

Tale of a Trail: Houston hears reasons for, against proposed OHV project

Expert panel heightens concerns of proposed OHV trail

By Jordan Gerard
Editor, The Caledonia Argus

The Save Our Bluffs group in Houston hosted an expert panel on Sunday, Aug. 8 at the International Owl Center.

Presenting was International Owl Center executive director and Save Our Bluffs member Karla Bloem, Dr. Russ Smith – marketing faculty at Winona State University, Dr. Dan Keyler – rattlesnake researcher and retired clinical toxicologist specializing in venomous snakebites, and Ron Meiners – retired Root River Soil and Water Conservation District Manager. Scott Leddy, a prairie restoration specialist, was scheduled to speak but did not due to a family emergency, Bloem explained at the beginning of the presentation.

Bloem started with a history of the project, overview of the studies and what research has been done since the start of this year.

Trail width ranges from 17.5 ft. to allow two-way traffic to pass, 8.75 ft. for a technical trail, to 3 ft. for a dirt-bike only trail and 0.8 acres of a rock crawl area (reduced from a previous area of 1.7 acres). The trails also allow for 4x4 Jeeps.

A data request for comments by Bloem to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) shows DNR field staff recommending “not to place trails on south and west facing slopes because it would degrade the prairie areas, and negatively impact any potential [rattlesnake] dens by disrupting the rock structure.” That comment was from the DNR interdisciplinary team in 2010.

Comments in 2019 echo previous comments and ones made by the U.S. Forest Service’s Trails Unlimited enterprise team, who also cited concerns about wet weather management, weak soils for frequent traffic and two-way trail traffic that will require pull-outs every 500

ft. to allow traffic to pass. Bloem also pointed out that at the time of the federal Environmental Assessment in 2013, no trails had been built yet, and thus the conclusion of that assessment “doesn’t matter unless you look at the methodology.” She also said there was not an attempt made to assess what would happen if motorized vehicles used the site, and that the process was supposed to “legally assess the use of motorized vehicles,” but they did not.

At the end of the assessment, one of three things are supposed to be done in order to conclude the project: decide not to do it, get a more detailed environmental impact statement or issue a “Finding of No Significant Impact.” Bloem said none of those were done, but the study was accepted.

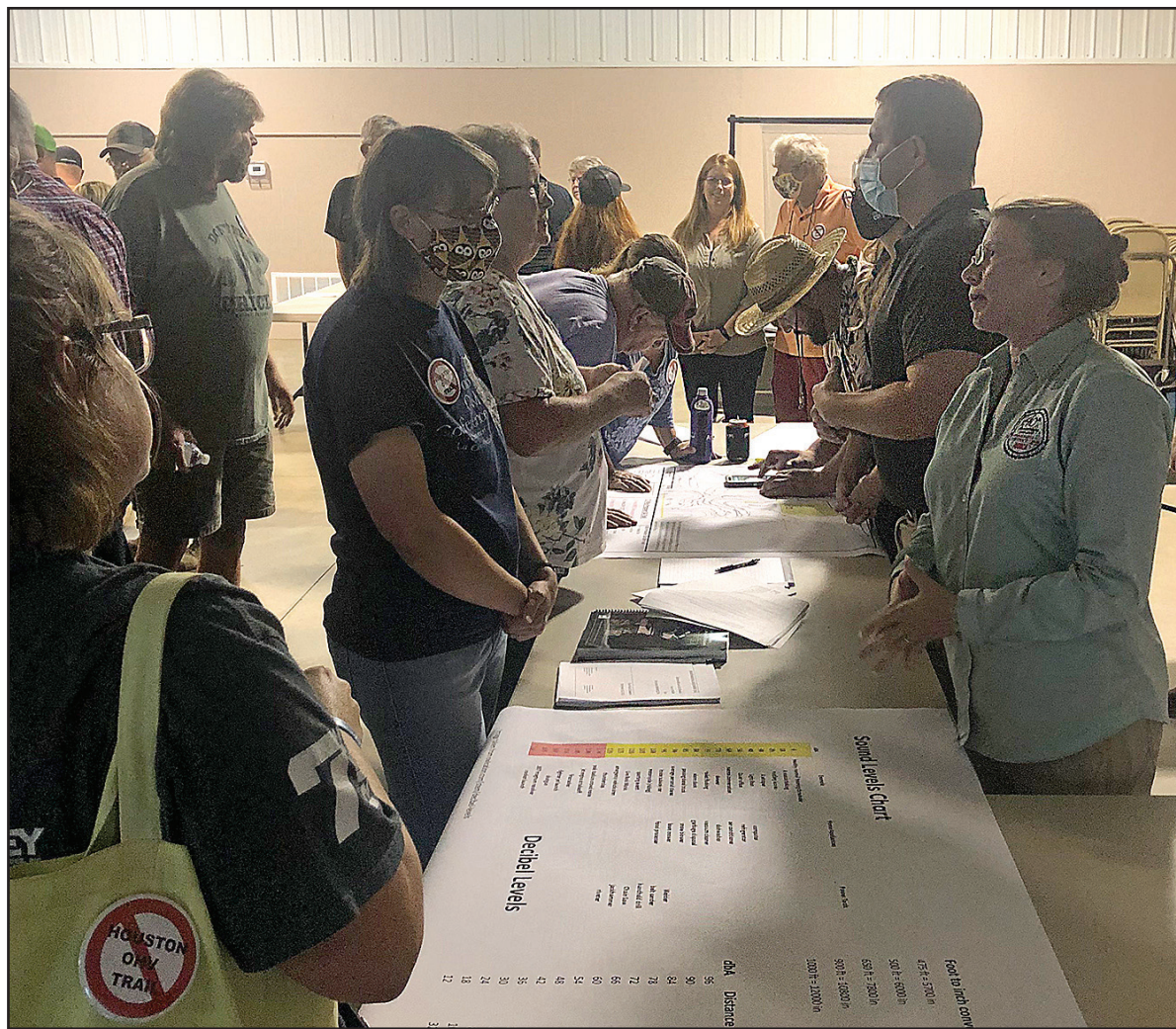
When that was pointed out to the National Park Service and the DNR, their reply reasoned that “... because the project is funded through Grant-In-Aid, no further review is required through the Land and Water Conservation Fund.”

