

# Building West Michigan's Alternative Transportation Network

by John Morrison, Executive Director  
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Like most kids, I loved my bike and loved exploring the world on it. There were no trails to speak of then other than paths through the woods and shortcuts from one neighborhood to the next. I was probably seven years old when Dad brought home my second bike, an old-old 26-inch girls bike he bought at a garage sale covered in glops of ugly green paint obviously applied with an old paintbrush. And I loved it! Inspired by Dad's stories of fixing up bikes when he was a kid, I sanded the paint off and we repainted it fire engine red with black fenders and chain guard. It was sweet but was soon replaced with a second-hand (or third-hand?) boy's Schwinn 3-speed that I could barely fit.

The Sears Christmas catalog was always a big deal with my brother and I scouring the pages dreaming of a shiny new 10 speed. When we got them, you couldn't get us off of them. My riding back then was on roads, often just for the joy of riding or to look for the house of a girl for whom I had a crush. I delivered hundreds of newspapers rain or shine (sometimes even in the snow)

on my bike. And I rode to school, parking it in the bike racks with many dozens of other bikes.

Like many kids, that all faded when I got my drivers license. Driving opened up a world of possibilities, it was easier, and the distances were greater. The bikes gathered dust and Dad sold them.

It was on a trip to the Netherlands some years later that I was inspired by all the bike paths and the infrastructure and the hundreds and thousands of cyclists using them. It stuck in my head and I wondered why we couldn't have that in the United States.

I was interested in cycling again, but was admittedly afraid to ride on the roads anymore. It's the same story we've all heard time and time again: too many cars with too many distracted drivers. In 2008 I was training for a marathon when I discovered West Michigan's trails, and I was hooked.



John Morrison rides the new section of the Paul Henry Thornapple Trail in Middleville after a ribbon-cutting ceremony on August 22, 2016.



I ran on them and rode on them and wanted to get involved.

## A Network in West Michigan

West Michigan had the good fortune to host the 25th annual Michigander Bicycle Tour last year giving me the opportunity to ride on about 20 regional trails during the eight-day tour. The tour is organized by Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance each year. Last year it included a lot of road miles too, but the 400-mile ride showed how much you can move around West Michigan using non-motorized trails.

West Michigan Trails & Greenways Coalition has played a role in the development and construction of many of those trails, whether it be helping communities or trail groups navigate the complicated bureaucracy of developing a new trail or helping with the local match required in funding its construction.

Most of us, myself included, have certain trails we return to for exercise, relaxation, or to reach a particular destination for ice cream, food, or drink. But it's also possible to explore our region going from trail to trail.

I gained a new appreciation for the extensive trail network we have and just how many places you can visit while staying mostly on trails. West Michigan has much to be proud of, as I heard numerous times from other riders on the tour.

This level of connectivity just doesn't exist in much of the country, and is argu-



John Morrison (right) with former WMTGC president Dennis Kniebel on the William Field Memorial Hart-Montague Trail during the Michigander Bicycle Tour in 2016.

Local officials cut a ribbon on October 17, 2016 to officially open a new tunnel under Lake Michigan Drive on the Fred Meijer Standale Trail.



ably one of the best in Michigan. I urge you not to take this network for granted. Get out and explore new trails and destinations and I promise you'll find new places to add to your "favorites" list. This magazine is a great place to get some ideas.

### Developments with the Network

That doesn't mean our work is done. Even with so much in place, the West Michigan region saw tremendous developments in its trail network last year. That includes the resurfacing of the 22.6-mile William Field Memorial Hart-Montague Trail, originally dedicated in 1989 and Michigan's first paved rail trail. It was completely rebuilt in 2015 and completed in 2016 with all new asphalt, widened to 10 feet, repaired and improved trail amenities including benches, interpretive historic markers, scenic overlooks, and more.

It's a beautiful trail definitely worth visiting (or revisiting), winding through rural and wooded terrain between Montague and Hart through the communities of Rothbury, New Era, Shelby, and Mears. Be sure to check out the White Lake Pathway in beautiful and historic Whitehall, connecting the Hart-Montague with the Fred Meijer Berry Junction trail to the south. There is a lot of art and sculpture along the trail, and it's worth exploring the town for architecture and fun places to eat.

Heading south out of Whitehall, construction has begun on the second and final phase of the Fred Meijer Berry Junction Trail. This connection has been a long time coming and finally made its way through too many hurdles to list, so it is especially good to see the shovels in the ground on this one. Look for Berry Junction to be completed in Spring 2018, connecting the Hart-Montague and White Lake Pathway all the way south to the Muskegon Lakeshore Trail around Muskegon Lake where there is, again, much to explore.

Continuing south along the lakeshore is progress on a collection of trails sometimes called the Grand Connection, including the North Bank Trail, Spoonville Trail, and Grand River Explorers Trail (formerly the Grand River Greenway Trail). Much is still needed to complete all these trails, but important pieces are coming together in the coming months that will soon make an impressive loop between Grand Haven, Nunica, and Spring Lake. Users will appreciate spectacular views, connections to parks, and some fun places to eat. Watch in the coming years as the trails find their way to Grand Rapids creating more loops along with connections to more than a dozen impressive parks, communities, and attractions.

Completed in 2016 is the tunnel under M-45/Lake Michigan Drive on the Fred Meijer Standale Trail. Linking the two sections of the Standale Trail really opens up alternative transportation options for local citizens, greatly improves the safety and usability of the trail, and enhances our local trail network for users and visitors who want to explore and connect to other great trails and communities. This project, too, cleared so many hurdles that could have prevented it from happening, so it's really good to see it completed and being appreciated.

Plans for a trail connecting Kalamazoo and Grand Rapids got a big boost last year with a planning grant from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR)

as well as support from local municipalities. By next year, following numerous community and stakeholder meetings, there should be a solid plan in place to move the project forward with construction of the 40-plus-mile trail in the coming years.

### An Alternative Transportation Network

West Michigan's trail network is impressive and continually developing, gaps between trails are being identified and closed, and long awaited trails are making progress. Still there is room to improve and to take it closer to the bicycle infrastructure I witnessed in the Netherlands. What is the next step? What will take this non-motorized trail network to the next level?

One way is to merge the trail network with the bicycle infrastructure being developed in our communities. Grand Rapids, for example, now has 80 miles of bike lanes and amenities making it easier to cycle in town. These systems need to work together, and the more seamlessly the better. Some of that is physical such as putting a connecting pathway in place. Some of it is informational such as signs.

A good signage system will keep residents and visitors alike comfortable with where they're going, knowing they're on the right trail, and understanding what is around them – whether it's attractions, restaurants, historical markers, or the next trail. Such a system needs to work on trails and across the other infrastructure including bike lanes and road routes in order to create a truly alternative transportation system.

Developing this system is more complicated than it seems, as any signage system needs to meet standards of various agencies and municipalities. WMTGC and the Greater Grand Rapids Bicycle Coalition have brought together numerous agencies to begin working on just such a solution, including the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), MDNR, Grand Valley Metro Council, Macatawa Area Coordinating Council (MACC), Kent County Parks, Kent County Road Commission, Ottawa County Parks and Recreation, and others. It will take some time to do properly, but the interest and understanding of the need is there and we look forward to finding and implementing a functional way-finding and place-making system in the coming years.

West Michigan Trails & Greenways Coalition looks forward to being involved in the continued development and evolution of our regional trail network as a part of West Michigan's alternative transportation network. And I look forward to the continued joy of exploring the world on my bicycle.



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