

FAQ — Frequently Asked Questions

Paving the west trail in the Pheasant Branch Conservancy as an alternative to widening Pheasant Branch Road

Prepared by Alder Mark Opitz, who proposed the Pheasant Branch Road “Complete Streets” concept in May 2026. Document updated 7/26/26.

Why was this concept proposed?

The development of the Redtail Ridge and Pheasant Crossing subdivisions significantly increases the number of people who need or want to access community services south of the Pheasant Branch Conservancy. Currently, it is unsafe to walk or bike along the vast majority of Pheasant Branch (PB) Road due to the roadway's narrowness and lack of sidewalks and bike lanes. Although the reconstruction of High Road north of Spring Hill Drive in 2027 will provide a safer, all-season route, it is unreasonable or impractical to expect all residents of the subdivisions east of High Road to have to walk or bike to the west before heading back east along Century Avenue to access such essential destinations as a pharmacy, grocery store, or a fitness center. Widening PB Road to add a shared-use path along one side, or to add bike lanes and a sidewalk, would entail removing dozens of trees, adding one or more extensive retaining walls, and significantly changing its “rustic road” character. Expanding PB Road would be more expensive and have much greater environmental impact than upgrading the existing parallel shared-use trail that runs atop a sewer interceptor and an artificial berm.

What does the city's draft Active Transportation Plan say about this safety problem?

The draft [Active Transportation Plan](#) (which is currently undergoing public review) highlights ways to improve conditions for pedestrians and bicyclists along several key travel corridors in the city. The draft plan released for public review in mid July now includes Pheasant Branch Road along with four options to help address safety and connectivity concerns (see [Appendix A on page 48](#)). This section was influenced by the feedback several city committees provided as they reviewed the path paving concept.

Why are ped/bike accommodations missing from nearly all of Pheasant Branch Road?

PB Road has largely retained its rural design for decades. As the Middleton Hills and Pheasant Branch Ridge subdivisions began developing in the late 1990s and there became a need to reconstruct the segment south of Whittlesey Road, city officials decided not to widen PB Road due to the concern that a wider road would increase vehicle speeds and have various negative environmental impacts, including the removal of dozens of trees. At the time, the Common Council chose instead to add a paved shared-use path connecting Whittlesey with Gaylord Nelson Road in Middleton Hills. In other words, they concluded that the addition

of a 10 ft. wide path along the western edge of the conservancy was less environmentally intrusive than constructing a wider road. Since then, two short sidewalk segments along PB Road were constructed to connect several residences with Gaylord Nelson Rd. and the Conservancy Condo development with Old Creek Road and nearby businesses.

What is the potential environmental impact?

- No detailed environmental analysis has been undertaken to compare the potential impact of the various options.
- The northern segment of the existing path follows a major sanitary sewer interceptor that was installed to serve Middleton's growing north side, west of the conservancy. The southern segment (south of the bridge over the creek) follows a berm that was erected many decades ago to redirect the creek north into the marsh. Formerly, the primary creek channel was located just north of the Goodwill store.
- Limestone paths require more frequent maintenance than asphalt or boardwalk surfaces. It's not uncommon to see erosion along the path multiple times a year, and there are locations where plumes of sediment have washed numerous feet downhill from the path, with some of it likely reaching Pheasant Branch Creek.
- From a water quality perspective, the city engineer has noted that "the unpaved trail in the conservancy is functionally impervious at this point, with being compressed over time... So from a water quality perspective, I don't think that paving the path would really have a significant impact either way." (Source: [Water Resources Management Commission meeting on 6/17/26](#))
- Upgrading the existing trail to adhere to the City's proposed standard specifications and details for asphalt paths would entail removing some vegetation along both sides of the existing path and widening / restoring the original path width. However, adding a ped/bike facility along Pheasant Branch Road would have a much bigger impact on the adjoining conservancy due to the need for one or more retaining walls (to overcome existing steep slopes) and the removal of dozens of mature trees and other longstanding vegetation.

What are the advantages of asphalt paths?

