

Appendix D - Trail Planning in Manistee County

History & Background

Trails and trail use have been activities associated with Manistee County for decades. From narrow paths to favorite water accesses and fishing holes to extended shoulder bike lanes and snowmobile trails, many types of trails exist throughout the County. Processes and initiatives of the past have developed some isolated trail parks in locations of the County, and have facilitated expansion of snowmobile routes that seek to connect our communities while spanning extensive sections of public forests. Support for trails and trail planning efforts extend back many years, and can easily be found in Master Plan documents from local units of government and the County over the past 30 to 40 years.

Initiated in 2014, a County-Wide approach to recreation planning outlined much of the same support and goals for trail development that had been found in previous plans. The difference with this specific endeavor was the community collaboration and consensus building of a singular plan with a more focused approach that spanned the entirety of the County. The completion of the planning process in 2016 provided sound public support for the development of trails and began a trajectory for a passionate group of residents to begin the necessary steps towards implementation of that shared vision.

The foundation for achieving success in trail planning and development began with the completion of necessary actions. These actions include:

- Completion of the 2016 County-Wide Recreation Plan with local and State approval;
- Establishment of broad brush stroke trail routes and trail hubs;
- Establishment of the Manistee County Recreation Commission;
- Establishment of the 501c3 Friends of SMARTrails;
- Refinement of trail routes and prioritization of section implementation;
- Completion of individual stand-alone non-motorized and regional trail route planning documents;
- Communication with the State of Michigan on localized efforts and their support of those efforts;
- Revision of the Recreation Plan in 2021 for recertification and approval by the State; and
- Inclusion of individual regional trail and non-motorized plans within a single primary document appendix that presents a full comprehensive plan for recreation and trail development in Manistee County.

