1. Planning Process, Purpose and Scope

The Root River State Trail Extension, Houston to La Crescent Master Plan was prepared by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, with assistance from the National Park Service (Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance), the Trails Subcommittee of the Houston County Economic Development Authority, and the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota.

Planning History and Process

The Root River trail was authorized in 1971, trail development began in the 1980s, and the trail was extended from Rushford to Houston in 1998. The Root River State Trail Master Plan was completed in 1979, followed by master plans for the Harmony – Preston Valley State Trail in 1995 and the Houston Extension of the Root River Trail in 1998.

Interested citizens have been working with DNR staff since around 1992 to extend the trail in Houston County. The informal group became an official subcommittee of the County’s Economic Development Authority in 2004.

In January, 2005, the Houston County Trails Subcommittee, partnering with the National Park Service’s Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program and the Community Assistantship Program at the University of Minnesota’s Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, began analyzing possible trail alignments between La Crescent, Hokah and Houston. The partnership produced a report that included inventory and assessment information about the proposed trail corridor and identifies potential trail alignments for further study. The findings of the report have been incorporated in this trail master plan.

In 2006-07 the group obtained State and Federal funding to begin buying land and building the trail. In 2007 a trail segment in La Crescent (the Wagon Wheel Trail) received a Transportation Enhancements Grant from the Minnesota Department of Transportation. Design of this segment is largely complete and construction is planned within the next several years. In 2007 the Committee also began negotiating with landowners for the purchase of trail corridors in La Crescent and east of Houston, in order to begin trail development from both ends of the corridor.

The diagram on the following page illustrates the planning process used in developing the trail master plan.
Trail Planning Process Chart

Who’s Involved

- Houston County EDA Trails Subcommittee
- National Park Service
- US Fish and Wildlife Service
- University of Minnesota
- DNR Resource Managers
- Community Leaders
- Scenic Byways
- Elected Officials
- Other Agencies
- Citizens
- Adjacent Landowners
- Trail Users

Steps in the Process

- Information Gathering
  - Natural and Cultural Resource Inventory
- Issue Identification
  - Opportunities and Constraints

Develop

- Vision for the Trail
- Goals for the Trail
- Design Concept

Formulate Trail Alignment, Trail Development and Management Recommendations

Prepare Draft Plan

Draft Plan Review
- Public Workshops
- Evaluation and Adjustment

Prepare Final Plan

Trail Plan Adopted – Implementation Begins
Public Involvement and Partnerships

Throughout the five-year period of trail planning, numerous meetings and public outreach events have been organized by the Houston County Trails Committee. The Trails Committee has worked for the past five years with DNR and Mn/DOT staff as part of the Southeastern Minnesota Association of Regional Trails (SMART), a partnership with local governmental agencies, trail groups, Region IV DNR and Mn/DOT, District 6 (Rochester). SMART “envisions a trail system for alternative modes of transportation connecting locally, regionally and to neighboring states, thereby enhancing environmental, socioeconomic and recreational benefits in Southeastern Minnesota.” Other project partners have included the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the cities of La Crescent, Hokah and Houston.

An initial open house was held in August 2005 at the Hokah Fire Hall. Large color maps depicting the natural resources inventory, proposed trail alignments for the La Crescent-Hokah segment, and images of the abandoned railroad bed were on display, with Trails Committee members stationed near the images to answer questions. A short presentation outlined the goals of the trail, trail benefits, natural and cultural resources inventory, proposed trail alignments and future work.

Concerns were addressed regarding many issues with trails on private property: liability, trail maintenance, wildlife management, hunting, and safety issues. Other topics included avoiding displacement of rare species and whether a trail would bring economic benefits to the area.

Two open houses were held in January and February 2011 to review the draft master plan and discuss conditions and issues in the entire trail corridor. The first meeting was held in La Crescent on January 20 in conjunction with a citywide trail visioning process. Most attendees expressed interest in the trail and support for better connections between La Crescent and state trails in Minnesota and Wisconsin. The second meeting was held on February 15 at the Valley High Golf Club in Houston and was focused on outreach to area landowners. Over 60 landowners and other area residents attended. Discussion focused primarily on landowner concerns and questions regarding land acquisition, trail management, and potential trail uses.

More detailed meeting summaries are provided in Appendix A.
Figure 1: Minnesota State Trails

Legislatively Authorized Trails
Developed State Trails
Planned State Trails
**Legislative Authorization**

Legislation authorizing the Root River State Trail system was first passed in 1971. This statute was subsequently amended several times to include more counties, cities, and an eventual name change to “Blufflands Trail System.” The 18-mile section of trail connecting La Crescent and Houston was legislatively authorized in 1992. Figure 1 depicts the legislatively authorized state trail system. Current legislative language is as follows:

Minnesota Statutes, 2009, Section 85.015, Subdivision 7, Blufflands Trail system, Fillmore, Olmsted, Winona, and Houston Counties.

