

# V • I • S • I • O • N • S

## Newsletter of McLean County Regional Planning Commission

### Message from the Chairman and Executive Director

In recognition of the silver anniversary of our community's most popular linear park, this issue of VISIONS is dedicated to talking about the past, present and the future of bicycle planning in Bloomington-Normal and McLean County.

Twenty-five years ago, well before dedicated multi-use trails were a common feature, Bloomington and Normal came together to build Constitutional Trail. It wasn't an easy decision for the policy makers at the time, yet today it is one of the urban area's most utilized and popular amenities.

Feel free to contact us with any questions or comments in regards to this or other commission business.

*George R Benjamin*

George Benjamin  
Chairman

*P. Vasudha*

Vasudha Pinnamaraju, AICP  
Executive Director

## A HISTORY OF CONSTITUTION TRAIL

One of Bloomington-Normal's most popular attractions turns 25 in May. Constitution Trail, a joint venture between the City of Bloomington and the Town of Normal, will be celebrating its silver anniversary on May 10. This popular linear park had its grand opening in May of 1989 with only 4.5 miles of trail. Since then, this park has grown nearly ten times to its current length of 37 miles and attracts thousands of local residents and visitors annually. This article will provide the highlights in the trail planning and development for the past 25 years.

The concept of this linear park in the Twin Cities originated in 1982 when Illinois Central Gulf Railroad (ICGR) announced their intent to abandon sections of their rail lines in Bloomington-Normal

region. Around the same time, the rails to trails movement was gaining traction nationally.

Bloomington and Normal looked at the proposed ICGR abandonment as an opportunity for the communities to develop it as a thoroughfare. The rail line was officially abandoned in late 1983.

In 1986, Bloomington and Normal officials proposed plans to develop a biking and hiking trail that would use the right-of-way of the abandoned line. The trail plans spanned eight miles from Vernon Avenue on the north and Chestnut Street on the south along the abandoned tracks as well as City streets in the Twin Cities. These plans also included looping the trail through Ewing Park on the Bloomington-Normal boundary



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and Underwood Park in Normal.

With limited support from the public, the Town and the City councils agreed to pursue grant opportunities to acquire the right-of-way.

During the summer of 1986, the Town purchased nearly 30 acres of ICGR right-of-way for \$89,000, and the City agreed to buy 26 acres for \$60,000. An additional \$450,000 was contributed to the overall purchases from the "Build Illinois" bond program.

The Twin Cities set funds aside for trail design and purchase of additional right-of-way from private property owners acquired from ICGR. On September 17, 1987, the City and the Town officially named the trail "Constitution Trail" in honor and celebration of the 200th anniversary of the United States Constitution.

About the same time, estimates for the total cost of the trail increased from \$450,000 to \$638,000. State funds and local funds such as capital improvement, parkland dedication, and general funds were all used to fund those costs. Extensions of the trail were reconsidered. In May of 1987, a site plan for the trail was approved and bid out jointly by the Town and the City.

In August of 1988, the construction bids came back \$100,000 over the revised estimates. The Town of Normal shouldered a major portion of the increase, as the majority of the proposed trail was in Nor-

*The Constitution Trail was officially dedicated and named on September 17, 1987, in celebration of the 200th anniversary of the United States Constitution.*

mal. As the community voiced concerns over the use of additional funds for this project, town fathers assured them this would be the last time the municipality would pick up any added expenses for trail construction beyond original bids.

On May 6, 1989, the trail had its grand opening with a ribbon cutting and other activities. Friends of the Constitution Trail became the official advocate organization for the trail and its development. Former Alderman Hugh Atwood is credit-

ed with getting the organization started and fondly referred to as the "Father of the Constitution Trail." He was subsequently recognized as the "First Designated Fellow of the Constitution Trail" by Bloomington Major Jesse Smart and honored at the ground breaking ceremony of the "Atwood Station" for his extensive contributions to the Constitution Trail planning and development.

Over the next couple of years, several expansions of the trail were proposed including expansion of the trail to Lake Bloomington and Evergreen Lake. In 1992, the City applied for nearly \$80,000 in state grants for this expansion, half of that to be spent on right-of-way acquisition from Conrail.