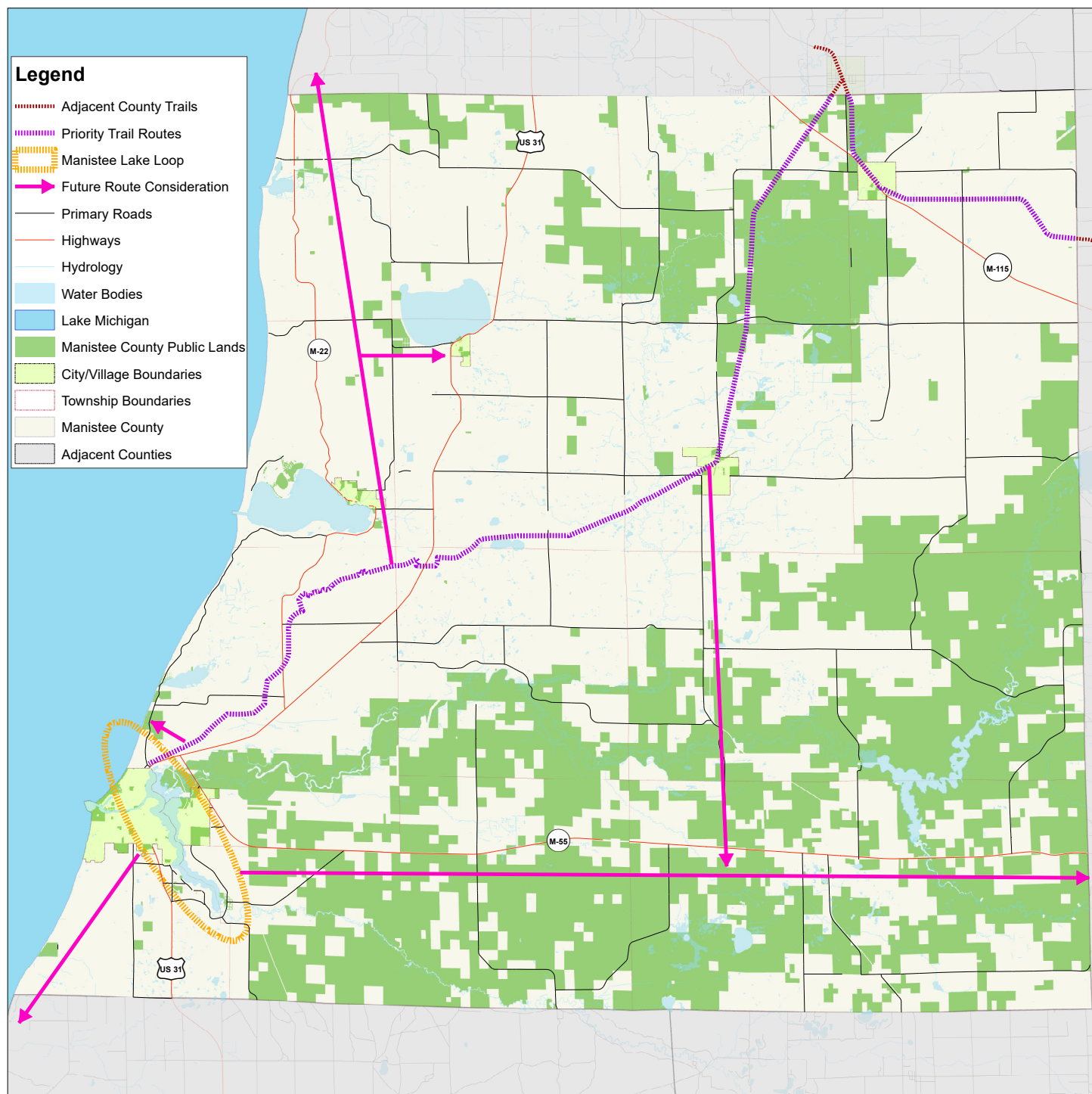


Methodology

Extremely comprehensive in nature, the existing efforts for trail planning shape the methodology of this appendix. Since 2016 a steering committee of Manistee County residents has led efforts for trail implementation guided by information and assistance provided by County Planning Department Staff. Initial trail planning as outlined in the 2016 County-Wide Recreation Plan was superficial in nature and directed the County towards more in-depth trail planning in several areas that included both trail types/uses as well as the appropriate structure and process for implementation efforts. This led to the establishment of the County Recreation Commission and the Friends of SMARTrails, focused attention on multi-use trail route delineation, outlined non-motorized transportation planning in the vicinity of Manistee Lake, continued to advocate for increased single-track back-country loops and connections within the vast public lands of Manistee County, and increasing knowledge of ORV users on established and available routes. Each of these tasks was touched upon in the time between 2016 and 2021.

Movement into the 2021 County-Wide Recreation Plan update process has outlined a need for the condensing of all information pertaining to recreation, particularly including and organizing the information and efforts within the last five years. This section will reinforce the lessons learned, current progress and identify necessary next steps.

Map D-1. Broad Brush Stroke Trail Connections



Support Structure & Advocacy

Recreation Commission

The Manistee County Recreation Commission is a formal advisory body to the Manistee County Board of Commissioners. They are an appointed body of ten members that is established under the authority of the County and Regional Parks Act 261 of 1965. The body membership includes 6 at large seats which are appointed by the County Board upon submittal of an application, with 4 statutorily required seats to be filled by a member of the County Board, a representative of the Road Commission, a Planning Commission member and the Drain Commissioner. The Recreation Commission acts in the following capacities:

- The formal body that is charged with seeking and obtaining grant monies for implementation of projects;
- Provide coordination with other County entities and departments; and
- Recommendation of approval of Recreation Plans and efforts to the formal legislative body.

This governmental commission functions in the public realm, therefore meetings must be advertised and open to the public. The County Board of Commissioners establishes the budget of the Recreation Commission. A well-functioning Recreation Commission is supported with staff.

Friends of SMARTrails (501c3 non-profit):

The Friends of SMARTrails is a formally established non-profit that is charged with advocacy for trail development fundraising and maintenance. The organizational structure is led by a formal Board of Directors, with additional participation of members of the public as non-board member participants. The Friends group acts in multiple capacities:

- They keep a pulse on the community as they interact with neighbors and visitors supporting advocacy for trail development;
- They communicate with local governmental elected and appointed officials;
- They strategize and prioritize for implementation efforts, acting as advisors to the Recreation Commission;
- They hold and attend events to spread awareness of the benefits of trails to the community;

- They fundraise for grant matches and trail maintenance efforts; and
- They assist with maintenance efforts as able.

The Friends of SMARTrails is a non-public body and therefore is not held to the same requirements as the Recreation Commission. Agendas, minutes and meetings are not required to be open to the public, allowing the group to discuss more sensitive subjects of landowner concerns or funding of efforts outside of the public eye. There is sometimes a need for closed door discussions for sensitive subjects, but it is advised that this support organization act largely within view of the public with abundant transparency in order to establish and maintain trust of the residents of Manistee County.