- They improve accessibility for all residents, including people who rely on wheelchairs and other assistive mobility devices. As noted on a Dane County Parks [webpage](#), "paved trails are consistent with Dane County's design standards for regional shared-use paths and help improve accessibility and year-round usability."
- They aren't prone to erosion from a heavy rainfall, meaning no ankle-twisting ruts or large plumes of sediment washing onto adjoining land.
- They don't become mucky during freeze/thaw cycles. The east side of Pheasant Branch Road is particularly notorious for this condition.
- They are nominally more impervious than existing hard-packed limestone paths, per feedback from the Water Resources Management Commission at their June 17 meeting.
- Asphalt paths can last over 20 years before they require substantial repair or reconstruction. Per Dane County's park planning manager, "We've seen 20 years out of the initial surfacing on the Capital City Trail before full replacement was required."

What are alternatives to paving the path?

This list is based on feedback and creative brainstorming that Alder Opitz has received since introducing the concept in early May:

- **Doing nothing / maintaining the status quo.** As a lifelong pedestrian and bicyclist, I consider this option entirely unacceptable for safety reasons. Residents who live near Pheasant Branch Road, particularly those with limited mobility, shouldn't be expected to travel half a mile to the west and then another half mile east to access community services east or south of the Century and Branch St. intersection (such as a pharmacy, groceries, health clubs, etc.).
- **Widening Pheasant Branch Road to add a shared-use path along one side, or to add bike lanes and a sidewalk.** This option would entail removing dozens of trees and, because of steep slopes in various locations, require the addition of one or more extensive retaining walls. In 2004, the City Council decided to keep the roadway narrow as a way to slow travel speeds and reduce environmental impact on the adjoining conservancy.
- **Modifying how Pheasant Branch Road is currently used.** For example, adding a traffic barrier in one or more locations would eliminate vehicle through-traffic, making it safer to designate the route as a "Bike Boulevard" where pedestrians and bicyclists have the right of way. A variation of this idea would be to allow only northbound vehicles to travel along one half of PB Road, with a barrier or bollards separating the other half of the road so it can function as two-way shared-use path. In either case, this option would inconvenience most current roadway users and largely shift the traffic burden to High Road. In general terms, it's better to distribute traffic across a network of streets instead of disproportionately placing the burden on fewer streets and their adjoining residents.

Why was the West Trail built and why is it located where it is?

The West Trail from Whittlesey Road south to the boardwalk leading over the bridge exists because it is the maintenance route for a sanitary sewer interceptor that serves the growing neighborhoods west of the conservancy. South of the bridge over the creek, the path runs atop a berm that was constructed over half a century ago to divert the main channel of Pheasant Branch Creek north into the marsh and wetlands. Formerly, at least some of the creek channel ran just behind the Goodwill store and adjoining buildings (this channel remains visible today from the boardwalk just north of Marina Court). In short, the current trail runs almost entirely along non-natural features.

Was the West Trail designed for bicycle use?

Yes. Nearly all of the 3.5 mile trail that encircles the conservancy had a width of at least 10 feet when it was constructed in phases during the 2000s. Over time, through lack of maintenance, sections of the trail have been allowed to narrow to as little as 5-6 feet. The current narrow width exacerbates user conflicts and no longer adheres to national shared-use path width standards. The trail was not designed for use by motorized vehicles other than maintenance vehicles, emergency access, and approved mobility devices in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). E-bikes are allowed as long as they comply with Wisconsin's definition of low-speed electric bicycles. E-motos are not allowed to be ridden along any trail or road in the city.

Wouldn't a paved trail increase user conflicts?

The difference in speed between a bicyclist and someone on foot or using a wheelchair can be quite pronounced and unsettling. This concern arises along most shared-use paths, not just ones in a conservancy. Trail etiquette is an issue requiring education and enforcement throughout the entire trail system. There are numerous examples in the Madison area of effective signs that could be displayed in key locations to help educate all trail users. User conflicts are exacerbated along narrow trails; there would be more room for people to pass others if the trail width were restored to at least 10 feet. As is noted in the Conservancy Lands Plan as well as in my proposal, it's possible and at times desirable to provide an unpaved shoulder or a separate trail to accommodate people who don't wish to walk or jog on pavement.

