

The Michigan Air Line Trail, Michigan's newest rails-to-trails conversion, creates an important connection between the Huron Valley Trail and West Bloomfield Trail.

Photo by Jon Hong

# TURN IT UP FOR TRAILS

BY ANDREA LAFONTAINE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
MICHIGAN TRAILS & GREENWAYS ALLIANCE

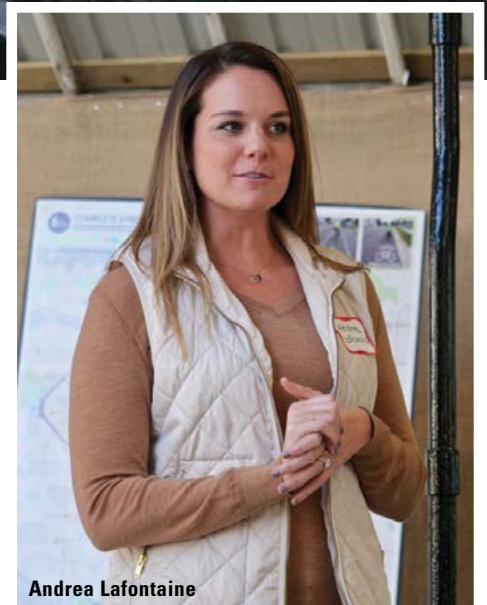
**H**il! If we haven't met, we're MTGA: a full-service resource center that leverages experience and relationships to create efficiencies that deliver a world-class trail experience for all. We're a membership-based organization that helps people build, connect and promote trails for a healthier and more prosperous Michigan. If you're already a member – thank YOU. Our members fuel our mission and ensure the future of Trails throughout our great state. If you're not a member, we invite you to join us; learn more at [www.michigantrails.org](http://www.michigantrails.org).

Two years ago, MTGA used this space to highlight unique regional efforts taking place around the state. Last year, it touched on the role of trails in economic development

and placemaking, and this year; we're going to marry the two. You might be wondering what commonality facilitates these nuptials? Connectivity. Connectivity in terms of more and better trails, the ability to go further, and being able to do more things via trails, such as: grab a coffee, visit a park, pick the kids up from school, etc. Now, to achieve greater connectivity, trail organizations across the state need greater resources and more capacity. That's where MTGA comes in.

Since late 2021, MTGA has been stepping up its advocacy game. TRAILS deserve greater investment, and we want to make sure decision-makers in Lansing are aware. An investment in trails is an investment in Michiganders, our communities and our quality of life – and if that isn't enough of a selling feature, lets include the role trails play in transportation alternatives, emissions reduction, environmental sustainability, and climate resiliency. Now that we've established the why these necessary investments should be made, let's talk about the how. Trails need more than a handful of recreation grant programs, rolled out once a year. Trails funding is a dynamic formula consisting of private donations, state, and federal grants (dare I add earmarks?), and philanthropy. And while Michigan has a select menu of options for that formula, the real elephant in the room that should be addressed is long-term, sustainable funding.

While our advocacy efforts are operating at full force, we're looking to the future and will be investing time and energy in community capacity assistance. MTGA is building the



Andrea Lafontaine

framework for a Review Committee (eventually it will have a much cooler name). Here's how it will work: we will pull together a team of the brightest minds in Michigan's trail space to review tough projects, offer a complimentary consult, and help brainstorm the best, next steps. Why is MTGA interested in this? We've heard from member organizations across the state that great trail projects and trail connections exist – but the capacity to lead the project is missing. We hear you, and we want to help. This effort is still in its exploratory phase, but we've already secured some top-notch trail experts who are ready and willing to assist. Together we will go further, and we are grateful for the opportunity deliver a quality trail experience for all.

Riders explore the newly completed Boardman Lake Loop Trail in Traverse City.

Photo courtesy of Prein & Newhof

