Roosevelt Park in Oconomowoc and take it to the Jefferson/Waukesha county line,” he said. “The old idea of driving a spike in the middle was very appealing to us. If we can get it going on both ends we think it will speed up the process.”

Cost of developing the entire trail, from Watertown west to the county line, is proposed to be primarily completed through available state grants and donations.

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.

The Parks Department also has approved the allocation of the remaining \$81,000 in the Carol Liddle bequest funds to be used toward the proposed interurban bike trail.

Liddle was a long-time generous donor to county parks projects. The initial purchase of land for Dorothy Carnes County Park was funded primarily by an unsolicited \$200,000 donation that came with just the single request that the park be named after her mother, which it was.

Her contributions to the park continued with \$90,000 toward the acquisition of another 20 acres in 2001. When she died in July 2003, Liddle left the county approximately \$400,000.

In recognition of her contributions and her legacy, the county designated the shelter at Carnes Park as the Carol Liddle Pavilion, which remains one of the county’s most popular shelters.

Funds from her bequest since have been utilized sparingly for additional acquisitions at Carnes Park and other projects.

All together with the grant and various donations and pledges that are committed or pending, the county currently has approximately \$446,000.

“This is extremely high priority for the Parks Department and the county, and we are committed to raising the money,” Nehmer said.

The parks director said the next step is submitting an application to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation enhancement grant program that could fund up to 75 percent of the project.

Should the DOT grant be obtained, construction could get under way as early as 2016. However, due to the number of changes related to transportation funding in the state budget, Nehmer said the county has not been given the green light to apply for the grant. A previous attempt for the grant was denied.

“We’re slow learners so we’re coming back at it again,” Nehmer said. “We’re not about to give up. The trail is going to be built — it’s just taking time.”

Anyone interested in helping to fund the trail is encouraged to contact Parks Director Joe Nehmer or program assistant Mary Nimm at (920) 674-7260 or jeffcoparks@jeffersoncountywi.gov.