Bloem also pointed out concerns

with the Federal Highway Administration Review, which included several studies. The National Heritage Information System (NHIS) database search for species, which Bloem pointed out has not likely been updated since 1993 and no one came to visit the site in person. Bloem said she is working to add more information to that database and found a lot of native species, three “special concern” species and 11 species of “greatest conservation

EXPERT PANEL

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Jordan Gerard/The Caledonia Argus

Meet in the middle

The open house event on Aug. 10 drew a little over 50 people. On the left is Karla Bloem, executive director of the International Owl Center and on the right is Karen Umphress, club member of the Twin Cities Trail Riders. Both have worked diligently to inform the public of the concerns and benefits of the proposed trail.

“We want to be considerate,” she said.

Rochester Rough Riders club member Geoff O’Brien said the clubs haven’t been as vocal because they didn’t want to pick fights.

“I didn’t want to pick fights. That’s not what we’re about,” he said.

It’s also a matter of breaking stereotypes. Concerns were raised at past council meetings about what kind of people the trails would bring in, with stereotypes such as “drunkards,” “wild and rowdy” and “they won’t spend money here.”

A former OHV’er, Meg Starkson, said the majority of the community isn’t like that. She used to go on trails with her ex-husband, and when he first started the hobby, she was apprehensive at first. Calling herself a hippie, she said had doubts too.

“They’re respectful and kind. People are close. It’s a tight knit family,” she said.

Starkson said the town of Gilbert, Minnesota was resistant at the idea of a trail coming in, but now the tourism is “irreplaceable.”

She also spoke to the noise con-

Finding common ground Groups, clubs supporting Houston OHV project

By Jordan Gerard
Editor, The Caledonia Argus

The proposed Off-Highway Vehicle project in Houston has garnered a long history even before a shovel has broke ground, and groups and clubs behind the scenes are moving it forward.

Though they haven’t been as vocal as those who oppose the project or those who oppose the trail’s location, they’ve been advocating the longest.

Tuesday night’s Aug. 10 open house event gave an opportunity for two groups to meet, talk and ask questions. Present were city council members, city staff, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources staff, Conservation Corps members and many club members.

The proposed 7.5 mile trail has been a hot topic of debate since its start. Residents have raised concerns of noise, pollution and erosion. Now, those supporting the project had the chance to talk about the potential benefits and ease concerns.

Karen Umphress, club member of the Twin Cities Trail Riders, said Tuesday night’s event was the second open house held over the past 13 years, in addition to booths at several Hoedown celebrations and distributing flyers with information on the trail project. They’ve also held training sessions for people and volunteers to learn how to build the trails, manage and maintain them.

She added various clubs and their members have helped in the community too. When damage was done to the Hauge property due to logging, the clubs helped with the work and put a new gate up.

