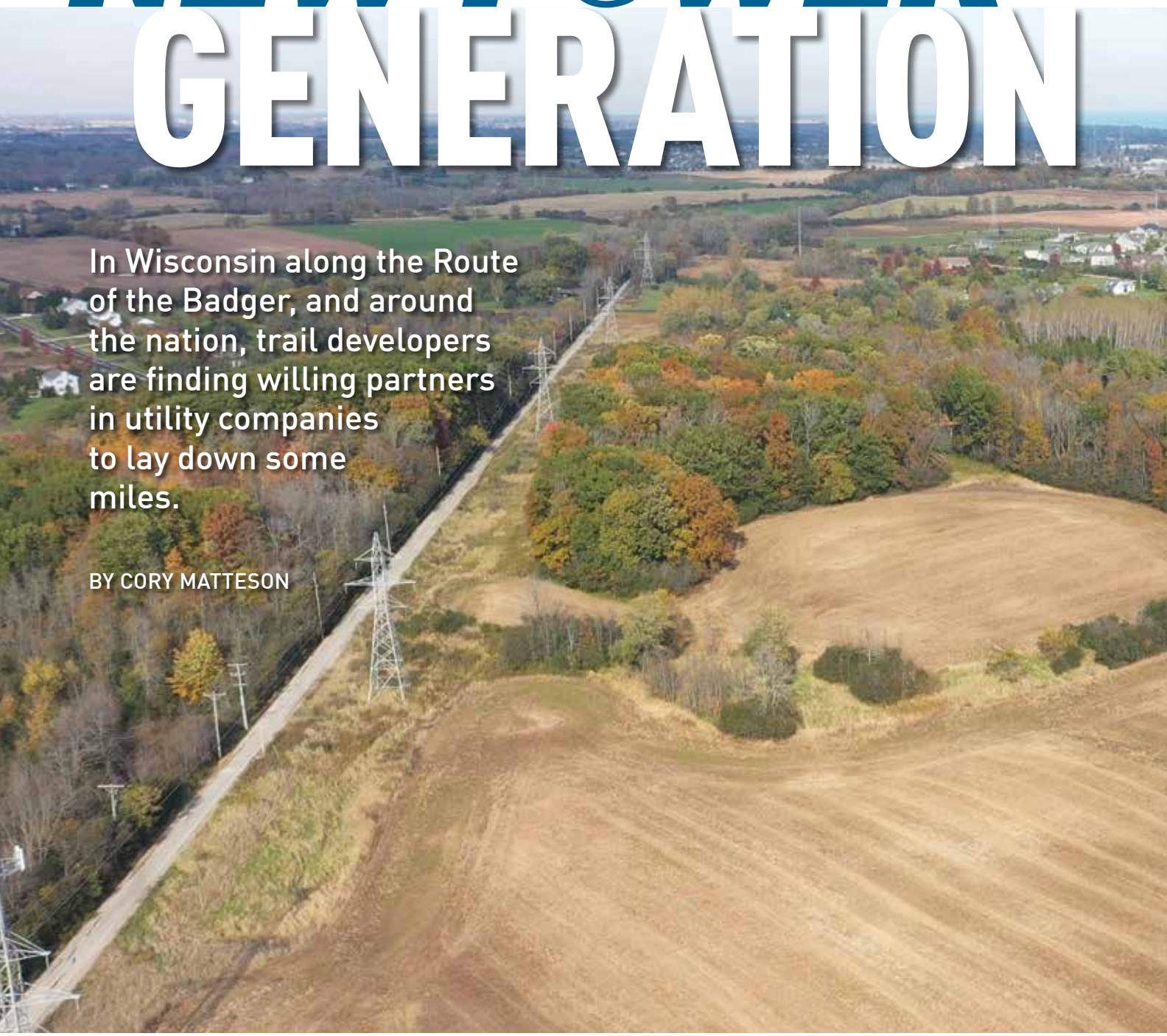
NEW POWER GENERATION



In Wisconsin along the Route of the Badger, and around the nation, trail developers are finding willing partners in utility companies to lay down some miles.

