

Trail could follow old rail line far to the west

A link from Lake Minnetonka real estate and lakefront downtowns to the Carver County countryside is close to reality.

Ben Steverman, Star Tribune

Plans are moving forward to turn 25 miles of an abandoned railroad line in Carver and Hennepin counties into a trail that could eventually link Wayzata with Hutchinson, Minn.

Carver County Parks is putting the final touches on a proposal for its 12 miles of the rail line, through rural areas in the western part of the county.

The Three Rivers Park District is farther along with plans for more than 13 miles of rail line in Hennepin County. Construction of a trail there could start this fall.

Carver County is studying how much a trail will cost and still must make key decisions, such as whether to allow snowmobiles or other motorized traffic, or whether the trail should be gravel or paved.

In Hennepin County, the park district board last month devoted \$500,000 to drawing up detailed plans for a paved trail. Planners will work with city officials to determine how the trail will be built, what bridges and overpasses will look like, and where benches, landscaping, parking and other amenities will be placed.

The trail has sparked opposition in the small city of Minnetonka Beach, where officials say a trail would come too close to homes. All other cities along the corridor expressed support for the trail, though St. Bonifacius made it clear that it would like snowmobiles to be allowed on the trail.

Hennepin County, which owns the rail line and will lease it to the park district for a trail, will not allow motorized vehicles, according to Boe Carlson of the Three Rivers Park District.

Carlson said planners will work closely with officials from Minnetonka Beach and other cities to try to satisfy concerns. For example, the park district might deal with privacy issues at certain spots along the trail by putting up fences or landscaping, he said. More than \$3 million is set aside for the project in Hennepin County, Carlson said. The total cost could be as high as \$5 million when extra amenities and improvements are added, he said.

The Dakota Rail Line, no longer used by trains, was purchased by Hennepin, Carver and

McLeod counties in 2001.

In Hennepin County, the trail would run along the north side of Lake Minnetonka, starting west of downtown Wayzata and proceeding west through Orono, Minnetonka Beach, the Navarre neighborhood of Orono, Spring Park and Mound.

The rail line right-of-way runs near or crosses water several times, offering impressive views of Lake Minnetonka.

After Mound, the trail runs through Minnetrista and St. Bonifacius. The rail line then enters Carver County near the north side of Lake Waconia and proceeds directly west through rural areas and the cities of Mayer and New Germany. It ends at Hutchinson, Minn., after covering a total of 44 miles.

According to a study by the Three Rivers Park District, the trail should attract about 70,000 users per year in Hennepin County, and about 75 percent of those visitors will live within three miles of the trail.

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