

# **Community Assistantship Program**

**Watsonwan and Blue Earth County Focus  
Group Meetings for Recreational Trails  
Final Report**

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Final Report**

Prepared in partnership with  
Watonwan County Extension Service &  
MN Dept of Resources, Trails & Waterways

Prepared by  
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University of Minnesota  
August, 2002

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**Watonwan and Blue Earth County Focus Group Meetings for Recreational  
Trails – Final Report**

Prepared for: Watonwan and Blue Earth Counties Trails Advisory Board

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August 2002

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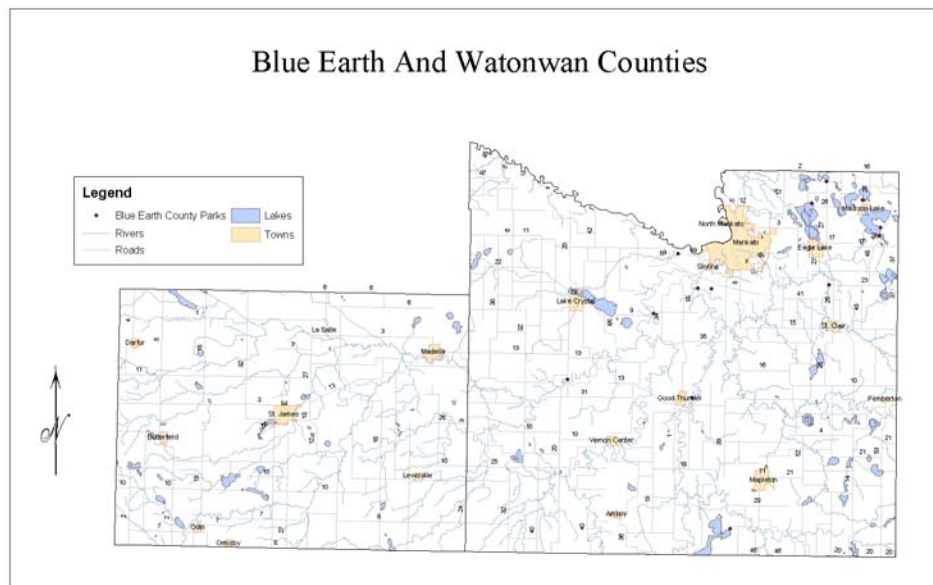
## **Acknowledgements**

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## Introduction

Throughout many regions of the country as well as in Minnesota recreational trails are being used for recreation, transportation and education. Recreational trails are trails that are used by individuals for recreational purposes such as biking, running, walking, in-line skating, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, and horseback riding. In much of the state, trails are helping areas to develop economically and are aiding in the creation of a higher quality of life for the people in these communities. There are many other community benefits related to trails. Among these are community pride, safe areas for recreation, and developing a better awareness/appreciation for our natural resources.

There are a growing number of recreational trail users across the country and throughout the state. Along with this growth, the number of trails continue to increase. Many of these trails began as local initiatives. One local initiative currently underway in Southern Minnesota is based on the possibility of extending the Hammond highway (County road 116) bike trail that connects Medilia, MN to St. James, MN (Figure 1).



This extension would involve using a section of abandon railroad bed along state highway 4 from St. James, MN southwest to Ormsby, MN. A locally organized group known as the Watonwan/Blue Earth Counties Trails Advisory Board was established in order to develop this idea (Appendix 1). Many of the members had been part of establishing the Hammond highway bike trail and therefore had an interest in the possibility of further trail development. The Trails Advisory Board decided that it was necessary to know what people in the communities of Watonwan and Blue Earth Counties along the potential trail corridor felt about developing a new recreational trail in their area. The Trails Advisory Board hosted a series of focus groups in February, March and May of 2001 to accomplish this objective. These meetings were designed as brainstorming sessions for individuals interested in discussing an inter-county trail system serving these two counties. The goals of these focus groups were to identify recreational opportunities, and community benefits and to identify possible trail corridors (that a new recreational trail might bring to the area). Some possible outcomes were economic impact, quality of life and bringing communities together.