In 1993, Bloomington received \$200,000 as part of the statewide efforts for bike path

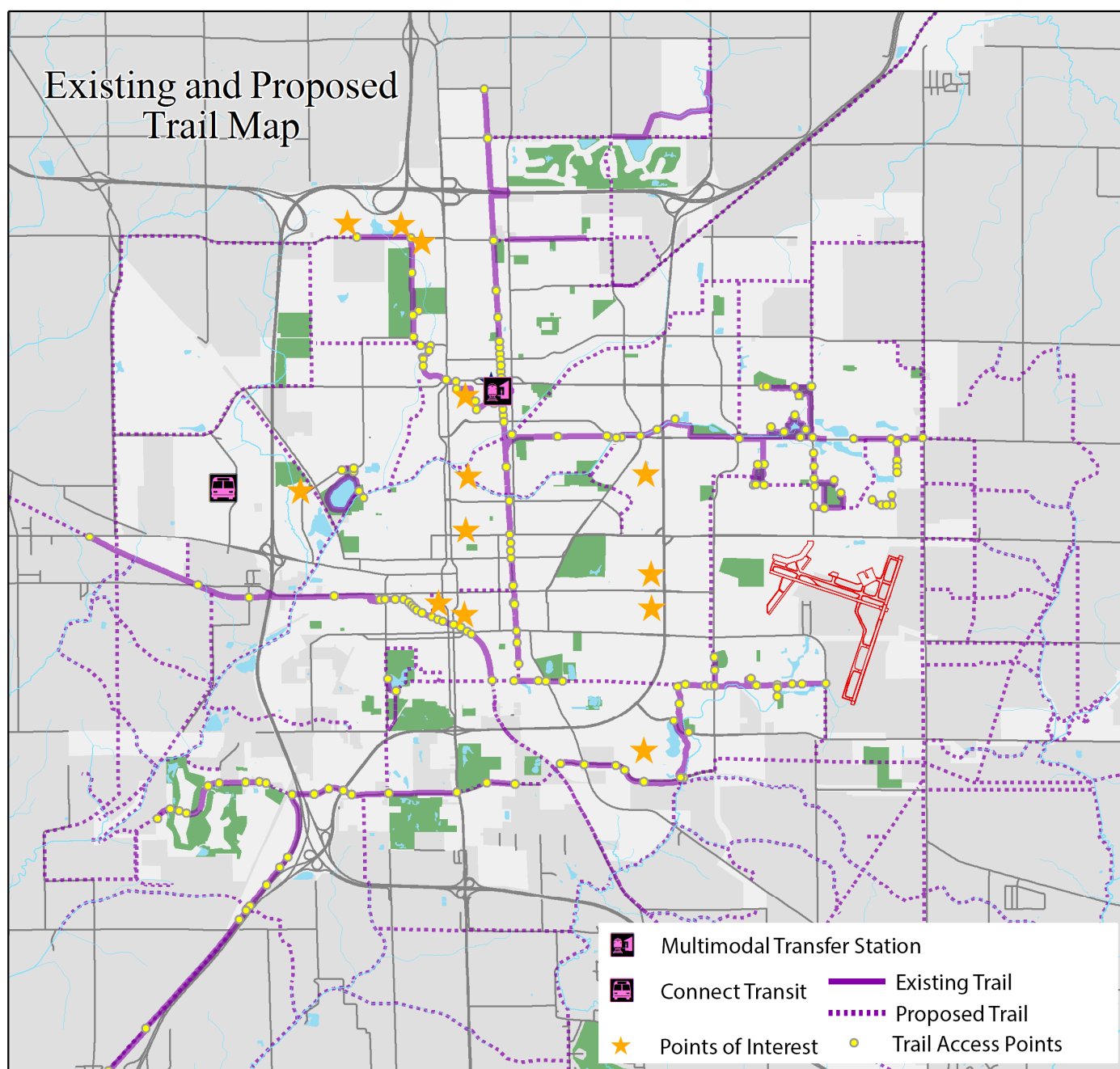


expansion. These funds assisted with expansion of the trail on the south and southwest sides of Bloomington. A 4.4 mile extension along Hamilton Road to Bunn Street helped connect State Farm South Campus with the existing trail. State Farm agreed to add 2.2 miles of trail through its property for additional connectivity.

In May of 1994, the status of Camelback Bridge in Normal took center stage. Options considered included renovation of the bridge at its present location, closing the bridge to vehicular traffic, moving the bridge and replacing it with the modern structure, or demolishing the bridge and replacing it. The Town of Normal Historic Preser-

vation Commission and the Town Council voted to leave it in its original location and repair it.

Later that summer, plans were made to expand the trail 20 miles over the next five years. The expansions included stretching the trail from the intersection of Hershey Road and Lincoln Street east towards the







Old Farm Lakes subdivision and from the intersection of Lincoln and Arcadia Drive south to Ireland Grove Road.

