



IMPACT100 TRAVERSE CITY

2022 ENVIRONMENT, PRESERVATION & RECREATION FINALIST: NORTH COUNTRY TRAIL ASSOCIATION

INITIATIVE: US-131 North Country Trail Trailhead and Boardman River Boardwalk

OVERVIEW OF INITIATIVE – IN THE APPLICANT’S WORDS

Since 2016, the Kalkaska Trail Town Partners began their efforts to bring a non-motorized, ADA accessible Trailhead to Downtown Kalkaska and eliminate “road walk” sections of the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT) to a safer and more natural setting along the North Branch of the Boardman River.

DNR approved the Phase I reroute in 2020. Phase II is to create a trailhead on US-131 with parking for 30 vehicles, including handicap spaces. An ADA Accessible trail, will lead to the Boardman River Boardwalk with seating space for all to enjoy nature. Impact 100 funds will be used directly for construction of the trailhead and boardwalk.

This facility will not only be a much needed asset to the NCT, but will create the ability for those who are mobility-challenged, as well as the entire community, to enjoy the Boardman River, at a location that has been too remote to access.

The following sections contain certain key information from the application, as written by the applicant.

While detailed financial information has not been provided here due to its confidential nature, each applicant submitted an initiative budget and supporting financial documents as part of their application. Each proposed initiative and the supporting financial documentation has undergone a thorough financial review by our Financial Review Committee (FRC) and the initiatives proposed by our finalists have met our standards for moving forward.

ORGANIZATION’S VISION STATEMENT

The NCTA's vision for the NCT is that of a premier footpath of national significance, offering a superb experience for hikers and backpackers in a permanently protected corridor, traversing and interpreting the richly diverse environmental, cultural, and historical features of the northern United States.

ORGANIZATION'S MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the North Country Trail Association (NCTA) is to develop, maintain, protect, and promote the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCT) as the premier hiking path across the northern tier of the United States through a trail-wide coalition of volunteers and partners. The NCTA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that partners with the National Park Service to unite individuals, affiliated trail groups, local Chapters, corporate sponsors and others linked in support of building and maintaining the North Country Trail and telling its story.

DESCRIPTION OF ORGANIZATION AND ITS HISTORY

In March 1980, Congress passed legislation authorizing the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST). The authorized route that the NCNST, also abbreviated as North Country Trail (NCT), follows today differs significantly in many areas from some of the initial proposals. Some of the early proposed route highlights and suggestions included transecting Ohio through Columbus to the Michigan/Indiana border, following the Lake Michigan shoreline, a large loop in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and following the length of the Sheyenne River in North Dakota. The Trail's current route was – and continues to be – the direct result of public input received during those early and subsequent public meetings. The trail now unites eight states, and immerses trail users in the best natural features and cultural heritage the North Country has to offer.

Once the trail began to take shape, in March 1981, 12 volunteers gathered at the bank in White Cloud, Michigan to discuss forming an organization: a major nonprofit partner with the National Park Service in building the NCNST. That core group of individuals decided dues shall be set at \$20 per person. Lance Field, the newly appointed President of the North Country Trail Association (NCTA), was the first to make his payment and officially became member #1. NCTA headquarters were the Birch Grove Schoolhouse in White Cloud, MI. The Association has since moved headquarters to Lowell, Michigan, and grown to a dozen staff and by thousands of volunteers and members across the country.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF INITIATIVE

In 2016, the North Country Trail Association (NCTA), the Kalkaska Downtown Development Authority (DDA), the Grand Traverse Hiking Club (GTHC), the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Northern Michigan Mountain Bike Association to re-route the North Country National Scenic Trail to the south end of the Village and through the downtown district as Phase I of the US-131 North Country Trail (NCT) Trailhead and Boardman River Boardwalk cooperative project. Our goal is to eliminate road walk sections of the North Country Trail (NCT), move them to a safer and more natural setting along the North Branch of the Boardman River, and to install an ADA compliant trailhead and trail to the North Branch of the Boardman River. The project will be located immediately south of Downtown Kalkaska, Michigan in Kalkaska County. The DDA contracted with Gosling Czubek, environmental engineers, to design a handicap-accessible trailhead parking lot and boardwalk to cross the North Branch of Boardman River. Design, engineering plans and architectural drawings for both the parking lot and the handicap-accessible boardwalk across the river has been completed and the Trail Partners are ready to begin Phase II.

The NCT and this project is part of the Michigan DNR Iron Belle Trail Initiative. The Iron Belle Trail showcases over 2,000 miles of trail, hundreds of municipalities, and crosses through 48 counties in Michigan. The network of existing trails and an evolving partnership allows trail users to explore trails by hiking or biking from the western edge of the Upper Peninsula to the Ohio border, or even to Belle Isle in Detroit.

The Kalkaska Trail Town atmosphere will be transformed by increasing the visibility of the NCT and non-motorized activities through an ADA compliant trailhead. Approximately 2.2 miles of NCT road walk will be eliminated and moved to a dedicated NCT footpath along the North Branch of the Boardman River. At the trailhead, there will be educational signage installed about trail use, trail etiquette, and more information on connecting trails in the surrounding area. Further beyond the trailhead, ADA compliant trail will be installed up to a series of three bridges and boardwalks over the river which will be open to non-motorized traffic and trail use.

In addition to an ADA compliant trail access point, trail users will have increased opportunities to view and shop at local businesses bringing much needed economic development to this community. This is especially important to long distance hikers seeking lodging, restaurants, postal service and re-supply opportunities along and nearby to the trail. Trail users and sectional hikers will also have a much needed designated meeting point and parking area that is easily found.

