



Starr's Cave gets trail OK

In sports terms, it would be considered a Hail Mary pass — a final appeal to a state advisory board to allow the Flint River Trail to connect with Starr's Cave Park and Preserve.

Des Moines County Conservation Director Kim Perlstein told county supervisors at their meeting Tuesday the pass was good for a touchdown.

"We won," Perlstein exclaimed. "We will be able to construct a hiking trail through Starr's Cave. We now have a continuous trail."

The Iowa State Preserves Advisory Board's 5-0 decision last week means conservation officials can proceed with building 1,500 feet of new trail in the western part of the preserve outside Burlington and improve existing trails, according to Perlstein. Two advisory board members were absent at the time of the vote.

It also marks a reversal of the board's previous stance against allowing a trail to link with the 20-mile Flint River Trail connecting Burlington to rural areas of the county.

Last year, the advisory board denied conservation officials' sovereign lands construction permit application to create a trail for cycling and hiking.

Approval of a sovereign lands construction permit is required before earth can be moved in the state-owned preserve, which is managed by the county's conservation department.

The decision was reversed by an Iowa Department of Natural Resources committee, but later upheld by the advisory board despite assurances that most of the bicycle activity on the trail would be along Burlington's riverfront.

At an October 2009 meeting, a majority of the advisory board members indicated they couldn't support a trail that would allow bicycle access due to its potential negative ecological impact.

"They were receptive this time around because we were only proposing a hiking trail," Perlstein said. "It's been a three-year process, and we are

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"My turn," said Hunter Lillie, 5, far right, and Wyatt Pearson, 4, middle, to Logan Kamrath, 5, who was looking into the beaver den Tuesday at Starr's Cave Nature Center while on a field trip organized by Little Nike Preschool from Notre Dame Elementary School in Burlington. The children took a guided hike through the woods and played in the nature center's wildlife exhibit.

very excited to able to move forward."

Supervisor Jeff Heland added: "Your persistence paid off."

Sections of the Flint River Trail will be opened in phases. According to conservation officials, the cost of the trail is estimated at about \$6.45 million.

City and the county officials have worked to make the trail a reality. The entities have filed joint grant applications.

Mike Norris, assistant director of Southeast Iowa Regional Planning Commission, said four funding sources, three federal and one state grant, have been secured for the county's portion of the trail.

About \$3.3 million has been raised, 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, according to an official.

The city's portion of the trail, which totals four miles, includes a mile from the Port of Burlington to the shuttered Burlington Basket Co. building.

Second and third phases encompass the remainder of the project and include roughly 16 miles of trails. A groundbreaking for the county phase of the project is scheduled for May 21.

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.