



Happy Trails

State's first recreational path connects northern Nebraska

BY PATRICK KELLY
Staff Reporter

NELIGH — Townspeople gathered here Sunday at a simple, yet highly significant, ceremony. The Neligh-Oakdale High School Band and the local chapter of the American Legion began the event with a parade. Mayor Karen Cisler cut the ribbon to a new trail for hikers and bicyclists, while similar dignitaries did likewise in O'Neill and Valentine.

The circumstance connecting the three northern Nebraska cities is the Cowboy Trail.

Billed as Nebraska's first state recreational trail and the longest national rails-to-trails conversion, it spans 321 miles, from Norfolk to Chadron. The trail follows the former path of the Chicago and NorthWestern Railroad running along U.S. Highway 20.

Trail advocate Pat Foote and others were very enthusiastic about the project's potential to unite towns along the pathway.

"It's linking (communities), maybe even with football rivalries," said Foote, a Nebraska Game and Parks Commission employee. "It's bringing them together."

The preservation of these railroad corridors is part of a technique known as "rail-banking," in which stretches of land are kept open for utilities like fiber-optic cables. While the strips of land are available for other public uses, their primary purpose is for hikers and bikers.

Although the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission undertook the project in December 1994, weather setbacks delayed the trail's opening until this fall.

Since then, the trail's 221 bridges have been decked, and guard rails have been installed to accommodate users. Most of the trail's surface is made of tightly packed gravel, but future plans include cementing the trail in Valentine, Ainsworth, Long Pine and O'Neill, and adding gravel to the path from Norfolk to Oakdale.

Federal grants from the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act have



LARRY VOECKS, the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission recreational trail manager, has helped coordinate construction of the Cowboy Trail, the longest rails-to-trails conversion in the nation.

primarily funded the project. However, Congress currently is debating whether future funds will be diverted for other transportation routes, like roads and highways.

If the ISTEA funds are dropped, the trail will lose only added refinements, such as higher-quality surfaces. The debate also involves talk of starting another system of funding to continue what the ISTEA grant initiated.

To date, the Nebraska Department of Roads — which receives the funds — has earmarked more than \$1.48 million for the trail, trail heads and other expenses. The nearly renovated Chicago and NorthWestern Depot in O'Neill also has received \$196,000.

For now, and to the delight of communities along the path, the Cowboy Trail is open and ready for use, Foote said.

"This may be the biggest thing to have happened to the trail's towns since they lost the railroad," she said. "We're very happy to complete this."



TOP: AMERICAN LEGION MEMBER LEROY SHABRAN totes his M-1 parade rifle while marching during Neligh's celebration of the Cowboy Trail opening. **ABOVE: CUTTING THE RIBBON** for the Cowboy Trail opening in Neligh are (from left): Mary Wilkinson, Oakdale city councilwoman; Karen Cisler, Neligh mayor; and Dwayne Westerhaul, head of planning for the trail.



DWAYNE WESTERHAUL, head of planning for the Cowboy Trail, and Karen Cisler, Neligh's mayor, receive a portion of the more than \$1.68 million earmarked for construction of the trail and trailheads.

Photos by
Mike Warren / DN