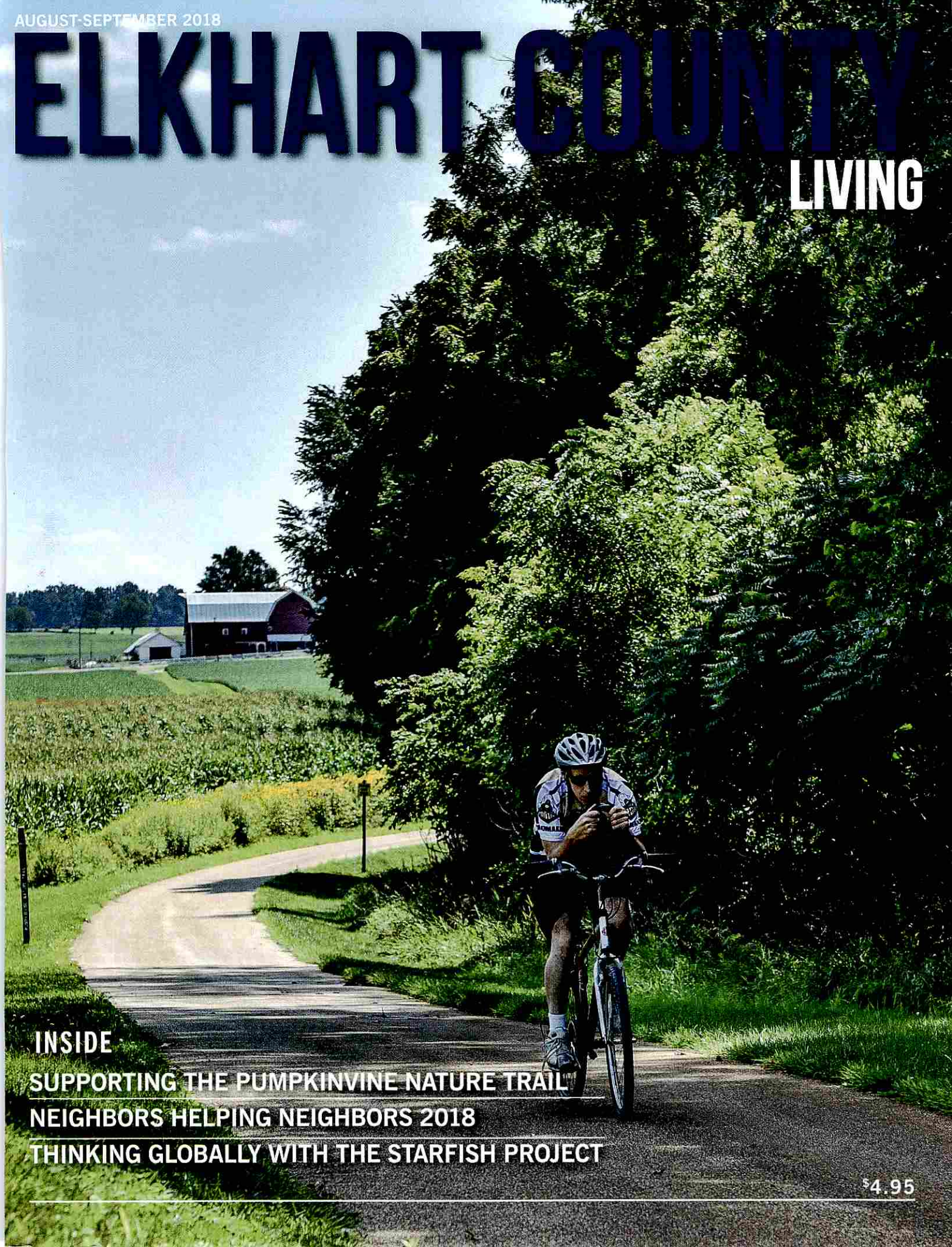
AUGUST-SEPTEMBER 2018

ELKHART COUNTY LIVING



INSIDE

SUPPORTING THE PUMPKINVINE NATURE TRAIL

NEIGHBORS HELPING NEIGHBORS 2018

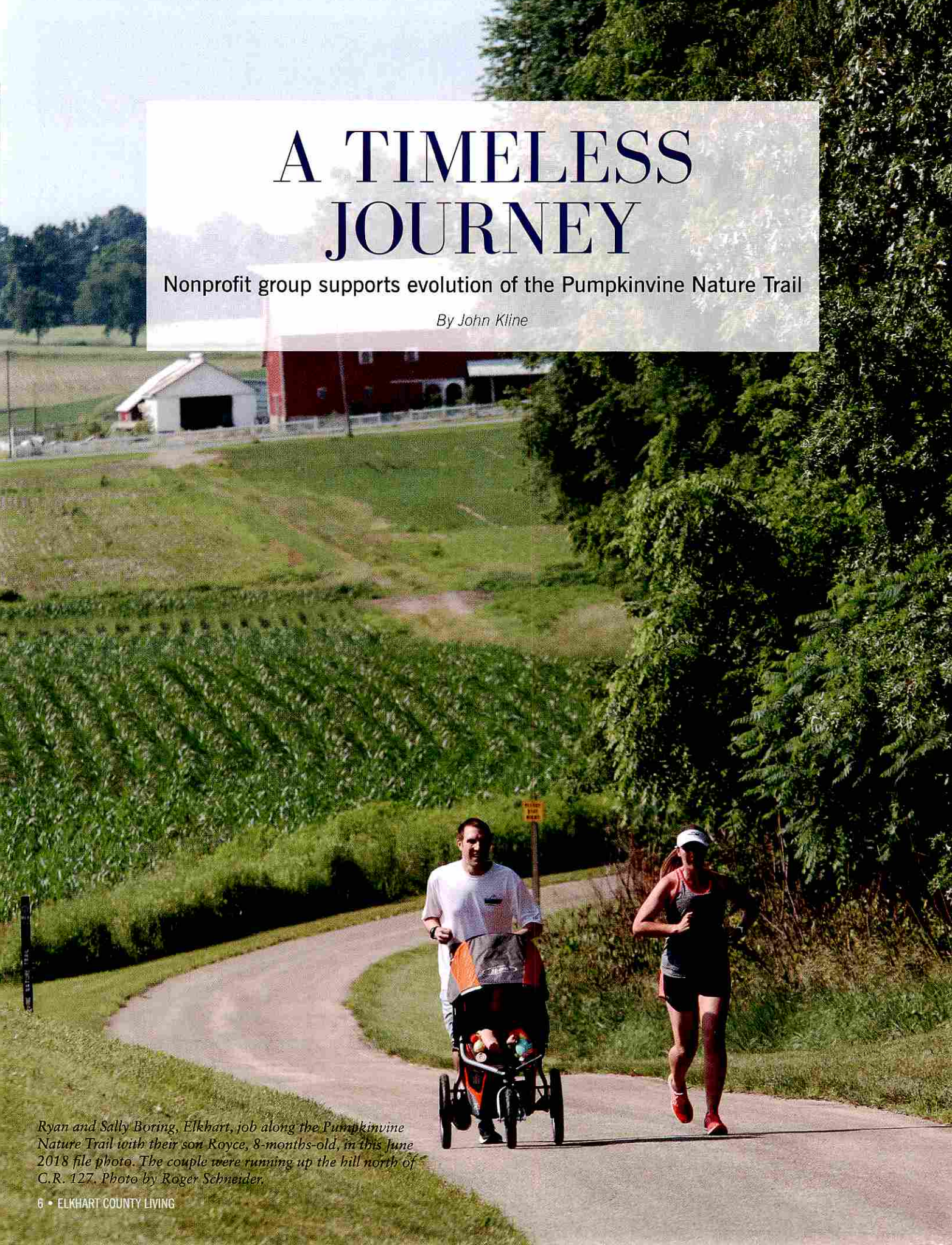
THINKING GLOBALLY WITH THE STARFISH PROJECT

$4.95

A TIMELESS JOURNEY

Nonprofit group supports evolution of the Pumpkinvine Nature Trail

By John Kline



Ryan and Sally Boring, Elkhart, job along the Pumpkinvine Nature Trail with their son Royce, 8-months-old, in this June 2018 file photo. The couple were running up the hill north of C.R. 127. Photo by Roger Schneider.

Bicyclists ride on the Pumpkinvine Trail. Photo by Ben Mikesell.

From land purchases and lawsuits to fundraisers and construction, local nonprofit Friends of the Pumpkinvine Nature Trail Inc. has been front and center through every iteration of the beloved trail's long evolution.

Formed in 1992 at the urging of Goshen resident and cycling enthusiast John Yoder, Friends of the Pumpkinvine Nature Trail is dedicated to converting what had previously been the abandoned Pumpkinvine railroad corridor into a linear park and greenway running between Goshen and the town of Shipshewana.

The organization, which is guided by a 12-person board of directors, is dependent mainly on a dedicated pool of volunteers to carry out day-to-day work required to achieve the group's short- and long-term goals. Yoder currently serves as the board's president.

Having started with a volunteer pool of about 300 individuals, each of whom contributed to the cause with both annual financial contributions and man hours, the group has seen a steady increase in support over the years. Yoder said, today, that volunteer pool has grown to include about 340 households and around 20 corporate and community sponsors.