How has the public responded to the trail paving concept?

To date, the primary concerns that have been raised are: 1) a paved trail would increase user conflicts, 2) it's expensive to improve the trail, and 3) the city has limited \$ and staff resources currently available for trail maintenance. Each of these concerns is entirely valid. The Friends of Pheasant Branch Conservancy have also formally expressed their organization's opposition to paving the West Trail. Unfortunately, their position statement doesn't fully summarize the options that have been presented and is missing some essential context.

Alder Opitz has received the following positive feedback:

- "I see pedestrians walking/riding on PBR more and more now that phase 2 is nearing completion and worry about their safety, especially at the speed the cars go and the hills causing blind spots." (Redtail Ridge resident, May 8)
- "The Pheasant Branch road "complete street" concept is a real issue. I don't have any brilliant ideas, but I do appreciate you suggesting alternatives for consideration." (Middleton Hills resident, June 7)
- "The new development has increased the car traffic on Pheasant Branch Road tremendously, and I believe the city of Middleton needs to address this danger immediately.... A safe road is long overdue. I support any effort that moves cyclists off of the road. A wider road with a separate bike lane or a paved recreational path along Pheasant Branch Road to Balzer is the only reasonable long-term solution." (Middleton Hills resident, June 8)
- "Just wanted to offer my wholehearted support for your comments about Pheasant Branch Road and the possibility of paving the West Branch Trail as a mitigation. The current character and footprint of PB Road is very much deserving of preservation for property owners and motorists (myself included), but the facilities for bikers/walkers/runners (I am all three) could use enhancement, and I believe the West Branch Trail is the best way to do that." (Pheasant Branch Ridge resident, June 8)

What is Dane County and WisDNR's involvement?

The unpaved path on the east side of Pheasant Branch Road north of Whittlesey Road is almost entirely located within the road right-of-way. Because most of this road lies within the

Town of Springfield's jurisdiction, Alder Opitz reached out to town officials to obtain their permission to extend the path north to the future intersection of PB Road with Ruffed Road (a connection that the Redtail Ridge developer may make as soon as the fall of 2027). Springfield officials are amenable to making their road right-of-way available for a shared use path in that area. Although the road right-of-way falls within the jurisdiction of municipal government, it is, of course, important and beneficial to coordinate trail development, construction, maintenance, and use with Dane County and WisDNR, which own and manage the land abutting the east edge of the right-of-way.

Final Thoughts:

As a Middleton resident since 1991 and a conservancy neighbor for most of that time, I have no interest whatsoever in degrading either the conservancy or the experience that people have as they cherish their time in this special place. I have no interest in "paving the conservancy," as was asserted by a paving opponent at a recent meeting.

My reason for introducing the trail paving concept in May was so that Appendix A of the draft Active Transportation Plan would include narrative that addresses the immediate safety needs of pedestrians and bicyclists who rely on Pheasant Branch Road to travel between northern neighborhoods and the community services and transportation routes on the south side of the conservancy. If the ATP hadn't addressed this issue, then someone in the future could have cited the plan's silence (other than a map showing a medium-term need for a sidewalk) as the basis for why upgrading the trail doesn't merit further consideration.

The West Trail follows a sewer interceptor or runs atop an artificial berm that was installed decades ago to re-route the creek into the marsh. The Public Works Dept. has on file a very preliminary design from 2002 that indicated that widening Pheasant Branch Road would necessitate the removal of numerous trees and the construction of a 1,000 ft. long retaining wall. Road widening impacts would almost certainly not be limited to the existing road right-of-way. Given the steep slopes along the east side of the road and the \$4 million cost estimate for reconstructing a half-mile segment of High Road, any project to widen PB Road would certainly have a much greater impact on the conservancy and the city budget. Thus, based on my professional and personal experiences, improving the West Trail is the most viable path forward.