

Creating a trail of learning

Institute works to open wetland path by fall

By **HEIDI DESCH**
Whitefish Pilot

Wandering through the Averill's Viking Creek Wetland Preserve can be challenging in spots with no trail as one jumps mud puddles and steps over small logs. However, the work becomes worth it when you hear birds singing and spy the tree gnawed down by a beaver.

By this fall, the Whitefish Lake Institute hopes a walk through the preserve will be made much easier when the institute's Interpretive Nature Trail is expected to open. The path is set to travel through 30 protected acres of wetland. A brochure will make the walk educational by providing information about the habitat and pointing to highlights like the beaver tree.

"We want to educate people on the importance of the wetland," said Lori Curtis, science and education director with the institute. "This is an opportunity to show people what can be done with development and still allowing the wetland to be preserved."

The wetland functions as a water quality buffer filtering water from the drainage before it flows into Whitefish Lake. It can also provide a reduction in flood intensity and provides wildlife habitat in an urban setting.

The Averill family purchased the 37-acre site off Wisconsin Avenue and in 2009 and gave 30 acres in the preserve to the institute and \$110,000 to fund wetland restoration. The Averill family in turn developed the Viking Creek project adjacent to the area.

Since obtaining management of the preserve, the institute has



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Volunteers work to install fencing in the Whitefish Lake Institute's Viking Creek wetland preserve off of Wisconsin Avenue. The insitute is working to complete an interpretive nature trail through the preserve.

been working to develop a trail. In addition to grants, the institute has spent about \$100,000 on the site.

The institute held a volunteer workday at the trail site Saturday installing fencing. Much work remains as paths are cleared, boardwalks placed and bridges constructed before the fall opening.

The upland/wetland mosaic of the area was created when the water levels of ancient Whitefish Lake inundated the area. Historically the area has been used for agriculture and grazing. Viking Creek passes through the area.

An information kiosk is planned at the main trail entrance/parking area on Viking Creek Drive. A native plant garden at the entrance will give information

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about the different plants found in the wetland.

A trail of finely-crushed gravel and boardwalks will create a path system through the wetland that is wheelchair accessible. Supporting kiosks at secondary trailheads will be located at Crestwood Park and near the Viking Lodge.

At the start of the trail users will be able to pick up a brochure that provides information corresponding to the various interpretive signs along the trail.

The interpretative signs will give details about the wetland involving science, as well as natural and cultural history.

"It's a neat way to learn about how the wetland works to clean water and why it's important for the lake," Curtis said.

The institute envisions a place for learning.

"This will be a big area for schools and education groups to come," Curtis said.