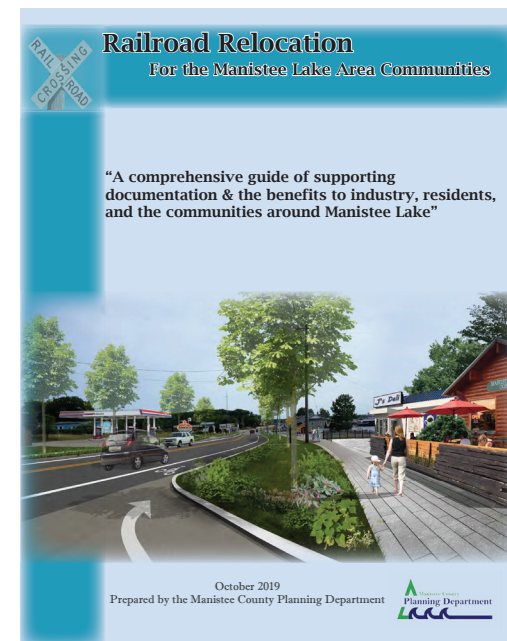
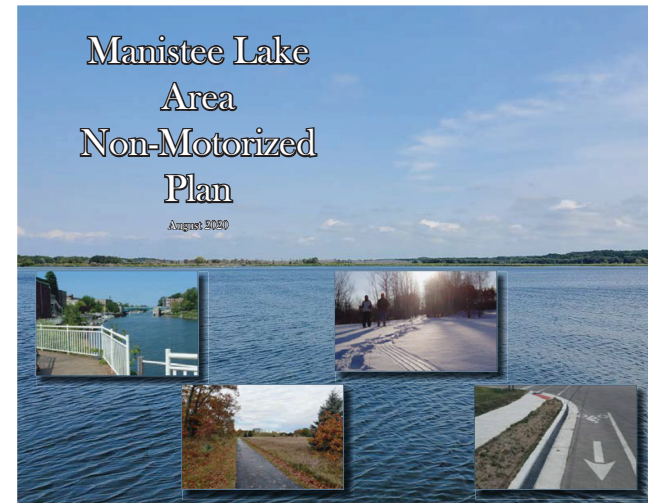
Trail & Non-Motorized Multi-Modal Opportunities

Localized Manistee Lake Area Communities Non-Motorized Improvements

The Manistee Lake Area contains the largest population concentration within Manistee County within the jurisdictions of the City of Manistee, Manistee Township, Village of Eastlake, Stronach Township and the Charter Township of Filer. A planning effort undertaken with collaboration of these entities and area stakeholders in 2019, led to the development of the Manistee Lake Area Non-Motorized Trail Plan. This plan outlined localized improvements to non-motorized facilities and also included desired connections of the regional multi-use trail system to the area.

The efforts of the document were founded in strong public and stakeholder participation which led to the identification and desired location of the improvements. Improvements in part drew upon on-going recommendation for relocation of the railroad from a significant portion of the Manistee Lake shoreline, opening up an expansive linear corridor around the lake that could be converted to a non-motorized pathway that would connect to existing and future facilities. The recommendation for relocation of the railroad can be extensively reviewed in the Railroad Relocation Guide:

- Recommended improvements are numerous for this area and those that are most noteworthy are identified below:
- Relocation of railroad and conversion to non-motorized pathway
- Placement of a sidewalk along US 31 from the north side limits of the City of Manistee to the Manistee Blacker Airport
- Placement of a sidewalk along US 31 from the south side limits into Filer Township to Merkey Rd.
- Placement of numerous pedestrian crossings across US 31 with signage and refuge islands in Filer and Manistee Townships and the City of Manistee
- Expansion of sidewalks in areas of residential land uses in the City of Manistee, Filer Township and Manistee Township
- Connection of multi-use trails to the edge of the urban areas of these communities to facilitate snowmobile access during the winter and non-motorized access during warm months.



Map D-2. Necessary Actions Railroad Map

Each of the identified improvements is a recommendation for incorporation; thus each is considered a technical improvement that aligns with goals that are structured to “improve” non-motorized assets, features and overall functionality. For a complete visual guide to the recommended improvements please reference Map D-2