(a) The Root River Trail shall originate at Chatfield in Fillmore County, and thence extend easterly in the Root River Valley to the intersection of the river with Minnesota Trunk Highway No. 26 in Houston County, and extend to the Mississippi River.

(b) Additional trails may be established that extend the Blufflands Trail system to include La Crescent, Hokah, Caledonia, and Spring Grove in Houston County; Preston, Harmony, Fountain, Wykoff, Spring Valley, Mabel, Canton, and Ostrander in Fillmore County; Rochester, Dover, Eyota, Stewartville, Byron, and Chester Woods County Park in Olmsted County; and Winona, Minnesota City, Rollingstone, Altura, Lewiston, Utica, St. Charles, and Elba in Winona County. In addition to the criteria in section 86A.05, subdivision 4, these trails must utilize abandoned railroad rights-of-way where possible.

(c) The trails shall be developed primarily for nonmotorized riding and hiking.

**Outdoor Recreation Act**

The Blufflands State Trail system is one of the legislatively authorized state trails in the Minnesota State Trail System (see Figure 1). State trails are one unit of the state’s outdoor recreation system established by the Legislature. In 1975, the Minnesota Legislature enacted the Outdoor Recreation Act (ORA) (Minnesota Statutes, Section 86A.05, Subdivision 4 and Section 85.015). This act established an outdoor recreation system comprised of eleven components or “units” classifying all state-managed recreation lands. The ORA requires that the managing agency prepare a master plan for the establishment and development of each unit. This plan fulfills this mandate. The La Crescent Extension of the Root River State Trail meets the following criteria established for state trails in the ORA:

a. A state trail shall be established to provide a recreational travel route which connects units of the outdoor recreational system or the national trail system, provides access to or passage through other areas which have significant scenic, historic, scientific, or recreational qualities or reestablishes
or permits travel along an historically prominent travel route or which provides commuter transportation.

The La Crescent Extension of the Root River State Trail will eventually link state trails, forestry units and state parks to communities along the trail. It continues the scenic route along the Root River valley, paralleling the river for much of its length, and provides access to the Root River itself, a designated Water Trail. In addition to connecting to state trails in Minnesota, the extension will also provide access through the city of La Crosse to over a hundred miles of Wisconsin State Trails.

b. No unit shall be authorized as a state trail unless its proposed location substantially satisfies the following criteria:

1. permits travel in an appropriate manner along a route which provides at least one of the following recreational opportunities:
   
   (i) travel along a route which connects areas or points of natural, scientific, cultural, and historic interest;
   
   The La Crescent-Hokah segment runs through the Root River valley and adjacent to the Mississippi River valley. These two river valleys influenced the development of the rich cultural and historical resources possessed by these two communities. The Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge lies east of the trail, while the Root River Wildlife Management Area lies to the north of Hokah.

   (ii) travel through an area which possesses outstanding scenic beauty;
   
   Trail users will enjoy the outstanding scenic beauty provided by the dramatic bluffs unique to the southeastern portion of Minnesota. The bluffs appear even more dramatic when contrasted with the wetlands
which are prevalent in the area between La Crescent and Hokah and the level agricultural fields between Hokah and Houston.

(iii) travel over a route designed to enhance and utilize the unique qualities of a particular manner of travel in harmony with the natural environment;

Wherever it is possible, it is recommended that the trail alignment take advantage of an abandoned railroad bed. By utilizing the abandoned rail grade, trail users will be able to enjoy the natural and cultural amenities, with reduced impact to the environment. Additionally, the trail affords bikers, hikers, and wildlife enthusiasts a way to safely enjoy the scenery and cultural and natural amenities by separating slower-paced trail users from faster-paced highway users.

(iv) travel along a route which is historically significant as a route of migration, commerce, or communication;

The Root River and its banks provided a historically significant route of travel, first for the prehistoric people and American Indians of the area. In the 1850’s, steamboats used the Root River to reach Hokah and Houston. Later, the railroad, first the Southern Minnesota Railroad and later the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad, replaced the steamboats. This railroad was the first to connect the communities of Houston, Hokah and later, La Crescent, to the more distant cities of St. Paul, Milwaukee and Chicago.