Participants indicated a variety of recreational opportunities that could be associated with a new trail to include biking, running, walking, inline skating, and cross country skiing. The desired destinations and points of interest indicated by participants included current natural and recreational areas, towns and cities, and rivers. Possible corridors for trail alignment were drawn by participants on a map (Appendix 4). A general alignment was developed that would follow a corridor connecting the cities of Ormsby, St. James, Madilia, Lake Crystal and Mankato(Figure 1). Economic impact, quality of life and bringing communities together were all high priority community benefits identified by participants.



This report was written to document the outcomes of the focus groups and was given to the Trails Advisory Board to aid in the possible development of an inter-county recreational trail between Watonwan and Blue Earth Counties.

## **Methods**

On February 13<sup>th</sup>, 21<sup>st</sup>, March 12<sup>th</sup>, and May 1st of 2001 focus groups were held for individuals interested in an integrated inter-county trail system between Ormsby, MN and Mankato, MN. A focus group is a data collection mechanism with a primary purpose of asking people their opinions on a particular topic/issue through the use of a guided discussion. Four different locations were chosen for these meetings in an effort to make it convenient for interested parties to participate in the focus groups. These sites were the Lake Crystal City Hall, Madelia Library, St. James City Community Room and Williams Nature Center in Mankato. These cities were chosen because they are the major cities in the direction that a new recreational trail could be formed from Ormsby to Mankato. Letters of invitation were sent to community leaders and residents who the Trails Advisory Board believed would have knowledge of recreational opportunities and land owner issues in the area (Appendix 2). Fifty individuals were invited to participate in the focus groups. Twenty-seven of those invited attended one of the focus groups.

Attendance at the focus groups included a range of users and interested parties. Bikers, walkers, joggers, cross-country skiers, snowmobilers, landowners, city administrators, a county parks superintendent, a city economic development coordinator, and real estate management were in attendance to represent the interests of their groups and/or communities. Minnesota DNR trail staff and University of Minnesota Extension staff also attended for technical assistance.

The focus groups followed the format developed by Krueger (1994). During these meetings participants were asked to answer a series of questions. Throughout the evening's discussion the participants were instructed to voice their opinions, ideas and concerns openly. The format for each of the focus groups was identical (Appendix 3). Each began with an introduction and

explanation of how the meeting would proceed. This included an explanation of the purpose of the focus group and a background of the trail project. After the introductions and backgrounds were completed participants were asked the following questions:

1. What recreational trail opportunities should be developed for this area?
2. How would these communities benefit from having a new recreational trail?
3. If a new recreational trail is built what points of interest should be connected and what are some possible corridors the trail could follow?
4. What are some obstacles/oppositions you can think of with regard to a new recreational trail?
5. How do we phase this in? OR How do we take the steps to get it done?

Responses from the participants were recorded and participants were asked to rank the importance of their responses. Participants were invited to draw their responses to question 3 on a poster-size map of Watonwan and Blue Earth Counties with markers (Figure 1). Potential alignments were drawn on the map by each focus group indicating where they believed the trail might go and what points of interest in the area should be connected (Appendix 4).

## Results

Detailed answers to the questions specific to each focus group can be found in appendix 5.

Many of the answers given at the 4 focus groups echoed similar themes or ideas. These themes and ideas for the questions follow:

Question #1: What recreational trail opportunities should be developed for this area?

- Biking
- Walking
- Rollerblading
- Non-motorized

Question #2: How would these communities benefit from having a new recreational trail?

- Economic benefits
- Quality of life
- Reason to live in the community
- Brings communities together (unity)

Question #4: What are some obstacles/opportunities you can think of with regard to a new recreational trail?

- Land acquisition
- Funding
- Crossing highways

Question #5: How do we phase this in? OR How do we take the steps to get it done?

- Develop the trail in stages what is best for all communities as funding becomes available

## **Discussion**

Overall, there was no major opposition to the development of a new recreational trail in Wantonwan and Blue Earth counties expressed by participants of the focus groups. The focus groups revealed that participants wanted multiple forms of recreational opportunities developed in and around their communities. The focus group participants indicated that if a new recreational trail were to be developed that it be for non-motorized use to include walking, hiking, running, biking, inline skating and cross country skiing.

Participants were asked to rank the importance of the benefits of developing a new recreational trail in their communities. Economic enhancement, quality of life and community togetherness were very important community benefits to participants.

