

Elsen, Nikki

From: Kabat, Tim
Sent: Wednesday, February 5, 2020 4:32 PM
To: 'Karen Kouba'; 'Tracie Blumentritt'; 'Rebecca Kilgore Guinn'; 'Jane Rada'; 'BARB HEINTZ'; 'Beth Piggush'; 'William Haviland'; 'Julie Chamberlain'; 'Christine Clair'
Cc: ZZ Council Members; Odegaard, Jason; Cavadini, Caley
Subject: RE: Grandma's Gateway Trail
Attachments: ISG Report of Grandma's Gateway Trail Plan.pdf

Hi,

Thank you for the note and comments. I apologize for the time it has taken to respond. As you might imagine, I have received a lot of communication on this project and I am working to get back to everyone. I attempted to address the concerns raised by many of you with this reply.

I begin by offering my apology to you and the neighbors on 29th Street and Ebner Coulee Road for the lack of direct notice on this project. The project was first announced back in 2018 and our staff met with the Bluffside Neighborhood Association on several occasions about the trail project, but we did not reach out to people individually until last month and that was wrong.

I have directed staff to do better in anticipating neighborhood impacting projects and to improve direct communication with those who may be affected going forward. There is always a balance with these types of projects and we should have done better.

I am also sorry if you feel lied to, deceived or that the City has not been transparent. To that end, we have gathered all the project information and will be soon updating the City's website – under "News" – to share the documents, studies and plans.

To address the charge that the City is not listening to you and the neighbors, I offer the following.

During the past several weeks we have received emails, phone calls and face-to-face visits expressing concerns about:

1. The safety of drivers, pedestrians and bicyclists at the trail access points on 29th Street and Ebner Coulee Road. In response, the City recently hired ISG – an independent engineering firm not associated with the project – to review these locations in relation to traffic, parking and safety. The attached report indicates the access points meet (and in most cases exceed) the minimum sight line distances for safe travel. ISG also made recommendations for signage and parking. As we work on the designs and specs of these access points, we will share the plans before they are finalized. We have not worked out the details yet, but I directed staff to hold a public information meeting once we have updated info.
2. The soil conditions, slopes and integrity of the bluff. As background, the City has constructed 15+ miles of trails in the recent past on the exact same types of soils and slopes as this project presents. We work with certified trail builders to plan and design the trails, accounting for local conditions and challenges. We also use professional trail builders to construct the trails according to the latest and best practices. In response to these concerns, the City hired ISG to review the construction specifications and standards for this project. The attached report includes their analysis with recommendations. On Page 5 of their report, they stated that "Long-term, high-volume use of similar trails within region have shown that even in soils rated as "severe" for erodibility, with careful management pre, during, and post-construction, erosion is not an issue."

3. The need for an environmental impact statement of the bluff before this project should proceed. An environmental impact statement is typically associated with a much, much larger and impactful project, as compared to the trails being proposed. These statements take years to complete and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. There has not been this need with any of the trails we have constructed previously. In response to these concerns, I offer that the City of La Crosse – through our actions – has invested millions of dollars into protecting and restoring our blufflands. In the past few years we have removed invasive species, planted native species and pollinator gardens, have repaired old and eroded trails, removed rogue trails and have constructed and maintained new, more resilient trails. We are fully committed to preserving and enhancing the gifts we have been given and take that stewardship seriously. No one wants to see erosion or boulders sloughing off Grandad’s Bluff, but the City cannot guarantee that there will never be a problem in the future with or without trails. My belief is that Ellen Hixon gifted this property to the City so that our people could have access to these beautiful areas forever. I do not believe Mrs. Hixon wanted the property sealed off – it was a quarry after all and not an untouched wilderness. The trail access points allow for hikers and bikers to go up and down the bluff more safely. Providing additional access and our continued investments in habitat restoration and maintenance will guarantee future generations can enjoy this land and might inspire more Ellen Hixons to get engaged in environmental stewardship.
4. The narrow width of the trails will be unsafe. In response to this concern, I have directed staff to work with the trail planners and builders to maximize the width wherever safe and practical so that we have a true multi-use facility. This might mean additional changes to the plan and we will keep the community updated on those changes. We also may look at “hike only” portions of the project or designate certain times or days as hiking or biking as this facility gets used and better understood by users, staff and volunteers.

In response to the accusations about the Parks, Recreation and Forestry staff – while there is always room for improvement, I can attest that our staff are dedicated, caring professionals who serve with integrity and compassion. They have completed a significant number of these projects and continue to raise the bar in habitat restoration, management, trail building and maintenance. The health of our bluffs and trails have come a long way in a short period of time due to their expertise and effort.

Unfortunately, our current political climate seems to reinforce the notion that there’s a “conspiracy” about this project. That lack of trust in the government may apply at the state and federal level, but I do not believe it is the case with our local government. We are all trying to do our best for the 52,000 residents who live here and the countless tourists who visit. I know I have learned a lot about these concerns and we are committed to making this a successful and safe project.

My hope is to continue the dialogue with you – especially as we begin to work on the details.

As always, please contact me with your questions or concerns and we will do our best to respond and address any issues that come up.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Tim

Tim Kabat

Mayor

City of La Crosse

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