

## Q&A with Houston Council members on proposed OHV Trail

The Argus reached out to the mayor and council members for their view on the proposed trail.

Since January 2021, have your opinions changed on bringing the trail to Houston? Why or why not?

**Cody Mathers:** In some ways, yes. Being newer to council, and with this being decided by previous councils a long time ago, I tried to refrain from having much of a public opinion on the trail. After all, who am I to come in and overturn things that were decided so long ago?

But now that we are hearing from what I perceive to be a significant amount of Houston residents who say they don't want it, I need to listen to them and look at what our project exit options are in case that's the route we need to go.

**Emily Krage:** I have always been open about wanting to see Houston grow and succeed. I have been voting like that since 2016, if it made sense for Houston.

Past councils started voting on this trail in 2009 and having been moving in the direction of bringing the park to Houston.

When I started running for council in 2016, I attended the monthly council meeting to see what the Council was working on and to get caught up. Council was voting on OHV business and the approved votes were moving the project forward.

So in 2017 when the next steps to move forward were presented to me, I voted in favor, to keep that project going. I have voted in favor for 2017, 2018, 2020, and so far in 2021. I can't see that there was anything to vote on in 2019.

The only thing that I have spoken out against was purchasing additional land that was presented to the board since the land was not connected. As some concerns are increasing, I would like to slow down and get some answers which council has voted in favor of such as conducting a new sound study. I will make my future votes dependent on what those types of studies show is best for the community.

Is there any other location suitable for an OHV trail near Houston?

**Mathers:** I'm not sure. Certainly we have large areas of land in Houston County where proximity to homes and noise concerns wouldn't be as big of an issue. But, I think the soil erosion and wildlife displacement concerns might be present regardless of location in this area.

**Krage:** Houston was picked because of the terrain and a ready supply of food and gas.

What are the next steps after the April 12 council meeting?

**Mathers:** I can only speak for myself, as one council member, but I would like to see a full list of project exit options so that we can weigh project pros and cons against the potential costs of discontinuing (because yes, there would be costs to discontinuing). I think the public deserves to know what those options are, too. And, I look forward to the noise study that will measure actual vehicle noise in the proposed park area.

**Krage:** The next steps are to continue to move forward with the sound study, look at the results, and make the appropriate decisions based off of that study. Council is looking at all options, including an exit plan that would require repayment of approximately \$400,000 in grant funding.

Will the advisory committee get together again this year?

**Mathers:** It is not one of my committee assignments as a council member, but I certainly hope it will reconvene now. This committee exists to bridge any communication gap between the city and community stakeholders, and the recent opposition to the project is, to me, a side effect of the committee not meeting since 2017. We need this committee to meet and do its job now more than ever.

**Krage:** I do not sit on that committee but I think it would

be a good idea. Reactivating the committee to research, compile options, and present recommendations to Council in regards to the trail makes sense at this time.

Is it worth it to have an Economic Impact Study be done and will a new/updated Environmental Assessment be done? Should the council schedule these studies?

**Mathers:** I can see value in an economic impact study. I would need to understand the cost and effort involved before I would commit to supporting one. If we determine it can be done at low cost and in a reasonable amount of time, I'm not sure what we would have to lose by doing one. As for an updated EA, the DNR is saying that it not necessary. I'm concerned that the first one was done before the trail alignments/paths were designated, but I'm not sure that's justification enough to redo it and go against DNR guidance.

**Krage:** An Economic Impact Study is only as good as the research that can be completed at the time of the study. There is no trail in Houston at this time so we would have to rely on other towns that have similar trails (which have been visited/talked with) and go based off of that information. We would need to rely on the information that is conducted for trails as a whole in Minnesota, which has been done, and go off of those numbers. This is what has already been completed. I am not sure if an Economic Impact Study can be completed on something that does not exist.

According to the Environmental Review Need Determination (10/02/2019) in regards to Houston MN Trails Project, the EAW Need Determination states, "...it appears that the project as proposed is not exempt from environmental review based on Minnesota Rules 4410.4600. However, it does not appear to meet any of the thresholds identified in Minnesota Rules 4410.4300 or 4410.4400, and therefore environmental review is not required." If there is project design change or information that affects the basis for that determination, it can be reassessed.

