

Staff Report

SHARED USE PATH SYSTEM EXPANSION PROGRAM UPDATE

July 22, 2025

BACKGROUND:

At its July 9, 2024 meeting, City Council directed staff to provide an update on the proposed connection of the loway Creek Trail. This trail is located on the north bank of loway Creek and currently terminates at a privately-owned well access road approximately one half-mile east of South Duff Avenue. The loway Creek Trail was constructed so that it could be extended further east when property rights were acquired.

While preliminary plans were developed as far back as 2010 to construct a trail alignment along the west side of the Skunk River between E. 13th Street and the Hunziker Youth Sports Complex, the project was not fully completed due to the City's inability to secure voluntary easements from all property owners. Ultimately, the segment between E. Lincoln Way & SE 16th Street was removed and the Skunk River Trail was constructed, leaving a gap in the trail network.

Following a staff transition in 2024, staff reengaged with the property owner to again attempt to secure property rights to close this gap in the network. Working with WHKS & Co., staff prepared updated exhibits that illustrated both the proposed trail easement and the extent of recent Skunk River bank erosion. **To create a mutually beneficial project, staff proposed combining the trail project with riverbank stabilization work that would directly benefit the property owner.**

The proposed river alignment map (attached) shows the details regarding this proposed work. This trail alignment is beneficial because the City intends to utilize the pedestrian bridge that was salvaged and has been stored since the construction of the Grand Avenue extension over loway Creek.

In December 2024, WHKS staked the proposed easement limits, and staff conducted an on-site meeting with the property owner. **Initial feedback was generally positive; however, no further progress was made in the following months as the property owner expressed reluctance to grant an easement or to sell the affected property.**

Staff has suggested to the property owner that an agreement, either in the form of an easement or acquisition of the necessary property to construct the trail, was an option to continue with the project. **As progress has stalled, staff has indicated to the property owner that the City's interest in armoring the banks of the Skunk River to minimize future bank erosion would be less of a priority if there is not a river trail alignment to protect in the area.**

Throughout discussions, the property owner emphasized that no distinction was made between farmable and non-farmable land when the family originally purchased the property.

Accordingly, the owner believes that any land within the river corridor should be compensated at the same value as cropland.

Staff consulted the Farmland Value Survey from the REALTORS Land Institute and Iowa State University Extension and Outreach, which shows that timber ground is valued at roughly 25% of high-quality cropland. No specific data exists for riverbank ground, but staff believes it would be similar to or less than timber value.

Staff has offered to obtain an appraisal of the necessary land acquisition; however, the property owner has continued to indicate that there is not an interest in selling regardless of valuation. It is important to note that if the property owner is unwilling to voluntarily grant rights for the trail to the City, Iowa Code does not allow for the use of eminent domain on agricultural land for the construction of a recreational trail.

Given the limited progress on the west side river alignment, staff is seeking Council direction as to whether to continue pursuing the Skunk River alignment or to shift focus to a potential alternate connection west of the river, near the City-owned well access road.

Considerations for Alternate Alignments

If the Skunk River alignment is not feasible, an alternate route adjacent to the well access road could be pursued. However, this option presents several challenges:

- The existing easement does not currently allow for shared use path access.
- Additional coordination with adjacent landowners would be necessary.
- The corridor is narrow and used for both farm and utility access, so widening or separation would be needed to accommodate trail users safely.
- A new pedestrian bridge would likely be required over Ioway Creek, as the existing bridge location is tied to the Skunk River alignment. This would also require a temporary easement during construction to perform Ioway Creek modifications.

Staff has prepared and attached a concept map outlining these alignment considerations.

Future Trail Network Context

This part of Ames lacks continuous trail connectivity; however, the planned South Dayton Shared Use Path Project, estimated for construction in 2026/27, will complete a significant loop between E. Lincoln Way and SE 16th Street in the southeast quadrant. This connection may reduce the urgency for the Skunk River alignment and allow time for future opportunities to emerge (e.g., renewed interest from the current landowner, changes in property ownership, or area redevelopment).