"We had our first meeting in December of 1989," Yoder said of the group's formation. "I called a number of my friends who I thought might be interested in the possibility of turning the old Pumpkinvine into a linear park. So we went about trying to find who was the owner, what the legal status was, and from there we eventually formed the Friends of the Pumpkinvine."

After purchasing the Pumpkinvine railroad corridor in 1993, the group turned its focus toward raising funds to develop the trail with the ultimate goal of turning it over to local parks departments when design and engineering were ready for trail construction.

"And we had many legal challenges in the early days," Yoder said of the group's work. "We had to prove that we owned the land. We were challenged to prove that, which we did through a number of lawsuits. Then we also helped to raise funds for purchasing the land. And then now, in the later years, we've also raised funds to build the trail."

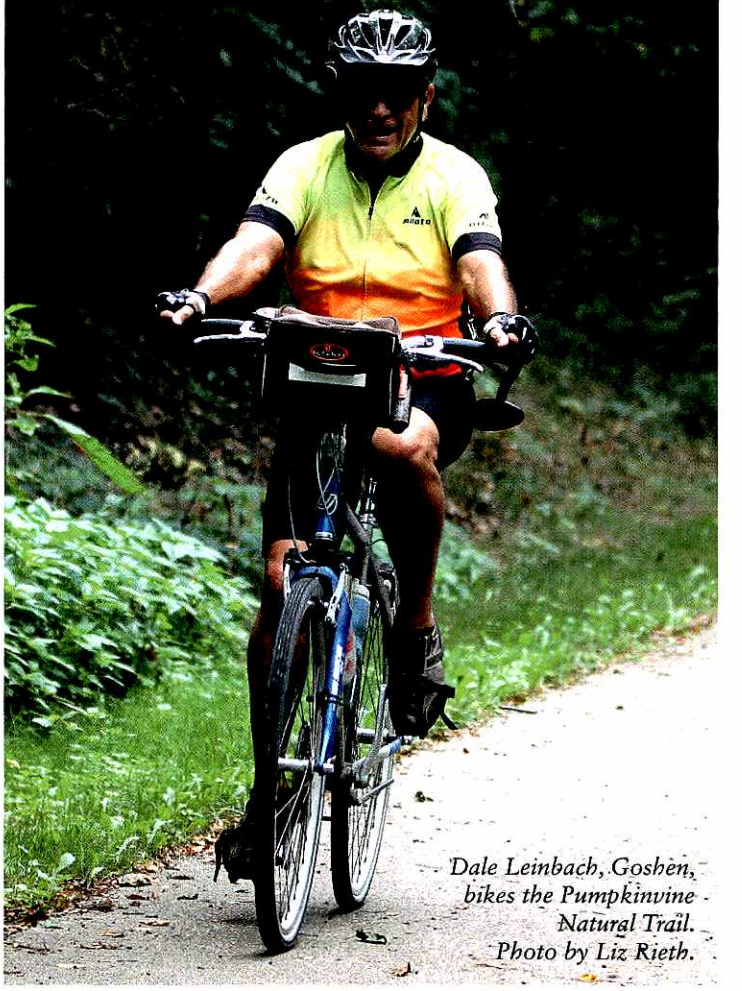
FOUR PARTS

Currently, ownership of the nearly 17-mile trail has been divided primarily between four entities: the Goshen Parks and Recreation Department, the Elkhart County Parks and Recreation Department, the town of Middlebury and the town of Shipshewana.

"The parks departments were the ones who got the major grants, actually. They got Transportation Enhancement funds to help build the trail," Yoder said. "So I think it's important to note that this was a partnership with them from the very beginning. We weren't going out and buying something and then just handing it over, like saying 'Surprise, here's 17 miles of trail for you!' We wanted them to be supportive of this so that we could work at this together, the whole process."

At about 16.5 miles in length, the trail begins at Abshire Park in Goshen and continues through the town of Middlebury before

Workers begin construction on closing the gap in the Pumpkinvine Nature Trail between C.R. 33 and C.R. 20 on July 30. Photo provided.



Dale Leinbach, Goshen, bikes the Pumpkinvine Natural Trail. Photo by Liz Rieth.

concluding in the town of Shipshewana. The trail also connects to the Maple City Greenway in Goshen, which, in turn, connects to the MapleHeart Trail in Elkhart, forming a regional trail network.

"It's mostly asphalt, 10 feet wide," Yoder said of the Pumpkinvine. "There's a mile-and-three-quarters here at the Goshen end that is crushed limestone. It's primarily tree-lined, forming a nice tree canopy that makes it nice and cool in the summertime, except for a couple of miles where we had to go off the corridor and around some farm fields. That part is not tree-lined, but in those sections we have planted some wildflowers. So if you go out now, you'll see some wonderful wildflower stands along the trail."

