

## Nickel Plate Trail, Inc. Endowment Fund

The clanging of railroad bells is a hallmark sound for Miami County. But when a railroad line is abandoned, it can fall into disrepair and become a dumping ground.

This once was the case for the Nickel Plate Line that runs through Peru. But with volunteer efforts and numerous generous donations and grants, an old rail line has been transformed into miles of trail for the community to use.

“Years ago, there were 38 miles of track where people could do bad stuff,” says Mike Kuepper, President of the Nickel Plate Trail Inc. “Now, it’s gone.”

Winding through Miami County, the Nickel Plate Trail – taking its name from the defunct railroad it now replaces – is 10 years in the making, drawing people from the local communities and across the U.S. to Indiana.

The Nickel Plate is also a part of the American Discovery Trail which stretches from the coast of the state of Delaware to the coast of the state of California. Indiana boasts some of the best-maintained trails in the country, and the Nickel Plate is no exception.

Businesses are also sprouting along the asphalt trail, bringing tourists from all over to sample Hoosier fare, spurring economic development.

“It has had a lot of positive effects,” Kuepper says.

When completed, the 38 miles of trail will offer locals and visitors a place to improve their health alongside Indiana wildlife. The Nickel Plate Trail welcomes cyclists, walkers, runners and anyone who has a passion for nature and wants to exercise. Even Boy and Girl Scouts and high school athletic teams find the trail’s natural and vehicle free setting to be a valuable community asset.

“It can be life-changing for a lot of people,” Kuepper says as he describes an individual he met who committed to using the trail to improve her health.

With 38 miles of trail, volunteer efforts are vital to the construction and maintenance of the trail. Volunteers ensure the paths are clear and that the trails are kept in proper shape. The trail’s vice president Bill Click estimates that the number of volunteers totals in the hundreds.

“There’s been a lot of sweat, a little blood, a few tears during this project over the years,” Bill says. “We’ve been really lucky with all of the hours volunteers put in.”

In addition to volunteers, the trail needs money to operate. The Northern Indiana Community Foundation granted money to the Nickel Plate for trail construction. And because maintenance fees are not covered by grants, the Nickel Plate Trail established an endowment fund with the Community Foundation for trail maintenance so the community treasure could be preserved. In 2010, NICF will match 25 cents for every dollar collected as a donation.

Because communities have embraced trail building efforts, more paths are sprouting every decade in Indiana. And many trails nearby are looking to connect to the Nickel Plate Trail.

“I don’t think we will ever finish,” Bill says. “As long as people like trails and support them, it’s just going to go on and on.”