Umphress said club members do have the passion for the trail, but they held off contacting council members because the council was already “barraged” by emails.

cern. Her son is on the Autism spectrum and noises affect him.

“It was rare that the [machines] had enough noise to disturb him,” she explained.

Umphress added much of the stereotype is limited to a single group of people, but most OHV hobbyists include a lot of families, people over 50, father/daughter teams and women.

It’s one of the few sports where you see teens hanging out with

OHV OPEN HOUSE

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- When crossing the street to get on the bus or to go home, make eye contact with motorists before proceeding.

EXPERT PANEL

Continued from page 2

need.”
The Environmental Assessment statement is approved by clubs, but is not checked for accuracy, Bloem added. That was approved by the Houston City Council in February 2021.

Bloem was also told that the Minnesota Environmental Review Laws did not qualify for this project because the area is an existing multi-use park. She also mentioned a citizens' petition for more review can be submitted to the DNR but they would not be required to do it. If the city requests that, the DNR must do it.

Dr. Russ Smith, who is experienced in tourism-related research, said the push from the state was based on money. In 2020, the OHV industry recorded \$15 billion in sales and has a projected annual growth of 7% through 2027, according to Global Market Insights.

Recent statistics that has gotten Minnesota's attention includes \$2.3 billion in revenue for Colorado, but \$28 million leaving Iowa because people travel out of state to the trails.

However, Smith pointed out that research was published by the National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council, an advocate for OHV trails. He said it was sponsored research, not peer-reviewed.

Smith said the state and regional tourism dollars presented would not necessarily represent local tourism dollars that Houston could or could not see if the trail was implemented.

He added there were a few other characteristics that OHV users want in trail destinations, such as more trails, longer trails, challenging and interconnected trails, friendly communities and ones that support OHV activities.

He also noted that in order to collect tourism dollars from trail users, Houston needs to have people or businesses in town to collect that money. He added that Houston doesn't have the tourism framework to develop a tourist segment. He estimated users might spend about \$30-40 in Houston.

Smith noted that the trail would also conflict with other types of outdoor recreation in Houston.

“Houston has tourism right now, nature-based tourism,” he said. “They're already here. They

spend more money, have more money, more are dedicated to local economics.”

Rattlesnake expert Dr. Dan Keyler said their habitat is more fragmented due to civilization and a disrupted gene flow. Since snakes have a bad reputation with people, their dens are often destroyed or their habitats are destroyed. Rattlesnakes use outcroppings and ledges to thermo-regulate their body temperature. They hunt in the forest for prey.

“Even if you put a trail around these features, the reality is, snakes will be moving across trails and through habitat and they run the risk of getting run over – maybe not deliberately, but inadvertently,” he said. “We have a prime piece of habitat in Houston and it's kind of unique.”

Keyler has 40 years of experience working with timber rattlesnakes and 30 years of experience with the Upper Mississippi River Valley timber rattlesnake.

He said there are about four to five fatalities in the US per year from snake bites, and most of those are from Western diamondback snakes.

Ron Meiners voiced his concerns about building trails on sandy loam soils and building condensed trails in a tight area.

“The thing that bothers me the most on hillsides ... when you're talking about trails, you're changing the overland flow,” he said. “Water comes down ... the hillside has taken a long time to get into the shape it's in. If you come in and start cutting, changing topography ... changing the overland flow ... going to get more water in concentrated flow areas.”

He also noted the devastation of the 2007 flood, where mudslides destroyed homes in Brownsville and covered roads in the county.

“You've got a short memory if you don't remember what happened in 2007, because it was absolutely devastating,” he said. “Mother Nature can be pretty cruel. An open area with many trails and we get a significant rainfall event, there's going to be havoc in there.”

To see the presentation in its entirety, visit www.saveourbluffs.com or find the video on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2h_WJEl1aDk&t=6799s.

OHV OPEN HOUSE

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their parents, she added.
“My dad has diabetes. He can't walk too far, but I can put him in a side-by-side and get him into nature,” she said.

There are different categories of the OHV hobby as well and different experience levels. Umphress said she rides dirt bikes.

“Dirt biking is physical. It's stress relief because you have to concentrate on the trail,” she said.

A typical trip for many is packing up, hitting the road and then includes local groceries, gas, eating, camping and recreating on the trails, O'Brien explained.

Many enjoy the hobby because it gets them out into nature and seeing views otherwise not seen. There's always someone to ride with because it's a giant community, he explained.

