

Village of Marcellus Trail Plan

Group 5 - Spring 2026



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History

Marcellus’s trail concept is strongest when it functions as a heritage trail—a place where residents and visitors learn how the landscape and community were shaped over time, rather than a route that only moves people from point A to point B. The Michigan History Center describes heritage trails as routes that connect users with both natural and cultural heritage, and notes that adding heritage interpretation can attract heritage tourists (who tend to stay longer and spend more) while also building local pride and learning.

This history section proposes an interpretive approach that is (1) historically grounded, (2) respectful to living communities whose histories are represented, and (3) easy to experience on foot or bike through a set of clearly defined stops that can be implemented in phases alongside trail construction.

Indigenous Homelands and Potawatomi Presence

Before Euro-American settlement, Cass County contained Potawatomi settlements, including burial mounds near Sumnerville. Federal policy forced removal, but a band led by Leopold Pokagon peacefully resisted by purchasing land in Silver Creek Township, preserving an enduring Native presence in southwest Michigan. Trail interpretation must acknowledge that local history did not begin with European arrival.

Early Migration, Land Acquisition, and Township Formation

Cass County was set off in 1829 and named after Governor Lewis Cass. Early settlers came from Ohio, Indiana, Virginia, and Tennessee, drawn by farmland. The Sauk Trail (Detroit to Chicago) passed through the county. Marcellus’s first settler was John Bair (October 1832), followed by Daniel Driskel (1833). The name “Marcellus” was adopted in 1843 (first choice unavailable), referencing Roman emperor Flavius Marcellus.

Agricultural Development

Fertile prairie land attracted farm-seeking settlers, accelerating growth. Marcellus remains a rural-agricultural community today, with agriculture shaping the historical and current landscape and economy.

Railroad and Main Street Transformation

The Peninsular Railroad was a pivotal turning point. Marcellus was incorporated in 1879. The train station was moved west in 1898 to serve the business district; by 1911, ten passenger trains stopped daily. Railroads linked local agriculture to regional markets and shaped downtown form.



Fig. 1: Marcellus depot and rail line, which played a key role in shaping the Village’s downtown and economic development.

Education History

Education was embedded in early settlement planning under the Ordinance of 1787 (land for schools). In 1895, Marcellus women formed a Ladies’ Library, which became a township public library by the late 1890s. Russell A. Wood’s 1918 bequest funded a dedicated library building. Today, the Safe Routes to School program uses trails, sidewalks, and crosswalks to support students walking/biking to school.

Social Justice: Abolition and the Underground Railroad

Cass County was a haven for freedom-seekers due to a strong abolitionist presence. The 1847 Kentucky raid involved armed slave catchers targeting Underground Railroad stations. The Underground Railroad Society of Cass County preserves sites, including the Dr. Nathan Thomas House and James E. Bonine House. Near the Bonine House, a settlement and school called “Ramptown” shows the intersection of education and abolitionist community-building.

Natural History: Glacial Landscape

Glaciers shaped Michigan's surface, leaving moraines and glacial erratics. The large rock formation near Bald Hill Road (if access permitted and geologically verified) can be interpreted as Ice Age processes and community memory. Include land ethics: seek permission on private property and follow collecting limits.

Proposed Interpretive Stops (adaptable to final trail alignment)

Library Stop – 1895 Ladies' Library origins → public library collection → 1918 Wood bequest; QR codes for oral histories/photos.

Indigenous Homelands Stop – Potawatomi history, burial mounds, forced removal, Pokagon's land purchase; consult tribes on language and tone.

Main Street Stop – How the railroad reshaped village form (1898 depot move, 1911 service frequency); then-and-now streetscape images.

Railroad Crossing/Depot Area – Railroads as connectivity infrastructure; modern trail as analog.

Education History Stop – Early schooling and “land for schools” + today's Safe Routes to School (sidewalks, safe bike/walk access to school complex).

Agriculture Stop – Fertile prairie/farmland foundation; current rural edge land use and community identity.

Underground Railroad Stop – Regional network with documented sites (1847 Kentucky raid, Bonine House, “Ramptown”); partner with the Underground Railroad Society for accuracy.

Bald Hill Road Natural History Stop – Glacial erratic or rock formation (if access permitted); interpret glacial transport and land ethics.



Trail Laws

1. Functions of Trail Law

In order to help to ensure that the creation and upkeep of trail systems strike a balance between the public interest and legal protections, trail regulations are essential. Trail regulations in Michigan can help to protect village governments from legal concerns, preserve private landowners' rights, guarantee user safety, and facilitate the legitimate advancement of trail projects and funding applications. For small communities like Marcellus, where collaboration between public and private players is crucial, these legislative frameworks are especially significant. These are some of the more significant laws in Michigan that help to provide

guidance for communities interested in building trails and will be also discussed in other parts of this plan:

2. Michigan Trailways Act (MTA)

Trails as a Public Good

The Michigan Trails Act formally recognizes trails as a form of public infrastructure capable of delivering broad social benefits. Under the Act, trails are considered a “public good,” meaning their value extends beyond individual users to benefit the entire community. These benefits include promoting public health, providing recreational opportunities, supporting non-motorized transportation, and fostering local economic development.

