

Notes for the Wisconsin Legislative Council Special Committee Enhancing Recreational Trails for Non-Motorized Use

By: Diane Conklin, Snowmobile, ATV, Recreation Boating and Rec Trails Grant Manager
Department of Natural Resources

The Department has two primary programs that would provide financial assistance for various sponsors to develop non-motorized trails. They are the Stewardship program, specifically – Acquisition and Development of Local Parks and Recreational Trails funds.

Stewardship, started in 1990, sets aside 50% of the funds in the Local Assistance Program for projects that improve community parks and acquire land for public outdoor recreation. Funds are available to towns, villages, cities, counties, Indian tribes and NCOs (Non-profit conservation organizations). Funds are allocated on a regional basis with 70% distributed on the basis of each county's proportionate share of the state population and 30% distributed equally to each county.

Funds may be used for land acquisition projects and development projects for nature-based outdoor recreation, such as fishing piers, hiking trails and picnic facilities. Funds are not available for non nature-based activities such as baseball and soccer fields. Costs associated with operation and maintenance of parks and other outdoor recreation facilities are not eligible for Stewardship funds. NCOs may only apply for funds for land acquisition; they are not eligible for funds for development on property they acquire.

The Recreation Trails Program (RTP) was signed into law in 1991 as part of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 and was re-authorized in 1998 under the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21). RTP provides for the transfer of federal gas taxes paid on fuel used in off-highway vehicles used for recreational purposes. The funds are to be used to assist local communities and trail groups in the development, maintenance or rehabilitation of recreational trails. These trails may be motorized, non-motorized, or multiple use/compatible use trails.

Since 1996-97 fiscal year, we have provided \$3.2 million for work on DNR properties. In that same time frame, we awarded \$8.1 million in

grants to various applicants to maintain, develop, or rehabilitate recreational trails and amenities. In total, the DNR has been awarded over \$11.6 million dollars, to include costs for education and administration of the program.

Our DNR web site contains application materials for both grant programs. <http://dnr.wi.gov/org/caer/cfa/Grants/index.html>

Applications are to be post marked by May 1 of each year. Regional staff rate projects according to the criteria provided in our grants booklets. In late June funding decisions are made and, depending upon when the state budget is approved and signed, grants are awarded – usually some time in July or August. However, no funds can be expended prior to receipt of a grant.

While DNR does not provide engineering for grant projects, it is an eligible expense. All of our grants are reimbursement grants and cost share for both programs is 50%. This means that the applicant, after receiving a grant from the Department, must expend the funds to complete the project and submit documentation. We will then reimburse 50% of the actual cost (not to exceed the award amount). Our regional staff are available to discuss the project initially with potential sponsors but also give technical advice on-site such as facilitating meetings with various DNR staff for permitting, issues involving endangered resources or various other natural resource concerns.

Some of the on-going concerns that I have noticed in the 15 years that I have worked with these programs is that there is not a constant stream of funds to maintain non-motorized trails. As you are probably aware, ATVs and Snowmobiles have a registration program and non-resident sticker sales program that allows funds to be placed in a segregated account. This allows the Department to provide on-going maintenance funds for these approved trails as well as development, rehabilitation and support. With non-motorized uses, there isn't a fund to provide these important on-going maintenance dollars. The only hope of maintenance funds is through the Recreational Trails program each year. While maintenance is a high priority in that program, the funds are somewhat limited and a large project or an

expensive one could be awarded the majority of the funds in one year, leaving the maintenance projects to fend for themselves.

Most of the non-motorized trails are maintained by various individuals and/or clubs or by county employees. However, without a reliable funding source, it is difficult to continue to maintain trails.

There has recently been discussion in Washington DC about restructuring some of the programs that the RTP funds come from. It is too early to know what this will mean. However, a worse case scenario could mean change in some form.