BY CORY MATTESON

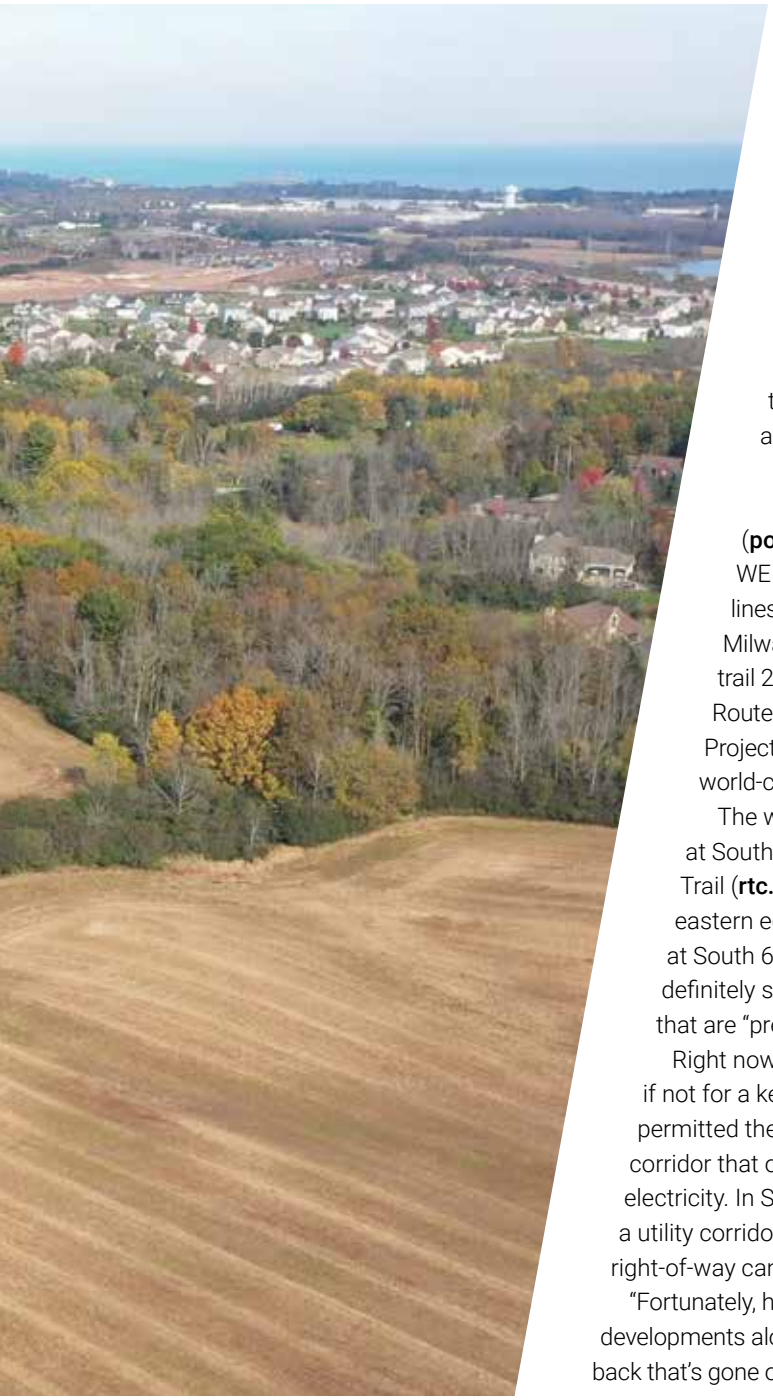


PHOTO: Along the Ozaukee Interurban Trail in Grafton, Wisconsin; the trail was created in part through a partnership with WE Energies.

Mike Amsden grew up in Greenfield, Wisconsin, and lived about a half block from a row of sky-high transmission towers whose power lines split a set of suburban Milwaukee backyards and woodlands. Back in the late '80s and early '90s, that corridor served as an unofficial neighborhood playground of sorts, Amsden, now 39, said.

