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Trail Comparison: Pedestrian vs. Recreational Motor Vehicle

We all have an interest in trails. Trails have the potential to benefit users but there are distinct differences to be considered when evaluating the State's role in trail development.

In my opinion pedestrian trails make more efficient use of available land resources. Consider a ten mile trail system, with two groups of 30 users, one group of pedestrians and one group of Recreational Motor Vehicle (RMV) operators. Most pedestrians would need more than two hours to cover the whole trail. RMV operators could easily cover the ten mile distance in 20 minutes or less. In the course of two hours each RMV user could cover the trail 6 times. If we were to sit by the side of the trail and observe the activity of each group for 10 minutes we'd see 2 pedestrians and 15 motor vehicles. The subjective question is: "which group is better served by the creation of such a trail?" If the tests were conducted separately I suspect the pedestrians would be pleased with their trail experience while the RMV users would be inclined to regard the trail as too crowded.

Beyond land resources, we are all aware of the scarcity of gas and oil. The contrast in consumption of these limited resources between pedestrians and RMVs should be obvious and this merits consideration.

In terms of equitable allocation of trail resources, pedestrian trails are available to everyone. RMV trails are available only to those people that can afford to own or rent the vehicles. In most cases shared use is not desirable or safe.

A separate and bigger (but related) social issue than trails is the high cost of health care. By providing an attractive place for healthy exercise pedestrian trails can reduce the cost of health care for a wide range of illnesses including obesity, high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol, heart disease, cancer and even a variety of mental health problems. Studies have shown that, in addition to helping people feel better, the regular exercise associated with pedestrian trail use can reduce obesity related medical costs by as much as 50 percent. In contrast, RMVs contribute to air, water and noise pollution, and mechanical environmental degradation. There is also a growing record of injury and death associated with RMV use.

As for financial impact, studies have shown that pedestrian trails attract people who spend money on food, lodging, clothing and supplies. The Boulder Junction Trail count for the 2003 season was 70,000 trail visits. Other studies indicate average expenses per visit for pedestrian trail users are \$27.00. That amounts to a local economic impact of \$1,890,000 per year just in the Boulder Junction area.

In summary, as we consider what is best for the people of Wisconsin in terms of State funded trail development it is my opinion that pedestrian trails are the best way to go.

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