

# Friends of the Green Bay Trail marks a decade of environmental stewardship in Glencoe

By **DANIEL I. DORFMAN** PIONEER PRESS FEB 23, 2021 AT 4:08 PM



Over the last 10 years, hundreds of trees and shrubs have been planted and millions of seeds sown along parts of the Green Bay Trail in Glencoe.

For the organization working on the restoration, it is a tale of triumph.

“This is a great story of what a few people with passion can accomplish,” said Cam Avery, who sits on the Friends of the Green Bay Trail board.

On Feb. 10, the organization celebrated its decade of service in a virtual program hosted by the Glencoe Public Library.

Avery took viewers on a pictorial history of the trail, noting how for many years it was a dark tunnel with debris piled up on the slopes since little maintenance was performed on the site from the 1960s until the end of the last decade, according to group members.

That meant Avery, who moved back to Glencoe in 2007 where he lived as a child, couldn't see the pathway due to a dense forest filled with invasive buckthorn.

By 2010, a group of volunteers led by resident Betsy Leibson started their work on the trail and eventually brought in other volunteers from Glencoe, Winnetka and Wilmette, among other local communities. The initial refurbishment target was an approximate five-acre area from Harbor Street south to Scott Avenue. Volunteers started to cut down and remove unwanted shrubs, trees, invasive species, and assorted debris.

"With the removal of invasive trees, plants and accumulated waste, embedded natural spring flowers were able to bloom," noted Meredith Clement, a board trustee.

Jo Ann Kimzey, a fellow Friends of the Green Bay Trail board member, remembered the use of power drills to make holes in the compacted railroad soil, recalling it was very labor-intensive work. The primary target was the eradication of European buckthorn, an invasive plant.

"It puts chemicals into the soil which prevents other plants from growing," Kimzey said.

Volunteers were able to remove much of the buckthorn and a series of native plants came back, Kimzey said, but to this day, that requires continual stewardship.

"The trouble is there is no way that these natives can fill in faster than the invasive (plants) come back," Kimzey said.

Kimzey identified other objectives such as the removal of poison ivy, encouraging biodiversity and the creation of an overall safer atmosphere.

"When you have heavy (brush) vegetation near a playground, your kid might disappear into it," she said.

In 2016, Friends of the Green Bay Trail representatives started a new effort from Harbor to south of South Avenue, commonly known as SOSA.

Volunteers have done their work with the support of the village, which owns most of the property, according to Glencoe Public Works Director David Mau.

“It’s a dramatic improvement,” Mau said. “Say what you want about buckthorn, but it is invasive, and it was crowding out everything else. It’s difficult for the village to manage because it grows so aggressively. Through their efforts, the south end is now a more diverse native landscape setting and you have clearance on both sides.”

Mau said village still provides for disposal of weeds and cuttings and village crews have removed roughly 150 dead or hazardous trees in the initial section over the past four to five years.

Friends of the Green Bay Trail efforts have not been universally endorsed throughout the community as some residents close to the property complained when the old plants were removed it created a lack of screening into their homes from the adjacent Metra tracks.

However, Mau believes that issue has eased.

“We maintain a regular dialogue with a couple of those neighbors,” he said. “That has quieted down significantly since their initial concerns.”

Bob Kirschner, an ecological and restoration consultant for the group, said tall evergreen trees were planted to provide better overall coverage for the neighbors.

“Many of them were chosen for their spectacular fall beauty as well,” Kirschner said.

Friends of the Green Bay Trail volunteers sought to enhance the aesthetics of the trail beyond the replanting of the native species. Specifically, there are now benches, a multiuse fountain, and a monarch butterfly hatchery.

Looking ahead, officials said they are now in a stewardship phase and working to enhance the resilience of the trail. Yet they spotlighted a series of challenges going forward including steep slopes leading to poor soil in addition the constant battle against the return of invasive plants.

“Invasive species will always keep us busy, they are always going to be around,” Kirschner acknowledged.

He also spoke of the perils of climate change, specifically flooding at some points combined with hotter winters, laced with droughts.

“Moving forward we need to factor changing climate into the plant species that we choose so they can withstand the expected changes in rainfall patterns as well as air temperature,” Kirschner said. “We need to create ecosystems that are affordable to manage and maintain over the long term.”

Avery said the group could use additional volunteers and fundraising to pay for some work required from restoration industry professionals.

“We always need to buy more plants and pay for more contractors,” Avery said.

Overall, Avery sized up the group’s continued efforts as one focused on a specific mission.

“We are environmental stewards of the Green Bay Trail,” he said. “Our mission is to provide a healthy, natural corridor for the well being of individuals and the surrounding communities.”

*Daniel I. Dorfman is a freelance reporter.*