"You know, my childhood memories are filled with spending time on that right-of-way, whether it be hiking or riding our bikes or playing baseball or football," said Amsden, who grew up to become the multimodal transportation manager for the City of Milwaukee.

He and his buddies played capture the flag and shanked golf balls in the woods off the corridor, whipped around on BMX bikes beneath the power lines, and sledded down a nearby hill he's come to realize in adulthood was not nearly as steep and terrifying as he thought it was. Back then, the area was treated like an "unpaved trail," he said.

Soon, part of the corridor will lose the "un" part of that description. The first phase of the aptly named Powerline Trail (**powerlinetrail.org**) will utilize the utility corridor, which is owned by WE Energies and carries a set of American Transmission Co. power lines, to create about a 3-mile east–west pathway for Greenfield and Milwaukee county residents (a second planned phase will extend the trail 2 more miles). It's one of the latest funded projects linked to the Route of the Badger, a Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) TrailNation™ Project, which is bringing partners together to build a 700-miles-plus world-class trail system that connects all corners of Southeast Wisconsin.

The western end of the Powerline Trail links up near Kulwicki Park at South 108th Street with Milwaukee County's 135-miles-plus Oak Leaf Trail (**rtc.li/oak-leaf-wis**). And Amsden can envision a connection from the eastern edge of the trail's first phase, which will stop near Armour Park at South 60th Street, the rest of the way to the Milwaukee lakefront. "That's definitely something that's on our radar," he said, adding that talks about that are "pre-preliminary."

Right now, he's focused on another trail project that wouldn't be possible if not for a key partner in the region, WE Energies. The utility company has permitted the city to build 1.3 off-street miles of trail on a north-side Milwaukee corridor that once featured an interurban rail line but for now transports only electricity. In Southeastern Wisconsin, and in municipalities around the country, a utility corridor is not a roadblock for trail developers; in fact, this type of public right-of-way can offer a path forward.

"Fortunately, here in Milwaukee, WE Energies has been very open to allowing trail developments along their power line corridors," Amsden said. "I don't know how far back that's gone or when that willingness to cooperate started, but it's great."

OZUAKEE COUNTY PLANNING AND PARKS DEPARTMENT

Electric Origins

About a decade after Thomas Edison patented the light bulb, North America's first power lines rose alongside the eastern shoreline of the Willamette River near the western terminus of the Oregon Trail. These were humble beginnings. The lines were built to transmit hydroelectric power from an Oregon City generating station about 14 miles up the river to downtown Portland, where it would illuminate a string of 55 street lights. A power line system that runs about half the length of a marathon is nothing compared to today's vast network of nearly 160,000 miles of high-voltage power lines, but it was a successful start. The lights first fired up in the summer of 1889, and a *Portland Morning Oregonian* story raved that "it worked magnificently, and conclusively demonstrated that our city can be lighted successfully from the falls." While those original transmission lines were likely of the inferior direct current variety, the first North American power lines provided something of a blueprint for all the alternating current systems to follow, by running along a straight-as-possible shot from point A to point B, adjacent to a navigable geographical path. Kind of like a railroad line does.

Now the roots of Wisconsin's largest electricity and natural gas provider, WE Energies, are linked to the rails. According to the digital Encyclopedia of Milwaukee, the company's origins date back to the founding of the city's first electric streetcar company, the Milwaukee Street Railway Company. In April of 1890, the first electrified trolley took off on Wells Street, and a *Milwaukee Daily Journal* reporter wrote that a Cream City traveler could now "slide through the city like a greased pig through a lasso." A few years later, the company became known as The Milwaukee Electric Railway and Light Company. The company has been known as WE Energies since 2002, and it is now part of the WEC Energy Group.

The company that would become We Energies traces its trail support back to the 1970s, said Dawn Neuy, WE Energies real estate services manager.