For the Village of Marcellus, this designation is significant because it positions trail development as a long-term public investment rather than merely a recreational facility. This legal recognition also strengthens the case for applying for public funds and grants, as the trail serves multiple aspects of the community.

Planning, Acquisition, Development, and Maintenance

The Michigan Trailways Act grants local governments explicit authority to plan and implement trail systems. According to MCL 324.72105, governmental agencies may “plan, acquire, develop, maintain, and operate” trailways within their jurisdiction. This includes the ability to:

- Acquire land through purchase, donation, or easements
- Develop trail infrastructure such as paths, signage, and facilities
- Maintain and manage trails over time

These provisions are critical for Marcellus, as they provide the legal foundation needed to move from conceptual planning to actual implementation. Without this statutory authority, municipalities would face significant barriers in securing land access and coordinating long-term management.

3. Recreational Trespass Act (RTA)

Private Land Protections

The purpose of the Recreational Trespass Act is to help to shield private landowners from unwanted access. This law prohibits anyone from entering or using private property for recreational purposes without authorization. For trail development projects that may incorporate or border private land, this is especially crucial.

Relevant to Marcellus, this regulation emphasizes how crucial it is to establish precise property lines and secure the necessary permits while designing trail paths. It lessens the possibility of legal problems and guarantees that trail users respect private property rights.

Posted Property Requirements

The RTA also establishes that landowners must clearly indicate when land is private. According to MCL 750.552, property may be considered “posted” if it is marked with signs, fencing, or other visible indicators. This requirement helps to protect both landowners and trail users by clarifying where access is permitted.

In practice, this means that any trail segments near private land should include clear signage to prevent accidental trespassing and maintain positive relationships with landowners.

4. Liability of Landowners

Protection Except Gross Negligence

Landowners who allow recreational activities on their property may be shielded from liability by Michigan law based on their management of the land. According to the Michigan Recreational Land Act, landowners who provide free public use of their property are often exempt from liability for injuries that occur there, unless those injuries are the consequence of "gross negligence or willful and reckless misconduct."

This clause is especially crucial for motivating landowners to take part in trail access initiatives. It helps to ensure that landowners who are granting public access won't be exposed to legal liability as long as they don't behave with reckless conduct of their land.

Reduced Liability for Public Access

Michigan law establishes an incentive system that encourages trail expansion by restricting liability. In places like Marcellus, where private land access could be required to finish trail linkages, this legal protection may be essential for promoting collaboration between the village and landowners.

5. Trail Management and Governance

Village Responsibility

Local governments usually take up management of a path once it is finished. This entails maintaining the trail's surface, putting up and maintaining safety signage, enforcing usage guidelines, and keeping an eye on the trail's general state. These obligations help to guarantee the trail's long-term safety and accessibility and are in line with the power granted by the Michigan Trails Act.

For Marcellus, this implies that instead of viewing the route as a one-time building project, the village should be ready to set aside funds for continuing upkeep and supervision.

Trail Committee or Council

A local trail committee can serve as an important governance structure to support trail management. Such a committee typically contributes to:

- Gathering community input
- Assisting with planning decisions

- Resolving conflicts between stakeholders
- Developing a long-term vision for the trail system

This collaborative approach ensures that the trail reflects community needs and remains sustainable over time.

Grant Administration

Proper legal compliance is essential for securing and maintaining funding. Trail projects often rely on state and federal grants, which require detailed documentation and adherence to regulations. This includes:

- Maintaining accurate records
- Submitting progress reports
- Ensuring compliance with applicable laws

Failure to meet these requirements can jeopardize funding eligibility. Therefore, establishing clear administrative processes is critical for the long-term success of the Marcellus trail system

Key Trail Building Planning Issues

Voluntary Landowner Participation

Trail development in Marcellus should begin by relying on voluntary cooperation with landowners. The Village is small and surrounded by private and agricultural land, so maintaining strong relationships within and nearby is more important than pushing short-term development. In a close community, trust and communication play a major role in whether a project is successful or not.

Larger connections, such as a potential Village-to-Lake route, would take lots of time, coordination, planning, and long-term trust between the Village and land owners. Building community support early, being transparent about plans, and involving residents in the process will make future planning and expansion more realistic. This approach helps avoid conflicts and concerns down the line and creates a strong foundation for long-term trail development.

Easements

Easements are one of the most realistic starting tools for trail development in Marcellus. They allow landowners to retain ownership of their land while permitting public access under clearly

defined conditions. This makes them more practical than acquiring large amounts of land, especially in a small community where property ownership and relationships are important.

Easements should clearly define how the trail will be used and maintained. Establishing these expectations early helps prevent concerns and ensures that both the Village and landowners understand their roles.

Some of the key elements of easement agreements include defining allowed uses, such as walking or biking, and hours of access, establishing maintenance responsibility, and including liability protections. Clear and well-structured agreements help avoid conflict later and also make future expansion easier.

Right of Way Use

Public right-of-way areas should also be used as a starting point for early trail development. These are areas the public already has access to, like road edges and sidewalks, that allow the Village to expand connections without needing to acquire additional land. This makes early implementation stages more achievable and very cost-effective.

