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Editorial: Using Fox River Trail year-round is worthy of study

The Brown County Parks Department is thinking about year-round use of the Fox River Trail.

That's a step in the right direction.

Assistant Parks Director Doug Hartman revealed earlier this week that the subject would be broached in the facility and park director's report at the Feb. 1 meeting of the county's Education, Culture and Recreation Committee. The first task will be to gauge the committee's interest and, if it's positive, to conduct a study of community interest and potential costs.

We support a feasibility study, and it should begin with the presumption that keeping the trail open throughout the year is desirable.

If there proves to be significant obstacles, they will emerge through the study. But judging from what we've seen during the nine or 10 months that the trail is relatively snow and ice free, it isn't unreasonable to assume that the most commonly used portions of the trail could be available for year-round activity.



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Let's give credit where it's due: Allouez resident Dan Conzemius, an avid runner and bicyclist, has been prodding county officials to examine the issue of year-round use. And it seems that they have decided to listen to his pleas.

"It's good to know that I've made some headway," he said. "It's hard to run on a trail that's covered with 3 inches of snow without twisting your ankle."

Conzemius shovels a half-mile section of the trail near his home. He gets his miles in by running back and forth on his cleared path.

There is precedent in Wisconsin for year-round trails. The Eau Claire Park Department keeps the Chippewa River Trail open throughout the year.

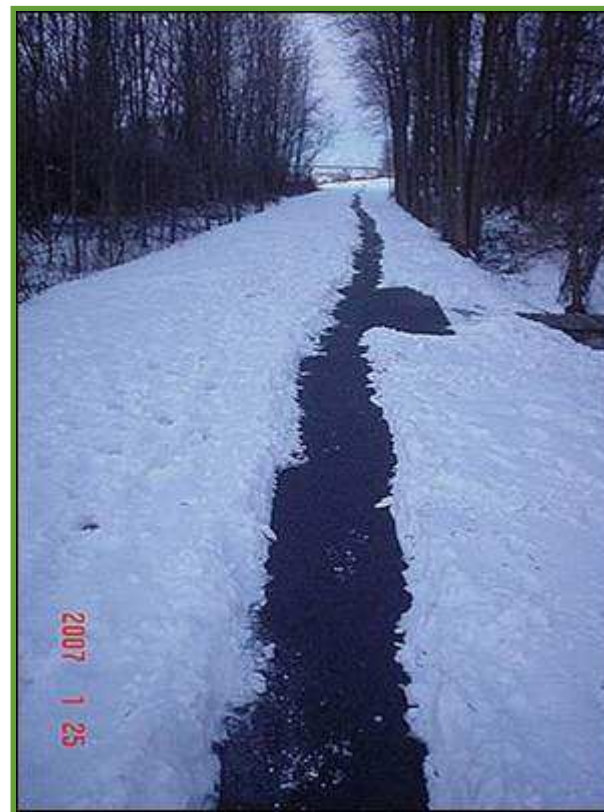
When the parks department first started clearing the trail, some officials wondered how many people would use it when the temperature dipped into the teens and 20s. But many walkers, runners and cyclists use the trail on a regular basis throughout the winter.

"We have an ordinance that requires sidewalks be cleared within 24 hours, but I think we would hear more complaints if we didn't open the trail than if we didn't enforce that sidewalk ordinance," joked Eau Claire park maintenance supervisor David Bohlinger. "It doesn't take much to send a plow down the trail. It's become a high priority issue."

Year-round use of the Fox River Trail was considered back in 1999 when the trail first opened. However, at the time there wasn't a clamor for keeping the trail open through winter, so the trail was maintained for use in spring, summer and fall.

But this isn't 1999, and the Fox River Trail has proven more successful than even its strongest supporters anticipated. Last year the trail had more than 158,000 users.

The trail is a treasured community asset and year-round use now deserves thoughtful and deliberate study.



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Allouez resident Dan Conzemius shovels a half-mile portion of the Fox River Trail for winter running. Special to the Press-Gazette

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