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Trail upgrades, grant awards highlight planned 2016 Parks and Recreation expansion

By SEAN DELANEY

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With new paths connecting trails in Chief Gene Shepherd Park to both Yates Cider Mill and the Macomb Orchard Trail set to open by the end of the summer as well as the recent completion of a path connecting River Bends Park to Lake St. Clair Metropark, Shelby Township officials say trekkers of all kinds will have even more chances to experience nature's beauty in 2016.

"We are truly blessed in Shelby Township," Township Supervisor Richard Stathakis said. "With 1,300 acres of developed parks and hundreds of miles of trails connecting those parks, there is no better place to enjoy God's splendor than our terrific township."

The 1.28-mile trail connecting River Bends Park to the city of Utica and ultimately to Lake St. Clair officially opened last fall, and local officials say they're eager to welcome in hikers and bikers from across the county to the township's 838-acre River Bends Park.

"Everyone that lives in Shelby Township knows what a tremendous asset it is to have a park like River Bends, and now we get to share that with the county and the region," Parks, Recreation and Maintenance Director Joe Youngblood said.

The cost of the Utica to River Bends Park trail was approximately \$2.4 million, with \$1.8 million from the Federal High Priority Projects Program and \$338,000 from the Michigan Trans-



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portation Alternatives Program funding most of the work. Shelby Township and Utica split the remaining cost of the project 41 percent to 59 percent, respectively.

"At River Bends, you can play disc golf, horseshoes, basketball, volleyball, and have a picnic and barbecue," Youngblood said. "We even have fishing and a trap/archery range. We are excited to bring more people to our community to use this asset, and hopefully they support our local businesses as well."

Also opening this year will be new walk paths linking Gene Shepherd Park to Yates Cider Mill in Rochester Hills.

Last year the Parks, Recreation and Maintenance Department, the Shelby Township Beautification Committee, the Shelby Township Historical Committee and Eagle Scout Spencer Haithcock worked together to create two unpaved walking paths from the Gene Shepherd Park tennis courts through a Michi-

gan Department of Environmental Quality conservation easement to the cider mill.

"This path is a testament to the great people we have in Shelby Township," Stathakis said. "With volunteers like Dub Hearon and (Haithcock) leading the way, it's easy to see why our community is in such great shape."

According to township officials, the next trail project will be a 0.8-mile, 10-foot-wide asphalt trail connecting Chief Gene Shepherd Park to the Macomb Orchard Trail. This trail is largely funded by two state grants secured by Township Engineer Carol Thurber and Youngblood. It will provide a connection to Gene Shepherd Park from the Macomb Orchard Trail and fill a large sidewalk gap that exists on Dequindre Road.

"We know that Shelby Township has the finest parks and trails in all of southeast Michigan, and it's very gratifying to see that the state of Michigan agrees and has invested in our existing trails," Stathakis said.

"Hopefully, that facilitates more positive responses from the state and other agencies that may help us expand these trails through grants."

The trail connecting Chief Gene Shepherd Park to the Macomb Orchard Trail also provides a critical connection for the Iron Belle Trail bike path project, which includes a 744-mile biking route connecting Ironwood, Mich., in the Upper Peninsula to Belle Isle Park in Detroit. The other local gap in the Iron Belle bike path is 3.1 miles between Chief Gene Shepherd Park and River Bends Park.

On March 15, the Board of Trustees unanimously approved a resolution required to apply for a Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund grant that would apply to a 0.6-mile portion of the gap. If that application is successful, the township would obtain a \$300,000 MDNR Trust Fund grant and a \$300,000 Transportation Alternatives Plan grant, so the next phase of trail could be constructed at no cost to the township.

The path between River Bend and Chief Gene Shepherd Park will run through River Bends Park along an easement created for the Oakland-Macomb Interceptor Drain project and connect to River Bends Park. The township received a \$20,000 grant from the state in 2015 to design the most feasible and cost-effective routes for the trails.

Thurber estimated that Shelby Township would finish its Iron Belle Trail connection in approximately three or four more phases.