Central Iowa trails gain 24 miles

by LISA HEIN & CATHY ENGSTROM

The new addition to the Central Iowa Trail Network includes a dramatic half-mile bridge with 120-foot piers that crosses the Des Moines River in Boone County. Project partners are seeking a bridge design “worthy of the scenery it crosses.”

Central Iowa’s Trail Network got a major boost in November 2005 when the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation purchased a 24-mile discontinued rail corridor that connects Ankeny, Sheldahl, Slater, Madrid and Woodward.

INHF plays a critical role in this multi-county, multi-million dollar effort. We negotiated more than three years with Union Pacific Railroad to acquire this corridor on behalf of the segment’s five communities and four county conservation boards. We’ve also helped our partners apply for state and federal grants—recently securing significant pledges for trail construction over the next five years.

But there’s a long path ahead before this latest acquisition is fully developed. The Iowa Department of Transportation has allocated funds to grade the existing rock ballast for non-motorized use. Meanwhile, partners are making plans to hard-surface it and to add trailheads, signage and other amenities. Estimated time to completion is five years, but some segments could be done sooner.

On the financial side, partners are awaiting engineering estimates but expect the final project costs to top $8 million. INHF will take a leadership role in private fundraising.

Meanwhile, we continue to negotiate with Union Pacific Railroad on future additions.

Lisa Hein is INHF’s Program & Planning Director. Cathy Engstrom is INHF’s Communications Director.
The BIG picture

Project past & future

When the trail ahead looks daunting, it helps to remember how far you've already come.

Just over 30 years ago, the city of Des Moines began building the first segments of a trail network that now crosses multiple counties. The network's many partners, including INHF, believe we're blazing the trail for making Iowa a national or even international trails destination.

Though progress was slow at first (and, for many, is still too slow), its pace quickens with each passing decade. INHF just secured a 24-mile addition (see article on facing page) with more segments under negotiation.

Spurred by results in the past 30 years, here are some of the partners' hopes and dreams for the next 5-30 years:

- Iowa's major trails are connected into a regional and statewide system.
- Key railroad corridors and their associated remnant habitats are "recycled" into trail corridors.
- Diverse populations—both human and wildlife—use trails year round.
- Bicycle transportation is faster and more rewarding than auto travel.
- Trail-focused fitness campaigns improve adult and youth health.
- Communities promote trails to attract new residents and to expand/add employers.
- Iowa markets itself as a "trails state"—where visitors can experience our rural vistas, small-town hospitality and urban culture.

Project partners

While neighboring states like Minnesota, Wisconsin and Missouri have state-managed trail systems, Iowa has had to rely on more diverse partnerships.

- Government: Most Iowa trails are owned, managed and maintained by county conservation boards or city governments. Federal dollars, administered by the Iowa Department of Transportation, provide the bulk of funding. State financial support comes primarily from the Resource Enhancement and Protection (REAP) program and the State Recreational Trails Fund—both chronically under-funded.
- Private: Many Iowa trails wouldn't exist today if not spearheaded by citizen volunteers. Meanwhile, private donations supply matching dollars needed to attract public funds.
- Nonprofit: Groups like INHF and the Iowa Trails Council have been involved in most major Iowa rail-trails. With our statewide reach and ability to handle both multi-year projects and quick deals, INHF's role ranges from background technical advisor to key player in acquisition, fundraising and planning.

- You: You can support Iowa's trails by volunteering, encouraging legislative support, and/or donating. INHF is accepting donations at 800-475-1846, www.inhf.org or by mail. Contributions designated "Central Iowa Trails" will support the network described here—or choose the more general "trails fund" or a regular membership to support trails statewide.

Trails and conservation

Why is a conservation group like INHF involved in trails?

Naturally, we embrace trail corridors' role in protecting wildlife habitat and remnant ecosystems. We also appreciate trails' ability to link Iowa's rural, small-town and urban areas; to help make Iowans healthier; and to showcase the economic/environmental connection.

Perhaps most important, trails reach Iowa's growing urban population—with its diminishing connection to the natural world. Trails provide an entry point for these kids (and their parents) to our remnant prairies, woodlands and wetlands. And if we don't get kids into nature somehow, we risk future generations that don't understand or value Iowa's natural heritage.

John Herdzina of Union Pacific Railroad and INHF's Lisa Hein finalize our recent 24-mile trail acquisition in central Iowa. Union Pacific has been a crucial partner in building Iowa's rail-trail system.
Banks' generosity aids trail

Trail advocates in eastern Iowa are celebrating the generosity of three area banks. Central State Bank in Muscatine, Community National Bank in Columbus Junction and US Bank in West Branch have made a significant contribution to future trails by forgiving the loan debt on the Hoover Nature Trail (HNT).

Sarah Lande, an INHF board member and Muscatine resident, responds, “We herald the banks’ contribution to encouraging the continued development of trails around our community and linking these trails to state and nationwide trail systems.”

Hoover Nature Trail is an ambitious project to create a 115-mile trail from Cedar Rapids to Muscatine and Burlington. It is part of the Iowa route of the transcontinental American Discovery Trail from California to Delaware.

The project was started in 1988 by Hoover Nature Trail, Inc., a non-profit organization formed by volunteers from communities along the proposed route. After construction of about 24 miles of trail in several segments, the project slowly came to a halt because of their inability to repay bank loans borrowed to assist with trail construction and match state grants.

Thanks to the lien release, the completed HNT segments are now owned by the following agencies: Louisa County Conservation Board, Cedar County Conservation Board, City of West Branch, Linn County Trails Association and the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation.

Iowa trails win federal funding

Recently approved federal transportation legislation, which provides funding for all modes of transportation, includes significant funding for Iowa trail projects.

Over $37 million has been earmarked towards specific trail planning and construction, including several segments of the proposed Mississippi River Trail, the upgrade of the Neal Smith Trail, the construction of the Des Moines River Bridge near Woodward (pictured on page 14), the Linn County extension of the Hoover Nature Trail, Johnson County Trails, the Wapsi-Great Western Line in Mitchell County and planning for the Lewis and Clark Trail in western Iowa.

These federal appropriations require a 20 percent match from state, local and private sources, which makes the REAP program and the State Recreational Trails Fund even more crucial over the next several years.

Though much work remains, it’s exciting to see this level of support and vision directed to statewide projects that benefit people of all ages and capabilities.