

Volunteers offer safety on trail bridges

BY ALGIS J. LAUKAITIS / Lincoln Journal Star

Crowded on a 1903 iron bridge across Salt Creek, the dozen or so men looked like a railroad gang from a bygone era. But these men were no gandy dancers.

They were volunteers: retired men in their 60s and 70s, employees from Pfizer and Lincoln Plating, members of the Great Plains Trails Network.

While many Lincolniters likely were stocking up on beer and snacks for the football game, these volunteers spent Saturday measuring, sawing and driving screws and nails on one of the main bridges on the Jamaica North Trail.

They were installing a wooden deck to cover the gaps between the creosote-soaked railroad ties and guard railings, so hikers and bikers won't veer off and plunge into the creek.

"It's a worthwhile project, so I want to make sure it gets done," said Albert Maxey, 68, a former duty commander with the Lincoln Police Department.

The 6.5-mile Jamaica North Trail on the eastern edge of Wilderness Park is not officially open. Most of the trail has been graded and covered in crushed limestone, but the Lincoln Parks and Recreation Department still needs to install crossing signs and other safety features. A dedication ceremony is planned for next year.

Terry Genrich, natural resources and greenways manager for Parks and Rec, said the volunteers are saving the city about \$46,000 in labor and also helping get money for future trail projects.

"Any time we submit a grant, the (trails) enhancement committee looks at partnerships and gives extra points for bringing in organizations and volunteers," Genrich said.

Lynn Lightner, 72, a former structural engineer for Kingery Construction Co., is spearheading the bridge work. He's worked on all nine bridges — 13 if you count the ones with multiple sections. Lightner has worked on other trails, too, like the MoPac, which runs east of Lincoln, and the Steamboat Trace near Brownville.

The Jamaica North Trail is his favorite — for now.

"It's just like, what's your favorite book? It's the last one I read," said Lightner, a longtime trails advocate.

The Jamaica North is unique. Built on an abandoned Union Pacific Railroad line, it hugs Wilderness Park on the east side and is in the Salt Creek flood plain. And it's flat as a pancake.

"It's just a beautiful trail," said Jerry Dvorak, a 52-year-old Pfizer employee. "I've seen deer and turkeys. I love it."

If they're lucky, volunteers get paid in coffee and donuts. They bring their own lunch. But working with other like-minded people who use and love the trails is reward enough for many.

"It just makes you feel good when you're done," said Dvorak, who's been riding his bike on the city's trail system for 10 years.

Although some volunteers come with carpentry skills, most learn on the job. The men, and occasionally some women, come from all walks of life.

"If you look at the hours of college credit it would be phenomenal," said interior designer and trails enthusiast Ross Greathouse.

Saturday was J.K. Purtzer's first time on the bridge crew.

"I wanted to help out with this because it's a cool project," said Purtzer, a database administrator. "I really like this trail. I really am impressed with the volunteers. I just can't believe there's that many volunteers out here."

Runner David Spinar of Lincoln, who came upon the bridge crew, was not only impressed by their work but the trail itself.

"I can't wait for my kids to grow up and enjoy it."

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