An outcome of the pandemic was a need to create safe and healthy recreational options for the community for all people with differing abilities. This trailhead will be yet another option for most people, but will be a new option for those who are unable to navigate through most of our single and two-tracked trails. The ability for those who are mobility-challenged to enjoy the Boardman River at a location that has been too remote to access, will bring nothing but joy in perpetuity.

This project is an integral part of our long-term focus to connect all non-motorized trails in Kalkaska through the Downtown District. Our long-term goal, is for residents and visitors of all abilities to be able to park at any public asset, such as the municipal lot or Railroad Square, and access any non-motorized trail within Kalkaska for both day and overnight hikes.

COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED

The key community to be served through this project will primarily be trail users in Kalkaska County and Northwest Michigan. In the Northwest Michigan region, the NCT passes through Kalkaska, Antrim, and Grand Traverse Counties. According to the 2019 Census data , Kalkaska County has a population of 18,038 residents, Grand Traverse County has 93,088 residents, and Antrim County has 23,324 residents.

One of the most underserved demographics in this region are mobility impaired individuals. The NCTA recognizes the importance of making the trail accessible to all, it is challenging to make the entire trail ADA compliant as it weaves through the woods and over uneven terrain. There is a dedicated effort by the National Park Service and the NCTA that any new structures built shall be ADA compliant. The US-131 North Country Trail Trailhead and Boardman River Boardwalk project is one of those key opportunities.

This new trailhead will provide additional opportunities for local community members in the Northwest Michigan region, a free recreation and educational opportunity. Outdoor recreational activities like this have been identified as key objectives from local municipalities because Kalkaska County is identified as a low to moderate income community.

NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY TO BE SERVED

This project is the final capstone to a series of trail improvements of the Kalkaska Trail Town collaborative effort. While the NCTA headquarters is in Lowell, Michigan it was the vision of a local Chapter and partners to begin a 12 mile reroute to a more scenic and safe trail through the woods, culminating in an ADA accessible trailhead. A portion of that reroute included a 1 mile sidewalk section of trail through Downtown Kalkaska, connecting trail users to local businesses.

This trailhead shall serve as a hub for non-motorized trail users. The initial phase of the project has been completed and 9 new miles of trail are open along the North Branch of the Boardman River. The next phase will be to design and install the boardwalks, bridges, and the trailhead itself immediately south of Downtown Kalkaska.

Within the Village of Kalkaska Parks and Recreation plan, published in 2017, they identified an objective to develop an interconnected system of trailways that link communities, parks, and existing trails. From the parks and recreation plan a Kalkaska Trails Task Force was officially formed from the initial partnership meeting in November 2015 that set this project in motion. At the original meeting there were individuals present from the Grand Traverse Hiking Club Chapter (GTHC), the NCTA, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), the Michigan Mountain Biking Association (MMBA), and the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT).

Partners identified a need to increase trail accessibility and install safer trail routes and trail access points. A newly installed trailhead will create a safer location for both long distance hikers and trail users and short term/day users, especially as it will be installed to current National Park Standards as ADA compliant. Trail users of all abilities and skill levels will be able to explore and enjoy a viewing platform over the North Branch of the Boardman River in Kalkaska County.

The final stage of the US-131 North Country Trail Trailhead and Boardman River Boardwalk project will be the boardwalks, bridges, and trailhead implementation. There will be increased educational opportunities for signs and interactive kiosks. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic the NCTA has noticed an increase in trail traffic as well as increased downloads of trail maps and NCTA memberships. Many trail users are experiencing the trail for the first time and are seeking credible information. Standardized signs on trails etiquette, how to interpret trail blazing, leave no trace ethics, and common plants and wildlife to the region will be installed to meet this need.

Moving forward, Kalkaska Trail Town partners will utilize and promote the inclusive trailhead through programming efforts like an annual National Trail Days Celebration and the Kalkaska Conservation District's Weeknight Hikes summer programs. Beyond the GTHC Chapter's effort to remove unsafe road

walking sections of trail, any new and improved trail will better connect and improve the entire 8 state coverage area with more accessible and scenic trails.

SUSTAINABILITY OF THE PROPOSED INITIATIVE

NCTA and GTHC Chapter volunteer network will have long term dedication to the US-131 North Country Trail Trailhead and Boardman River Boardwalk. The core group of Kalkaska Trail Town partners are constantly developing and maintaining the NCT for continued trail use and enjoyment. Maintenance of the trailhead, parking lot, and boardwalk will be completed in combination with the NCTA, the Village of Kalkaska, and the Kalkaska Downtown Development Authority, all of which can contribute financially for upkeep costs as they arise.

The North Country Trail Association (NCTA) strives for program and financial sustainability through individual, corporate, and foundation giving. 2020 marked the 40th anniversary as a membership based organization. As such, more than 57% of the Association's current funding is generated through raised revenue from individuals (a percent that continues to grow to support need). Membership underwrites outreach programs designed to grow awareness and engagement with the Trail. These programs have experienced a significant increase in attendance since March 2020 - as more people turn to the outdoors for respite. As a result, NCTA has seen a growth in membership during the same timeframe.

Other sustaining programs financially supported by individuals and partner grants and awards include the educational, material, and financial support for the Association's 29 Chapters in our entire 8 state service area. These Chapters, powered by volunteers, have provided the 'boots on the ground' building and maintenance of the Trail since NCTA was first established in 1981.