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October 19, 2016

TO: Metropolitan Planning Organization Policy Board

RE: proposed use of Great Western Trail corridor for Veterans Parkway construction

The Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation (as well as members of the MPO Bike-Ped roundtable) recently learned of proposed impact of 1½ to 2 miles of the Great Western Trail for the Veterans Parkway extension in Warren County and we want to inform the MPO Policy Committee of our concerns.

We understand the pressure from the changing urban landscape. But we trust Iowa's public officials and community leaders to make thoughtful changes that preserves the trail experience that draws people to their communities to work, live and raise families.

INHF has major concerns to the proposed use of the Great Western Trail for road right-of-way and converting the existing 100' wide greenway into a 10' side path - with no proposed mitigation or consideration of the conservation values that this corridor provides.

We worked hard in the 1980's and 1990s with great public support and trust to acquire and establish the former railroad corridor that has now become the Great Western Trail between Des Moines and Martensdale. The Great Western Trail is owned and managed by both Warren and Polk County Conservation Boards as a linear park and greenway. Together we worked for years to make this trail. We competed for public grants, raised private donations, collaborated with local businesses, relied on volunteer leaders and put our energy into creating a nature experience for all to enjoy and pass forward to future generations.

The Great Western Trail has become a regional attraction that provides wellness opportunities, recreation, economic development as well as wildlife habitat and open space for the entire metro.

Our objections center on the permanent loss of public parkway, conservation values and habitat that provide the quality experience that serves the people throughout central Iowa so well today.

We firmly believe that the proposed road alignment will negatively impact the uninterrupted trail experience forever – and will put at risk all the gains and benefits that the trail has come to provide.

This corridor is public parkland that serves the purpose that the public has already paid for. Also, please be aware that Iowa code entrusts this land to the Warren County Conservation Board and in a 1973 opinion from the Iowa Attorney General, this corridor cannot be released

from ownership for other uses unless there is proven to be “no further need of the land for park purposes” (Iowa Code section 350). We assure you this is not the case for this property.

If city and county leaders are determined to use this proposed route, we request **a replacement of the trail corridor with a similar size, quality and experience** — and mitigation of the damage being done not just to the corridor and its natural elements but to the safety and attraction that this trail provides today.

We are requesting that local leaders consider the following going forward:

- If the road goes in this corridor, a similar linear park with natural elements and minimal crossings should be replaced.
- This replacement should be part of the cost of building the road. It is unacceptable to expect the conservation community to build an alternative trail segment at their own trouble and expense. The public already constructed a trail here. Any road project that removes it should also replace it —complete with natural beauty and a substantial separation from vehicular traffic.
- Alternatively, a re-routing of the **road** away from the Great Western Trail would preserve the trail experience and honor the public land and public funding represented by the trail.
- We ask that the next phase of the project specifically request input from Warren CCB, the Bike-Ped Roundtable and trail users prior to finalizing any design and bid letting, so that area stakeholders can be fully informed of the project.

We request that as area leaders, you do your best to support efforts to retain a quality experience on the Great Western Trail and secure *true* community input on the design of the road so that we can reach a constructive solution to maintain the corridor and allow for growth. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joe McGovern". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Joe McGovern, President

cc: Tom Hadden