

OUR VIEWS

Bike trail to Beloit is visionary idea

When the day comes that bicyclists can pedal down an off-road trail from Janesville to Beloit, they'll largely have the Rock Trail Coalition to thank.

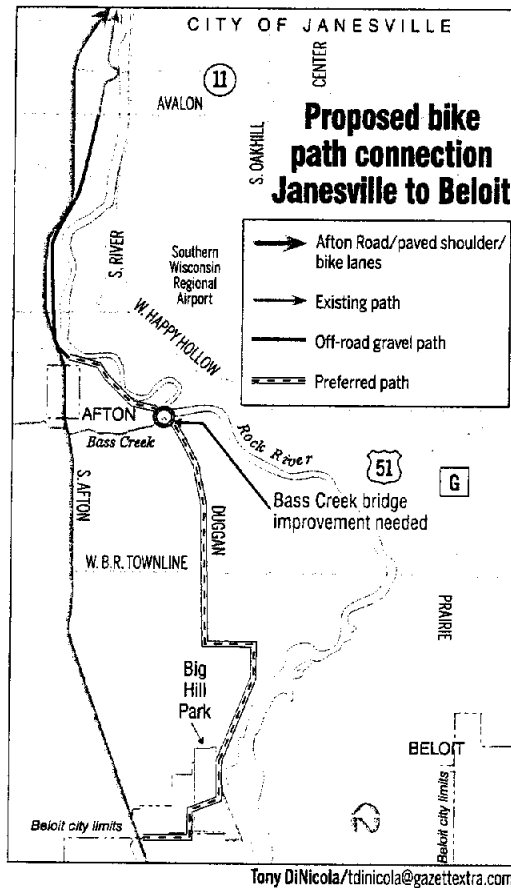
It takes effort, persistence and vision to build such trails, and the coalition is leading the way.

Money is always an issue, of course. The trail already runs from Janesville to Afton, and a consultant's estimate puts the cost to extend it to Beloit's north side at another \$3.3 million. That's not chump change. Coalition President Dean Paynter, however, thinks it could be done for less. His group is exploring the idea of getting a state trail designation that could help secure grants.

Besides that, a parcel secured a year ago provides insight into how teamwork and support can cut costs. The Janesville City Council agreed last June to buy a key parcel of abandoned railroad right-of-way just south of Tripp Road for \$45,000. At that time, the coalition pledged \$10,000. Evansville's Agrecol, founded by Bill Graham, chipped in \$10,000 to further reduce the city's outlay. Agrecol also agreed to invest \$10,000 toward seed to sew native plants. Landowner Mike Morris offered to donate time and equipment to clear vegetation, work valued at \$5,000.

If government and coalition officials can continue to build such support, they should vastly reduce tax dollars needed.

Trail supporters have hosted meetings this month to get public input.



Some residents point out that nearby Afton Road already has paved bike lanes on its shoulders, making the off-road trail unnecessary. Mixing bicyclists and motorists on that road, however, poses safety concerns for bikers.

Planners have wisely altered the bike route when residents expressed con-

cerns about it running through their backyards. Some landowners fear that allowing easements might erode property values. However, studies show that homes within a mile of a trail generally have higher values, said Ryan Garcia of SAA Design Group, which helped study and craft a master plan for the trail.

Someday, this trail will have implications reaching beyond Rock County. Plans call for the path extending from Janesville to link with the Jefferson Glacial River Trail at County N north of Milton. Paynter says officials in Beloit and South Beloit, Ill., are talking about how Wisconsin and Illinois trails could stretch to Chicago.

Some residents criticize trails as frills when governments struggle to fund basic services such as fire and police protection, trash pickup and road repairs. These tough times won't last forever, however. Besides, our communities will need more young, urban professionals to fill the needs of future employers. These educated people appreciate quality-of-life amenities such as trails.

Bike trails can function as more than tourist attractions. Gas prices are high, and while they might dip periodically, they'll only climb higher in future years. Someday, more and more people will save fuel, reduce pollution and improve their fitness by bicycling to work, shop or reach entertainment spots.

Vision today can put in place the bike paths that will prove valuable tomorrow.