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Bridging the gap

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A section of the Boardman Lake Trail between 14th Street and the Northwestern Michigan College University Center, shown in an aerial photo Monday afternoon.

Record-Eagle/Andrew Rosenthal



TRAVERSE CITY — New asphalt runs along a route between Fourteenth Street in Traverse City and Northwestern Michigan College’s University Center just south of city limits.

There's a bit of work left on the new part of Boardman Lake Trail, said Brian Beauchamp, communications and policy director for TART Trails. That includes seeding the dirt, installing a guardrail and adding some crosswalk markings.

The last push to link the path to its southern trailhead in Medalie Park is yet to come.

"Just seeing the progress being made and a finish line in sight, I think everybody's just excited," he said, adding the nonprofit's looking forward to celebrating with all the partners who put together the years-long effort and the people who will enjoy the final result.

That second phase should be ready by Independence Day 2022, said TART Trails Planning and Management Director Chris Kushman. It'll be the final link in the two-phase project to loop the trail that's set to cost \$6,311,411 to build both phases.

That includes \$2,043,142 for the nearly-finished stretch, and Kushman said so far the work is wrapping within budget.

Team Elmer's is building both phases, and company Communications and Marketing Director Tonya Wildfong said work for the second one could start by July. They're waiting for the city to wrap a few preconstruction items.

City Manager Marty Colburn said the city's going through its agreement with trail design contractor Prein & Newhof. That includes looking at how changes affected costs within it.

"Right now we have a contract that's for both phases, but as you go through different stages of a project, some things are moved around, is the best way to put it," he said.

That second phase will include a few amenities along the first one, like a landing on Boardman Lake near Sixteenth Street, Kushman said.

The project, he said, is admittedly pricey. The terrain and a route that in many spots hugged a railroad right-of-way presented some challenges. So too did more than 900 feet of boardwalk, including across the lake's southwest corner, two bridges over the forks of the Boardman River surrounding Medalie Park and lengthy retaining walls.

“We’re the first ones to acknowledge that these are very high price tags on this, but as we’ve kind of said all along, that the most challenging part of completing the trail around the lake was saved for the end because it is so challenging,” Kushman said.

The final construction cost overshot past estimates, and permitting issues held up construction in August 2020, as previously reported.

It’ll all be built according to plan, save a spur planned to link NMC University Center and the corner of Cass and South Airport streets, Kushman said. That portion has been shelved, both to focus on the main stretch and because Bay Area Transportation Authority plans to move its headquarters away from the intersection where the spur would’ve led.

TART Trails and Traverse City are two of a handful of partners on the project, including Garfield Township, as previously reported. The government, through which a good portion of the trail passes, put up more than \$1 million, including \$800,000 as a long-term maintenance fund. Grand Traverse County has partnered, too — Medalie Park is county-owned, and the county Brownfield Redevelopment Authority put up more than \$4 million.

So too is the Michigan Department of Transportation, which put up more than \$830,000 for the project’s first phase, as previously reported. TART Trails itself raised \$425,000, and the city paid for trail design. Grants totaling \$750,000 from the Department of Natural Resources and the Land and Water Conservation Fund have helped, too.

Trails and outdoor spaces nationwide saw a surge in use during the COVID-19 pandemic, the virus now on a steep decline within the U.S., and Beauchamp said he’s looking forward to more trail use as a lasting trend.

“One of our takeaways is that these trails are there for the community year round,” he said. TART Trails is working on developing even more in close proximity to users, with the ambition of making every home into a “trailhead,” he added.

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