Using ROWs can expand on existing sidewalks, reduce legal complications, and help build momentum for the trail system's progress. There is already a need for safer pedestrian access along M-216, where people currently walk along the roadway, creating safety concerns. The Michigan Department of Transportation is also reviewing sidewalk improvements in this area, which could be another opportunity to integrate trail development with safety improvements. This could allow the Village to improve connectivity while also addressing an existing issue.

Railways

Existing or Historic Rail Corridors

Even without an active trail project, the existing railroad corridor could be a strong long-term opportunity. Rail corridors are good because they can provide continuous, direct routes that can also support future regional connectivity. In Marcellus, this could potentially link to the broader Cass County trail system.

Keeping this option open allows the Village to adapt if ownership or use changes in the future. Even if it is not immediately usable, it should be part of long-term planning considerations.

Flat Land Potential

Marcellus is relatively flat, and rail corridors are typically built along flat terrain. This makes it even more suitable for trail development because they require less grading and are easier to build.

Flat, continuous corridors also improve accessibility, making trails more usable for people of all ages and abilities. With approximately 12.6% of residents reporting a disability, accessible design is an important thing to consider. Altogether, these factors are good for construction, accessibility, and general inclusivity for a new local trail system.



Fig. 2: Active rail line in Marcellus, which currently physically divides the village and will be considered in trail planning.

Waterfront and Drainage Corridors

Trail Opportunities

Wetlands and drainage corridors, like those near the northeastern creek, can act as natural routes for trail development if designed properly. These areas already follow natural patterns in the landscape, which greatly helps guide trail pathing and reduces the need for any big land changes.

In addition to functionality, these types of corridors can also add scenic value, making the trail more appealing for recreational use.

Public Land Adjacent to Waterways

Using publicly owned land near waterways could also provide several advantages. It is generally easier to build in these areas because there are fewer private property concerns. These corridors can also connect multiple areas and create more continuous trail segments while adding recreational and environmental value. As with any public land use, it is important to seek appropriate permits for uses of certain types of lands such as wetlands and river corridors.

Environmental Considerations

Wetlands play an important role in managing stormwater and protecting water quality, so trail planning should work around these systems so as not to disrupt them. Poorly placed/built trails can lead to erosion, drainage, and flooding issues, or worse environmental damage.

It is also important to recognize that wetlands and drainage corridors are regulated by the state. Any work done in or near these areas will likely require permits and coordination with the appropriate state agencies. Because of this, wetlands and similar corridors should be treated carefully and with proper planning before any development takes place.

Trail planning should also generally avoid critical zones that will require surveying and careful site analysis. In places where trails are near wetlands or drainage systems, buffers and other design practices should also be used to prevent erosion and maintain natural functions. Protecting these areas is very important to long-term sustainability, and the less intrusive the work done, the better.

Utility and Shared Use Corridors

Utility corridors can provide long, continuous routes for trails without requiring new land acquisition. These corridors are already set aside for infrastructure purposes, which makes them useful for connecting different areas. They can act as paths between neighborhoods and key locations while minimizing disruption to private land. However, using these corridors definitely requires coordination with utility providers to address things like safety concerns and establishing clear use agreements. They should always define things like access, safety requirements, and maintenance responsibilities. When used in the right way, utility corridors can definitely be a valuable connection and support the overall trail network.

Sewer Easements (LASA)

Existing easements associated with sewer infrastructure could also offer opportunities for trail routing. These corridors provide access across land, which can definitely also help with planning and reduce the need for new land acquisition.

Identifying and evaluating these easements early in the planning process is important. Since they restrict development and cover large areas, they can make routing more efficient and cost-effective while also helping the Village expand its trail system in a practical way.

Relevance of key Michigan Statutes

Michigan Trailways Act

The Michigan Trailways Act recognizes trails as a public benefit and supports the development of connected trail systems across the state. While some residents may not be familiar with trail

planning, this legislation helps justify trail development as a positive long-term investment for the community.

It also reinforces that trails are not just recreational features, but also support connectivity, health, and economic activity. Aligning local planning with this mindset helps strengthen the case for development and supporting long-term goals.

Recreational Use Act

The Recreational Use Act helps limit liability concerns for landowners who allow free recreational use of their land. This is especially important in a rural area like Marcellus, where many potential trail corridors involve private or agricultural land.

Clear communication and education about these limitations are essential for building trust. Landowners need to understand that their rights are protected and that participation does not expose them to unnecessary risks that might come with it. Clear communication between the Village and landowners is the most important part of maintaining positive relationships and encouraging participation.

Acquisition Methods

Trail corridors can be secured in many different ways depending on availability, opportunity, and willingness. Flexibility is important in order to take advantage of chances as they arise.

Some options include easements, land donations, purchases, or partnership agreements. Forced acquisition should be avoided at all costs in a small community setting, as it can easily hurt relationships and create long-term conflict that reflects badly on the trail plan. A gradual approach lets people work on expanding the trail system over time as funding, opportunities, and other conditions get better over time.

