

EAST METRO

State gives \$4M to complete White Bear Lake bike trail

Advocates for the 10-mile bicycle and walking trail believe the path can now be finished by 2021.

By Greg Stanley (<http://www.startribune.com/greg-stanley/484708631/>) Star Tribune |

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Cyclists and pedestrians soon will have a path of their own along the narrow and winding roadways surrounding White Bear Lake.

After more than a decade of efforts by residents and a handful of lawmakers, the Legislature has set aside a little more than \$4 million this year to help complete a 10-mile trail around the popular east metro lake.

The route, to be called the Lake Links Trail, will be somewhat duct-taped together with a hodgepodge of connections to existing bike paths in the small downtowns and communities around the lake.

At various points the path will jump on and off the old rail bed of the long-abandoned St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, now covered with grass and topped by a natural tunnel of pine branches and maple and ash leaves.

The goal is to get bikers, walkers and people in wheelchairs off two-lane roads like Highway 96 and Highway 244, where the shoulders can be just inches wide and cars speed by at more than 50 mph, said Mike Brooks, co-chair of the Lake Links Association, a grass roots organization that fought to secure the money.

Brooks hopes to have the trail complete by 2021.

"People should have the right to move under their own power, safely," he said. "These trails aren't just recreation. It's about transportation. It's about being able to go to the store, and helping a kid get to school or to a park."

Much of the money will be split between Ramsey County and the city of Mahtomedi. The county will use \$2.6 million to build a trail along South Shore Boulevard, on the south side of the lake, and Mahtomedi will use \$1.4 million to add a trail along Birchwood, Wildwood Beach and Briarwood roads.

White Bear Lake Township and the city of White Bear Lake each will get \$11,000 to start planning trail access along Highway 96.

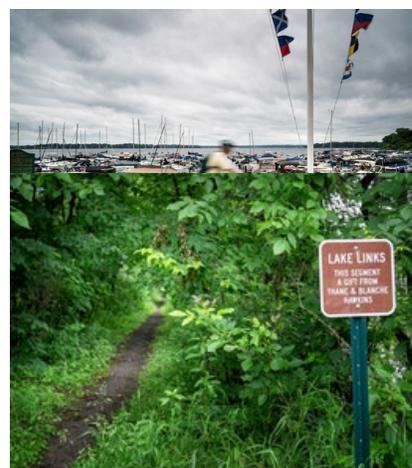
Exactly what the trail will look like at specific points, and who will be responsible for maintaining it once it's built, still has to be ironed out. Some portions of two-lane roadways may turn into one-way streets, leaving one lane for traffic and the other for bikers and pedestrians, Brooks said.

Much will depend on where the state or county right of way ends, and also where an 8- to 10-foot wide trail would fit, Brooks said.

"It'll be eclectic," he said. "You might have a boardwalk here that goes into the woods, and then come back out in the open along some quieter residential roads and then back into the woods. It's about how we can advance this with the least impact and cost."

The final design of the trail also will depend on how many homeowners buy into it. Much of the route advocates want would run through the old rail bed, which has been parceled up and is now owned by a number of different homeowners in the area. The trail association has been working to get permission from landowners to use the rail bed, one 500- to 1,000-foot parcel at a time.

About three miles of trails already have been built in the communities surrounding the lake. Another three miles of the trail will follow smaller residential roads and require no new construction. That leaves just over three miles left to build to complete the loop; the



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Thane and Blanche Hawking donated a 500-foot easement in Dellwood.

\$4 million in state funding will help close about half the remaining gaps.

The new construction should build momentum to finish the trail, said state Sen. Chuck Wiger, DFL-Maplewood, who wrote the bill to appropriate the money. He said he has been trying to lock down state money for the trail since 1997.

"It's building momentum," Wiger said. "We don't want it to be half-a-trail or partial, it needs to be complete. It will link nicely with other area trails and won't be just a regional resource, but a state resource."

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