

# Alberta's Iron Horse Trail

## Celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary on June 8, 2013!

### A Model of Community Cooperation

**North East Muni-Corr Ltd:** A part nine registered not for profit company consisting of ten municipalities who own the rail corridor. They meet once a month to conduct Muni-Corr business. N.E. Muni-Corr deals with all the land holdings of the organization.



**Ten Municipalities:** Smoky Lake County, Town of Smoky Lake, Village of Vilna, M.D. of Bonnyville, Town of Bonnyville, City of Cold Lake, Village of Glendon, Town of Elk Point, Town of St. Paul and St. Paul County. Each municipality approves all trail structures within its jurisdiction and helps maintain the local trail.

**Riverland Recreational Trail Society:** This is a registered not for profit charitable organization that carries out the role of coordinating trail development on the corridor by working closely with Muni-Corr, the ten municipalities and local stakeholders. RRTS Directors meet once a month to plan and carry out trail building. They have a trail steward program and they monitor and report on trail activity. Patrol a specific section of the trail, reporting back one overall Trail Coordinator. Also involved in building and operating the trail. There are presently eleven trail steward regions.



**Iron Horse Trail Groomer Foundation:** This is a registered not for profit organization with a membership from each of the regions five snowmobile clubs. They own a groomer and trailer and their purpose is to groom the Iron Horse Trail in the winter time for snowmobiling.

**Alberta's Iron Horse Product Club:** This is a position only and is not a registered not for profit organization. Focus on tourism product development, research and education. Role in connecting groups to resources and spearheads inter-provincial relationships. Helps start local and marketing initiatives for the trail.



**Alberta's Lakeland Destination Marketing Organization (DMO):** A registered not for profit, co-funded organization with a regional Board of Directors. Create regional tourism marketing partnerships to reach regional, provincial and inter-provincial markets. Partner with the Iron Horse Trail to represent Alberta's Lakeland tourism region at tradeshow and conferences. This organization has a much wider regional scope than the trail.



## Background:

N.E. Muni-Corr Ltd. has a Master Agreement with each of the ten municipal partners for looking after the 300km. of abandoned rail line. The municipality's maintenance responsibilities to look after the 99 foot right of way include weed and pest control, culvert maintenance, bylaw signage, grading and minor repairs. Minor repairs have included washouts and items that require equipment or manpower outside the scope of what the volunteers are able to do. Over the years, a lot of the area has grown in which is the intent of N.E. Muni-Corr. As a result, there is very little maintenance required when it comes to mowing and blading; approximately twice a year for the rural partners and mowing more often for the urban partners. Each municipality has other maintenance issues; County of St. Paul is battling with beaver damns, culvert replacements and washouts, the M.D. of Bonnyville also deals with washouts and culvert replacement and the urban partners deal with dust control and aesthetics.

N.E. Muni-Corr Ltd. has a License of Occupation Agreement to lease the middle 33 feet of the right of way to Riverland Recreational Trail Society (RRTS) who operates it as a multi use recreation corridor. RRTS is a non profit organization made up of volunteers, trail users and supporters from throughout the region. RRTS was formed about the same time as N.E. Muni-Corr and the volunteers were instrumental in the acquisition of the rail line and the development of the Iron Horse Trail. Another non profit organization was formed at the onset. The Iron Horse Groomer Foundation is made up of volunteers from the five snowmobile clubs in the region; Smoky Lake, St. Paul, Elk Point, Bonnyville and Cold Lake. The Foundation did fundraising and applied for grants to purchase a snowmobile trail groomer. This included three years of operational funds which they managed to stretch over ten years. These two organizations have worked together and been responsible for maintenance on the trail; garbage, signage, deadfall, closing and opening gates, regular patrols to make sure there are no safety issues, grooming in the winter, repairs to structures and dealing with trail abuse whether it is speeding, garbage or other wilful damage.

We look around the table today and see many of the same faces that were volunteering right from the beginning. Whether they belong to Riverland or the Groomer Foundation, they were all

instrumental in building the Iron Horse Trail up to what it is today - an iconic tourist attraction. These volunteers have worked tirelessly to apply for grants, fundraise and work with other local groups and the municipalities to get the staging areas built, get proper signage on the trail, develop a trail steward program to deal with safety issues, work with adjacent landowners to alleviate problems, work with local authorities to develop a uniform set of bylaws and work with the provincial government to develop recreation corridor policy. RRTS manages the maintenance of the trail throughout the summer months and the Groomer Foundation manages the maintenance of the trail throughout the winter months. Without both of these organizations, we would not have a safe, family friendly trail that is enjoyed year round by people from our region, from across the western provinces and beyond.