Maintenance and Responsibility

Maintenance planning is also very important for long-term success, and was something identified as a concern in the Master Plan survey. Without clear plans, trails can quickly fall into disarray and end up reducing usability and public support. Those types of responsibilities should be clearly defined early in the process. The Village would probably handle routine upkeep, safety checks, signage, and development, while support from Cass County, local organizations, or volunteers can help manage long-term maintenance. Not only would that help community bonding and identity, but it would also guarantee that there are no concerns from the start and continue to guarantee the safety, functionality, and maintenance of the trail system over time.

Phased Implementation

A phasing approach is the most realistic way to develop a trail system in a small community like Marcellus. It would be really difficult to start multiple projects in the system at once, so starting small or area focused and expanding in different ways over time is the way to go.

The focus should be on public right-of-ways and existing opportunities while identifying the main use corridors and communicating with landowners throughout the entire process. Early stages should also focus on starting from as central a point as possible, spreading info through connections that can immediately branch out, benefit, and support the community.

As things like funding and new opportunities become available, the system can expand and adapt to include more detailed planning instructions for larger connections and regional links. Doing this will also allow the Village to work at a healthy pace, keeping development manageable and sustainable.

Agencies and Partnerships

Local

Collaborating with the local population, as previously stated, would not only feel like a community effort, but also showcase the history that is wished to be preserved. A few of these local places may provide more help, as volunteers, with the trail. A few could also provide a variety of resources that are in need:

- Village of Marcellus
- Marcellus Township
- Marcellus Community Schools
 - Each class and/or school can create a project that would be displayed along the trail

Any local organizations or similar groups will most likely be of help with fundraising. For example, organizing group hikes, guided tours around the Village of Marcellus, etc.

County

The county and surrounding areas, Cass County, Cass County Road Commission, and Cass County Parks, may provide great resources like land use planning, planning committees, and nonprofit organizations for help with the upkeep and maintenance of the trail.

State

The following agencies are run by the state of Michigan, which provide a number of resources for the Village of Marcellus' trail plan. Each of the three departments - Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR), Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT),

and Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development (MDARD) - provides services that can be specifically geared towards the Village of Marcellus.

The first state agency is the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR). This department could help with the management of the trail, but also provides different resources regarding parks and recreation with their *Parks and Recreation Division*. This division focuses on the acquisition, development, and management of trails located on state-managed land. Another possible resource is the *Michigan Trails Advisory Council*. This council acts as a helper in facilitating trail management. In addition, the council advises both DNR and the governor's office on issues related to the trail and provides an important conduit for resident engagement.

The second state agency, Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), is in charge of the transportation systems in Michigan. This agency provides two grant programs for non-motorized vehicles. The two grants are the Transportation Alternative Program (TAP) and Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program, which are both more detailed in the "Program" section.

The third and last state agency is the Michigan Department of Agriculture & Rural Development (MDARD). This state agency provides laws about agricultural production and distribution. It ensures the safety of the environment through partnership and collaboration, and also helps promote the trail within possible farming sectors.

Environmental Considerations

The environmental setting of Marcellus plays a huge role in how a trail system should be planned and built. The Village is small and surrounded by active farmland, so the shift from residential areas to open land happens quickly. Because of this, trail planning cannot just focus on where space is available; it has to consider how the trail fits into the landscape as a whole. A well-designed trail should connect people to key places like downtown, parks, and neighborhoods, while also protecting natural systems and existing land uses. In practice, this means using corridors that already exist and avoiding areas that would require major environmental disruption.

Greenways are one of the most practical ways to approach this. Instead of creating entirely new paths, trails can follow existing features such as road right-of-ways, drainage corridors, public land, and current sidewalks. This reduces cost, limits environmental disturbance, and makes the trail easier to expand over time. Starting with internal connections within the Village, such as linking residential areas to downtown and community spaces, is the

most realistic first step. Research on trail planning consistently shows that trails are most successful when they connect places that people already go to, rather than acting as isolated recreation paths. Once these core connections are established, the system can gradually expand outward toward lakes or regional trail networks.

The railroad corridor running through Marcellus is another important factor that shapes the trail system. Because it is active and cannot be safely crossed without major infrastructure, it should be treated as a fixed boundary. Instead of trying to force connections across it, the trail should remain on one side of the Village and rely on existing road crossings where needed. This simplifies planning, reduces safety risks, and makes long-term maintenance more manageable. Constraints like this are common in trail planning, and working with them instead of against them usually leads to a more practical and achievable design.

Water and drainage are some of the most important environmental considerations in any trail plan. In Marcellus, drainage patterns are influenced by farmland, roads, and low-lying areas, which means some corridors may look ideal for trails but come with hidden challenges. Trails should avoid wetlands and flood-prone areas whenever possible, since these areas are both environmentally sensitive and costly to develop. Best practices emphasize that avoiding wetlands entirely is the most effective way to prevent long-term erosion and maintenance issues. When crossings are unavoidable, they should be placed in the narrowest and most stable locations, using features like boardwalks or reinforced surfaces.