State Farm Insurance’s contribution to the trail on its property neared completion in 1995. Also that year another expansion was planned to extend the trail along G.E. Road in Bloomington. Normal planned extensions along the Norfolk and Southern Railroad line parallel to Linden Street as well as a loop around what was then Diamond Star Motor Corporation (now Mitsubishi Motor Manufacturing). That year the Town of Normal received a grant of nearly \$126,000 from the Illinois Department of Conservation. These dollars were used for the acquisition of 3.75 miles of right-of-way from Southern Pacific Railroad for a planned trail expansion from the town hall north to Northtown and Kerrick Road. This segment was completed in 1996.

In October of that year, Mitsubishi Motor Manufacturing of America donated \$50,000 to the Friends of Constitution Trail

in celebration of the car manufacturer producing its one millionth vehicle.

Over the next two years, the metropolitan-wide linear park saw major extensions with additions adjacent to the Amtrak station in Normal and extensions into north Normal, as well as extensions along G. E. Road in Bloomington to Airport Road. Other amenities were added along the trail, including the Sister Cities Gardens and the Hidden Creek Natural Area.

In 2000, the trail was given a national Millennium Trail designation by the White House Millennium Council, U.S. Department of Transportation, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and National Endowment for the Arts.

A small trail access point was built in 2001 connecting the trail from North Veterans Parkway underpass to G.E. Road. Two smaller extensions were also constructed in the Eagle View Subdivision in far east Bloomington in 2002.

The trail began winding its way from the urban center to the

further reaches of the metro area in earnest about this time. The longest continuous extension of the trail during this period occurred in 2002 when Constitution Trail was built from Evans Street in south-central Bloomington through southwest neighborhoods to West Washington Street past the old Amtrak station in Bloomington. This extension eventually connected to Route 9 West approximately a quarter mile past Mitsubishi Motorway.

Most of the other extensions were done piecemeal when funds for trail extensions became available. The trail was extended along Lincoln Street at various points from 2001 to 2009. Additions were made along the “Atwood Wayside” portion of the trail from 2003 through 2010 which were made from the Old Jefferson Street neighborhoods to Croxton Avenue from 2003 to 2010.

From 2003 through 2005, the trail was extended in the Fox Creek Road area in southwest Bloomington, and from 2007 to 2011, along West Hamilton

Road. Extensions to eastside subdivisions also occurred during the period with Tipton Trails (2002), Eagle View and the Grove Subdivision on Ireland Grove Road (2012).

The Town of Normal added extensions around Fairview Park and Heartland Community College in 2006, and extended the trail through Uptown in 2012. That same year, a short portion of trail was constructed from Airport Road to Raab Road to Normal Community High School to encourage walking and biking to the high school. The Town finished portions of the trail in far north Normal at Northtown Road in 2008 and 2012.

Today, the length of the trail is more than 37 miles and can be accessed at numerous locations within the metropolitan area. Constitution Trail remains one of the urban area’s most utilized and popular amenities.

*Special thanks to Mercy Davison, Town Planner at the Town of Normal and the Pantagraph for providing much of the information that was used in this article.*

### Renewing Route 66

U.S. Route 66, that most iconic American highway, has been woven through the fabric of McLean County for nearly ninety years, linking our communities to the wider world of Illinois and the nation, and to the emergence of the 20<sup>th</sup> century fascination with the open road. Inevitably over that long life, times and needs have changed, and the “Mother Road” has been changed as well. Longtime residents of our area recall the gradual remaking of Route 66, as it was first the foundation for the construction of Interstate 55, and then was set aside as interstate interchanges were built.

Those years of transition returned the smaller towns along Route 66 to the slower, quieter pace of earlier days. The diversion of highway traffic away from the center of towns also created

economic challenges for the many businesses developed to serve the travelers and tourists from the heyday of Route 66.

Still, despite the decades of transition, the surviving sections of Route 66 continue to link communities across McLean County, and continue to provide economic opportunities as a renewed appreciation for the historic

and cultural significance of the road has grown.

Finding uses for the remnants of the highway led to new avenues for cooperative planning and implementation between McLean County and the municipalities connected by

Route 66. For fifteen years, a consortium of local governments has been working with the State of Illinois to build our County’s portion of a state-wide project to cross Illinois from Chicago to St. Louis with the Historic Route 66 Bike

Trail.



In 1999, Bloomington, Chenoa, Lexington, McLean, Normal, Towanda and McLean County agreed to cooperate on the construction of the Route 66 Historic Bikeway, sharing the costs with the Illinois Departments of Transportation (IDOT) and Natural Resources (IDNR). Federal grants awarded under the Illinois Transportation Enhancement Program (ITEP) continue to provide much of the funding for the multiple phases of the project. IDNR has also provided support. The participating local governments contribute matching funding at rates

proportional to their populations.

