

EARLY BEGINNINGS

The story of the Fred Meijer Heartland Trail actually begins with the development of the railroad in Michigan. From 1860 to 1900, railroad mileage grew from 770 miles to 7,946 miles (the Chesapeake & Ohio/ Père Marquette, Pennsylvania and the Grand Trunk & Western.



Bridge deck construction - Greenville

From 1950 to 1980, the early beginnings of the FFMHT, railroad mileage in Montcalm County decreased from 106 miles to 7 miles. These abandonments opened the way for the concept of Rails to Trails.

In 1988 Bill Cargo of Edmore was notified that CSX railroad was abandoning the 26 mile rail section from Elwell (Gratiot County) to Edmore (Montcalm County) In 1989-90 the MDNR indicated strong support for the Trail and DALMAC and Hitachi Corporation gave \$25,000 in support. In 1992 the MDNR prepared an offer to CSX for purchase, Dave Arking (Edmore Village Administrator) arrived and took up the cause in spite of strong opposition from some Council members. March of 1993 MDNR informed trail supporters that an offer was imminent, but opposition began to appear. They were few in numbers but powerful in the County. MDNR began to draw away from the project and Fred Meijer first read about the project in the Greenville Daily News. A group formed to support The Heartland Trail in 1993 and completed a preliminary Development and Management Plan. In January of 1994 the Friends of the Heartland Trail was officially formed, thanks to much help from Chuck Miel a local attorney. David Nelson was elected the first Chairman and led the group through the first two years. The spearhead for the FMHT was formed.

In early 1994 over 3,000 signatures were obtained for Trail support and a referendum in Edmore passed with 57% in support of the Trail – but the MDNR felt this wasn't sufficient -- they needed a positive vote from the Montcalm County Board of Commissioners. In March of 1994 the Commissioners called for a public meeting to be held at the County Courthouse in Stanton. The meeting was standing room only (over 200 Trail supporters) and both supporters and opponents stated their case. The last supporter was Fred Meijer himself and he truly re-energized Heartland Trail supporters. The County Commissioners refused to support the Heartland Trail on a vote of 8 to 5. It was very apparent that the Heartland Trail was going to have to be a private effort to become a reality.

CSX was becoming more impatient about selling the trail section and on a Monday morning in May of 1994, John Heron (FFMHT Trail Board Member) received a call from CSX that they had received an offer for the Trail and would sell if they didn't receive a better offer by 5 p.m. on the following Wednesday. Intense telephone calls to Fred Meijer, his lawyers, and National Rails to Trails Conservancy followed and on June 8, 1994 NRTC received word that their bid had been successful. The Friends of the Heartland Trail could begin to create and develop the Trail. This arrangement was a first for NRTC, since they had never owned a trail before. On May 2, 2000 the National RTC passed the ownership of the Trail to the Friends of the Fred Meijer Heartland Trail. Fred Meijer paid for the legal fees that they had spent for the purchase and transfer of the Trail. From that time the Heartland Trail became known as the Fred Meijer Heartland Trail and stands as the first of many trails in Michigan to carry Fred's name.

(These memories were from John Heron, who was there - Village Council of Edmore and FFMHT Board Member from 1994 – 2016)