In addition, trail design should follow natural drainage patterns rather than disrupt them. Poorly designed trails can collect water or divert it, leading to erosion and long-term damage. Sustainable trail design focuses on keeping water off the trail surface by using proper grading, permeable materials, and vegetation buffers. If water is managed correctly from the start, the trail will require far less maintenance over time and will have a much smaller environmental impact. These design choices are especially important in rural areas where drainage systems are closely tied to agricultural use.

Agricultural land surrounding Marcellus also needs to be prioritized in the planning process. Trails should not cut through active farmland, as this can interfere with crop production, create safety issues, and damage relationships with landowners. Instead, trails should follow field edges and maintain buffer zones between users and crops. This approach protects soil quality, reduces conflict, and keeps farm operations running normally. Construction practices should also avoid compacting soil or disrupting drainage, since even small changes can affect productivity. Respecting agriculture as a working landscape is essential if the project is going to gain long-term community support.



Fig. 3: Example of a trail placed along the edge of farmland, allowing public use while keeping a safe distance from crops and farm operations.

One advantage Marcellus does have is its relatively flat terrain. This makes trail construction easier and allows for a more accessible design from the beginning. Flat terrain reduces the need for major grading and helps minimize environmental disturbance during construction. It also makes it easier to create trails that can be used by a wider range of people, including those using wheelchairs, strollers, or bikes. Design should still prioritize smooth surfaces, consistent widths, and clear sightlines, but the natural landscape already supports these goals.

Finally, the trail system creates an opportunity to incorporate green infrastructure into the Village. This includes things like planting native vegetation, adding pollinator-friendly areas, and using natural features to manage stormwater. These elements are not just aesthetic; they help stabilize soil, improve water quality, and support local ecosystems. Trail systems that include these features tend to be more resilient and require less long-term maintenance, especially as weather patterns become less predictable. Over time, this allows the trail to function as both a recreational space and an environmental asset for the community.

Green Infrastructure Opportunities

The trail system presents an opportunity to incorporate green infrastructure principles, including:

- Native plant buffers along corridors
- Pollinator-friendly plantings
- Stormwater infiltration features
- Tree canopy expansion for shade and heat reduction

By integrating environmental enhancements into the trail system, Marcellus can create a corridor that functions as both recreational infrastructure and ecological support.

Planning Issues—Protecting Property Rights

What Needs to Be Looked at First

Before any trail development begins, the Village of Marcellus must first identify and understand what parcels fall along potential trail corridors. The Master Plan emphasizes a strong interest in expanding walking trails and exploring possible Village-to-Lake connections. Having a goal early makes mapping and analysis an easier but still very important first step. This will allow the Village to determine where trails are implementable and where potential conflicts or constraints may exist.

This includes identifying land ownership, land use, and physical or environmental limitations. Parcels should be categorized within groups like residential, agricultural, or publicly owned, while also keeping track of areas of active farmland and sensitive land features like wetlands. Publicly owned land like parks, right of ways, and municipal property should also be prioritized in early phases because it allows the Village to begin building connections earlier without requiring additional agreements or land acquisition.

Because Marcellus is a small community (approximately 0.7 square miles) and is surrounded by agricultural land, these mapping decisions are even more important. Even small adjustments in where a trail is placed and developed can help avoid conflicts with private property and reduce impacts on landowners. Taking the time to understand these conditions early will allow people to make more informed decisions and help prevent issues later in the planning and implementation process.

Agricultural Constraints

Agriculture is one of the dominant land uses surrounding Marcellus, and trail planning must be designed to coexist with those nearby operations. Trails that interfere with crop production or equipment movement can create safety concerns and long-term conflicts, making it important to plan routes carefully.

Trail alignments should also follow field edges or natural boundaries whenever possible, instead of cutting through active farmland. Planners should also consider drainage patterns and wetlands, which are very common in agricultural landscapes and in SW Michigan in general, and can affect both trail stability and farm/land use. Maintaining clear access route information for farm equipment is essential, as it's necessary for daily operations.

Seasonal conditions must also be considered. During certain times of the year, it may not be practical to go to certain areas. Farming is a great example, with pesticide spraying or general activities that may limit use. Avoiding agricultural land or building surrounding alternate routes around buffers with similar approaches is also important. Being flexible with people involved is the number one priority when developing trails with the goal of long-term success and expansion.

Residential Concerns

While there is strong community interest in expanding trail systems, residents also have justified concerns about privacy, safety, and how trails may affect nearby homes. Addressing these concerns early in the planning process is also going to be important when gaining support for the plan. Homes and residential areas located near trail corridors have to be navigated carefully as well. Landscape management, spacing, and other conditions are all things to consider when determining where land/buffer changes might be needed.

For a community like Marcellus, these concerns carry a lot of weight. Thoughtful planning and clear communication will almost always make sure that trails are seen as a benefit rather than a disruption. It is important to take careful note of potential concerns like those to guarantee any success.