Comments made at a recent meeting sum up the feelings of the two organizations; when negotiations started with CN to acquire the rail line, we all worked together. It was a partnership between local rate payers who volunteered their time and energy, ten municipalities who provided financial backing, expertise and political clout and various other groups and stakeholders who believed in the project. We need to get back to working together so we can figure out what kind of mechanism to put in place to sustain the trail through municipal and volunteer changes. There is nothing like this trail in Alberta and so many people embrace it; users, government stakeholders and other trail builders.

Financially the non profit organizations struggle with their operational costs.

The Groomer Foundation can not work casinos because they are an off shoot group of the five snowmobile clubs who already have casino licenses. Snowmobile Clubs receive about \$12.00 for every ASA snowmobile pass their organization sells. Last winter, Elk Point sold 5, St. Paul sold 25 and, with the lack of snow, the other clubs did not fare much better. This money along with their own club casino funds goes to maintaining their local trails and structures.

Riverland raises money through a membership fee to join their organization. Membership is \$10.00 per person or \$25.00 per family which nets the group about \$1300.00 a year. Ironically, the membership is made up of the trail volunteers who already contribute significantly by paying for their own gas, meals and materials to maintain the trail, attend meetings and to fix what's broken. RRTS works a casino, once every two and a half years and usually gets around \$20,000.00. However, this money cannot be spent on the day to day operations of the group. It goes towards signs, trail resurfacing and other capital projects.

Both organizations get the work done on the backs of their volunteers. There are no wages paid out in either group and they are continuously looking for support within their communities. Companies such as UFA Glendon, Double D Bobcat in Cold Lake, Northern Lights Welding in St. Paul and Lakeland Petroleum in Bonnyville are great supporters and have donated fuel and trucking services to the Groomer Foundation. Our trail stewards make regular trail patrols using their own vehicles and gas. The list goes on and no one doubts the great contributions, financial and labour, that come from volunteers. But, at the end of the day, they are struggling to pay insurance, meeting expenses, fuel, oil changes and equipment maintenance, office expenses, book keeping and other general expenses that can not be taken care of with grant or casino dollars.

The Muni-Corr Trail Maintenance Committee, Iron Horse Trail Groomer Foundation and Riverland Recreational Trail Society met on several occasions to discuss the need for some type of permanent funding for the volunteer organizations for the maintenance of the Iron Horse Trail. As a result, the Committee brought forward the following recommendations and at their June 11<sup>th</sup> Muni-Corr meeting, a unanimous motion was passed to support the recommendations as presented in principle.

#### Committee Recommendations:

1. The ten municipal partners support the non profit organizations so the trail development and maintenance work continues to be done. This can be done through diverting the Iron Horse Trail Tourism Product Club funding previously approved by the ten partner municipalities and providing a top up. The amount for each municipality is determined by applying the N.E. Muni-Corr Proportionate Share formula that was developed when the company formed and is part of the Master Agreement each partner signed.

Annual budgets for each organization

<b>Riverland Recreational Trail Society</b>		
Insurance	2,000.00	
Voluntary Trail Pass Program	1,200.00	
Memberships	250.00	
Meeting & Office	1,150.00	
Bookkeeping	600.00	
Giveaway Promotional Items	500.00	
Signs, sign posts, magnetic vehicle signs & rotating lights	3,000.00	
Replace vandalized outhouses, picnic tables and other trail amenities	1,000.00	
Paint, locks, chains, reflective tape, surveyors tape	600.00	
Stakeholder & Gov't Tours	1,200.00	
Trail Camera	500.00	
<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>12,000.00</b>	<b>12,000.00</b>
<b>Iron Horse Trail Groomer Foundation</b>		
Insurance	3,000.00	
Fuel	3,000.00	
Repairs & Maintenance	10,000.00	
<b>Sub Total</b>	<b>16,000.00</b>	<b>16,000.00</b>
<b>Total Budget</b>		<b>\$28,000.00</b>

Riverland Recreational Trail Society works a casino in Camrose once every 2 ½ to 3 years. They usually net about \$20,000.00. These funds are spent on the following:

- Volunteers to attend various educational conventions / seminars
- Informational signs for the trail
- Iron Horse Trail promo DVD
- Website updates and maintenance
- Capital projects

The day to day expenses reflected in the above budget are not allowed to be paid using casino funds:

- Insurance.
- Voluntary Trail Pass stickers, books and supplies, membership books.
- Memberships to AAMDC, Alberta's Lakeland DMO, Alberta TrailNet.
- Office supplies; telephone, paper, photo copying, postage, flowers, thank you's, and annual AGM expenses (volunteer appreciation).
- Bookkeeping.
- Giveaway promotional items; toques, hats, neck warmers.

