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TF trail gets accolades

Manhattan wants to reach Logan to join trails

Dennis Gaub, staff writer 14 hrs ago



Three Forks resident Gene Townsend poses for a photo on his favorite stretch of Headwaters Trail System in this archive photograph. Manhattan residents are working to meet Gene in Logan with a trail, but state requirements boost costs to build along right-of-way.

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Efforts to expand biking and walking trails on the western side of Gallatin County got a recent boost when the system was featured in a national magazine.

The winter 2019 issue of Rails to Trails magazine shone the spotlight on projects around the country, including a trail system that began in 1997 and has become a prominent amenity in in Three Forks.

The article, titled “Montana’s Headwaters Trail System: Little Trail Grows in Big Sky Country,” written by freelancer Scott Stark, starts with overview of the project’s modest beginning:

“It was originally envisioned as nothing more than a pleasant circuit around a small-town public park. It was never meant to connect to a nationally renowned state park, spur economic development or contribute to the deep railroad history of the town. But ideas in Big Sky Country have a way of growing.”

Gene Townsend, mayor of Three Forks for about 30 years, spearheaded the project. He told Stark the original vision was to build “a simple little trail” circling the town ponds.

“But people kept asking for more – wouldn’t it be nice if it went here? Or connected there? Or crossed this river? It just kept growing.”

A humble beginning grew to a trail that now runs almost 12 miles, connecting Droulliard Fishing Access on Montana Highway 22 and Missouri Headwaters State Park. Townsend, however, is not resting on his laurels. He told the Belgrade News this week he would like the Headwaters Trail to connect with a short existing trail in Manhattan, and then perhaps more.

Helping to carry the ball in Manhattan, banker Bob Dewit said people there have been trying to build a trail system for more than 25 years.

“A trail did get built from Manhattan to the Fish Wildlife Parks site on the Gallatin River,” a length of about two miles, and there’s interest among community members to expand the trail system, Dewit said Tuesday.

The effort became more formal last year with the founding of

Manhattan Trail System, Inc., and led to more ambitious hopes and planning.

“Right now, we’re researching the feasibility of building (a trail) to Logan to connect with the Headwaters trail. There’s also interest in a trail going north of Manhattan,” which would allow additional non-motorized travel to the Gallatin River, Dewit said.

The highest priority, however, remains raising money to build the trail to Logan, about 5-1/2 miles away from Manhattan, he said.

“Our first trail out to the Gallatin River cost over \$800,000. We had to build two bridges. One was at Baker Creek, but the big money was the bridge over the Gallatin River.

“The problem we have in Manhattan that they don’t in Three Forks is they have miles of abandoned railroad beds. We have to build in state highway right-of-way to the standards of a light road,” he said.

That entails removing a foot or two of topsoil, then hauling in “pit run,” larger, coarse gravel and packing that fill. Next, crews have to haul in road mix, consisting of a few inches of fine sand and gravel, and finally the trail can be paved.

“Our cost per mile is several times more than in the Three Forks area,” Dewit said.

In the neighboring community, Townsend and those who’ve helped him arrange to use former Milwaukee Road railbed, unused since the railroad left Montana in 1980. They apply road mix and then pave the trail.

“It’s so easy. That’s why we’re so challenged,” Dewit said.

“The good news going to Logan is we don’t have to build any bridges. We still have to go through all the highway excavation (procedures).”

Dewit said the Manhattan organization researched several routes before choosing the best one. The next step is to hire an engineer who will prepare a cost estimate.

Both the Headwaters trail and the Manhattan one are multi-use routes. In Manhattan, most trail users, including Dewit, are walkers, although he said his wife rides her bike as well.

Townsend's ambitions go beyond a Three Forks-to-Manhattan link. He said Monday he would like to see trails that give cyclists, runners, walkers, horseback riders and others an alternative to highways all the way across Gallatin County. That would involve tying in Belgrade and Bozeman.

There's potential well beyond the county and even Montana, according to Townsend.

His contacts in the national Rails to Trails movement say the United States is nearing the point when it will be possible to build a trail from Washington, D.C., to Washington state.

Organizers think this national route will be possible when all states along the route have built trails covering at least 50 percent of the needed mileage within their borders, according to Townsend. Last year, the national figure hit about 53 percent, he said.

He and others in the state Rails to Trails organization spent two days at Chico Hot Springs in January with their counterparts from Wyoming as well as representatives of Fish Wildlife and Parks, the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and the Montana Department of Transportation.

"We started the conversation on how to get across Montana and the state of Wyoming, how to get the trail system going," Townsend said.

As trails expand, they will bring economic benefits to communities along the way, he said.

"A lot of people ride bikes, and they can spend a lot of money" on longer trips, Townsend said, giving as an example someone who might cycle from Three Forks to Columbus and have to buy food and lodging along the way. In contrast, a motorist would make that a non-stop trip of a couple hours.

"Does it affect me?" said Townsend, mostly a motor-vehicle driver. "No. But I'd like to see it keep going."

Townsend added that he and his wife, Pat, do ride their bikes to the Headwaters park and the end of the trail, a 12-mile spin away from 70 mph traffic on the frontage road.

Read the Rails to Trails magazine story about the Headwaters Trail System here:

http://magazine.railstotrails.org/resources/magflipbooks/2019_winter/#16/z