

# **MACKINAW TO HAWKS RAIL-TRAIL**

## **A segment of the Alpena to Mackinac Trail**

### **MASTER PLAN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In 1996 and 1997 the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR), with support from local units of government, acquired the 58.97 mile former railroad corridor from Hawks to Mackinaw City for snowmobiling and other non-motorized uses. Since the corridor was acquired by the State, a snowmobile trail has been signed and maintained along the grade but very little else has been done with the scenic property.

In early 2004 the DNR and the Top of Michigan Trails Council initiated a community wide process to develop a master plan for the trail. All local government units, DNR staff, trail user groups and non-profits were invited to participate in the process, creating the Mackinaw to Hawks Trail Planning Committee. Their vision for the trail corridor is as follows:

***A 59 mile greenway stretching from Mackinaw City to Hawks that includes a year round, world-class, multi-use rail-trail facility that links northern Michigan and acts as an economic engine for local communities.***

This 59 mile trail corridor extends through two counties, Cheboygan and Presque Isle, through two cities, Cheboygan and Onaway, two villages, Mackinaw City and Millersburg, as well as the towns of Aloha, Tower and Hawks. Between the town centers there are many lakes, rivers and wetlands as well as large blocks of public lands that limit future development in these regions. This makes the areas beyond the town centers and lake front resort developments sparsely populated with limited potential for future growth in some areas.

There are many significant resources along or near the trail that impact the planning decisions for facilities. Such resources are existing State Parks, commercial centers, roadside parks, scenic view points, schools, and recreation facilities. These resources are important in the planning process in order to understand the local needs and to determine the needs for trail heads, trail access points, connections to community resources, and needs for trail connections.

Currently, the Mackinaw to Hawks trail is well used during the winter months for snowmobiling. The trail links directly with other snowmobile trails near Millersburg and creates opportunities for loops through Black Mountain and Cheboygan.

The rest of the year the trail is not well used. The unimproved surface is soft dirt and ballast stone, being inconsistent and making it difficult for both pedestrians and bicyclists. The exception is between Mackinaw City and Cheboygan where the DNR has been putting down a crushed stone surface in phases, which should be completed in 2006.

Local residents appear to use the trail to walk, ride their bike, or horseback ride. The Michigan Trail Riders Association uses the portion of trail from M-33 to Mackinaw City for horse riding events. The Midland to Mackinac Trail uses the portion of the former railroad grade from Waveland to Mackinaw City.

Both Cheboygan and Presque Isle counties have economic issues and are considered by the State as “distressed communities”. It is believed that the development of a year round trail facility will enhance the tourist economy in the region. Currently snowmobiling provides an economic niche during the winter months. By making this trail a destination location with great trailside Mackinaw to Hawks Master Plan amenities, it should spur and enhance other economic developments such as hotels, restaurants, and shops.

Various types of trail development standards were reviewed and discussed while creating the plan. Making the trail accessible for the highest and best uses, including snowmobiles in the winter and bicycles and pedestrians the rest of the year, was the number one goal of the plan. Therefore a combination of trail development standards is recommended in order to comply with the various user groups. They include:

- A 10’ hard surface of crushed-packed limestone with asphalt in recommended areas if possible and allowed by the DNR.
- A 2’ crushed stone shoulder on one side and a 4’ crushed stone shoulder on the other.
- 12’ vertical clearance.
- Signs placed 3’ to 5’ off the surface.

If the horse clubs choose to develop a parallel, separated trail within the 100’ wide corridor, they should be allowed to develop one on their own accord.

It was decided that a formal committee was needed in order to oversee management of the trail. A “Friends” group was suggested but one that included local government officials. At the same time, it is recommended that the DNR continue to be the overseeing manager of the entire trail and that working agreements be signed with government agencies, service clubs, and non-profit entities to develop and maintain the trail, all being coordinated by the Friends group.