Several points of interest were mentioned as having potential for connection along a trail alignment. These included recreational areas, lakes, and communities. Possible corridors followed rivers and creeks and Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and/or Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) buffer lands along drainage ditches. Use of CRP/CREP buffer lands might reduce land costs. Participants indicated that areas such as highway crossings and shoulders should be avoided as trail corridors to reduce safety risks.

Participants also expressed concern about land acquisition costs and lack of funding to acquire and develop a corridor. Some were also concerned that some private land owners might not support recreational trail development on or near their land. To address these concerns focus group participants considered phasing a new recreational trail in by developing it in stages, this would allow the trail to be acquired/developed as funding becomes available. Participants also considered making connections between existing trails in the Mankato area and developing a trail section from Ormsby to St. James along Highway 4, this section of highway is an old

railbed section that is currently a state designated Wildlife Management Area. Beginning with these two ends of a corridor were seen as the most practical starting point for phasing in a potential recreational trail. As more funding becomes available land between Mankato and St. James could be acquired for possible trail development.

Based on the results of the focus groups the following recommendations are made:

- Continue to move forward with proposed trail alignments based on results of the focus groups. This would involve making connections between existing trails in the Mankato area and connecting these with the community of Lake Crystal. Developing a trail section from Ormsby to St. James along Highway 4. As support and funding become available continue to add to these trails to eventually connect in the middle, making one continuous trail from Ormsby to Mankato.
- The trail alignment should connect with scenic/recreational areas and communities whenever possible. The alignment should be off the road shoulders as to allow users the most safety possible.
- Seek to develop partnerships with private landowners and address their concerns of proposed trail alignments.
- Build local government and legislative support for recreational trail expansion within Watonwan and Blue Earth Counties.

## **Bibliography**

Kruger, R. (1994). Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

**Appendix 1: Members of the Watonwan/Blue Earth Counties  
Trails Advisory Board - 2002**

1. Alan Bennett  
48098 State Hwy 60  
Lake Crystal, MN 56055
2. Al Forsberg  
Blue Earth County Hwy Dept  
35 Map Drive PO Box 3083  
Mankato, MN 56001
3. Tony Jacobs  
Crystal Coop  
542 E Blue Earth  
Lake Crystal, MN 56055
4. Bob Chance  
DNR  
RR 2 Box 245  
Windom, MN 56101
5. Keith Muetzel  
City of St. James  
PO Box 70  
St. James, MN 56081
6. Dwayne Krenz  
Watonwan County Commissioner  
144 2<sup>nd</sup> St. SE  
Madelia, MN 56062
7. Darin Haslip  
Madelia Economic Development  
29 West Main  
Madelia, MN 56062
8. Bob Sorenson  
Watonwan County Commissioner  
RR 1  
St. James, MN 56081
9. Highway Engineer  
Watonwan County Highway Dept.  
Co Road 12 E  
St. James, MN 56081
10. Gary J. Wyatt  
Watonwan County Extension Educator  
PO Box 68 Courthouse  
St. James, MN 56081
11. Bob Hauge  
Lake Crystal City Administrator  
100 E Robinson PO Box 86  
Lake Crystal, MN 56055
12. Bob Hobart  
MN DNR  
261 – Hwy 15 South  
New Ulm, MN 56073
13. Dean Ehlers  
Park Superintendent  
Blue Earth Co. Parks  
35 Map Drive, PO Box 3083  
Mankato, MN 56001
14. Andy Johnson  
Blue Earth Co Commissioner  
237 Belgrade Ave  
No. Mankato, MN 56003



## Appendix 2: Sample Letter of invitation

February 5, 2001

Dear Focus Group Participant,

Thank you for your interest and willingness to attend the focus group concerning the possible development of a recreational trail in and around Lake Crystal. The meeting is scheduled for **February 13<sup>th</sup> from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. at Lake Crystal City Hall, 100 East Robinson Street.**

This is one of several focus groups that are being conducted in Blue Earth and Wagonwan Counties. The purpose of the focus group is to identify the possibility for and interest in developing a recreational trail. It is hoped this meeting will highlight the community benefits of recreational trail opportunities and some of the possible points of interest and routes that a recreational trail might take. No decisions will be made at the focus groups. However, the information gathered in these meetings will be compiled for use in future decisions and planning the possible development of a recreational trail.