Design Considerations

Trail designs in Marcellus should prioritize safety, accessibility, and long-term usability while staying consistent with the goals of the Village. The Master Plan emphasizes accessibility being a priority, and with roughly 12.6% of residents reporting a disability, the trail system should be designed to be friendly for everyone to use. Given Marcellus' relatively flat landscape, an accessible design is definitely achievable. Trails should use smooth, stable surfaces wherever possible, as well as minimize slopes and adjust trail width depending on surrounding land use and space. Another of the most important parts of design is signage. Thorough signage is important and should be included everywhere from trail entry points, checkpoint/guide markers, directional markers, distance guides, and whatever else may be necessary to help people understand the trail system.

Safety should be a main focus throughout the design process. Trails need to be easy to see and navigate, so maintaining clear sightlines is important, along with designing safe

crossings where trails interact with roads or other high-traffic areas. Lighting should also be added wherever needed, especially in areas that may be used more frequently. However, it is important to note that it should not be excessive or intrusive to nearby residents.

Maintenance should also be considered during the design phase. Trails that are designed well from the start are easier to maintain and are more likely to stay safe and usable over time. One of the biggest parts of taking care of trails is that they are ever-changing, and even maintenance plans have to be adaptable and carefully done. Doing so early helps reinforce a trail system that people can understand, trust, and use consistently without confusion or safety concerns.

Land acquisition/management considerations

From a legal standpoint, trail development in Marcellus should focus on using easements instead of full land acquisition whenever possible. Easements allow landowners to keep ownership of their property while still allowing public access under agreed conditions, which makes them a more realistic and cooperative option in a small community. It is a smart financial decision and helps keep development minimally intrusive.

Clear agreements are also very important when working with landowners. Like the approach to easements, agreements should outline what the trail will be used for, who is responsible for maintenance, and how any concerns or issues will be handled. Setting these expectations early also helps avoid confusion and builds trust between all parties involved.

Michigan law also provides liability protections for landowners who allow free recreational use of their land. A lot of people may not fully understand this, so clearly explaining these protections during outreach is important. Doing this can help reduce concerns and make landowners more open to participation. Taking the slow implementation path, where trails are built gradually as opportunities come up, also makes the process more manageable and realistic for the Village.

Community Impact

Trail development can bring real benefits to the Village of Marcellus, especially when the focus is on practical and realistic outcomes. Trails can improve walkability, make it safer to get to parks and downtown areas, strengthen community identity, and support future connections to nearby areas. In a small community like Marcellus, even small improvements can make a noticeable difference. Better connections between places can change how people move around and interact with the Village on a daily basis. Trails can also encourage outdoor activity and give people more opportunities to use local spaces. The main goal is to improve the overall quality of life by making movement around the Village safer, easier, and more accessible for everyone.



Fig. 4: Community Building in Marcellus, Michigan. Early public spaces like this played an important role in shaping community life and continue to reflect the Village's identity today.

Branding and Identity (with Points of Interest)

Creating a clear identity for the trail system helps make it feel like a defined and important part of the Village. This can include having a consistent name, signage, and design style that reflects the character and history of Marcellus. A strong identity like that makes the trail easier to recognize, understand, and use, while also helping build community pride.

Adding points of interest along the trail can make it more engaging and meaningful. Places like Wood Memorial Library can act as starting points or information hubs, while downtown and Main Street provide access to local businesses and activity. Parks like Ray Gyllstrom Park and Village Commons serve as key gathering spaces, and the historic railroad corridor adds context to the Village's development.

Other features, like the Underground Railroad connections, natural areas like creeks and wetlands, and local schools, help connect the trail to both the environment and the community. Including these elements helps turn the trail into more than just a path and makes it something that represents Marcellus as a whole.

Trail Development and Funding

Developing a trail system in Marcellus will require a phased and realistic funding approach. Because the Village is small and has limited financial capacity, it is not practical to plan for a full trail system all at once. Instead, the most effective strategy is to start with smaller, clearly defined projects and build momentum over time. This approach reduces financial risk, allows the community to see early success, and makes future grant applications more competitive. Many successful trail systems in Michigan have followed this model, starting with short segments and expanding as funding and support increase.

One of the most accessible starting points for Marcellus is the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) Recreation Passport Grant Program. This program is designed to support local recreation projects and is well-suited for early-phase trail development within the Village. Funding from this program could be used to construct a small trail segment that connects existing sidewalks or to create a loop linking downtown, parks, and nearby neighborhoods. Projects that improve public access and demonstrate community benefit tend to be more competitive, so focusing on a clearly defined and widely used route will strengthen the application. Including features like signage, accessibility improvements, and trailheads can also increase the overall value of the project.

As the trail system begins to expand, the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP), administered through the Michigan Department of Transportation, becomes a strong funding option. Unlike recreation-focused grants, TAP is centered on transportation and safety. This makes it especially relevant in Marcellus, where there is already a need for safer pedestrian movement along road corridors such as M-216. If the trail is framed as a way to connect residents to schools, downtown, and local services, rather than just recreation, it is more likely to qualify for this type of funding. TAP can support shared-use paths, intersection improvements, and ADA-compliant infrastructure, all of which align with the Village's goals for walkability and safety.