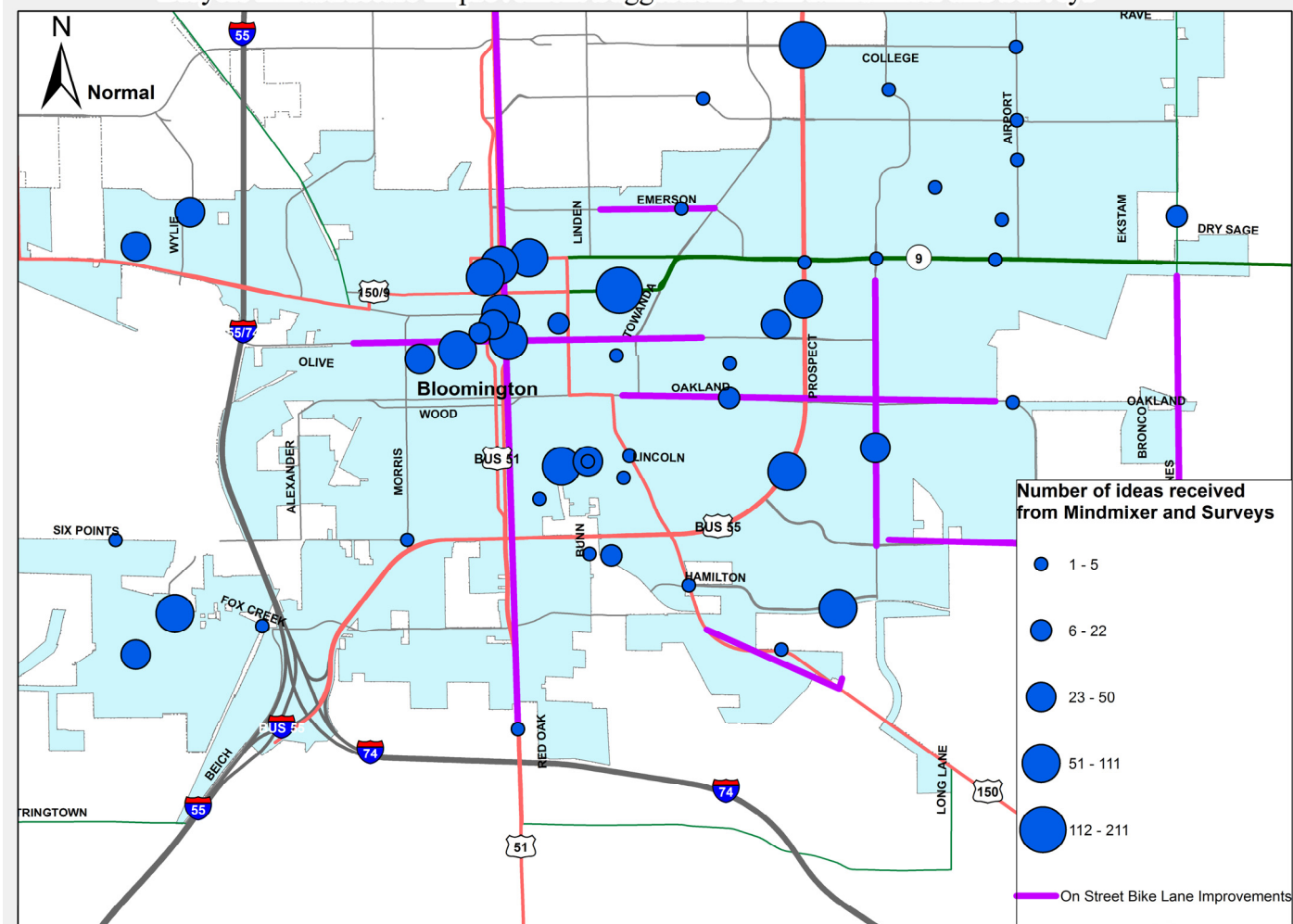
In addition to their joint efforts, some of the local governments have built trails that draw from local interests. In Bloomington-Normal, the 25-year development of the Constitution Trail provides the urban area link for the Route 66 Historic Bikeway. Both Lexington and Chenoa have constructed trail sections that provide connections through their communities.

Earlier this year, McLean County was awarded \$800,000

from the latest round of ITEP funding, for the construction of the new section of the Bikeway, which will extend from northeast Normal towards Towanda. County Engineer Eric Schmitt noted that construction was originally expected this year, but will now take place in 2015. The County is working with IDOT staff and others to clarify details of the construction plans. IDOT will assist in determining the final design details that will integrate the Bikeway in Towanda with railroad work be-



City of Bloomington Bicycle Plan  
Bicycle Infrastructure Improvement Suggestions from Mindmixer and Surveys



ing done to accommodate high speed rail service.

