

FLYWAY TRAIL OPEN

Winona-to-Wisconsin trail gives outdoor enthusiasts greater path to exploration

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The Flyway Trail connecting people from Winona to Wisconsin is done.

Years in the making, the trail now brings people from Winona to other side of the river via the historic John A. Latsch Wagon Bridge, leading them very close to the start of the Great River State Trail.

As trail users continue through the area, they can now travel all of the way from Winona to Reedsburg, Wisconsin, smoothly transitioning from the Great River State Trail to the La Crosse River State Trail to the Elroy-Sparta State Trail and then to the 400 State Trail. And, as a result, bicyclists starting in Wisconsin also have a new way to reach and explore Winona, too.

"The Flyway Trail has quickly become a favorite attraction for us at Visit Winona to recommend because it checks all the boxes for unique outdoor recreation," said Kate Carlson, executive director of Visit Winona. "Folks of all abilities can take in Mississippi River views from the 12-foot-wide



pedestrian path along the Highway 43 bridge near the trailhead in Winona, wind down to Latsch Island, head across our historic Wagon Bridge and boathouse community, and finally onto the new Flyway Trail Connector in Aghaming Park — it's an incredibly picturesque bike or walk and accessible to everyone."

The trail helps meet a desire that Rick Diermeier, vice president of the Flyway Trail organization's board of directors, said he heard from Minnesotans. People told him they wanted an off-road option to reach locations in Wisconsin such as the Great River State Trail, Trempealeau National Wildlife Refuge and more.

"We have been seeing a steady increase in our visitors' interest in outdoor recreation for the past fiveplus years, and attractions like the Flyway Trail which can be accessed 365 days a year allow Winona to stand out as a true mecca for outdoor activities year round," Carlson stated.



"Visitors have been especially excited for the completion of Phase 2 which connects Winona to the Wisconsin trail system into Bluff Siding and beyond through a new paved trail path," she stated. "Extending these important access points is a great way for outdoor enthusiasts to explore not only Winona but also the other amazing regional towns in our Driftless area."

Originally, the plan was to have the trail cross the railroad track next to the start of the Great River State Trail in Marshland. The track is not in use there, but is not abandoned.

The Canadian National Railway has been resistant to this idea, Diermeier said. The Flyway Trail organization is continuing to attempt to work with the railroad to make that crossing happen.

At least for now, that leaves trail users crossing the tracks on the highway.

There was a benefit to this slight setback, though. Diermeier explained that federal funding through the Federal Land Acquisition Program that was originally meant for the work involved in crossing the railroad now could be used in another way. If the funding wasn't used, it would have been lost.

The funding instead has been put toward the second phase of the project, creating a paved path alongside the highway.

The Flyway Trail organization also decided to pave the first phase of the trail, which brought people to the Wisconsin side of the river, to match using its own funds.

Diermeier estimated on Aug. 7 that there was only three days left of work to be done on the second phase. The path was already in use by then though by both bikers and walkers.

The project has probably cost \$4.5 million so far, according to Diermeier.

While a large portion of that has come from federal funding and other grants, more than \$1 million of it has been raised by the Flyway Trail organization.

"I think it's an indication that people really do value things like this, and it's a great venue to get people to the area," said Diermeier.

While phases 1 and 2 might be at their end, the work of the Flyway Trail organization is not complete. Diermeier said it's still looking at future options and has an grand plan of connecting the trail all the way up to Alma.

People can learn more about how to support the organization and its plans by visiting flywaytrail.com.