In parallel to Skunk River Trail efforts, staff is also working on a pedestrian bridge and trail connection over Ioway Creek at S. 4th Street. Recent cost estimates have escalated beyond the original \$760,000 budget. A single-span prefabricated bridge is now estimated at

\$860,000, with total project costs expected to reach \$1,500,000.

Local Option Sales Tax funds allocated to the Skunk River Trail have been identified as a potential source to cover the funding gap for this important 2026 construction project. **The potential for realignment or delay in the Skunk River trail corridor would open an opportunity to continue with additional trail and pedestrian projects, including the loway Creek at S. 4th Street project, that do not currently have impediments due to acquiring property rights.**

Additionally, the salvaged pedestrian bridge from the Grand Avenue extension that was planned for the river crossing on the Skunk River alignment could be utilized for another project. This project would be the crossing of loway Creek, north of the Applied Sciences Complex, west of Moore Memorial Park. Further evaluation would need to be completed to ensure this is feasible. However the span appears to be long enough to accomplish the crossing at this new location. This may help accelerate this trail connection as well.

OPTIONS:

Option 1:

Continue pursuing the west side Skunk River alignment, including a crossing of loway Creek using the City's existing pedestrian bridge. This would require securing either an easement or fee title acquisition from the current property owner. This is the option that has been sought since 2010 without meaningful progress towards obtaining an agreement. **There is not an estimate as to a timeframe, if at all, when an agreement may be finalized for the trail connection.**

Option 2:

Redirect efforts to the well access road alignment, which would involve coordination with multiple property owners, a modification of existing easements, potential purchase of additional adjacent property, and the purchase of a new pedestrian bridge due to the realignment of the crossing over loway Creek.

If Council selects this option, staff recommends also reallocating Skunk River Trail Local Option Sales Tax funds to fully fund the S. 4th Street pedestrian bridge project, ensuring its continued progress toward 2026 construction.

The Skunk River Trail connection remains programmed in the fifth year of the Capital Improvements Plan and can be reprioritized based on future property rights. Additionally, the salvaged bridge could be relocated to the Moore Memorial Park crossing.

Option 3:

Pause efforts to establish a trail connection in this area, allowing time for the South Dayton project to be completed. Staff would continue monitoring the situation for future opportunities (e.g., landowner interest or area redevelopment). The South Dayton Avenue connection between E. Lincoln Way and SE 16th Street in 2026/27 could serve as the network connection in the area.

If Council selects this option, staff recommends also reallocating Skunk River Trail Local Option Sales Tax funds to fully fund the S. 4th Street pedestrian bridge project, ensuring its

continued progress toward 2026 construction. The Skunk River Trail connection remains programmed in the fifth year of the Capital Improvements Plan and can be reprioritized based on future property rights. Additionally, the salvaged bridge could be relocated to the Moore Memorial Park crossing.

STAFF COMMENTS:

Staff believes all reasonable efforts have been made to establish a west side river alignment and that the direction forward is unlikely to change without a shift in ownership or interest. Accordingly, Option 2 offers the most viable route to achieving connectivity of the loway Creek Trail. Furthermore, Option 2 would allow for the continued development of other trail projects such as the S. 4th Street crossing, and loway Creek crossing near Moore Memorial Park, which are facing funding challenges due to inflationary pressures of raw materials for bridge construction.

Given the potential challenges with the well access road alignment, staff may initially focus on the loway Creek to SE 16th Street connection, pending the outcome of preliminary conversations with affected property owners.

Option 2 would not preclude the City from obtaining a trail alignment along the Skunk River corridor in the future if the opportunity arose.

ATTACHMENT(S):

[Proposed River Alignment Map.pdf](#)

[Well Access Road Alignment Notes.pdf](#)

[Referenced Locations Map.pdf](#)