- Trail stewards get a set of magnetic signs and a rotating light for trail patrols. Signs and sign posts get stolen or damaged and need to be replaced.
- A few outhouses have been vandalized and get replaced along with picnic tables. Some tables were old to begin with and are now beyond repair.
- Toilet paper, surveyors tape, paint, stakes, locks, chain and other trail steward supplies.
- Meeting expenses associated with stakeholders, government and other interested trail builders. For example; Clearwater County and Recreation Corridor Committee Tour.
- Trail camera.

Cost for each Municipality using Proportionate Share formula

Municipality	Product Club Funding	Proportionate Share	Amount
County of St. Paul	4,800.00	24.0 %	6,720.00
Town of Elk Point	360.00	1.8 %	504.00
Town of Bonnyville	1,380.00	6.9 %	1,932.00
Town of Smoky Lake	320.00	1.6 %	448.00
M.D. of Bonnyville	5,000.00	24.0 %	6,720.00
Village of Vilna	44.00	0.2 %	56.00
Smoky Lake County	3,800.00	19.0 %	5,320.00
Town of St. Paul	1,400.00	6.6 %	1,848.00
City of Cold Lake	3,040.00	15.2 %	4,256.00
Village of Glendon	140.00	0.7 %	196.00
Total	20,284.00		28,000.00

2. Proportionate Share formula along with clarification and interpretation of Master Agreement be dealt with at subsequent N.E. Muni-Corr meetings.
3. Municipalities honour agreements their predecessors put in place.
4. N.E. Muni-Corr Ltd. and volunteers from both non profit organizations presents the approved proposal to each of the ten partner councils.

Summary:

Riverland Recreational Trail Society finds the majority of their volunteer hours and expenses are associated with “organizational” duties and tasks. Here are some examples of work done in the past, being worked on now and some future projects the group will be involved with.

- a) Develop and implement a Riverland Recreational Trail Society Directors Handbook.
- b) Develop and implement an Emergency Response Plan.
- c) Organized Trail Steward Program and serve as a liaison to deal with trail user and adjacent landowner complaints.
- d) Organized Executive to manage a volunteer base that is spread over ten municipalities.
- e) Ongoing research, writing proposals, reports and finalizing grant applications. To date, just over 1.2 million dollars have been brought into our region through grants that Riverland Recreational Trail Society has applied for and administered.
- f) Trail Tours and presentations to various Government representatives and other stakeholders. Clearwater County, Recreation Corridor Committee, Premier Stelmach, Minister Cindy Ady, Valerie Pringle, Travel Alberta, N.E. Muni-Corr and Municipal representatives, to name a few.
- g) Develop, organize and set up the longest geo cache in the world. This “Power Trail” is attracting worldwide attention with interested parties from Europe and the US planning to visit the Iron Horse Trail.
- h) Work with other organizations in the region to find other ways to utilize the trail and acquire trail stewards and volunteers to help maintain the trail. For example, the Lakeland Cross Country Ski Club now holds an annual event on the trail, The Iron Horse Ultra 100 use the trail as part of their race course. These groups have a vested interest in the trail now and help with maintaining it and promoting it.
- i) Probably the most important capacity the Riverland Recreational Trail Society volunteers serve in is their connections. We have volunteers who sit on the Board of Alberta TrailNet, River Valley Alliance and the Recreation Corridors Committee to name a few. RRTS volunteers were heavily involved in the Lower Athabasca Regional Plan and were successful in changing the areas and use of recreation land in the Plan. They even organized a bus load of people representing affected businesses and recreation groups to attend the Edmonton Legislative to meet with several Ministers. To date there have been two Ministerial trips to Quebec to assess first hand their trails, Government support and maintenance programs. Another trip is planned for 2012 and this is all done with volunteers from Riverland Recreational Trail Society. Ongoing lobbying to our Provincial and Federal Governments, providing information, ideas and input to them and other interested trail builders in Alberta.