An agenda for the focus group and a list of questions that will be asked of the group at the meeting is enclosed.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this meeting. Your attendance is important, if you cannot attend or if you have any questions please call Bob Hauge at 507-726-2538 or Tony Jacobs at 507-726-2057.

Sincerely,

### **Appendix 3: Agenda and Questions for Wantonwan/Blue Earth Counties focus groups**

#### **Agenda for Focus Groups:**

- I. Welcome and Introductions
- II. Background
- III. Focus Group Purpose
  - A. What do we want to accomplish?
  - B. Meeting Process
- IV. Focus Group Discussion
- V. Wrap up/closure
  - A. Where to go from here
  - B. Who to contact with additional information, thoughts, ideas or questions.

#### **Questions for Focus Groups:**

1. What recreational trail opportunities should be developed for this area?
2. How would these communities benefit from having a new recreational trail?
3. If a new recreational trail is built what points of interest should be connected and what are some possible corridors the trail could follow?
4. What are some obstacles/oppositions you can think of with regard to a new recreational trail?
5. How do we phase this in? OR How do we take the steps to get it done?

#### **Appendix 4: Map of possible trail alignments from focus groups**

The following map represents possible trail corridors that were drawn by participants in answering part of Question #3 during the focus groups. Participants were given markers and allowed to draw on a large wall map. The possible corridors expressed by participants have been color coded to designate which focus groups proposed a particular alignment.

(See attached PDF: Appendix4map.pdf)

**Appendix 5: Results of individual focus groups**

<b>Qs.</b>	<b>LAKE CRYSTAL February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2001</b>	<b>MADELIA February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2001</b>	<b>ST. JAMES March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001</b>	<b>MANKATO May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001</b>
<b>1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Biking</li> <li>-Cross Country Skiing</li> <li>-Running</li> <li>-Inline Skating</li> <li>-Opportunities for x-country skiing racing competitions</li> <li>-Non-motorized</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Walking</li> <li>-Biking</li> <li>-Prairie vs. wooded area (is it desirable?)</li> <li>-ATV trail opportunities</li> <li>-Skateboards / rollerblades</li> <li>-Dual treadway</li> <li>-Motorized users having potential for crop destruction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Non-motorized</li> <li>-Hiking</li> <li>-Biking</li> <li>-Safe area for kids to ride bikes</li> <li>-No snowmobiles (studs tear up trail)</li> <li>-Roller blades</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Circular trails</li> <li>-Connecting existing trails</li> <li>-Horse trails</li> <li>-Skate skiing</li> <li>-Non-motorized</li> <li>-Fast biking</li> <li>-Provide for families</li> <li>-Educational component</li> </ul>
<b>2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Tourism/Economic</li> <li>-Quality of life</li> <li>-Family activities</li> <li>-Reason to live in the community</li> <li>-Unity (common goal)</li> <li>-Regional draw</li> <li>-Diversification of economy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Better health alternatives</li> <li>-Quality of living</li> <li>-Attract others to live here</li> <li>-Enhance other recreational activities (campgrounds, parks)</li> <li>-Economic benefits to providers (food, goods, hotels, recreational sports dealers)</li> <li>-Ties communities together</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Safe place to exercise</li> <li>-Economic impact</li> <li>-Quality of life (another opportunity)</li> <li>-Enhance area accessibility (viewing)</li> <li>-High school sports (train on it)</li> <li>-Running club could use it</li> <li>-Good place to roller blade</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Improves the quality of life</li> <li>-Increased property values</li> <li>-Wildlife/non-game</li> <li>-Complement other uses when planned properly (ex. YMCA/RJT)</li> <li>-Complements business</li> <li>-Tourism benefits</li> <li>-Alternative form of transportation</li> <li>-Trails make biking safer</li> </ul>

