

Milwaukee Road Corridor Study

Technical Appendix B

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Title: TRANSCRIPT OF TELEPHONE SURVEYS WITH FIRE DEPARTMENT
OFFICIALS ALONG SELECT RECREATIONAL TRAILS
ON FORMER RAILROAD GRADES

By: STAFF OF THE DNR
TRAILS PLANNING SECTION
TRAILS & WATERWAYS

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Department of Natural Resources

TRANSCRIPT OF TELEPHONE SURVEYS WITH FIRE DEPARTMENT
OFFICIALS ALONG SELECT RECREATIONAL TRAILS ON FORMER RAILROAD GRADES.
SURVEY CONDUCTED BY DNR STAFF DURING SEPTEMBER 1979

List of Fire Department Officials Contacted:

Elroy-Sparta Trail

Norwalk: Fire Chief, Ken Terris (608/384-7575)
Sparta: Erv's Firefighters, Chief Tom Sullivan
(269-3122)
Kendall: Fire Chief, Walter Zerk (463-7110)
Wilton: Assistant Fire Chief, Ken Thurow (385-6779)

Douglas Trail

Rochester: Fire Chief Murtz, Secretary Chris Peterson
(507/282-7550)
Douglas: Fire Lieutenant, Jack Gustine (356-4472)
Pine Island: Assistant Fire Chief, Roger Krause
(356-4141)

Heartland Trail

Park Rapids: Fire Chief, Dick Harsha (218/732-3111)
Nevis: Assistant Fire Chief, Gary Evers (652-3333)
Akeley: Department Official (652-2855)
Walker: Fire Chief (547-1231)

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Interviewer: This is an interview with Ken Terris, Fire Chief in Norwalk, Wisconsin, and he has jurisdiction over the Sparta-Elroy Trail. Mr. Terris, you were just telling me about a fire?

Fire Chief: Yes, we had one fire several years ago. It formed between the highway and the trail where it went around the park - oh, about 200 feet or something like that.

Interviewer: And was it a very serious fire?

Fire Chief: No, minor.

Interviewer: So you were able to deal with it?

Fire Chief: Yes, it was a grass fire is all.

Interviewer: Do you see any problems with fires along the trail?

Fire Chief: No, that was our only occasion that we ever had anything to do with it.

Interviewer: And you're not even sure it was caused by someone on the trail or the highway?

Fire Chief: Right.

Interviewer: So generally you feel your staff is large enough and your jurisdiction small enough so you can answer any of these calls?

Fire Chief: Oh yes.

Interviewer: Have you heard of any other fires along the Sparta trail?

Fire Chief: No, that's the only fire that's had any connection with the trail whatsoever.

Interviewer: Do you have any other comments you'd like to add about the trail and fire prevention along the trail?

Fire Chief: Well, we've never had any problems outside of that one - probably four years ago.

Interviewer: This is an interview with Tom Sullivan, who's Fire Chief from Erv's Fire Fighters located in Sparta, Wisconsin, and they cover portions of the Sparta-Elroy Trail. Mr. Sullivan, you were about to tell me if you'd answered any fire calls along the trail.

Fire Chief: Well, we have had several in the past, but so far this year we haven't had any. Of course, our fall fire season is still coming up. But in the past we haven't had any problems with it whatsoever.

Interviewer: Well, you said in the past you have had a few calls though.

Fire Chief: Well, yes. I would say last year or the year before, we had just several small ones but nothing really serious.

Interviewer: What kinds of fires were they?

Fire Chief: What they were primarily was grass/brush fires possibly set by someone on the bike trail but not necessarily. Property damage normally is very little because of the fact that it's normally just a brush and grass, high grass area. It doesn't take us very long once we get out there (to put it out).

Interviewer: You're close enough so that you can answer them pretty quickly?

Fire Chief: Oh yes.

Interviewer: Was it the landowners that called you?

Fire Chief: Well, normally it is. It's probably the landowners adjoining the bike trail that call us; sometimes it's passing motorists that'll call in when they get into the city - then they'll give us a ring.

Interviewer: I spoke to some of the fire fighters in Norwalk and in Kendall, and they mentioned that they feel it's unclear whether they're supposed to answer those calls or whether the DNR answers them themselves. Is that true for you also or do you know that it's your jurisdiction?

Fire Chief: Well, normally not. When it's in our area we answer the calls, and, in turn, we radio the Black River Falls or Tomah DNR station and we tell them that we're responding to the call. And then when we do get there, we also notify them that we have it under control so that they can save themselves a trip.

Interviewer: So, you've never had to call them for additional help? You've always been able to handle these fires yourselves?

Fire Chief: Yes, especially the ones along the bike trail. In other areas, of course, it's a different story.

Interviewer: You don't expect any serious fire hazards caused from the trail then? And you don't foresee any problems in the future?

Fire Chief: No, we don't. No, normally the ones along the bike trail are pretty well contained in or around the trail itself because it does go through some heavy agricultural areas and most of these fields are in hay or corn. Normally, there's not really a big threat in an agricultural area. However, if these trails do go through a forest area where there's more pine then you probably would have some problems.

Interviewer: In your area, the trail doesn't go through that type of vegetation?

Fire Chief: No, no it does not, right.

Interviewer: Ok, and most of the fires that you've dealt with have also been in the expected fire season which is in the fall?

Fire Chief: Yes, early spring and fall.