Safe Routes to School is another program that could play a role if the trail system connects to Marcellus Community Schools. This program focuses specifically on improving safety for students walking or biking to school. Even a relatively short trail segment that reduces the need for students to walk along busy roads could qualify for funding. In addition to construction, the program can also support signage, crosswalk improvements, and education initiatives that promote safe travel. Coordinating with school administrators early in the planning process would be important for pursuing this opportunity.

For longer-term expansion, the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund provides a larger but more competitive source of funding. This program can support both land acquisition and major recreational development projects, making it a good option for securing trail corridors or

building more substantial infrastructure. However, it typically requires matching funds and detailed planning, so it is better suited for later phases once the trail alignment is clearly established. Communities that have already completed smaller projects and demonstrated success are generally in a stronger position to receive Trust Fund support.

Putting these programs together, a phased funding strategy becomes clear. The first phase should focus on building a short, high-use trail segment within the Village using Recreation Passport or TAP funding. This creates a visible and functional starting point that the community can use and support. The second phase can expand the trail by extending corridors and improving connections, potentially using additional TAP funding or securing easements along key routes. The final phase would focus on larger-scale expansion, including potential regional connections, supported by programs like the Trust Fund.

This step-by-step approach is important not just for funding, but for long-term success. Trail projects that try to do too much at once often struggle to maintain momentum, while smaller, well-executed projects tend to build stronger community support. Over time, this also makes it easier to secure additional funding, since grant programs often prioritize projects with proven impact and clear planning. By starting with realistic goals and expanding gradually, Marcellus can develop a trail system that is both financially sustainable and widely used by the community.

Community Engagement and Economic Impact

Businesses

Working with local businesses brings more visitors into the Village and supports local businesses through increased foot traffic. Local restaurants and diners like Big Tony's Pizzeria, Wakey Jake's, Amy's Fabulous Diner could help facilitate this. Retail and specialty shops like Enchanted Gardens, and Mertastic Treasures, could help bring in the additional foot traffic due to Marcellus' variety of locations that it has to offer. Bringing in local businesses, even if there are few, could help make a noticeable difference in a community like Marcellus and can most likely have a positive impact on property values.

Connectivity

Having and establishing a connection with the already existing population around Marcellus would best benefit the trail production for not only volunteers, but to help with the continuing effort of adding onto the already existing history that is embedded within the village. Here are some options and/or opportunities for others to get involved:

- Community connections
 - Schools
 - Local business owners
 - Recreational clubs
 - Environmentalists
 - Volunteers
- Safe non-motorized movement
 - Biking
 - Walking/hiking
 - Skating

The Village of Marcellus could also consider looking towards the Michigan Trails Advisory Council for more engagement from the community. This council takes public comment quarterly and makes recommendations to help tune the state’s motorized and non-motorized trail system.

Regional Connectivity

The first connectivity deliverable should be a small, legible heritage loop within the village that connects meaningful destinations: historic downtown blocks, civic buildings, parks, and school-related routes, so the trail experience has a coherent narrative structure.

The walkability analysis and parks location map you provided support this approach by showing that multiple high-value destinations are clustered within a compact village footprint. (In your final plan, place the maps early in the Regional Connectivity section so the loop concept is visually clear to the reader.)

A recommended heritage-loop concept is to anchor the loop at the library (as the interpretive “trailhead”), then route users through downtown and outward to parks, returning through a second corridor to create a complete circuit. This design supports walking and biking for both residents and visitors while also distributing economic foot traffic across downtown. The village’s own planning documents emphasize downtown improvement and preservation as a combined goal—exactly the kind of synergy heritage loops are designed to support.

Core loop destination nodes (examples to map onto the final alignment):

- Columbian Park

- Ray Gyllstrom Memorial Park
- Steven's Park
- The Village Commons (as a central open-space/social node shown on the parks map)
- Downtown Main Street blocks are the “heritage spine,” tied to railroad and commerce interpretation

This loop should be designed so that users constantly encounter either (a) a destination, (b) a decision point with wayfinding, or (c) an interpretive moment. That is what prevents the trail from feeling like it connects “random places.”

Regional connections and phased growth

A connectivity strategy should explicitly identify where the loop could grow and what partnerships/policies would be required for each step.

Regional context and nearby communities

The village master plan provides regional orientation: Marcellus is accessible via M-40 (north–south) and M-216 (east–west), and it is located roughly 17 miles east of Dowagiac, about 53 miles southwest of Battle Creek, and about 75 miles south of Grand Rapids.

This matters because it anchors a realistic “regional day-trip” market and supports phased trail expansion as funding allows.

County and regional trail network priorities

The 2020 Southwest Region Nonmotorized Plan identifies Cass County priorities and corridor gaps, including:

The M-60 corridor is a multi-community connector passing through Dowagiac, Cassopolis, and Vandalia.

An “Airline Trail” concept is being investigated by the county parks department as a separated nonmotorized facility using the M-60 corridor and potentially an abandoned railroad corridor.

On-road network priorities that explicitly include the “Marcellus Highway (Dowagiac to Marcellus)” - a direct statement that regional planning sees Marcellus as part of a larger county network.

Phased growth strategy

Phase 1: Build the village heritage loop. Focus on the highest-return connections among downtown, parks, and civic buildings shown in your parks and walkability maps. Pair this with

immediate heritage signage and a “start here” kiosk at the library. This phase produces a complete, meaningful experience even before any regional expansion occurs.