Regional Multi-Use Trail Development Routes & Connections

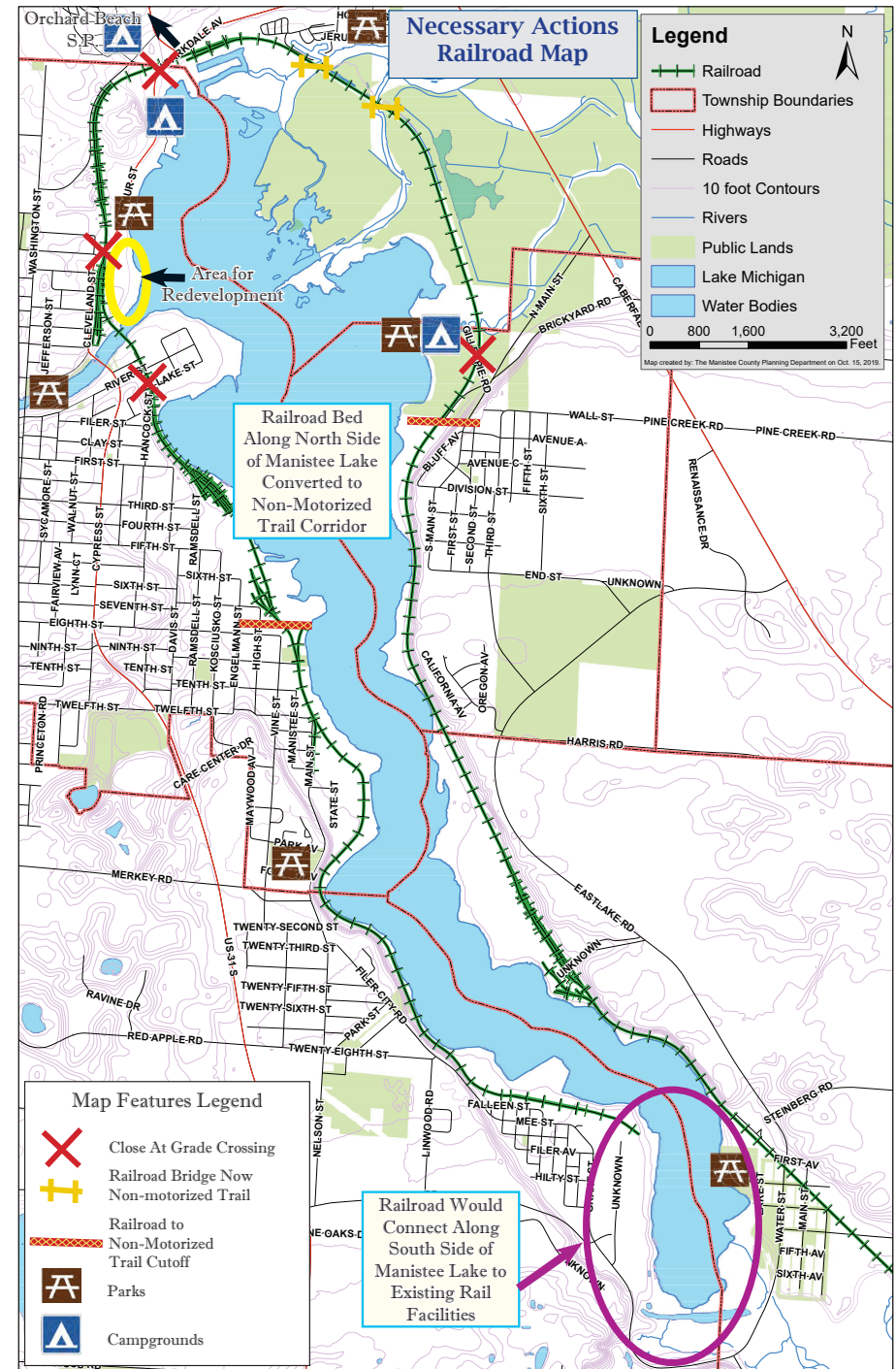
Establishment of off-road or separated trails for multi-use (snowmobile in winter, non-motorized during warm months) and providing regional connections continues to be a primary objective of the Friends of SMARTrails and the Recreation Commission. With many months spent planning and establishing the locations of routes throughout the County, first as broad-brush strokes and then refined to identify recommended placement on the land, the initial priority routes were established.

Priority Route Segments

There are three primary prioritized segments of multi-use regional trails that are in a position for implementation efforts at this time. They are:

1. The Betsie Valley Trail extension from Thompsonville, Southeast and East along the abandoned railroad corridor into Cleon Township and the Village of Copemish, exiting east into Wexford County towards Mesick.
2. The Betsie Valley Trail extension from Thompsonville, South along the abandoned railroad corridor into Springdale Township, continuing South into Maple Grove Township and the Village of Kaleva.
3. The extension of the priority trail route # 2 from Kaleva to the West and Southwest into Brown Township and Northern Manistee Township turning south towards Tribal areas of the Little River Band and terminating in Southern Manistee Township near the City of Manistee.