<b>Qs.</b>	<b>LAKE CRYSTAL</b> February 13 <sup>th</sup> , 2001	<b>MADELIA</b> February 21 <sup>st</sup> , 2001	<b>ST. JAMES</b> March 12 <sup>th</sup> , 2001	<b>MANKATO</b> May 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2001
<b>3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Recreation center / Jones Park / JC Field</li> <li>-Go to Mankato not Madelia yet</li> <li>-Brad: wants to see it hook to RJT because he uses it already</li> <li>-Follow Hwy 60 into Minneopa St. Park (Minneopa Creek)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Campgrounds</li> <li>-Parks</li> <li>-Golf courses</li> <li>-Riverside ski/hiking trail</li> <li>-Student nature project</li> <li>-Riverview Heights Subdivision</li> <li>-Use CRP/CREP buffer lands along ditches</li> <li>-Show prairie land as it is</li> <li>-Traverse both prairie, wooded, and creek/ravine areas</li> <li>-Abandoned farm sites (rest stops, educational information)</li> <li>-Fedji Lake and lakes near Lake Crystal</li> <li>-Eagles Nest Park</li> <li>-Using trail system being planned to connect</li> <li>-Madelia to La Salle to St. James (Younger Brothers site)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Join trail to go around lake</li> <li>-Dedicate off-road trails (not on road shoulder)</li> <li>-Connect communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Camping/Rec./Services connection</li> <li>-Complete what is around Mankato</li> <li>-Mankato Loop</li> <li>-Connect Lake Crystal to Minneopa State Park</li> <li>-Connect Lake Crystal to Rapidan and RJT</li> </ul>

<b>Qs.</b>	<b>LAKE CRYSTAL</b> February 13 <sup>th</sup> , 2001	<b>MADELIA</b> February 21 <sup>st</sup> , 2001	<b>ST. JAMES</b> March 12 <sup>th</sup> , 2001	<b>MANKATO</b> May 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2001
<b>4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Avoid wetlands</li> <li>-No rest stops along highway</li> <li>-Need to use County Road 9 to cross river at Rapidan</li> <li>-Below grade crossing at 169</li> <li>-Land Acquisition and Funding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Landowner opposition</li> <li>-Cost for securing land</li> <li>-Crossing highways, railroad tracks, ditches, lakes/marsh areas</li> <li>-Floating walking bridges might address wetlands areas</li> <li>-Do not make another Hammond Highway trail (too dangerous)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Too dangerous to follow highway shoulder</li> <li>-Crossing Highway 60</li> <li>-Crossing the river from St. James to Ornsby (need to reconstruct bridge)</li> <li>-Land acquisition</li> <li>-Treadway along South side of town (10<sup>th</sup> Ave.) landowners not open to sidewalk expansion (presently)</li> <li>-Old railroad bed (DNR) is prime hunting (need to replace with good hunting)</li> <li>-Anhydrous tank at Ornsby (bypass or fence off)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Section from Minneopa is high dollars</li> <li>-Cost</li> <li>-Private land ownership (avoid if possible)</li> <li>-Competition for monetary resources</li> <li>-Lack of potential corridors</li> <li>-Lack of overall planning and development</li> <li>-Hunting on trails conflict (Sakatah/RJT)</li> </ul>
<b>5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Go to Mankato first</li> <li>-Do it in stages</li> <li>-Try to go cheap</li> <li>-Add as money becomes available</li> <li>-CREP plan might allow it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Talk with landowners</li> <li>-Find options that are available</li> <li>-Pick option that is best for all communities</li> <li>-Focus on the big picture (Ornsby to Mankato)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Ornsby to St. James first then connect to lake trail</li> <li>-Want to see it happen soon</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Finish existing projects</li> <li>-Build cooperation between all interest groups</li> <li>-Get private funding</li> <li>-Dept. of Trails to coordinate projects</li> <li>-DNR look at connecting existing trails</li> </ul>

The following questions were asked at each of the focus groups. The table above provides the specific answers to each question as given by participants at that focus group. Answers provided correspond with the question number found at the left of the table.

- 1. What recreational trail opportunities should be developed for this area?**
- 2. How would these communities benefit from having a new recreational trail?**
- 3. If a new recreational trail is built what points of interest should be connected and what are some possible corridors the trail could follow?**
- 4. What are some obstacles/oppositions you can think of with regard to a new recreational trail?**
- 5. How do we phase this in? OR How do we take the steps to get it done?**

Focus Group attendance:

Lake Crystal Focus Group – 6

Madelia Focus Group – 7

St. James Focus Group – 9

Mankato Focus Group – 9