In order to thoroughly describe the trail and its different characteristics and issues, it was split into four segments and described in detail by segment: Mackinaw City to Cheboygan at State Street, State Street in Cheboygan to M-33, M-33 to Onaway at M-211, and Onaway at M-211 to County Road 451 in Hawks.

Each trail segment has a description which is then illustrated on corresponding maps including an inventory of existing recreational resources along or near the trail such as other trails, trailheads, parks, campgrounds, lighthouses, historic sites and scenic view points. In addition existing condition of the trail was also inventoried including trail surface condition, drainage problems, bridges, gates, road crossings, and trespass issues.

In the full report specific recommendations for each segment are ranked in priority order. Recommendations include fixing drainage problems, bridges, and erosion issues, realigning the trail at difficult site limited road intersections, and creating partnerships for trail development where appropriate. Amenity recommendations have corresponding maps in the report and include locations for trailheads, restrooms and/or porta-potties, river access and overlooks, benches, and interpretive signs.

In general, because the different user group need different amenities, such as pedestrian’s slower speeds need facilities more often than snowmobiles, the following amenity standards were followed: a trailhead, varying in size, in every city, village, and town center, restrooms or porta-potties every 7 to 10 miles, a water source available on regular increments, and benches/rest areas every 2 to 5 miles. These standards appear to accommodate all user types.

The top three recommendations, in priority order, for the entire Mackinaw to Hawks segment of the Alpena to Mackinac Trail as outlined in the Trail Master Plan include:

**1. SURFACE**

*The trail surface needs to be a hard, consistent surface that people can equally enjoy walking, bicycling, and snowmobiling. It is recommended that the trail surface be a crushed limestone that compacts to create a hard surface that is good for snowmobiles, bicycles, and pedestrians. If and/or when the DNR would allow a paved surface with snowmobiles, paving the two segments of trail between Aloha and Mackinaw City should be considered if the local trail groups are so inclined to pursue such a surface.*

**2. SAFETY**

*General maintenance and safety should be done first and foremost including fixing drainage problems, road crossings, trespass problems and structural issues, which are outlined in the individual trail segments.*

**3. SERVICE**

*Developing Trailheads as outlined in the trail segments but prioritized as follows: Cheboygan, Onaway, Millersburg, Mackinaw City Phase II, smaller use parking areas.*

In addition to the top three recommendations and the 38 segment specific recommendations that are outlined in the report, the following recommendations were made for overall trail management, maintenance and development:

1. Start a friends group in order to coordinate development, maintenance, management, and marketing of the trail.
2. Officially name the entire trail the Alpena to Mackinac Trail and develop a trail logo; use the name and logo in all marketing, advertising, and trail development projects.
3. Create and install a comprehensive sign system that meets both snowmobile and non-motorized trail requirements. Included should be the traditional safety signs, but also road name, trail maps, directional signs to adjacent facilities, and confidence markers with the trail name and logo.
4. Work with MDOT and other road agencies to create a standard specification on road crossings of multi-use trails so that when roads are reconstructed, drainage does not flow onto the trail causing trail flooding problems and that proper site distance and signage are included in the road plans.
5. Reconsider the need for gates along the trail. If determined that they are needed, install a gate or bollard system that is pedestrian, bike, snowmobile, and maintenance friendly.
6. Have regular scheduled maintenance of culverts and structural review of the bridges.
7. Work with schools to utilize the trails and start a “bike to school” campaign.
8. Work with local tourist bureaus and economic enhancement agencies to market and advertise the trail, once developed, for year round use. Work with local agencies to create pedestrian and snowmobile links to existing and future spur development along the corridor.
9. Work with other trail groups to create trail connections and loops for various user groups.
10. Work with the County Health Departments and MSU Extension services and create a “healthy community initiative”.

In summary, it is hopeful that this document continues to live, updated through time, by coordinating efforts between a Friends Group, DNR, and other stakeholders. This coordination is needed in order to implement one recommendation at a time and make the former railroad corridor a world class, year-round rail trail facility.