

# Lonnie Kester: A Farmer with a Vision Builds a Public Trail

by Howard Meyerson

Photo by Howard Meyerson

**L**onnie Kester grew up on a Michigan farm and farming is his life. But the 58-year-old family man from Millington – a rural village northeast of Flint – is known for more than his agri-business interests. Though he farms 3,900 acres and sits on the boards of the Tuscola County Farm Bureau and Genesee County Fair, he is as likely to strike up a conversation about rail-trails, his passion.

Kester loves to talk with cyclists on the Southern Links Trailway, the 10.2-mile abandoned Penn Central Railroad corridor he bought and later developed for public use with the help of the Michigan Departments of Transportation and Natural Resources. The rural bike path runs through farm country. Its scenic route is enjoyed by thousands annually. It is part of U.S. Bike Route 20, which extends from Marine City, Michigan to the Oregon coastline, and it is a link in the 774-mile Iron Belle Trail, proposed by Michigan Governor, Rick Snyder.

“I never dreamed of making it a trail,” notes Kester, who lives with his wife, Carol, outside of Millington, the trailway’s northern trailhead. “We bought it in 1998 because we needed 1,000 feet to get to another farm we bought. Tessenderlo Kearly, the company that owned it, didn’t want to sell 1,000 feet.

They wanted to sell 7.42 miles of it. Fifteen thousand dollars seemed like a good deal.”

A good deal, indeed, but Kester would invest far more once he committed to developing a public trail. The remaining 2.74 available miles would cost him \$110,000 in 2004. Disputes about other parcels would cost more yet. There were legal challenges too and other complications. But, Kester is known to be determined once he sets a goal. He borrowed money, with interest, to clear the financial hurdles and spent more than \$500,000 with no guarantee he would see a return.

“When I bought it I didn’t know if I would recoup any of the money,” Kester explains. “I bought it with faith that this corridor would, one way or another, become a trail. I had several offers to sell it off, and I turned them down and those folks got mad, but I didn’t want to break it up. I told everyone here, ‘This is bigger than any of us.’ It’s a wonderful thing. Rich men and poor men are equal on the trail.”

Kester began lobbying local decision makers soon after his first purchase, and in 2001 the trail was added to the Tuscola



Cyclists gather for a group ride during opening day festivities on the Southern Links Trailway.

County Parks and Recreation Master Plan, a crucial step if the trail was to become a public facility. Working to get buy-in from six local municipalities took some doing, Kester said, referring to the process as “a nightmare.”

“There were a lot of people who didn’t think it was a good idea,” notes Dale Fuller, Southern Links Trailway Management Council president and former Marathon Township supervisor. “Like every other trail there were people who didn’t want it running by their place. But once it got going, things settled down. It’s surprising how many people use it now. It’s brought people in from all over and everybody is really happy that it is there.”

The Southern Links Trailway is known for its pastoral qualities, open farmland and wooded segments; it passes through several tunnels of trees. There are ponds with turtles and muskrats to see, benches for reststops and places to picnic. Its bridge over the Holloway Reservoir, at Columbiaville, is a good place to fish. Horseback riding is allowed and a public beach and campground are found in Otter Lake.

Pat Wood, owner of Curley’s Lakehouse Grill, in Columbiaville, lauds Kester for pushing the trail through. It’s brought business to the community. His restaurant is frequented regularly by cyclists. Eighty percent of them, he notes, come from somewhere else.

“Lonnie is a visionary. He likes to move things forward,” Wood declares. “He’s given so much time and effort to these communities and did something great. It’s completely changed the landscape.”

Wood noticed that the trail improved the quality of life in the region, in the rural communities along it, for instance, where little has changed for decades. The trail is a magnet for local people who use it regularly to exercise. He and Kester both know of diabetics who’ve stopped needing medication since they began to ride it regularly on bicycles. Touring cyclists, Wood adds, have been exposed to the “small town charms” of the area. The organized groups that hold fundraisers on it have helped broaden local perspectives as they promote various messages, whether about organ donation, rescuing animals, or other causes. But most of all, the trail has fostered a larger sense of community.

