



Starr's Cave wins step in trail plan

Decision thrown back to state park board.

By JEFF ABELL

jabell@thehawkeye.com

The Des Moines Conservation Board of Directors won a victory in its bid to reverse a state advisory board's rejection of a plan for a portion of the 20-mile Flint River Trail to run through Starr's Cave Park and Preserve near Burlington.

"It didn't look good. Finally, I think we have gotten our message across. However, we still have some more obstacles to overcome," said Conservation Director Kim Perlstein.

Conservation board members met recently with an Iowa Department of Natural Resources committee regarding the denial of its sovereign lands construction permit application. The commission ruled 5-1 in favor of conservation board.

The commission's decision puts the ball back in the court of the Iowa State Preserves Advisory Board, who voted to withhold approval of the permit because the trail would allow bicycles, which is prohibited in state preserves.

Approval of the permit is required before the trail connecting Burlington to rural areas of the county can be linked to the state-owned preserve managed by the county's conservation department.

"The majority of the DNR commission saw the merit in our position. They are asking the preserve board to reconsider their decision. Their decision is a total disregard of local desires. There is nobody in Des Moines County fighting this trail," Conservation Board Chairman Dave Riley said.

Sections of the trail will be opened in phases. The four-mile stretch of the trail that runs through Burlington will be paved, with the remainder constructed with crushed stone.

The cost of the trail is estimated at about \$6.45 million.

So far, about \$3.3 million has been raised toward the trail, including \$151,000 from the city and \$379,000 from the county and \$521,000 from the Vision Iowa fund that kick-started the project in 2004.

When the trail is finished in 2013, it will wind northwest of Burlington and connect the Mississippi River Trail, downtown Burlington, the Port of Burlington, Riverside Park, Thye Woods Habitat Preserve, the historic Zion school, the Big Hollow Recreation Area and the Flint River Valley.

As for their appeal, conservation officials remain optimistic.

"There is a misunderstanding by the advisory board on what this preserve is. This is not a pristine preserve. Other than the cliffs and the cave, it has been used and abused over the years. Bicycles on this trail would not impact the cave or the cliff. I'm confident we can get that point across," Riley said.