(v) travel between units of the state outdoor recreation system or the national trail system; and

The trail segments between Houston, Hokah, and La Crescent are part of the as-yet incomplete Blufflands Trail System. Ultimately, the Blufflands Trail System will provide connections to trails such as the Shooting Star State Trail, Stagecoach State Trail and Goodhue Pioneer State Trail. Additionally, this trail extension will allow for access to trails connecting La Crescent to La Crosse, providing access to the Wisconsin State Trail System. Finally, the La Crescent-to-Houston Trail will allow long-distance cyclists a side journey from the Mississippi River Trail, a planned bike route that will ultimately follow the Mississippi River from northern Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico.

2. Utilizes, to the greatest extent possible consistent with the purposes of this subdivision, public lands, rights-of-way, and the like; and
Portions of the trail will utilize an abandoned railroad bed. Remaining portions of the trail will utilize a combination of road and rail right-of-ways, public lands and lands acquired from private entities.

3. **Provides maximum potential for the appreciation, conservation, and enjoyment of significant scenic, historical, natural, or cultural qualities of the areas through which the trail may pass; and**

By concentrating trail development on the abandoned railroad grade wherever possible, the impacts of new trail development to wetlands and floodplain in this unique area can be avoided or minimized. Overlooks and interpretive facilities are proposed to increase trail users’ appreciation and understanding of the natural and cultural resources of the area. Plant community restoration projects, wildlife habitat improvement projects, and development of environmental education information are all projects that could benefit trail users.

The trail corridor can be a corridor for both habitat and recreation, across landscapes developed for agricultural, commercial, and residential use. The ecological value of the corridor could be enhanced by working to restore healthy native plant communities.

4. **Takes into consideration predicted public demand and future uses.**

The master plan evaluates and uses current research and trends on existing use of trails and demand for trail opportunities. Current demographic data is taken into account, as well as information gathered at public workshops.

**Guiding Principles for Sustainable Trails**

Guiding principles for ecologically sustainable trails provide the underlying rationale for actions related to protecting, restoring, and managing natural environments associated with trail development. There are seven core principles:

1. Avoid sensitive ecological areas and critical habitats.
2. Develop trails in areas already influenced by human activity.
3. Provide buffers to avoid/protect sensitive ecological and hydrologic systems.
4. Use natural infiltration and best practices for stormwater management.
5. Provide ongoing stewardship of the trails and adjoining natural systems.
6. Ensure that trails remain sustainable.
7. Formally decommission and restore unsustainable trail corridors.¹

Applications of these principles will minimize the impact of trails on natural resources and sensitive ecological systems. Importantly, the strict application of these guiding principles has to be balanced against the need to locate trails where they will be of high recreational value to the targeted users, who often want to be close to nature, enjoy beautiful scenes, and observe wildlife. This is an important consideration and underscores the need for resource managers, trail designers, and other interested individuals to work together to determine which values are the most important for any given trail alignment.

**Vision and Goals for the Blufflands State Trail System in Houston County**

**Vision:**
Provide opportunities for people to safely enjoy the unique natural beauty of this area in all seasons while improving their personal health and well being.

**Overall Goal:**
Provide a high quality, multi-use trail extending the Root River State Trail from the city of Houston to the city of La Crescent that is managed in harmony with the Blufflands Landscape and meets the needs of trail users and surrounding communities.

**Community Goals:**
- Improve the quality of life for local residents.
- Provide a safe way recreate, and to commute to work or school.
- Showcase the positive scenic, historic and natural assets and amenities of the area.
- Maximize benefits for local residents and communities as a top priority.
- Pursue the following lower priority community goals where possible:
  - Encourage tourism related businesses, such as lodging and retail services.
  - Build on the success of Houston and other communities with trails to revitalize the downtown areas of Houston County’s cities.
  - Increase opportunities for agricultural and eco-tourism.

**Connectivity Goals:**
- Connect the Wisconsin and Minnesota trail systems in the Seven Rivers Region and the Mississippi River corridor to provide an interstate trail option, making this trail system a preeminent trail system in the nation.
• Connect to and complement the Mississippi River trail system, the Great River Road National Scenic Byway, and the Historic Bluff Country National Scenic Byway.

• Connect and provide directional signs to points of interest in Houston County in order to encourage appreciation of the area’s historic and natural features.

**Environmental Goals**

• Manage and enhance the natural and cultural features of the trail and the Blufflands Landscape.

• Design, construct, and maintain the trail in a way that enhances the natural environment and minimizes trail users’ impact.

• Restore and manage plant communities, wildlife, soil and water resources in a manner appropriate to the Blufflands Landscape.

**Meeting Trail User Needs**

• Provide access for a wide range of people with varying degrees of capabilities, including those with disabilities.

**Adjacent Landowner Relationships**

• Develop and maintain the trail so that impacts on adjacent landowners are avoided or minimized.

• Coordinate land management activities with adjacent land owners when possible and appropriate.