"I wasn't around in the 1970s, but that's really when this discussion started happening with my predecessors … and by the late 1970s is when we actually started to have some trail agreements in place," Neuy said.

Among the first projects were segments on what is now the Ozaukee Interurban Trail (**rtc.li/ozaukee-interurban**), which runs mostly along land leased from WE Energies. The 30-mile trail follows the route of the old Milwaukee-Sheboygan interurban railway, which closed in 1948. It now connects to the Oak Leaf Trail (**rtc.li/oak-leaf-wis**) at its southern terminus and runs from the northern Milwaukee County line village of Brown Deer up through Mequon, Thiensville, Cedarburg, Grafton, Port Washington and Belgium before linking up in Oostburg with the 14-mile Sheboygan Interurban Trail (**rtc.li/sheboygan-interurban**), which is also on the old electric railcar path that was acquired by Wisconsin Electric (now WE Energies). The railway once carried Delta blues legends like Charley Patton, Skip James and the Mississippi Sheiks to their final destination in Grafton, where they recorded at the Paramount Records studio. Now it's one of several Southeastern Wisconsin trail stretches known for cyclist-friendly breweries and cafés.

Though the first inroads were made in 1975, it took until 1998 before the state provided funding to county and community groups to fill in the remaining gaps. In the early days, Neuy said, trail projects were one-off decisions. Now, she said, there is an overall mission of building up the Route of the Badger in places where WE Energies corridors can contribute.

PHOTOS: Before (above) and after (below) visuals of the developing Powerline Trail corridor in Greenfield along the developing Route of the Badger trail network

Read about the Oak Leaf Trail, part of the developing Route of the Badger, in the Winter 2020 issue of *Rails to Trails*: rtc.li/oak-leaf-mag.

400
No. of multiuse trails in America that coexist within electric utility corridors

17%
Portion of rail-trails in the U.S. at least partially shared with a utility corridor

700+
Mileage of the developing Route of the Badger in Southeast Wisconsin

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PHOTOS: In Oostburg, the 17.7-mile Sheboygan Interurban Trail connects with the Ozaukee Interurban Trail, providing 30 miles of connectivity south to the 125-mile Oak Leaf Trail. All three are part of the developing 700-mile Route of the Badger.

There are currently 98 miles of Wisconsin trails on WE Energies corridors, with another 37 in the works. She credited RTC Route of the Badger Project Manager Willie Karidis with matchmaking on many of the latest projects.

"He's really been that conductor of sorts, where he marries the municipality or the county with the utility company and identifies the route," Neuy said. "Then we, with our internal group, both our electric and gas operations groups, make sure that we can accommodate those trails and make sure that we're not going to impede any of our facilities. And we'll also coordinate with other utility companies such as American Transmission Company, because they do have a lot of transmission on our fee-owned corridors."

Karidis said that working with WE Energies has been a vital part of the gap-filling strategy along the Route of the Badger, adding that the partnership can serve as a model for other trail developers who have considered working with utility companies to build up trail networks across the country. And it doesn't hurt, he said, that there are several avid trail users on the WE Energies leadership team.

"Why do we do it? Environmental stewardship, community access, healthy communities," said Tom Metcalfe, president of WE Energies and Wisconsin Public Service. "It just ticks so many boxes for us."

An avid cyclist and former board member of the Friends of Hank Aaron State Trail (**hankaaronstatetrail.org**), Metcalfe said he has marveled at how that trail has contributed to the revitalization of Milwaukee's Menomonee Valley.

"Working closely with the city and community groups, we were able to, I think, design a system of both green space and industrial-commercial space that is, I'm sure, the envy of many cities across the country now," Metcalfe said. "If you go down through the Menomonee Valley, even if you didn't know what it looked like before, just seeing it the first time you'd be impressed."

Metcalfe said the WE Energies team has developed a culture of supporting trail projects in his time there.

"It's all about trying to connect these corridors so that we can have not just a trail that runs for 3 miles and then you have to get back on the streets again and figure out how to get to the next section," he said. "If we can ride from Milwaukee to Madison, you know, that's when things really start to get exciting."