While nearly complete, there are two "gaps" remaining in the trail that the nonprofit is currently working to complete, Yoder explained.

FILLING THE GAPS

"We actually had three gaps, the first of which was between C.R. 33 and C.R. 20," Yoder said. "That was all purchased from five families. We owned almost nothing in that section. They were willing to work with us, and we worked together to decide where the trail was going to go. So that has been resolved."

Gap 2, as Yoder calls it, is a half-mile section running between C.R. 20 and C.R. 35, all but 620 feet of which is currently owned by the nonprofit.

"In that section, the landowners have said they are willing to work with us. So we are hopeful that we can work out the details of that in the next year," Yoder said.

Rounding out the trail's remaining gaps is Gap 3, a small section of unfinished trial running between C.R. 850 West and downtown Shipshewana.

"With Gap 3 there are around seven landowners, and five have agreed to either sell or donate their land," Yoder said of the group's ongoing negotiations. "So we're still working on two other landowners to work out the details of either them contributing or us purchasing the land. So what we're really doing right now is trying to close the gaps in the trail between Goshen and Middlebury and also the last half-mile into Shipshewana. In fact, they just started work on the first gap (July 30) out at C.R. 33, and that should be finished by November. As for the other gaps, we still have a lot of details to work out with those, but I'm hopeful that we can do it within the next year."

In the meantime, trail users must utilize county roads to circumvent the unfinished sections of the Pumpkinvine, an admitted detraction from what is typically a stress-free and idyllic trail experience, he said.

"But one of the really cool things about the trail is that it has inspired spurs off of the Pumpkinvine," Yoder added. "For example, there's the Abshire Trail that goes from the Pumpkinvine down to Monroe Street. And then the Monroe Street Trail is a grandchild of the Pumpkinvine, since it's built off of the Abshire Trail. And just last summer, the Ridge Run Trail in Middlebury opened. It's 1 mile from the Pumpkinvine over to Greencroft Middlebury and the Essenhaus and Northridge High School. None of that would exist if the Pumpkinvine hadn't been there first."

SPONSORS HELP

To assist with its work, the nonprofit relies on three main funding sources: its corporate sponsors, its annual contributions from members and, of course, the group's annual Pumpkinvine Bike Ride, which consistently draws thousands of biking enthusiasts to the county from throughout the region and beyond.

"The Pumpkinvine Ride has been our main fundraiser," Yoder said of the ride. "This year was the 19th ride, and through the years, it has raised anywhere from $10,000 to $20,000 per year. It just depends on the weather and how many people show up, but that's been a very consistent source of funding for us."

While nearly all of the group's available funding is currently being funneled toward completion of the trail's remaining gaps, Yoder envisions future uses for the funding including things such as assisting the parks departments with ongoing maintenance and resurfacing needs.

"These things definitely take maintenance. You just can't build it and walk away," Yoder said of the trail. "Rails-to-Trail Conservancy, that's the national organization that helps groups like us, they put out a book that says that it costs $2,000 per mile per year to maintain a trail like this. So the Pumpkinvine, which will eventually be 17 miles long, I would say it would cost about $34,000 a year for maintenance.

"And when it comes to resurfacing and that kind of thing, that's going to be an expensive proposition," Yoder added. "We were talking about resurfacing the limestone section from Abshire Park to C.R. 28, for example, and it would cost probably $100,000 to do that. So, it's not something that the parks departments are necessarily going to have in their yearly budgets."

Future expenses notwithstanding, Yoder said he remains convinced the Pumpkinvine is and will continue to be an irreplaceable boon to the county, both in terms of economics and quality of life.

And he's not alone in that assessment.

"The Pumpkinvine Nature Trail is a tremendous asset to the citizens of Elkhart County," said Ronda DeCaire, director of the Elkhart County Parks Department. "We are presently in the midst of the Elkhart County Parks Five-Year Master Plan Survey, and residents have told us so far that bike riding is the second most popular outdoor recreation activity they participate in, with walking/hiking being first. Also, residents are telling us through the survey that multi-use trails such as the Pumpkinvine are considered one of the top five benefits of the Elkhart County Parks.

"With over 60,000 annual users of the Pumpkinvine Nature Trail, it benefits not only the health of residents through increased physical activity, but also brings tourism dollars to the community with riders coming to the trail as a destination. Trails such as the Pumpkinvine make Elkhart County a more vibrant community and a great place to live."

For more information about Friends of the Pumpkinvine Nature Trail or to become involved, visit www.pumpkinvine.org.