



Raeanna Raines/Whitefish Pilot

### Wetland trail

Jeremiah Anderson and Justin Koller of Balancing Axe work on constructing a portion of the boardwalk part of the trail.

## Wetland trail opens at Viking Creek

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By HEIDI DESCH Whitefish Pilot

Enter the Whitefish Lake Institute's wetland interpretive nature trail off of Wisconsin Avenue and it doesn't take long for the outside world to all but disappear. The birds can be heard chirping, the streams flow under walking bridges and the dense trees create a WLI's director Mike Koopal calls the trail in the Averill's Viking Creek Wetland Preserve a respite and a place to learn.

"I call it a slow cooking trail," Koopal said. "The trail is intended to reconnect people with nature. It's a great place to explore the great outdoors with young children."

Development of the interpretive nature trail was a line item agreed upon by the Whitefish Lake Institute, the Friends of Wisconsin Avenue and the Averill Family during negotiations of the Viking Creek Development proposal. The property was gifted to the Whitefish Lake Institute by the Averills in 2009.

The Whitefish Lake Institute has since been developing the trail and patching together funding. The trail officially opens this week with a ribbon cutting ceremony and celebration Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Koopal said when he first drafted a plan for WLI in 2004 he would have never imagined owning land or developing a trail.

"But it was clear that the importance of this wetland to the health of Whitefish Lake was worthy of protection," he said. "In the end, the wetlands and interpretive nature trail are the result of broad based generosity that now becomes another great community amenity that makes Whitefish special."

The Viking Creek Wetland Preserve is 28.8 acres of wetlands with Viking Creek passing through the area. Wetlands provide water purification, flood protection, groundwater recharge and habitat for wildlife.

Along with the property, the Averill family gave \$110,000, which served as the initial funding for trail development and wetland restoration. Since then WLI has spent \$50,000 and another \$65,000 in grants have been used to bring the trail to fruition. A number of local businesses have donated time and materials to the project.

"This is a community project," Koopal said. "WLI gets to be the stewards of the land on the public's behalf."

Interpretive signs and a companion trail guide make it possible to not only enjoy the walk, but also learn about the wetlands. At the trailhead on Viking Creek Drive, a native plant garden includes a number of plants that grow in the wetland along with identification plaques.

Lori Curtis, WLI science and education director, said many of the plants were replanted in the garden after being removed for the trail development.

"We want people to be able to identify the plants when they go into the wetland," she said. "With it out at the entrance, if people can't walk in to the wetland they can still learn at the entrance."

A trail of finely-crushed gravel and boardwalks creates a wheelchair accessible path. There are benches along the trail at various points. Supporting kiosks at secondary trailheads are located at Crestwood Park and near the Viking Lodge.

Curtis said a lot of thought has been taken to create a trail that not only protects the wetland, but also creates picturesque points.

"There's a feeling of calm that comes over you when you enter the wetland," she said. "The noise from the road just dissipates."

The trail is closed to bikes because the sight distances are limited, and dogs are not allowed to prevent wildlife harassment. The trail will have a seasonal closure from March 15 to May 1 to prevent human/bear conflicts and to protect the integrity of the trail during wet conditions.

"We hope the public understands and respects our management philosophy so that the trail can be enjoyed by all," Koopal said.

The trailhead and parking area are on the east side of Wisconsin Avenue between Crestwood Resort and The Viking Lodge, just across the road and slightly south from The Lodge at Whitefish Lake.