Are you comfortable with having outside groups bring the trail to Houston? Would you prefer a local group to oversee the trail? Would that group be under the city or operate independently?

**Mathers:** I don't feel equipped to answer this question. I haven't met anyone from the outside groups, and at this time I have no reason to question their dedication to implementing the project with fidelity. I'm not sure we could switch to local groups at this time, as the outside groups were the ones who sponsored the grant with us.

**Krage:** I prefer to see a group that will be able to maintain the trails appropriately, be able to apply for grants/funding, and have regular communication with trail users, local businesses, the community, the DNR, and the City.

If the trail doesn't go through, what else could Houston add to its list of recreational and tourism opportunities?

**Mathers:** One great thing that has come out of the public engagement over the OHV project is that people are presenting other ideas for improving Houston. And, we should be evaluating those ideas regardless of the OHV project continuing or not. Some ideas I recall

offhand are: Developing our Root River access to increase canoeing, kayaking, tubing, etc.; hiking trails; mountain biking trails; opening up more property to for commercial opportunities (zoning). We're a short drive from La Crosse, Winona, and Rochester, and we should look at ALL ideas that would draw families from those cities to Houston in order to keep our city thriving.

**Krage:** Trail or no trail, Houston can always be looking to add to our list of recreational and tourism opportunities.

Since joining council, two new businesses have been added within city limits, two businesses were annexed in to city limits which hopefully promoted tourism to the area.

Also since joining council, to promote an increase in recreation and tourism council has voted in favor of new banners and signage, funding for tourism projects, approved changes to Nature Center such as camping and the Natural Playground, assisted and supported Mission 66 for the new City Park, worked with the International Owl Center for land agreement for the proposed new site, made changes to the food truck policies to allow for more availability options, a new community center, and street improvement projects. I am sure I am missing some, and I hope people continue to come forward with their ideas and projects.

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**Happy 60th Anniversary**  
Harold and Eunice Meyer on May 6th!  
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## Fate of proposed OHV trail hangs in the balance

By Jordan Gerard  
Editor, The Caledonia Argus

After a turbulent meeting in April, the fate of the proposed Off-Highway Vehicle trail in Houston hangs in the balance.

One document that has not been examined in this series yet is "Design and Layout of Houston OHV Trail" by U.S. Forest Service Trails Unlimited LLC, the author is Jerry D. Barrow, a retired civil engineer with 32 years of experience with the forest service, six years in private practice and 30 years in trails. He has degrees in civil engineering and forestry, the document sites.

In the document submitted Oct. 25, 2015 and revised March 31, 2016, Barrow notes several concerns about the area of land, including the Natural Resources Conservation Service soil types, which notes sandy soils and silty clay loam soils, as "weak soils for frequent traffic." This has been a key concern if the trail is built in South Park.

Photos shared with the Argus from resident Russ Williams shows what happens when "any amount of work is done on Grant Street," especially if sand is being moved and it rains. The photos are from 2019 and that was the year of the new water pump house, located next to South Park.

With the sandy soils, Barrow gave several recommendations, techniques and equipment types in order to harden trail treads, reduce erosion and control water. He also states the trail construction is "going to require much greater skilled equipment operators with expertise," and that there will be a "higher construction cost."

In the project summary document, it states, "Members of the OHV clubs will perform trail construction and ongoing maintenance..." but Barrow states trail maintenance should be done by highly trained individuals with appropriate and properly maintained trail equipment well-suited to the job.

It is not clear yet who will be building and maintaining the trails, as that part of the process has not



Submitted by Russ Williams

The photo above shows sand and mud washing down Grant Street in 2019, as the new water pump house was constructed.

been discussed by the OHV Advisory Committee. Finally, Barrow states the trail can be successfully constructed with specialized engineering considerations and diligent maintenance and management.

In addition, the city has to assure the Houston OHV Park Initiative will be maintained for a period of no less than 20 years. A Minnesota Department of Natural Resources interdisciplinary team was requested by DNR Parks and Trails to do a "coarse filter" review of the area, essentially a proactive approach. That was done by the DNR Central Regional Management Team that is "always involved in GIA [Grant-In-Aid] reviews, but are more familiar with GIA processes in which they are consulted on environmental factors bearing on a specific pro-

posed trail alignment rather than a general area."