Priority segments 1 and 2 are under full public ownership with property records detailing that the abandoned railroad corridor is owned by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Priority segment 3 has a combination of public and private ownership along its course. Discussions with landowners have been ongoing thanks to the efforts of the Benzie-Manistee Snowbirds snowmobile organization, therefore the route is drafted as a fixed location. Each of these segments are presented in Appendix E with aeriels, roadways, streams, wetlands, steep slopes and property owner information to assist with implementation efforts.



While implementation efforts are on-going for the preceding priority routes, it is recommended that Manistee County and the Local Units of Government begin work on determining routes that are currently only identified by a broad-brush stroke. Successful determination of the appropriate placement of a route is a process that needs to be conducted with full transparency. Local community leaders must work together coordinating meetings that seek the input of residents and property owners. Stakeholders included in this process should include local snowmobile and cycling clubs, Friends of SMARTrails, County Road Commission, MDOT when applicable along with other interested parties. The following routes have been identified as desired connections but have not made it past the broad-brush stroke stage. Feasibility of each route is largely dependent on landownership, natural features, community support and anticipated costs.

- There is strong community support for a lakeshore route that would connect the City of Manistee, Onekama Township and Arcadia Township continuing North towards Frankfort. Determining a route is particularly challenging as the lakeshore has very limited public land when compared to the interior portions of the County. One option is to work with road agencies for utilization of road right-of-way, with another option to work with utility easements that may allow for trail placement.
- In the southern portion of the County there is opportunity for a West to East route that would span Stronach and Norman Townships. This route is very feasible with abundant public land contained within the Manistee National Forest. Connections from Manistee to Wellston could be planned more easily with this public land in mind. The route could allow for connections towards the East into Wexford County.
- In the central Eastern portion of the County a route can be planned for a South to North connection that would provide linkages from Wellston North through Brethren and connecting to the segment of trail in Kaleva.
- Linkage to the Bear Lake area. It largely makes sense to connect Bear Lake along the lakeshore trail. There are a couple of options from creating a separate connector trail to routing the trail away from the lakeshore into Bear Lake. A third option is to create an entirely new trail segment that would connect the lakeshore trail to Bear Lake and continuing into the interior of the County towards Kaleva and Copemish.

The Manistee River Loop, a 20 mile loop trail that circumvents the Hodenpyl stretch of the Manistee River via the Manistee River Trail and a section of the North Country Trail, has become a huge draw to our area in the last 10 years. The primary use is for overnight backpacking treks along the loop, but also provides opportunity for shorter in and out day hikes. The loop has become a symbol of “Loving a natural area

death,” with the amount of use that it currently receives. A typical weekend will find all parking areas filled to capacity with Coates Highway containing overflow along the shoulders of the roadway. In recent years during mid-week the parking areas have continued to fill to capacity.

The extensive existing public use along with public input from work sessions and surveys has identified a strong desire for loop backpacking routes within the County. Existing recommendations from the 2016 plan identified a need to work with the United States Forest Service in support of implementation of these trail types. The existing plan called for exploration of backcountry trails that circumvented the Little Manistee River and Pine Rivers. These projects should continue to be supported, but it may be beneficial to work with the USFS in developing a backcountry trail forest use plan. Connection of the Little Manistee, Pine and Manistee River corridors with overland routes that connect Big M. and other areas of extensive forest in Manistee County would be a huge draw for users and would spread use out across the forest instead of the continued extensive use of the Red Bridge area.

The ORV community is a strong vocal supporter of trails and road use for various street legal and licensed ORV’s. Through surveys and public input from community events gathered during the summer of 2019, it is evident that a significant sector of the permanent and visiting population wishes to utilize ORV’s in Manistee County. Case studies have displayed a need for separation of trail users in regard to ORV and hiking/biking (source: <https://ghtrails.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Gandy-Dancer-study.pdf>).

Moving forward with implementation and trail planning efforts it would be good practice to work towards development of an informational pamphlet that contained routes available for ORV use and also promotes local businesses within the communities that are accessible by ORV. Local Units of Government in Manistee County have opened up the shoulders of certain local roads for ORV use, and the State of Michigan has opened up significant segments of forest roads within the Pere Marquette State Forest. A process of reviewing the feasibility of establishing some fixed routes that incorporate loops that connect communities and provide riders with opportunities to view the country-side and access sections of State Forest is highly recommended.

