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State deal will double length of Hank Aaron trail

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The state has negotiated a deal to buy 5 1/2 miles of an abandoned railroad corridor that will double the length of the Hank Aaron State Trail, from Miller Park to the western county line, an official said Tuesday.

Advertisement The price tag for the corridor owned by the Canadian Pacific Railway will be \$4.5 million, said Dick Steffes, real estate director for the state Department of Natural Resources. The money for the purchase would be drawn from the state Stewardship Fund.

Steffes said the DNR board will consider the deal at its May 24 meeting, and closing on the sale appears likely in late July.

Gov. Jim Doyle has scheduled a news conference concerning the trail for 11 a.m. today in the Ward Theater, on the grounds of the Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center. The railway corridor is being converted to a paved path for cyclists, pedestrians and skaters that passes near the theater, in the historic district of the VA grounds.

The corridor being purchased extends roughly from the western edge of the Menomonee Valley, through the VA grounds and along the north edge of State Fair Park. It hugs the West Allis-Milwaukee border, passes south of the Milwaukee County Zoo and then turns north before reaching the Underwood Creek Parkway at N. 123rd St.

Building a bike path in the corridor is estimated to cost \$1.6 million, said Melissa Cook, the trail manager with the DNR. The state has received a \$1.28 million federal grant to pay for 80% of the project, she said.

With the extension, the trail would span the width of Milwaukee County and connect to the Oak Leaf Trail on the lakefront and the Waukesha County line.

A projected 2009 completion date also would represent rapid progress, considering the arduous effort required to establish the eastern section of the Hank Aaron, from the lakefront to Miller Park. Work on that section started in 1997 and was completed, for the most part, this spring.

"The east portion has been so challenging because of all the intense development there (in the Menomonee Valley)," Cook said. "Where do you put a trail? This is a fixed corridor. We know where it's going to go."

The completed Hank Aaron State Trail will be valuable as a recreational path and a commuter route for people who choose to bike to work and to the numerous venues along the route. Cook said about 400,000 people live within three miles of the trail, which connects the lakefront to the Menomonee Valley, Miller Park, State Fair Park, the VA and the Milwaukee County Zoo.

"The trail will take you anywhere you want to go," said Bruce Keyes, president of the non-profit group Friends of the Hank Aaron State Trail.

Milwaukee Ald. Michael Murphy said the trail will be a valuable asset, bringing bicycling customers to businesses along the route, in the Historic Third Ward, the valley and West Allis commercial areas.

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