"Why do we do it? Environmental stewardship, community access, healthy communities. It just ticks so many boxes for us."

Tom Metcalfe, President, WE Energies and Wisconsin Public Service

The Missing Link

Visit the Powerline Trail website (**powerlinetrail.org**), and you'll be greeted by an image that shows two rows of Greenfield homes divided by the WE Energies corridor. Visit the Phase 1 section of the site, and you'll find a version of this image that lets you slide back and forth from before to after, with the after image revealing what a mixed-use trail will look like once the aptly named trail is built.

That "after" part has been on a City of Greenfield wish list for quite some time, said city engineer Jeff Katz, whose son Matt created the before-after sliding graphic.

"This corridor has been on the City of Greenfield's radar as a location for a bicycle trail for, I think, 25 years or more, probably," Katz said.

ROUTE OF THE BADGER

TRAIL NATION

The Route of the Badger is a developing 700-miles-plus regional trail network that aims to create equitable connections to critical destinations and premier cultural attractions throughout Southeast Wisconsin. When complete, the network, an RTC TrailNation™ project, will stretch from Milwaukee to Dousman, and from Sheboygan to Kenosha. Further links could even be made to Chicago, Madison and, eventually, Minneapolis. Learn more at railstotrails.org/badger.

PHOTOS: The city of Milwaukee has plans to add a segment to the 3.7-mile burgeoning Beerline Trail (above, left and right) using WE Energies utility corridor land. The Beerline Trail is part of the developing 700-mile Route of the Badger TrailNation project.

There had been some swing-and-miss attempts to fund a trail project there in the past, he said. Katz credits the expansive Route of the Badger vision for helping Greenfield secure funding for the Powerline Trail.

"When I heard that the Route of the Badger network of trails included the planning idea of putting a bicycle trail or multiuse trail there, we thought, this is perfect," he said. "When plans support the idea of a trail, then grant providers are more interested in providing grants. There were other studies that had shown the idea [of developing] a trail there. The Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission [**sewrpc.org**], which is a seven-county commission in this part of the state of Wisconsin, had shown [interest in] a trail in this corridor, and all these things helped us to get a grant for what we're building now."

Katz said the Powerline Trail is an important addition to southern Milwaukee County, an area that has some north–south connections but is lacking latitudinally.

"There are not many east–west connections, so this is going to bring a lot of people to the other trails in the system," Katz said. "It's truly a missing-link trail."

Katz and Amsden said trail developers view the Powerline Trail as a first link that could eventually connect Lake Michigan to Madison and potentially La Crosse. More immediately, the focus in Milwaukee is to develop a trail that runs parallel to a low-volume rail line through the city's underserved 30th Street Industrial Corridor. A study published by RTC, "Reconnecting Milwaukee," found that only 8% of Milwaukee residents living in neighborhoods experiencing inequality were within 2 miles of an existing trail access point compared to 24% of the general population, and that many of those neighborhoods overlap with the 6.7-mile 30th Street corridor in the northwest portion of the city (**rtc.li/connect-milwaukee**).

Learn more about the Beerline Trail in the 2017 Green Issue of *Rails to Trails*: rtc.li/beerline-essay.

"There are not many east–west connections, so this is going to bring a lot of people to the other trails in the system. It's truly a missing-link trail."

Jeff Katz, Greenfield City Engineer, on the developing Powerline Trail in southern Milwaukee County

A trail along the 30th Street corridor is viewed by proponents as a transformational project that will provide a predominantly Black community with a protected trail that provides greater opportunities for outdoor recreation, nonmotorized commuting and connections to the greater Milwaukee and Route of the Badger trail systems.

