

To: Conservancy Lands Committee
Date: June 23, 2026
From: Mark Opitz, District 6 Alder
Subject: FAQ — Pheasant Branch Road Complete Streets Concept

As you can imagine, the concept I introduced in May has prompted a spirited community discussion about how the city's draft Active Transportation Plan should address the urgent safety needs of the Pheasant Branch Road corridor. To supplement the public comments forwarded by city staff as well as the excellent staff report included in the June 24 meeting packet, I thought it would be helpful to summarize the feedback I have received to date as well as address some of the concerns that I've heard raised. Hopefully this memo will help address any questions you may have for me in advance of tomorrow's meeting.

Why did you propose this concept?

It is unsafe to walk or bike along Pheasant Branch (PB) Road due to the roadway's narrowness and lack of sidewalks and shoulders. Pedestrians and bicyclists who live in the growing Redtail Ridge subdivision lack a safe, all-season, and reasonably direct way to access community services and transportation routes located in eastern Middleton. Widening PB Road to add a shared-use path along one side, or to add bike lanes and a sidewalk, would entail removing dozens of trees, adding one or more extensive retaining walls, and significantly changing its "rustic road" character. Without question, expanding the road would be more expensive and have much greater environmental impact than upgrading a parallel shared-use trail that runs atop a sewer interceptor and an artificial berm. The draft Active Transportation Plan highlights the needs of several key travel corridors in the city, but for PB Road there is only a map indicating a medium-priority need for a sidewalk. At a minimum, the ATP should call out the road's deficiencies and provide an overview of the options for mitigating the risks pedestrians and bicyclists face when they try to access the conservancy or various community services.

What is the potential environmental impact?

- No detailed environmental analysis has been undertaken to compare the potential impact of the various options.
- The northern segment of the existing path follows a major sanitary sewer interceptor that was installed to serve Middleton's growing north side, west of the conservancy. The southern segment (south of the bridge over the creek) follows a berm that was erected many decades ago to redirect the creek north into the marsh. Formerly, the primary creek channel was located just north of the Goodwill store.
- Limestone paths require more frequent maintenance than asphalt or boardwalk surfaces. It's not uncommon to see erosion along the path multiple times a year, and there are locations where plumes of sediment have washed numerous feet downhill from the path.
- Upgrading the existing trail to adhere to the City's proposed standard specifications and details for asphalt paths would entail removing some vegetation along both sides of the existing path and widening / restoring the original path width. However, adding a ped/bike facility along Pheasant Branch Road would have a much bigger impact on the adjoining conservancy due to the need for one or more retaining walls (to overcome existing steep slopes) and the removal of dozens of mature trees and other longstanding vegetation.

What are the advantages of asphalt paths?

- They improve accessibility for all residents, including people who rely on wheelchairs and other assistive mobility devices. As noted on a Dane County Parks [webpage](#), “paved trails are consistent with Dane County’s design standards for regional shared-use paths and help improve accessibility and year-round usability.”
- They aren’t prone to erosion from a heavy rainfall, meaning no ankle-twisting ruts or large plumes of sediment washing onto adjoining land.
- They don’t become mucky during freeze/thaw cycles. The east side of Pheasant Branch Road is particularly notorious for this condition.
- They are nominally more impervious than existing hard-packed limestone paths, per feedback from the Water Resources Management Commission at their June 26 meeting.
- Asphalt paths can last over 20 years before they require substantial repair or reconstruction. Per Dane County’s park planning manager, “We’ve seen 20 years out of the initial surfacing on the Capital City Trail before full replacement was required.”

What are alternatives to paving the path?

This list is based on feedback and creative brainstorming that I have received since introducing the concept in early May:

- Doing nothing / maintaining the status quo. This is entirely unacceptable for safety reasons.
- Widening Pheasant Branch Road to add a shared-use path along one side, or to add bike lanes and a sidewalk. However, this would entail removing dozens of trees and, because of steep slopes in various locations, require the addition of one or more extensive retaining walls.
- Closing one or more sections of the road to motorized vehicles to eliminate through-traffic with the road designated as a “Bike Boulevard” where peds and bicyclists have the right of way. This would inconvenience most current roadway users and largely shift the traffic burden to High Road. In general terms, it’s better to distribute traffic across a network of streets instead of disproportionately placing the burden on fewer streets and their adjoining residents.
- Allowing only northbound vehicles to travel along one half of PB Road, with a barrier or bollards separating the other half of the road so it can function as two-way shared-use path. Southbound drivers would have to travel along High Road or find a nondirect route through adjoining neighborhoods.

Was the West Trail originally designed for bicycle use?

Yes. Constructed in phases during the 2000s, the entire 3.5 mile trail that encircles the conservancy originally had a width of at least 10 feet. Over time, through lack of maintenance, sections of the trail have been allowed to narrow to as little as 5-6 feet. The current width is too narrow for a shared-use trail, and it exacerbates user conflicts. The trail was not designed for use by motorized vehicles, except for maintenance vehicles, emergency access, and approved mobility devices in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). It’s my understanding that e-bikes are allowed as long as they comply with Wisconsin’s definition of low-speed electric bicycles. E-motos should not be using this or any trail or road in the city.