Houston resident Phil Pedretti said the trail will be good for the community, as it will bring people into Houston.

“We need tourism in Houston,” he said. “They will spend money in town.”

He noted Loken's Sawmill Inn was full two weeks ago with side-by-sides, and added all businesses will be able to benefit from it.

Pedretti started the sport last year and purchased a side-by-side, out of boredom from covid. Now, he and his family visit his parents in their side-by-side, taking the scenic route.

Having been to other trails, Pedretti explained what trail ride can look like. Machines are 10-15 ft. apart, and usually can carry two to three people. Oftentimes, drivers

can't drive too fast, due to navigating trails and turning. The engines use non-ethanol gas, not diesel and not black smoke.

He also mentioned he hasn't seen erosion on other trails because of the way the trails are built.

If there's any common ground to be found amongst the two groups, it's a love of nature.

“They're more of a naturalist than they think,” Starkson said. She added club members also help take care of the land and also plant back trees.

“People enjoy nature. It doesn't matter if your enjoyment is hunting, birdwatching, or off-roading. We all appreciate it,” Umphress said.

Umphress explained she has worked on a lot of projects with the same concerns voiced by Houston residents: noise, pollution and erosion.

“They will find out it's not an issue,” she said. “We try to make it a point to support a community that supports us.”

Clubs often hold fundraisers. O'Brien mentioned the Rochester Rough Riders hold a fundraiser for Multiple Sclerosis (MS) and raised near \$100,000. Pedretti mentioned if the trail was built, Houston could be included on area poker runs that often benefit groups or individuals.

O'Brien added the trail would be a great opportunity for common ground, as interpretative signs could be placed on the trail. The trail would also open up the geographic location of the bluffs and bring tourism to Houston.

Houston Council creates exit committee

By Jordan Gerard
Editor, The Caledonia Argus

Giving themselves another option or an opportunity to learn more, the Houston City Council approved the creation of a four-person exit committee for the Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) project at its regular meeting on Monday, Aug. 9.

The council was initially hesitant to create the committee, citing the sound study with OHVs and another archaeological study had not been performed yet, and thus, had no results or new information to base an exit committee on.

Council member Tony Schultz said he didn't think the city was at the point where an exit strategy was necessary. Council member Cheryl Sanden made the motion to create the committee, but said the creation of it did not indicate the city is moving or would move in that direction. The goal of the exit committee is to negotiate a way out of the project without the city paying back about \$516,523.

There was confusion among council members and audience members about the city's future ability to be selected for DNR grants if they chose to exit. Mayor Dave Olson said the city would lose its grant ability, while resident Anna Benda said she spoke with a DNR representative who said “...if the city backs out, it does not blacklist the city.” She added the DNR representative said future grants toward OHV projects might not be available if they exited.

City Administrator/Clerk Michelle Quinn said the DNR did not know what impact exiting would have on the city.

Members of the committee are Anna Benda, Karla Bloem, Larry Connery and Ron Evenson. Council member Cody Mathers will be the council liaison. The first meeting of the committee was not determined.

Electric vehicle charger

After some discussion, and continuing discussion from July's council meeting, the council approved a motion to purchase a 15.4 kilo-watt (kw) electric vehicle charger from MiEnergy. MiEnergy will cover up to \$5,139 of the purchase cost, but the city will be responsible for the installation costs. The charger is dual pedestal, so two cars can charge at the same time.

The city can choose how to charge fees for the charger, either by a parking fee, amount per kw/h or amount per hour of time charged. The city will receive new quotes for installing the upgraded charger. It was recommended by the planning board to install it by the new community center.

Other news

The council approved a final payment of \$93,907.67 for work completed on Lincoln St. and approved a fourth pay application to Wapasha Construction for the new wastewater treatment plant in the amount of \$201,834.99.

The council accepted donations from Silver Creek Rustlers 4-H Club of a 6 ft. bench, Houston County Farm Bureau for another 6 ft. bench and a \$7,200 donation for the purchase of acoustic panels for the community room from an anonymous donor.

The council also approved the mutual aid agreement with Caledonia Ambulance.

Also approved on Monday was a single bid for native seed collection. That went to Dan Smith and Alan Wade of Prairie Moon Nursery. The city will receive 10% from the final cleaned seed, and Prairie Moon will also weed out garden beds at the nature center and add plants to fill in as needed.

Finally, the council approved the hire of Grace Shupe as the new Houston Nature Center assistant.

Next meeting

The next meeting of the Houston City Council will be Sept. 13, at 6 p.m. at 111 W. Cedar St.

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