

AARP Wisconsin: Shawano Pathways trails project wins AARP Small Dollar, Big Impact grant

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SHAWANO – A proposal by Shawano Pathways to create two new walking trails in Shawano County has been selected to receive an AARP Wisconsin “Small Dollar, Big Impact” grant.

One will be located along the Mountain Bay Trail, just west of Sturgeon Park, and the second will be located at Alpine Shores Park. Specifically, these areas will become G.R.A.C.E. (Grateful, Release, Acceptance, Challenge, and Embrace) Trails, which organizers say are trails meant to move people toward the life they were meant to live.

These grants are being awarded once a month throughout 2021 to projects across Wisconsin that are designed to improve communities and make them better places for everyone to live, work and play as they age.

Judges selected this project for a \$1,000 grant after reviewing dozens of proposals from all over the state. The funds will help the group create two separate meandering trails along with two small footbridges, two roofed kiosks, signage and benches. This G.R.A.C.E Trails initiative is designed to help people who might be struggling during this pandemic.

Matty Mathison, a long-time Shawano resident and high school teacher who serves on the Shawano Pathways board, submitted the grant application. She said she was

thrilled to learn their project was selected.

“Our G.R.A.C.E. Trails are going to happen because of grants like AARP’s Small Dollar, Big Impact. I’m so grateful that the committee saw the lasting value of this endeavor.”

Mathison said Shawano Pathways was formed in 2011 with part of its mission being to improve biking and walking opportunities in Shawano County. The group hosts several annual events and to date has developed three biking routes, four park-to-park loops in the City of Shawano, and two Born Learning Trails, multiple snowshoe trails and user-activated lights at a busy intersection.

Mathison said COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the area, with death, illness, unemployment, loss, and isolation taking its toll. “It is our strong belief that several G.R.A.C.E Trails would provide an opportunity for people to begin the healing process through the powers of nature and self-reflection.

“There has long been anecdotal evidence that exposure to nature provides several real health benefits. These include reduced stress and anxiety, improved physical health through walking and hiking, while also finding spiritual connections by enjoying the outdoors,” she said.

At the start of each Shawano Grace Trail will be a roofed kiosk with an explanation and map of that G.R.A.C.E. Trail. It will also include a list of sponsors, along with benches and plantings. Along the trail will be five stations, each one emphasizing one letter of the words “grateful, release, acceptance, challenge, and embrace.” The Shawano Grace Trail 5 letters (G-R-A-C-E) which invite the following questions to explore while you walk:

G – What am I Grateful for?

R – What do I need to Release?

A – What do I need to Accept?

C – What is my next Challenge?

E – What can I Embrace as possible?

Walkers are encouraged to stop at a station, reach and think about the posed questions, and relate it to their own situation. There will be a bench and plantings at each station, which can be purchased as memorials. For more information, contact Shawano Pathways at www.shawanopathways.org. For general information, visit www.gracetrail.com

A team of volunteers and park staff expect to finish the project by mid-summer.

“Whether or not we realize it, we have all been impacted by COVID. It is hard to remember what ‘normal’ was,” Mathison said. “For some there may be leftover emotions, many of which are just now rising to the surface. Sadness, depression, helplessness, loneliness, may be part of our lives for a long time. Having a G.R.A.C.E Trail experience allows people to take steps forward to discover healing, hope, resiliency, and joy.”

Ever since proposing this project at a Shawano Pathways board meeting several months ago, Mathison said it has gained momentum. Both the City of Shawano and Shawano County Parks directors expressed their support, offering to provide the locations, in-kind labor, and future maintenance of the trails.

Additional financial support is also forming at grassroots levels, as others in the community are beginning to learn about these trails and are choosing to become involved. A \$150 donation from a local 7-year-old girl who wanted to contribute her own money toward a bench was the first of what the group hopes will be many local donations, creating similar connections of pride and ownership.

The Shawano project fits perfectly with the spirit and intent of the grant program, said AARP Wisconsin State Director Sam Wilson. “Our goal is to support communities as they make positive changes that inspire long-term progress on livable issues. This project hits that nail right on the head.”

AARP Wisconsin’s launched its “Small Dollar, Big Impact” grant program in 2020 and is now in its second year of helping proposed projects move forward in rural and urban parts of the state. All projects must be completed within 60 days from winner announcement.

“These grants are exactly what the name describes – short-term, low-cost solutions that could have remarkable impacts on the shaping of neighborhoods and cities,” said Darrin Wasniewski, Associate State Director of Community Outreach for AARP

Wisconsin.

“There are so many great ideas and proposals for making life better in communities across Wisconsin. We know how impactful \$1,000 can be. This is our way of extending some seed money to get these projects off the ground.”

The grant program is open to some nonprofits and government entities. For more information on the program, visit www.aarp.org/wi

The Shawano Grace Trails are provided under license from Grace Trail, Inc., and based upon the original Grace Trail located in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Any questions or desire to install your own Grace Trail? Please reach out to Anne Barry Jolles at Anne@gracetrail.com.