What feedback have you received to the concept you proposed?

To date, the primary concerns that I've received via email or during conversations are: 1) a paved trail would increase user conflicts, 2) it's expensive to improve the trail, and 3) the city has limited \$ and staff resources currently available for trail maintenance. Each of these concerns is entirely valid.

The letter from Diane Ramthun that was forwarded to committee members does a nice job summarizing the concerns I have heard. I also received six additional emails in opposition to the concept I proposed.

At the same time, here are excerpts of the positive feedback I have received:

- "I see pedestrians walking/riding on PBR more and more now that phase 2 is nearing completion and worry about their safety, especially at the speed the cars go and the hills causing blind spots." (Redtail Ridge resident, May 8)
- "The Pheasant Branch road "complete street" concept is a real issue. I don't have any brilliant ideas, but I do appreciate you suggesting alternatives for consideration." (Middleton Hills resident, June 7)
- "The new development has increased the car traffic on Pheasant Branch Road tremendously, and I believe the city of Middleton needs to address this danger immediately.... A safe road is long overdue. I support any effort that moves cyclists off of the road. A wider road with a separate bike lane or a paved recreational path along Pheasant Branch Road to Balzer is the only reasonable long-term solution." (Middleton Hills resident, June 8)
- "Just wanted to offer my wholehearted support for your comments about Pheasant Branch Road and the possibility of paving the West Branch Trail as a mitigation. The current character and footprint of PB Road is very much deserving of preservation for property owners and motorists (myself included), but the facilities for bikers/walkers/runners (I am all three) could use enhancement, and I believe the West Branch Trail is the best way to do that." (Pheasant Branch Ridge resident, June 8)

Wouldn't a paved trail increase user conflicts?

The difference in speed between a bicyclist and someone on foot or using a wheelchair can be quite pronounced and unsettling. This concern arises along most shared-use paths, not just ones in a conservancy. Trail etiquette is an issue requiring education and enforcement throughout the entire trail system. There are numerous examples in the Madison area of effective signs that could be displayed in key locations to help educate all trail users. User conflicts are exacerbated along narrow trails; there would be more room for people to pass others if the trail width were restored to at least 10 feet. As is noted in the Conservancy Lands Plan as well as in my proposal, it's possible and at times desirable to provide an unpaved shoulder or a separate trail to accommodate people who don't wish to walk or jog on pavement.

What is Dane County and WisDNR's involvement?

My proposal is to improve and extend the existing path within the Pheasant Branch Road right-of-way, which is primarily controlled by the City of Middleton and the Town of Springfield. (It's not clear to me whether a 160 ft. long segment of the road is under the jurisdiction of the Town of Middleton.) Town of Springfield officials are aware of my proposal and are amenable to making Town right-of-way available for a shared use path in that area. In my view, the City of Middleton, in collaboration with the Town(s), has jurisdiction to make improvements within the road right-of-way. That said, it is, of course, important and beneficial to coordinate trail development, construction, maintenance, and use with Dane County and WisDNR, which own and manage the land abutting the east edge of the right-of-way.

Final Thoughts:

As a Middleton resident since 1991 and a conservancy neighbor for most of that time, I have no interest whatsoever in degrading either the conservancy or the experience that people have as they cherish their time in this special place. Nor did I intend for the Council referral to result in city staff feeling compelled to undertake a thorough analysis of the impact of improving the West Trail in the conservancy. My reason for advocating for this concept was for Appendix A of the ATP to include narrative that addresses the immediate safety needs of pedestrians and bicyclists who rely on Pheasant Branch Road to travel between northern neighborhoods and the community services and transportation routes accessed via the Century/Branch intersection. If the ATP doesn't end up including this information, then I could easily envision someone in the future citing the plan's silence (other than a map showing a medium-term need for a sidewalk) as the basis for why the trail improvement concept doesn't merit further consideration.

As committee members consider the concept I proposed, please keep in mind that the West Trail follows a sewer interceptor or runs atop an artificial berm that was installed decades ago to re-route the creek into the marsh. The Public Works Dept. has on file a very preliminary design from 2002 that indicated that widening Pheasant Branch Road would necessitate the removal of numerous trees and the construction of a 1,000 ft. long retaining wall. Road widening impacts would almost certainly not be limited to the existing road right-of-way. The city engineer is understandably reluctant to provide a ballpark cost estimate to implement the initial design concept, but given the steep slopes along the east side of the road and the cost estimate for reconstructing a half-mile segment of High Road, any widening project would certainly have a much greater impact on the conservancy and the city budget. Thus, based on my professional and personal experiences, improving the West Trail is the most viable path forward.