Grants to fund future construction are pending. If this funding is made available, construction of Bikeway sections connecting Towanda and Lexington may be possible in late 2015, or in 2016. Over that two-year period, these phases of construction would add 11.2 miles of completed trail to the roughly 15 miles already built by the County and several of the municipalities, including Constitution Trail and the Chenoa and Lexington trails.

Engineering and design work is still needed for some sections of the Bikeway, including connections to the Livingston and Logan county lines, and the link between Lexington and Chenoa. Engineering is complete for other sections, which will connect McLean, Funk's Grove and Shirley. These additions to the Bikeway will add nearly 20 miles of trail to the completed project.

Although time, patience and funding are needed to complete the County-wide Route 66 Historic Bikeway as planned, the trail as it exists today is ready to be enjoyed. In those areas where Bikeway construction is still pending, the League of Illinois Bicyclists has published guides to bicycle routes using local roads, which are available through MCRPC, or online at <http://www.bikelib.org/maps-and-rides/route-guides/route-66-trail/>.

## City of Bloomington Bike Plan

The City of Bloomington is embarking on creating a bicycling master plan for the entire city. The goal of this plan is to help guide bicycling infrastructure investments to achieve the greatest results with limited funding.

The planning efforts are led by the League of Illinois Bicyclists (LIB). LIB is a statewide advocacy organization that promotes bicycle access, education and safety across the state. McLean County Regional Planning Commission (MCRPC) is supporting the LIB and the City's bike planning efforts through enhanced public outreach campaign.

As part of this campaign, a survey was sent to Bloomington residents in their water bills. An online tool, Mindmixer, was also deployed to foster conversations on the topic along with an interactive workshop led by LIB.

Over 1,000 people have participated to date. About 275 people actively engaged in the online conversation, approximately 670 responded to the surveys and 80 residents attended the interactive workshop.

Information gathered through these different forums include personal biking habits, biking-related infrastructure issues and ideas to make Bloomington a bike friendly community.

Nearly 52% of all the ideas submitted emphasized the need for bicycle-related infrastructure improvements, such as completing the missing links in the Con-

stitution Trail network and improving the bike-related infrastructure on the streets. The map on page six illustrates the volume of ideas for specific improvements. The three most popular ideas emphasized safety near Veterans Parkway, improved access to Bloomington High School, and Constitution Trail connectivity.

Over 27% of all ideas emphasized safety for bikes on Bloomington streets as a concern. Suggestions to improve safety included installing bike signage and educating the motorists on sharing the streets. Safety concerns were tied with education concerns. Nearly 7% of respondents emphasized the need for educating both cyclists and motorists on rules of the road.

About 12% of the ideas submitted want the City to focus more on improving the existing infrastructure for motorists. A majority of these respondents suggested fixing the pot holes on streets.

Less than 8% of all ideas suggested implementation of various bike-related programs such as bike sharing and improving parking lots to accommodate bikes.

If you have not submitted your ideas yet, please feel free to do so via [Bloomingtonil.mindmixer.com](http://Bloomingtonil.mindmixer.com). LIB expects to have a preliminary draft of the bicycle master plan by Fall 2014. Once available, this plan will be posted on the City and MCRPC's website for further input. ♦

This publication presents information on planning and development issues that impact the quality of life in the Community of McLean County. We can be reached by mail at 115 E. Washington St. #M103, Bloomington, IL 61701, by phone at (309) 828-4331, by fax at (309) 827-4773, or by e-mail at [MCRPC@mcplan.org](mailto:MCRPC@mcplan.org).

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#### **VISIONS**

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## **Celebration Planned for Constitution Trail Anniversary**

The Constitution Trail is 25 years old in May and plans for the celebration are in the works.

The festivities will be from 10:30 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. on Saturday, May 10 at the Connie Link Amphitheatre in Normal. The venue is located adjacent to the old Normal Annex building off of Linden Street. The event will feature dignitaries, organizational information booths, and various other activities, including trail walks and rides.

The City of Bloomington, Town of Normal, Friends of Constitution Trail, Lake Run Club, McLean County Wheelers and Bike BloNo are sponsoring the event. A new way-finding logo will be unveiled at the celebration. The logo will be used along the entire length of the trail, which stretches approximately 37 miles.

The most recent additions of the trail include a half-mile extension from Kerrick to Ziebarth Roads, an extension from Airport Road to Normal Community High School and a mile extension from west of Linden Street to Northbridge.