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Ralph Wilson Gateway and Trail open on Belle Isle

DNR and partners complete southern trailhead for Michigan's Iron Belle Trail and break ground on new Eugene & Elaine C. Driker Trail

DETROIT (APRIL 26, 2022) – Representatives from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation gathered today on Belle Isle for the ribbon-cutting of the first phase of the Ralph Wilson Gateway and Trail. The ceremony also celebrated the launch of construction for the new Eugene and Elaine C. Driker Trail on the east end of the Detroit island park.

Located on the eastern end of Belle Isle, the new gateway serves as the official southern trailhead for Michigan's Iron Belle Trail, which is considered the longest state-designated trail in the nation. It stretches more than 2,000 miles across the state along two separate hiking and biking routes, connecting communities between Belle Isle in Detroit to Ironwood in the western tip of the Upper Peninsula.

The new gateway greets visitors with a park/trail kiosk, a small plaza area with a pergola and picnic tables, a new parking lot, and a path to reach the [recently installed "One World ... Under Michigan Stars"](#) – a towering glass-and-steel sculpture designed by Erik and Israel Nordin of the Detroit Design Center.

“Michigan is known as the Trails State for many good reasons, and none more fitting than what we are celebrating today. The Iron Belle Trail, now more than 70 percent complete, is built segment by segment through partnerships just like this,” said DNR Director Dan Eichinger. “This foundation of support is echoed by the recent record investment in state and local parks announced just last month by Gov. Whitmer, setting up more outdoor recreation facilities and resources for the future.”

The new Ralph Wilson Trail, which serves as the first segment of the larger Iron Belle Trail, provides a 6-mile, off-road and dedicated pathway for pedestrians and cyclists around the entire island. The first half of the trail is complete, taking visitors from the gateway along the beach side of the island to MacArthur Bridge. The construction for the remaining half of the trail and gap along the shoreline will begin later this year.

Today's ceremony also signified the launch of construction for the new Eugene and Elaine C. Driker Trail that will allow visitors to walk from the new Ralph Wilson Gateway into the more natural environment of the island around a portion of the Blue Heron Lagoon and past the Livingston Memorial Lighthouse.

“Belle Isle, with its history, natural beauty, attractions and recreation opportunities, is a treasure for southeast Michigan and everyone who spends time here,” said DNR Parks and Recreation Chief Ron Olson. “We’re gratified to see these trailhead resources and miles of new trail becoming a reality, because they’ll make for an even richer, more memorable visitor experience.”

A combination of Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund, Land and Water Conservation Fund and Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation grants and private grants have paid for the engineering and construction of the new Ralph Wilson Trail and Gateway and Driker Trail. To date, the Wilson Foundation has provided \$29.9 million in funding to support regional trails in southeast Michigan, including the Iron Belle Trail and Great Lake to Lake Trails.

“In 2018, the Foundation made a \$50 million commitment to support a more connected and enhanced regional trail system in southeast Michigan, in honor of Mr. Wilson’s 100th birthday. Thanks to the state of Michigan’s vision to support and drive ambitious projects like the Iron Belle Trail and others, we have been able to develop a strong partnership with the DNR and several communities across the region to help bring these projects to life,” said David O. Egner, president and CEO, Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation. “Belle Isle is an iconic and beloved park serving the residents of Detroit and visitors near and far, and the addition of the Ralph C. Wilson Gateway and Trail, and new Eugene and Elaine C. Driker Trail, will be a welcome addition to those experiences.”

The new gateway is named in honor of the late Ralph C. Wilson, Jr., a lifelong resident of the Detroit area and an entrepreneur who held businesses across several different industries. However, Wilson was best known as the founder and 55-year owner of the Buffalo Bills NFL team. Prior to his passing in 2014, Mr. Wilson provided that a significant share of his estate, including the sale of the Buffalo Bills, be used to continue his lifelong generosity of spirit by funding the foundation that bears his name.

“It’s incredible to have this beautiful gateway named in honor of Ralph. As a person who loved people from all walks of life, it is meaningful to have the trail be a gathering place for families and friends who want to get outdoors and enjoy each other and nature,” said Mary Wilson, wife of the late Ralph Wilson and life trustee of the Ralph Wilson Foundation. “It’s even more special to have this gateway connect to a trail that recognizes and honors the Driker, two people that Ralph held deep affection for and friendship with during his life.”

Eugene and Elaine C. Driker are lifelong Detroiters who together, and each in their own professional capacities, have shared a long history of achievement from urban affairs to law, arts and culture, social action and philanthropy. Eugene Driker has served as a life trustee of the Ralph Wilson Foundation since its founding in 2015.

“A trail is a connector, and here the Driker Trail unites two parts of a physical pathway that will provide pleasure for Detroiters in perpetuity. But having the Driker name joined with Ralph Wilson’s is an even greater honor than the tangible byway being launched here today. Ralph

was a remarkable person – kind, public-spirited and extraordinarily generous. Linking our name to his is a tribute beyond measure for which we are deeply grateful,” said Eugene Driker.

For trail maps and the latest information on the Iron Belle Trail, visit Michigan.gov/IronBelle.

For statewide trail resources and recreation opportunities, visit Michigan.gov/DNRTrails.

For more on the Detroit island park, visit Michigan.gov/BelleIsle.

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The **Michigan Department of Natural Resources** is committed to the conservation, protection, management, use and enjoyment of the state’s natural and cultural resources for current and future generations. For more information, go to Michigan.gov/DNR.

The **Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation** is a grantmaking organization dedicated primarily to sustained investment in the quality of life of the people of Southeast Michigan and Western New York. The two areas reflect the devotion of Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. to his hometown of Detroit and greater Buffalo, home of his beloved Buffalo Bills NFL team. Prior to his passing in 2014, Mr. Wilson provided that a significant share of his estate be used to continue a life-long generosity of spirit by funding the Foundation that bears his name. Based in Detroit, the Foundation began with a grantmaking capacity of \$1.2 billion over a 20-year period, which expires January 8, 2035. This structure is consistent with Mr. Wilson’s desire for the Foundation’s impact to be immediate, substantial, measurable, and overseen by those who knew him best. For more information visit rcwjrf.org.