Interviewer: This is an interview with Mr. Walter Zerk, Fire Chief in Kendall, Wisconsin. Mr. Surich, you were just about to tell me about the fire on the Sparta-Elroy Trail that you dealt with?

Fire Chief: We had a grass fire, oh it must be two years ago now. And, we didn't have any problem with the fire. But, since then, we found out that we are no longer in DNR district so we have to take care of those fires ourselves, I guess. Because you see the DNR out of Black River Falls here will only come down to county trunk A and that's between us and Tomah. So we didn't know if we were supposed to fight the fire on the trail or if we were supposed to call the DNR out of Tomah.

Interviewer: I see, but since then you've found out that it is your jurisdiction?

Fire Chief: We gotta take care of it, yes.

Interviewer: Well, does that cause a problem for you?

Fire Chief: Oh not really no. As long as they let us drive on it, that's the biggest problem we've got. You've got to get to it.

Interviewer: You have a large enough staff there, and you're close enough to the trail so you can get to it without any problems?

Fire Chief: Yes, but there are certain places we have to drive on it in order to get through.

Interviewer: Do you think the trail causes any special fire hazards?

Fire Chief: No.

Interviewer: You mentioned that fire that did occur was a grass fire. Was that the one that was between the trail and the highway?

Fire Chief: No, there was one between the trail (not intelligible) well it went into a landowner's field. Otherwise, I don't think there are any problems with fire.

Interviewer: What's your general reaction to the trail?

Fire Chief: I would say it's alright. The trail is good and the people are getting better every year on it. The people that used it the first couple years - I'd say the first five years - were a different kind of people, skruffier crowd.

By being a businessman here in town you could notice that. I know some of them that started out to Elroy probably had a dime in their pocket and they still had it when they got to Sparta.

Interviewer: So it didn't bring any business into your area.

Fire Chief: They were a different bunch of people. Lately, we've found out that we've got groups coming out of Minneapolis-St. Paul.

Interviewer: Any groups from Illinois?

Fire Chief: Quite a few, alot out of Chicago and around Chicago. And they come in groups now. They're really, you know, like family style, and it's getting better. We haven't had any problems with fire, but a town nine miles up the road here had a fire.

Interviewer: Which town is that?

Fire Chief: Wilton, and they called for help and everything out of Tomah. And the way I understood it, they wouldn't send anything down to help them.

Interviewer: You mean they called for help to the DNR and the DNR didn't send anything down?

Fire Chief: Right. They said it wasn't their jurisdiction - all the further they went was county trunk A.

Interviewer: Now, normally you think the DNR would answer fire calls?

Fire Chief: No, I don't think they would. That's like I said, they only told us down here that we couldn't go on that trail no matter what.

Interviewer: But then when there was actually a fire they said that you should answer it?

Fire Chief: Well, they didn't come right out and tell us that we had to answer it but what are we going to do, we have to take care of the landowners. They won't give a straight answer. But if they're going to stop us from using the trail when we do fight a fire; then they're going to have to take care of their own trail whether we're out of the district or not.

Interviewer: So as far as you're concerned, it is unclear exactly who is responsible?

Fire Chief: That's right. It's just good to know that the results of this survey you're doing will be reported to the Wisconsin DNR. If we wait for a fire department to come out of the DNR at Black River Falls or Tomah or wherever it comes out of, you might just as well kiss her (the fire-threatened area) good-bye.

Interviewer: Because they're too far away?

Fire Chief: Because they're too far away. We will take care of the

landowners, but if we can't run the trail we won't take care of any of it.

Interviewer: Well, when you answered that last call, did you go on the trail?

Fire Chief: Yes we did, we never heard anything. Either they didn't know about it or something. I don't know.

Interviewer: This is an interview with Jack Gustine who's lieutenant and secretary for the Pine Island fire division. Mr. Gustine, you were just about to tell me about your experience with the Douglas Trail. Did you say you had answered a fire call there?

Fire Official: One, yes and I think it was three years ago.

Interviewer: And were there any special circumstances regarding this fire?

Fire Official: No, just a couple of youngsters having a good time with a weiner roast, I guess.

Interviewer: So, it wasn't serious at all?

Fire Official: No, the only thing is that at the time we had that one, we got doubled up on another one clear down in Oronoco Township, on our rural runs down there.

Interviewer: Well, did that cause problems then? Were you able to answer both?

Fire Official: No and yes. We doubled back and got both of them put out.

Interviewer: So you don't foresee any special fire hazards associated with the trail?

Fire Official: No, the only thing that I can say, that as long as I'm talking to the Department of Natural Resources - and I think they're well aware of this - we had this nasty flood here a few weeks back, and I think it would be proper if Natural Resources would widen and deepen the (not intelligible) and get the darn trees out of the tressel right down here by the park so the water can flow through there better.

Interviewer: Which park is that?

Fire Official: The city park in Pine Island.

Interviewer: All right. Do you have any other comments about the trail generally? Do you like it?

Fire Official: Nothing but favorable reactions. I have a son that's a snowmobiler, and he thinks it's one of the greatest things that ever happened. It's being used by what we can tell by a great number of people; horseback riders and bicyclists in the summer months and then, of course, in the winter there's snowmobilers and I guess they've been doing a pretty fair job of grooming it too.

Interviewer: Good, glad to hear that. Thank you for your comments.

