



the Timberjay

Published by Timberjay Inc., with offices in Tower, Minnesota

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Tower's Ancient Cedar Trail

Over 20 years ago, Marshall and I became aware of a stand of old-growth upland cedar, located within the city limits of Tower. This 100-acre patch of woods is unique in our area, with trees dating back to the 1880s, most likely originating following a fire that occurred a few years before the opening of the Soudan Mine, right before Tower was incorporated. It has a dense overstory, large rock outcroppings that give views of nearby Lake Vermilion, and a relatively open forest floor. Area foresters have concluded the area has never been logged, and due to the introduction of whitetail deer to the ecosystem later in the 1900s, is a patch of woods not likely to be reproduced, since young cedar are a favorite food of whitetail deer.

The power company had asked the city for permission to cut the stand for a new powerline, but after the urging of several residents, ourselves included, the city council denied permission to cut, and the powerline went in on an alternate route.

The plan had always been for the city to develop a series of trails in the area, which is located just off of a paved biking trail. But as years went by and nothing happened, we decided to take charge.

We created an ad-hoc committee with leaders from the Wagoner Trail Club (which oversees the city cross-country ski trails), Friends of Vermilion Country School, and the Tower Economic Development Authority (TEDA). The creation of recreational trails had been an action point in the city's most recent comprehensive plan.

Timberjay Publisher Marshall Helmberger is also the executive director of TEDA, and Timberjay General Manager Jodi Summit is the head of Friends of Vermilion Country School (a booster club for the local charter school, where Summit is also the School Board Chair).

We received permission from the city council, procured the needed easements to cross one small area of privately-owned woods, received permission from the bike trail authority and snowmobile club (access to the trail involves travelling a short distance on both trails), and wrote two grants to secure the funds needed to construct the trail.

The project received grant funding from the Northern St. Louis County Trails Task Force (a matching grant based on volunteer hours put towards the project), and from Lake Country Power's Operation Roundup program. The grant funding has been used to purchase the wood and hardware needed for the 500 feet of boardwalk, as well as for maps, wooden kiosks to post the maps, and trail signage. The trails will also be used in the winter, for snowshoeing.

Over 200 hours of volunteer labor have been put in since the spring, and a small crew of dedicated volunteers put in 500 feet of wooden boardwalk over a wet area, have marked and cleared over 1.5 miles of trails, and created maps and interpretative signage. Marshall has acted as the trail crew leader. With pandemic-related restrictions in place, working on the trail filled up weekend time that we normally would have spent covering all the sports, festivals, and events that were canceled due to COVID-19.

The Timberjay has been instrumental to the project, with articles recruiting volunteer workers, and reporting on the project's progress, as well as volunteering graphic design services and serving as the planning center for the project.

We have chronicled the project in the Timberjay (see attached articles). We will be hosting our first "open house" event in October, offering guided walks. Once all the maps and kiosks are in place, we will do a more formal open house to thank our grantors.

The trails are already getting a lot of use locally. We now have regular calls and visits to our newspaper office with people asking for directions. A naturalist group from a neighboring town 25 miles away just came with two dozen people who hiked the trails. Students from the charter school will be using the trail as part of their environmental education curriculum, and the local elementary school has also expressed interest in taking their students on the trails.

The project has also opened up new lines of cooperation between the Wagoner Trails Club (all non-motorized trails) and the local ATV Club, and plans are in place to develop more non-motorized woods trails cooperatively between the two clubs. There have also been some talks to make the trail part of the nation-wide North American Hiking Trail, which is planning to have a segment going through Tower.

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