Planning efforts that lead to established routes for ORV use will remove the issue of necessity of allowing or establishing ORV use on trails being developed for hiking/biking and snowmobiling. There is abundant data established in GIS datasets with Manistee County that identifies roads in communities that are open to ORV use. Communication and planning with the Manistee County Convention and Visitor’s Bureau could lead to funding that can make these pamphlets and maps a reality.

Future Route Planning

Manistee County Trails Discussion

There is consensus for trail development within Manistee County and support for snowmobile trails as well as non-motorized trails (hiking, biking, equestrian, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing) development is evident. All future trail development should focus on these user groups, and consideration for collaboration for the development of multi-user trails is a priority. Examples of shared use for trails allowing snowmobiling as well as non-motorized use exist outside our County, and these best management practices should be reviewed for consideration for within Manistee County.

Trailheads:

Trailhead placement and proper development is of utmost importance to trail design and implementation. Consideration of parking, amenities such as restrooms, picnic tables or seating, potable water source, informational signage and bike racks and canoe/kayak cradles is very important dependent upon the trailhead use and location. Trailhead design should have some uniformity throughout the County so that a common theme is easily distinguishable. These types of themes are already present across the Manistee National Forest at USFS Recreation Sites. A theme can assist with identification and promotion of sites and allows people to know that they have arrived.

Way-finding:

Way-finding is an important consideration during trail implementation efforts. Through directional maps, signage and trail markers or blazes; trail use is planned, route choice is determined, and identification of location is known.. Thoroughly identified routes ensure that trail users can reasonably find there way from one destination to another, without wrong turns occurring at junctions, or wrong route selection. Similar to trailheads, way-finding signage should carry common themes which are specific to individual routes or trail types. Through unique characteristics one can more easily identify when they are utilizing a specific trail or trail type.

Land Trail Type Discussion:

There are many different trail types pertaining to the design, construction and makeup of the trail surface. Different uses require different widths, surfaces, grades and design. What follows are the most common constructed trail types recommended to be utilized within Manistee County for various trail routes and segments.

Single Track Natural Surface Trail:

Single track natural surface trails are most often utilized for hiking, backpacking and biking during the summer months and snowshoeing during the winter months. Single tracks are designed for the width of a single person or biker so the tight confines of the space limit snowmobile use and become congested quicker in areas of high use.

Natural Surface Trail 4'-8':

4'-8' natural surface trails are often utilized in areas for cross-country skiing and snowmobile use during the winter (allowance for grooming equipment) and unimproved non-motorized uses such as hiking and biking which facilitates easier travel compared to single track trails in many cases. This also affords room for multiple users to hike or ride side by side as well as for allowance for easier passage in opposing directions.

Hard Packed Surface Trail 8'-12':

8'-12' hard packed trails are designed and constructed to provide ease of travel for the user and to allow for both snowmobile use as well as non-motorized uses during the summer months. Hard packed often refers to crushed limestone, but can also consist of road gravel, crushed concrete or other suitable packable stable material. These trails are often constructed along trail segments further away from population centers and popular recreation sites, where paved trails should be utilized to facilitate universal accessibility. The cost of hard-packed vs. paved trails should be explored for more remote trail segments, as maintenance for hard packed may be significantly less than costs of resurfacing paved trails.

Paved Trail 8'-12':

8'-12' paved trails are utilized for non-motorized use as well as being available to snowmobile use. Often constructed in high use routes, populated areas and adjacent to popular recreation sites, these trails provide for universal accessibility as they provide a very stable platform for transportation.

Extended Road Shoulder 1-4':

Extended road shoulders are often added to roads to facilitate on-road bicycle use. For experienced riders extended road shoulders are easily and comfortably utilized, but they are seen as less desirable by less experienced riders as well as young riders and families. Road shoulders should continue to be pursued for designated on-road

bike routes, although more support for establishment of off-road facilities is evident through public input gathered in Manistee County.

Land Trail maintenance:

Maintenance of trail systems is an important consideration during trail implementation. Agencies tasked with management and upkeep of public lands often lack budget funding for the addition of miles of land trails, and can be cautious of adding additional trail miles to public lands. This caution is warranted and discussions early on in a process concerning maintenance and how it will be paid for with monetary funds and/or volunteer hours can ease the implementation and construction of trail segments.

