

TRAVERSE CITY RECORD-EAGLE

Traverse City, MI 49684

*Michigan Press Association
'Newspaper of the Year' 2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010;
2004 MPA award for Public Service reporting
and 2009 Sigma Delta Chi Award for excellence
in journalism in Public Service reporting*

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OUR VIEW

Multi-use bike paths roll to a rosy future

Non-motorized recreational and bike paths are important trails today and into northern Michigan's future.

They make our communities livable and breathable. They spur economic activity. They protect wildlife habitat.

They lead us to quiet places and beautiful landscapes. They connect communities and the natural world. They take us down safer, less-traveled roads into urban neighborhoods. They give us a deeper sense of place and help us maintain it.

During the last two to three decades, nearly 200 miles of trails were created in Grand Traverse, Leelanau, Benzie and Kalkaska counties by far-sighted community activists, local governments, organizations and volunteers with strong support from local businesses.

Two new projects — Buffalo Ridge Trail in Traverse City and the 27-mile Sleeping Bear Heritage Trail in Leelanau County — are important additions to this network and deserve widespread public support.

Munson Medical Center has pledged \$10,000 for the first phase and now also is pledging to match, dollar-for-dollar, up to \$10,000 in private donations by March 15.

The total estimated cost of Buffalo Ridge is \$345,000. When completed, the trail will link the Grand Traverse Commons' south campus entrance just west of 14th and Division streets to West Middle School and eventually to three schools, natural areas, the Commons, Historic Barns Park, Great Wolf Lodge, the YMCA and the TART system.

The Sleeping Bear Heritage Trail, the brainchild of the local Leelanau Heritage Scenic Route committee, will cost an estimated \$10 million — half from federal, state and local governments and half from private fundraising, over about 10 years.

About \$3 million in government grants already have been awarded.

Construction of the first phase of mostly hard-surface trail through the length of the lakeshore is expected to start this fall

on a four-mile segment of M-109 linking Glen Arbor to the Dune Climb.

The trail, when completed, will run from the Manning-Norconk intersection south of Empire to Good Harbor Bay at the north end of the park in Leelanau County. It will mostly parallel state highways M-22 and M-109. The goal is to make the park safer

for bicycling families with children and other non-motorized uses.

Only already disturbed land in the park — existing trails and abandoned railroad beds — will be used for the trail.

Scenic northern Michigan, with its tourist-driven economy, is already a mecca for recreational trail enthusiasts, a trend that promises to continue.

Today, the combined TART and Leelanau trails stretch 28 miles from Bunker Hill Road near Acme to Suttons Bay.

The Betsie Valley Trail winds 27 miles from Thompsonville to Frankfort-Elberta. The Kalkaska Area Recreational Trail is two miles long.

Long-range plans call for expansion of the TART system to Williamsburg, Kalkaska and Elk Rapids, as well as into the Boardman Valley and toward Interlochen, Thompsonville and Betsie Valley. Talk has also begun on how to extend the Sleeping Bear trail into Benzie County.

The Sleeping Bear Dunes Heritage Trail will be a great ride in our region — and for it — if a survey of 696 people visiting Sleeping Bear Dunes during one July week in 2009 is any indication.

Eighty-eight percent said they purchased meals, lodging and other support services in communities within a one-hour drive from the park.

The top six communities mentioned in order were Traverse City, Glen Arbor, Leland, Beulah/Benzonia and Frankfort.

The average total expenditure per person was \$199.

The park didn't estimate overall economic impact of the park on surrounding communities, but if you multiply that by the total number of 2009 visitors — 1,165,836 people — you get \$232 million.

By any measure, that's well worth the effort and the investment.

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Write us a

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Political endorsement limited to 100 words.

All letters must contain contact information which will be published a