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TOP STORY

Officials break ground on new Council Bluffs-Neola bicycle trail

By Tim Johnson

tjohnson@nonpareilonline.com Jun 11, 2017



Staff photo/Joe Shearer

A groundbreaking ceremony for a multi-use trail connecting Council Bluffs and Neola is held at the Smith Wildlife Area on

near County Road L34 on Saturday, June 10

Officials broke ground Saturday for a trail that will someday link Council Bluffs with Underwood and Neola and hook up with trails leading to other communities.

The Railroad Highway Multi-Use Trail will begin at Smith Wildlife Area near the intersection of Railroad Highway and Husker Lane and run north along the highway. Work on the first segment, which will travel 1.8 miles to County Road L34, is underway and is scheduled for completion this year, said Brian Shea, chairman of the Pottawattamie County Trails Association.

“This will be the first of many trails across southwest Iowa, Iowa and even other states,” he said. “We hope to get out to Underwood sometime next year and, shortly after, to Neola.”

Jan Ehrens, deputy city clerk in Underwood, said before the ceremony that she was excited about the project.

“We live on a farm, and it’s difficult to ride,” she said.

The trail will provide a safe place away from all the traffic for bicyclists, Ehrens said.

Shea credited Mark Shoemaker, executive director of Pottawattamie County Conservation; and Brian Leaders of the National Park Service’s Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program with leading the effort to develop trails in the county and beyond.

“They had the vision, and they kept the drive,” he said.

Shoemaker started thinking about a county trail system seven years ago, he said.

“When I was park ranger at Long’s Landing, it was our responsibility to mow the (Wabash Trace Nature Trail),” he said. “I thought it was really neat to connect the communities, and I thought ‘wouldn’t it be neat to connect all the communities in Pottawattamie County.’

“Every community in Pottawattamie County was involved in this process,” Shoemaker said. “It’s going to be a big benefit to Pottawattamie County.”

Neola Mayor Pete Sorenson said the trail will boost economic development in the smaller towns by bringing people out from the cities.

“What small towns need is people — people to buy their goods and services,” he said. “This is a way to connect people to small towns. As mayor of Neola, we are super excited that this is going to come out there.”

“My No. 1 thing on the trail is safety,” said Denny Bardsley, mayor of Underwood. “My second thing is health — it’s a healthy thing to do. My third thing is economic development.”

Bardsley, who worked as an Iowa State Trooper for 33 years, recalled going to the scene of an accident where two middle-school students had been crossing Railroad Highway on their bicycles and were hit by a vehicle that had just crested a hill.

“That was one of the toughest duties I had to perform,” he said.

Leaders complimented the committee for raising more than \$4 million for the trail.

“Mark (Shoemaker) was the driving force behind this,” he said.

The National Park Service provided some technical assistance, he said.

“We went through a number of communities in Pottawattamie County and asked people to provide input” on where they would like to have trails and what kinds of trails they thought should be built, Leaders said.

The result was the Pottawattamie County Trail Plan. While the Railroad Highway trail will be concrete, the plan also includes some soft-surface paths, he said.

The 17-mile trail to Neola will be part of a network of trails that will combine to reach Manilla — about 100 miles in all, Leaders said. East-west trails are also planned.

“We’re looking at doing a poured concrete trail 10 feet wide from Omaha all the way to Des Moines,” he said.

Plans are in the works to piece together some lightly trafficked roads to form a Lewis & Clark Trail, Leaders said. The route would be marked as a shared-road trail for safety purposes.

The Iowa West Foundation awarded a \$1.1 million grant for the trail, Shea said. The remaining funds came from a federal recreation grant of \$300,000, a state recreation grant of \$700,000, a \$425,000 grant from the Metropolitan Area Planning Agency, a \$38,000 grant from Iowa’s Resource Enhancement and Protection program and \$60,000 from the Pottawattamie County Board of Supervisors, as well as public contributions.

“One of our four strategic areas is community development, which includes place building,” said Pete Tulipana, CEO of the Iowa West Foundation.

“We’ve built trails in the Omaha-Council Bluffs area, and we’re so excited to partner with this group to get trails going throughout the county. People of all ages enjoy trails. We have already made a commitment to fund the second phase.”

Pottawattamie County Supervisor Scott Belt said the trail will encourage people to visit the county’s parks.

“I think it’s going to be a blessing to everyone out here,” he said.