
Berrien County Trails Master Plan - Steering Committee Meeting December 14, 2021 - Presentation & Discussion Summary

Introductions:

Gary Wood welcomed everyone on behalf of the Friends of Berrien County Trails, and provided an update on the effort undertaken by the organization to acquire the resources and move forward with the Trails Master Planning Process. This includes hiring Abonmarche Consultants to lead and facilitate the planning process. Gary introduced the project leadership team, which includes:

- Gary Wood, Friends of Berrien County Trails
- Marcy Hamilton, Southwest Michigan Planning Commission
- Dawn Marie Smith, Be Healthy Berrien
- Mike Huber, Abonmarche Consultants

Mike Huber provided a brief overview of the economic, health and quality of life benefits of expanding the development of trails in Berrien County. It was noted that the master planning process is in some ways a response to the growing public recognition and support for increased trail development and use that has occurred during the development of transportation and community master plans. The ability to consolidate and coordinate multiple existing plans or efforts was noted as an additional benefit to undertaking this planning process.

Planning Process Overview:

Mike Huber continued with a powerpoint presentation summarizing and overview of the Planning Process. The Process will include the following 4 primary components:

- Existing Conditions report – this is currently ongoing as the consultant team has begun collecting initial research related to existing facilities and traffic analysis data
- Public Engagement – this is the next stage of the project and will occur throughout the first quarter of 2022
- Analysis & Facilities Planning – this will involve route and data analysis and the development of potential route options
- Implementation – this is the development of the final plan, and includes route recommendations, best practices and local jurisdiction plan adoption

Mike highlighted what the leadership team expects and needs from the Steering Committee members to help ensure the success of the planning process. These Steering Committee expectations were sent in advance of the meeting, and are grouped around 4 primary actions:

- Convene – SC members are expected to attend 2-3 meetings as a part of the on-going process
- Review & Provide Input – The leadership team will be sending relevant information to SC members to provide input and feedback on goals, implementation strategies and

public engagement methods. SC members are expected to provide feedback in a timely manner.

- Identify – SC members can help the leadership team by pointing out major conflicts while trying to schedule key community workshop sessions
- Assist – SC members will be asked to actively assist in items where they have local expertise and the ability to influence constituencies. This includes local data collection and helping drive community engagement participation.

Mike presented the project Vision, Purpose and Goals – these were also distributed ahead of the meeting for review and feedback. There was overall consensus that the Vision, Purpose and Goals of the process will provide a solid foundation for the planning process and the final plan content. Goals are organized around 9 key themes.

In addition to the Vision, Purpose and Goals, Mike presented a brief overview of the proposed content of the final Master Plan document (which was distributed ahead of the meeting). The Final will include:

- Existing Conditions
 - Full inventory of existing facilities
 - Community Assessment data
 - Community Survey results
 - Stakeholder interview and focus group discussion summary
- Analysis and Route Development
 - Demand & Use Analysis
 - Gap Analysis
 - Traffic, crash and comfort analysis
 - Route suitability criteria development
 - Route option creation and prioritization
- Implementation
 - Priority routes
 - Maintenance recommendations
 - Community safety programs
 - Local policy recommendations
 - State and National Certifications and Designations

Public Engagement Overview:

Project communications are a very important part of ensuring the success of the planning project. The leadership committee is being very intentional to develop a communications strategy that will raise the community awareness of the planning process, drive high levels of public engagement, provide updates on progress throughout the process, and guide the distribution and messaging around the final plan document. The communication tools will include timely press releases, integration of a project website into the Friends of Berrien County Trails website, and social media posts to support community engagement activities and key project milestones. Steering committee members active participation in assisting with project communications will be essential in maximizing public awareness and engagement.

As the public engagement process will be the focus of the project in the 1st quarter of 2022, Mike presented some details on the specific public engagement activities that are a part of



the planning process. There will be 3 primary public engagement activities a community survey, stakeholder interviews and focus groups, and a series of community-based work sessions. The community survey and stakeholder interviews will occur during the 1st quarter of 2022, and are aimed at gathering community perceptions, use patterns and preferences. The community-based work sessions will occur once preliminary analysis and recommendations have been completed, and will focus on building consensus on findings and recommendations.

Existing Conditions Overview:

Mike presented an overview of the proposed structure for organizing and presenting the existing conditions component of the master plan, including the existing bicycle and pedestrian facilities in the County. The consultant team is developing a series of GIS based maps that can be easily be up-dated in the future as changes to the trails systems occur. The goal is to engage every local municipality in the County and develop a comprehensive inventory of all types of non-vehicular transportation facilities and routes. In addition, the plan will include an inventory of primary destinations or traffic generators – places where people want or need to connect. These will provide the foundation for performing a gaps analysis that will influence the development of potential future routes. Mike presented early versions of maps showing facilities related to schools, businesses, health care facilities and parks. A key component of the existing conditions analysis will involve the team's ability to engage every municipality and get the most up to date information related to existing and planned facilities. This will be accomplished through a targeted Community Assessment that will be distributed to every municipality in the county.

Discussion Overview:

Following the powerpoint presentation, Gary Wood engaged the steering committee members in discussing their reactions to the process along with providing any additional insights they would suggest moving forward.

PROCESS COORDINATION DISCUSSION

A number of steering committee members identified additional planning processes happening or planned in the County, and the need to coordinate with these planning efforts as a part of the process. Specifically, the City of Benton Harbor Master Plan, Berrien County Master Plan up-date and MDOT long-range plan (just completed). Berrien County completed an on-line survey and received 2,100 responses – access to trails was issue of note. Chikaming Open Lands also completing a land conservation plan that will include a focus on non-motorized transportation projects.

PROCESS INCLUSION/OUTREACH DISCUSSION

There were suggestions made related to potential additional steering committee member additions or stakeholders to be involved in the process. Specifically, Michigan Trails & Greenway Alliance (Gary indicated that they are included), engaging younger voices – they are future users and funders/volunteers, possible private sector stakeholders like bike shop owners, Chamber of Commerce, and finally disability community and transportation equity stakeholders.



CONNECTIVITY DISCUSSION

Connectivity was discussed relative to a couple of concepts. With the Marquette Greenway funding announcement, connecting in and from the Greenway in New Buffalo to other parts of the County is a significant opportunity. Better connectivity and access to trails can eliminate the needs for users and group riders to have to drive to trails and launch rides (eliminate vehicle portion of the trip). Connectivity to schools was identified as a priority, citing the City of Joseph as an example with the design of Langley Ave. However, there was some question about the associated costs of extending trails/paths to more rural schools. Finally, opportunities were raised related to connectivity outside of Berrien County – specifically to Cass County (equestrian trails) and Kal-Haven Trail.

PROJECT ELEMENTS DISCUSSION

Trail promotions – specifically the need for better trail promotions – was raised as an issue. Need for better maps and signage to help people find and use trails. Additionally, trail support facilities including trailheads and parking areas were noted as opportunities for improvement. Current facilities not adequate if the goal is to increase number of trail users. Finally, expansion of facilities specifically in rural areas. This includes building wider township and county roads to accommodate wide shoulders for non-motorized connectivity. MDOT has developed first non-motorized plan and includes these concepts. Berrien County and Berrien Township also exploring these concepts.