- Trail maintenance tasks include:
- Clearing debris and garbage
- Maintaining pavement
- Grading of hard surfaces
- Mowing of vegetation
- Grooming of snow

Developing a Framework for Implementation:

As the need, desire, and support is established by this recreation plan to develop multi-use trails, work needs to commence to plan a well designed trail system. By doing so, trail planners have continuously found that good advance planning will result in decreased long term maintenance costs, thoughtful connections and preservation of natural and cultural resources; as well as having a more meaningful economic development impact on the local economy. Meeting the recreational and destination needs, as promoting a healthy lifestyle, of residents is very important. Using the trail system to help promote our communities in order to increase prosperity is also a very important factor. Ultimately, communities will work together to plan and implement the trail plan in a collaborative manner unlike previously seen in Manistee County.

Implementation Framework:

Utilizing the information collected within this plan and synthesized within this chapter, leadership members for trail implementation have a tool box with which to move forward. Moving forward requires utilizing these tools and the framework for future

steps for regional trail planning which are broken into the three categories of: visioning, collaboration, implementation.

Visioning:

Identifying and analyzing:

- More refined locations of the trail corridors
- Potential funding sources
- Trail layout, design, and trail use
- Landowner/ stakeholder identification and outreach

Collaboration:

Identifying stakeholders to collaborate and partner with and seeking to:

- Understand different user groups, their interests and concerns
- Reconcile different goals and needs.
- Obtain ideas for design, locations, and types of uses for the trails

Implementation:

Building the trail planned for will require the following issues/goals accomplished:

- Purchasing of land, receiving donations, or obtaining easements for trail segments.
- Liability issues resolved.
- Accessibility, including being compliant with the American Disability Act, issues highlighted and resolved.
- A trail maintenance and operations policy which includes seeking and cementing a strong trail volunteer group who will assist in day to day operations of caring for the trail system.
- Jurisdictional issues will need to be resolved.
- A general management structure in place for various trail segments.
- The development of a way-finding system.
- Ensuring that the Visitor's Bureau and other methods of promoting the County are involved and have all the most update information available.

Identified Loops Non-motorized Loops

Non-motorized loop trail systems are desired of residents and visitors. Loop trails are desired as they provide for continuous travel along a linear trail providing unique views along the entire route while returning to the initial starting point. Public input as well as the local knowledge of leadership team members identified two locations for desired loop trail implementation.

Manistee Lake Trail Loop:

The Manistee Lake Trail is suggested as a non-motorized trail route which would encompass the entirety of Manistee Lake, linking all communities which surround the Lake. Discussions concerning the establishment of a loop trail around Manistee Lake need to include all municipalities which surround the lake, the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians, the railroad company, all industries along the lake, the DNR, as well as local residents. (See Map D-3)