A public hearing was held July 9, 2012, in which residents and other people expressed their opposition, favor or proposed questions. A summary can be found online at <https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/input/mgmtplans/ohv/plans/houston-ohv-trail.html>.

Written comments were also welcomed before Oct. 19, 2013, as noted in the public notice section of the Houston Banner on Sept. 19, 2013.

The next council meeting is May 10, at 6 p.m. at the community center.

This is the fourth in a series of articles exploring the proposed OHV trail in Houston.

**WARRIOR WOW!**  
Congratulations from your friends at Merchants Bank  
Providing tools to help build smart financial habits for our youth.  
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Stop in and see this week's Warrior WOW! Students and Athlete on display in our lobby.

**WARRIOR WOW! Students of the Week**

**ALAYNA YAHNKE**  
Grade 6, Caledonia Middle School  
Daughter of Jay & Stacey  
Alayna does a wonderful job of getting her assignments submitted on time and always tries to do her very best. She participates in class and works well with others. Nice job, Alayna!

**MERIK ALLEN**  
Grade 6, Caledonia High School  
Son of Andy & Sheri  
Merik is a very enjoyable student to have in class. He comes to school with a positive attitude and strives to do his best. He is kind and helpful to his peers and frequently makes those around him smile. He is a delight to have at Caledonia Middle School.

**ATTENTION TAXPAYERS**  
The first-half real estate taxes are due and payable on or before  
**May 15, 2021**

Taxes may be paid at:  
• Bremer Bank: Houston  
• ESB: Eitzen-Caledonia-LaCrescent  
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Other options to pay your taxes are available:  
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If you have any questions or need further details please contact  
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## NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING REGARDING FUTURE USE OF SPRAGUE WOODS CITY OF CALEDONIA

The Caledonia City Council will hold a public hearing on Monday, May 10, 2021 at 6:00 p.m. in the City Auditorium at 219 E. Main St. to discuss the future of Sprague Woods. The City Council is evaluating whether to keep Sprague Woods in its natural state as a green space for community use or whether to sell the property for commercial development. Community members are welcome to attend the meeting to express their opinion regarding its future use.

You can also submit comments to the City Council by email at [cityhall@caledoniamn.gov](mailto:cityhall@caledoniamn.gov) or by mail addressed to the City of Caledonia, Clerk's Office, 231 East Main Street, P.O. Box 232, Caledonia, MN 55921. If you have any questions about the public hearing, please contact the Clerk's Office at (507) 725-3450.

There will be a Retirement Open House honoring Pastor Dave and Kathy Passing for their 22 years of faithful service to the Community Church of Hokah and surrounding area.  
Coming to Hokah as Village Missionaries in December 1999, they have been shepherding the church body and discipling through men's, women's and couples Bible Studies - as well as leading countless children in yearly VBS, after-school Kids Klub and teens at the Friday Nifters group.  
Join us to celebrate the Passings and their years of dedication, and to bless them on their retirement.  
**Community Church of Hokah, 204 Main Street**  
Saturday, May 15, 2021 - 12:00-3:00 PM

My family and I would like to thank you all for the love and support you have shown during this difficult time as we grieve and remember our loved one. As we continue to look through the cards, we compiled a list of words that people used to describe Lucille. I wanted to share the list: Lucille was an Asset, Awesome, Admired, Angelic, Amazing, Beautiful, Beloved, Brilliant, Blessed, Bubbly, Comforting, Caring, Classy, Cherished, Cheery, Dear, Energetic, Fun, Friendly, Full of Faith, Great, Giving, Generous, Genuine, Good, Happy, Hugger, Hardworking, Helpful, Inspiring, Infectious smile & chuckle, Intentional, Joyful, Kind, Loving, Laughing, Lucky, Loyal, Missed, Memorable, NOT Forgotten, Nice, a real Peach, Personal, Pleasant, Pretty, Precious, Positive, Role Model, Remembered, Strong, Sweet, Sincere, Special, Smiley, Thoughtful, Treasured, Unforgettable, Upbeat, Valuable, Vivacious, Vibrant, Willing and Wonderful.  
Thanks again,  
John Petersen