Phase 2: Connect the loop to education corridors. The master plan explicitly identifies ongoing efforts to connect the western portion of the village to the school complex via sidewalks, and it describes Safe Routes to School as the framework for safer walking/biking, including MDOT-supported infrastructure grants (sidewalks, crosswalks, and related improvements).

The trail plan should treat this as an early “spoke” from the loop, not optional, because student mobility is both a safety outcome and a long-term user base.

Phase 3: Extend toward regional destinations using corridor opportunities. Two corridor types are especially relevant to a small village that must stretch its limited funding:

Active rail adjacency (rail-with-trail) where feasible, using best practices around separation, fencing, and safety agreements. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy defines rails-with-trails as public paths that run parallel to active rail, describes them as tools for building safe connections where right-of-way is constrained, and emphasizes that design practices (including fencing and controlled crossings) can reduce safety risks.

Utility and easement corridors where rights-of-way already exist. The master plan documents that the village maintains an agreement with the Lakes Area Sewer Authority for backup/regional wastewater treatment and holds a defined share of system capacity—evidence of existing inter-jurisdictional infrastructure relationships that may come with mapped easements.

Library as the interpretive and navigation hub

The village master plan identifies the library location (205 E. Main Street) and notes reciprocal borrowing agreements with the Cass District Library and the Van Buren District Library—a practical example of how Marcellus already participates in a regional service network.

This makes the library a natural “trailhead” location for: printed maps, interpretive brochures, audio-tour QR codes, and rotating exhibits tied to heritage stops.

Jobs and economic-development connectivity

Regional connectivity is not only about recreation; it is also about connecting people to employment and strengthening the local service economy. Michigan state press releases document major investment in the Southwest Michigan Advanced Research and Technology Park (SMART Park), including infrastructure funding intended to support business growth and job creation.

Trail economics research published through Rails-to-Trails documents that trail development can drive economic activity but requires proactive planning to manage demand, support small business success, and align land/building needs with anticipated growth.

For Marcellus, this supports a practical recommendation: position the heritage loop as a “downtown front door,” then connect outward to regional employment and heritage destinations as phase funding allows—rather than building disconnected segments that never become a complete system.

Next Steps and Key Considerations

Parcels and Routing

What parcels fall along the most feasible potential trail corridors? Identifying land ownership and land use early will help determine where trails can realistically be developed and where constraints may exist.

Are there any priority corridors already identified by the Village or Township? The Parks Master Plan doesn’t fully address it, so understanding existing plans or preferences can help the trail goals.

Stormwater and Environmental Design

What types of stormwater infiltration features (e.g., bioswales, permeable surfaces) would be appropriate for trail development in Marcellus? Proper stormwater management will be important for preventing erosion, maintaining trail stability, and protecting surrounding land and water systems.

Street Crossings and Safety

Example: If the trail begins at the Marcellus Township Library, crossings will be required. Are street crossings permitted with proper design, or should they be avoided whenever possible? Clarifying concerns will help with safe route designs and make sure signage, visibility, and crossing treatments are used when necessary.

Allowed Uses

What types of uses are permitted on Village trails (walking, biking, etc.)? Defining intended uses will help guide trail design, including things like width and surface materials.

Are motorized uses (e.g., ATVs, side-by-sides, minibikes, golf carts) prohibited? These types of uses will impact safety, maintenance, and overall experiences for everyone.

If uses are restricted, who would be responsible for monitoring and enforcement? Establishing responsibility for liability sake early helps make sure rules are clear and consistently enforced.

Safety and Crime

Is there any available data or local insight regarding safety or crime associated with trails in similar communities? Surveying residents and people nearby will help with awareness and understanding this, which can help address community concerns and guide design decisions that promote visibility and safe use.

What measures would the Village consider to maintain safety (lighting, visibility, community oversight)?

Planning for safety early will improve public confidence and long-term success of the trail system.

Seasonal Use

Example: Would cross-country skiing or other winter uses be permitted on trails? Figuring out safety is important, especially with seasonal activities that can increase community engagement and use of trails.

Property Ownership and Access

Example: Who owns key potential corridor areas such as Black Cat Alley? Like the concern with parcels, figuring out ownership is important for finding out feasibility and access agreements.

Are there existing easements or access agreements in these locations?

Existing agreements could make implementation easy and reduce the need for new ones.

Regional Connections (Marcellus to Cassopolis)

What opportunities exist to connect to nearby destinations such as the VFW Museum, Swiss Valley, Little Fish Lake, Donnell Lake, and Dr. T.K. Lawless Park?

Identifying long term connections can help guide expansion and strengthen regional connectivity.

Are there existing or planned routes that could support these connections?

Working with nearby communities and assets can improve feasibility and long-term success.

Cassopolis (18 miles from Marcellus) is feasible, it'll just take time to get there.

Legal Disclaimer—This plan does not convey specific legal advice only recommendations for the community leaders to consider thoughtfully. Any recommendations made by this plan should be thoroughly discussed by local planning and legal officials.

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