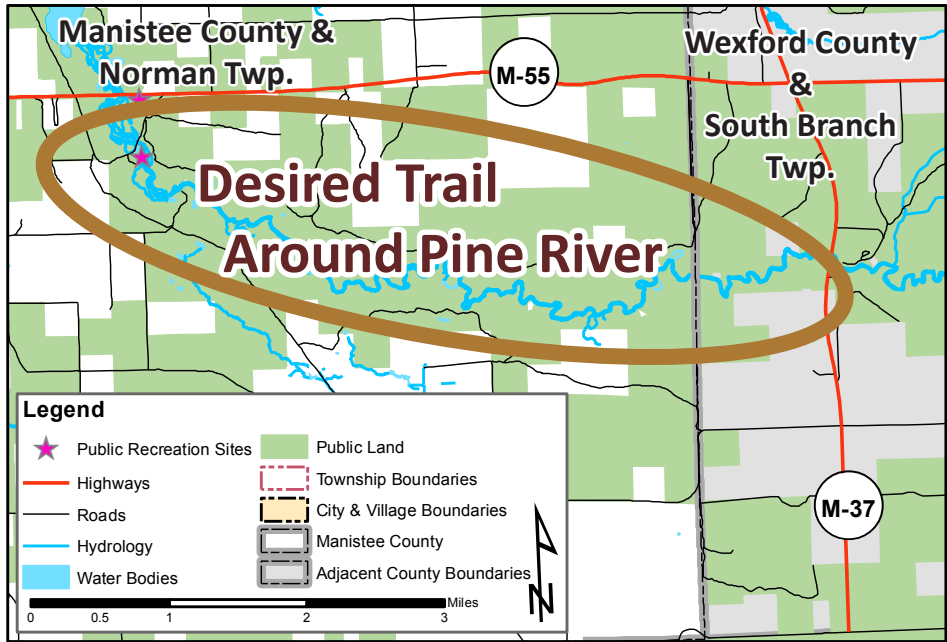
Map D-3. Manistee Lake Look



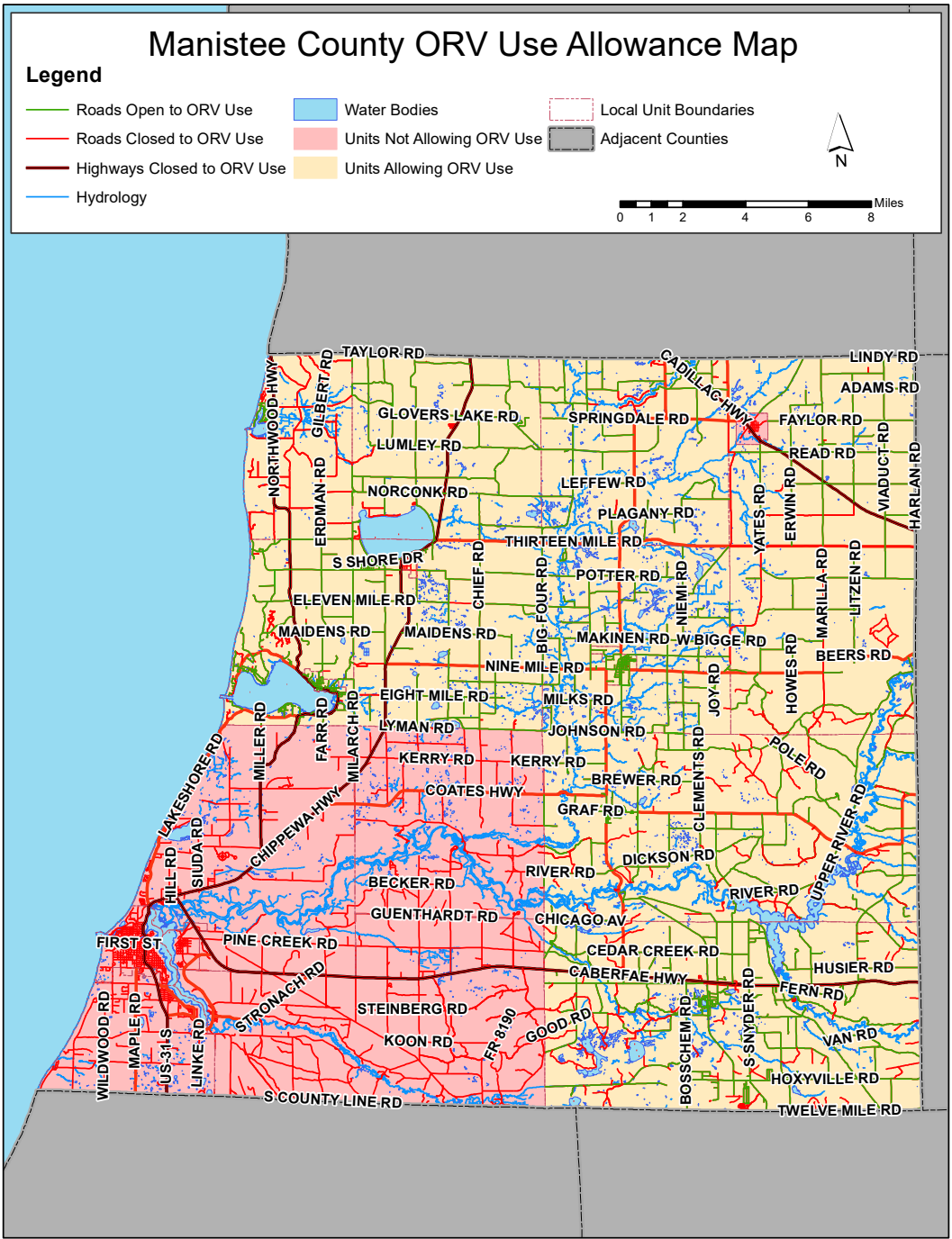
Pine River Trail:

With the popularity of the Manistee River Trail-NCT Trail loop with hikers and particularly overnight backpacking enthusiasts, it is suggested that a natural surface single track loop trail along the Pine River Corridor in Manistee and Wexford Counties be explored. This beautiful river valley landscape which is contained within the Pine River Corridor, has special regulations for use and any trail implementation efforts must first approach the USFS to initiate conversation. Full collaboration with the USFS is required as the vast majority of land within the corridor is contained within the Manistee National Forest. Collaboration between Manistee and Wexford Counties as well as Norman and South Branch Townships is advised as the trail would likely fall within these municipalities. (See Map D-4)

Map D-4. Pine River Loop



Map D-5. ORV Map



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