An additional project that will serve the city's northside residents is the 1.3-mile trail being developed on WE Energies land. Last November, the city won a nearly $1 million Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) state grant to convert the turf beneath the utility lines to a 12-foot-wide trail. The trail parallels North 20th Street from West Olive Street to West Villiard Avenue. Along with the north–south 1.3-mile 20th Street trail on the former utility corridor, a 0.35-mile east–west section of former rail line will be converted to trail thanks to the TAP-funded project. The small segment is a standalone piece of the city's portion of the burgeoning Beerline Trail, and both pieces of the 1.65-mile project could be expanded in the future. But the trail will provide immediate benefits to the area; in its TAP grant application, the Department of Public Works said the trail would allow for safe utilitarian nonmotorized trips for the 10,600 people who live in three census tracts adjacent to the proposed path.

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"About 725 people are employed in the 0.25-mile area surrounding the proposed trail, many in jobs along the former Beerline rail corridor," the grant application states. "The trail will provide a safe, comfortable way for people to bike or walk to these jobs."

Amsden said the project provides neighborhood and regional connectivity.

"This stretch of the power line corridor provides access to not only Lincoln Park and Rufus King High School, but to the bigger regional Oak Leaf Trail system," said Amsden. "So it's great for short neighborhood trips to get to recreation or educational facilities, but it also then extends the Oak Leaf Trail out into the neighborhoods. It's a really critical piece. It's a short stretch, but really ties nicely into the existing trail system."

Of course, liability and safety are factors in contract agreements, which must be carefully laid out between the city and the utility company.

"They want to make sure that people aren't in contact with their facilities, so they want to maintain some sort of clearance," Amsden said. "They want to ensure they have access at all times, and … that the entity in control of the trail would be us. We'd be getting the easements to use that land, and then we'd also be required to maintain the trail. Things like that need to be in place."

And so far, Metcalfe said, WE Energies has not had a situation where the utility has received a claim from a member of the public or a third party because of the use of one of the trails built on utility corridors.

"That right there builds the confidence that what we have … is safe," Metcalfe said. "It's the right thing to do. It can be time-consuming to get these agreements in place …. You've got to bring a lot of people along, but it's worth the effort."

Powerful Partnerships

WE energies was on the forefront of these partnerships, but take a look around the country, and you will find many other utility companies have joined forces with trail developers. In fact, a spatial analysis by RTC of its trail database and publicly available electric-transmission lines data revealed that more than 400 multiuse trails across the country coexist within electric utility corridor rights-of-way, and approximately 17% of rail-trails in the United States are at least partially shared with this type of utility corridor.

In Upper Michigan, the St. Ignace to Trout Lake Trail (**rtc.li/st-ignace-trout-lake**) is in place because Michigan Bell donated ground space to the Forest Service after purchasing the corridor from a rail company that had not engaged with trail supporters. Fiber optic cables now run beneath the 26-mile trail. In Houston, the city and CenterPoint Energy signed an agreement in 2014 to build hike-and-bike trails along utility corridors, and projects like the first phase of the Spring Branch Trail (**rtc.li/spring-branch-trail**) are coming online. In Florida, a Duke Power corridor is propelling an extension project—known as the Duke Energy Trail (**rtc.li/duke-energy-trail-fla**)—on the Fred Marquis Pinellas Trail (**rtc.li/pinellas-trail**) in Pinellas County. The Florida Power and Light utility corridor contributes to the Cross Seminole Trail (**rtc.li/cross-seminole**), and Miami-Dade County officials in recent years have explored developing more trails under FP&L transmission lines.

There are more examples, and in areas that haven't yet built such partnerships, Metcalfe encourages utility company leaders to explore the possibility. And as he was speaking about this topic, a lightbulb seemed to go off.

"I might even say that if another utility was serious about this, and wasn't sure where to start, that I would be happy to share with that utility a template of the kind of agreements that we have in our municipalities so that they can maybe use that to help them in their discussions," Metcalfe said. If that offer could help power more partnerships to build miles on utility corridors, he reasoned, it would be well worth the effort.•

Cory Matteson is a freelance writer and communications specialist at the University of Nebraska.

PHOTO: The Oak Leaf Trail in Milwaukee is part of the larger 700-mile Route of the Badger trail network that is being built out in part through collaboration with WE Energies.