“That wasn’t here before the trail was built,” Wood explains. “It (the trail) regularly brings people together. I see people sitting together at tables now. They’re all cyclists, part of that community. Five years ago they wouldn’t have sat together. People from these (trail) towns didn’t interact with one another. On Fridays in the summer now,

the riders and their wives take up a third of my restaurant.

Kester, a fourth-generation farmer who was born on a Millington farm and presided over a local chapter of Future Farmers of America while in high school, might have left well enough alone once he purchased the first trail segment. He grew up poor and knows the value of a dollar. He began working in the family bean fields at seven and found employment with area farmers as he got older. Kester recalls the bread and bologna sandwiches of his youth, the staples in his household, along with milk, because simply “there was nothing extra.”

But his desire to build a trail grew as he became increasingly aware of Michigan’s expanding rail-trail initiative. Kester attended a state trails conference in 2000 held by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a national nonprofit that promotes rail trail development. Its Michigan office became the non-profit Michigan Trails and Greenways Alliance. Today, Kester sits on the MTGA board of directors.

“The seed was planted at the conference,” Kester said. “After talking to all the people there who offered to help, I took it on... It was the right thing to do. I believe in God and believe the Holy Spirit directed the whole thing. I am a farmer. We don’t waste anything. And this was the best use of the land. I spent close to \$575,000 and got about \$500,000 back, but there were many times I thought we are going to get our asses kicked.”

The Southern Links Trailway Management Council was established in 2003 to eventually take ownership of the trail. It held fundraisers and sought other local support. Six municipalities have a representative on the council which received land acquisition and development grants from the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Kester paid to have the rail corridor appraised in 2006. It was valued at \$712,000. He donated \$212,000 to the council to help meet funding match requirements for grants. The council then purchased the property from him for \$500,000.

Today Kester sees only the benefits it provides: a safe place for children to ride and play, a scenic route where local people can get out and enjoy nature, and the growing economic boost to the region as more people find it. He knows of fathers who now ride with their children, men who wouldn’t have been out otherwise.

“Lonnie is a very caring and community minded person with a lot of old-fashioned values,” notes Nancy Krupiarz, executive director for MTGA. “At the same time, he’s a conundrum. Some people get mad about how sharp he is in his business dealings.



Lonnie talks with one of his neighbors who rides the trail almost daily.

Photo by Howard Meyerson

Others think he is the greatest guy ever for all he has done for the community.

“I met him when he showed up at the state trails conference in Midland. He introduced himself saying ‘I have a rail corridor and I’m going to turn it into a trail.’ I thought ‘Yeah. Sure. Who is this nutcase?’ It’s usually government agencies who do that. Then, we got a call from him a year later wanting to show us the corridor. We visited him and quickly became believers.”

Kester’s farming and business acumen serves the MTGA well, according to Krupiarz. The organization works with trails all over the state. Farmers living along them often are reluctant to support the projects. Kester brings a unique perspective to the discussions, she said. He understands their concerns and often can allay their fears.

“Lonnie is a risk taker and that is really important,” Krupiarz proclaims. “The Southern Links Trailway would never have happened without him; it absolutely would not have happened.”

Kester admits to getting emotional about the trailway, even occasionally shedding tears of joy. He loves talking with people who use it and is known for walking up to strangers to find out how they like it. One couple he met in 2015, Deb and Hob McConville, from Connecticut, found the trail on the Adventure Cycling Association website. Both were approximately 70 years old, Kester said. They had logged 109,000 miles on their 35-year-old tandem bicycle and had ridden across America seven times.

“I saw them riding all decked out with saddlebags and chased them about 13 miles,” Kester admits with a smile. “I came up waving my hand and said ‘I’m not here to rob you.’ Hob extended a hand and said ‘How are you doing Mr. Kester?’ They had apparently seen an article about me at the trailhead. Then they said ‘We love this trail.’”