



## **Completed bike trail to Palatka could lead to rewards from agritourism**

By Stuart Korfhage  
May 15, 2018

With one key section of an area bike trail nearing completion, Herb Hiller can imagine days where hundreds of cyclists pedal through the county, stopping for meals and maybe light shopping at small restaurants or food trucks or even roadside produce stands.

It's more than a dream for the co-founder and past president of the St. Johns River to Sea Loop Alliance. It's a goal he's spent considerable energy trying to achieve — and something he continues to work on.

Currently, the 22-mile segment of the St. Johns River to Sea Loop bike trail that connects the Vermont Heights area of St. Johns County to Palatka is under construction. It's scheduled to be finished in November.

When that happens, Hiller wants St. Johns County businesses to take advantage of the opportunity to reach cyclists and attract more of them by creating an agritourism corridor through the southern part of the county.

It's an area filled with working farms, gentle scenery and little economic development.

Hiller said that can easily change if businesses are developed to serve the cycling community that he thinks will soon embrace the area once the safe pathways are built. He said estimates currently put the usage of the unconnected paths at around 50,000 cyclists per year.

"When you get to 22 miles and there might be a reason to stop, the (usage) numbers will double," Hiller said. "That will make it a destination."

Construction on the Palatka to St. Augustine State Trail, or State Road 207 Rail Trail, from Main Street in Hastings to S.R. 207 in Spuds, received \$3,288,834 from the Florida Department of Transportation. Construction on the same trail from the Putnam County Line to Hastings received \$2,217,575. A trail head and restrooms were also built in the Vermont Heights area.

The completed trail will run right through Hastings, a community that has been searching for increased business development for years. Hiller said he hopes to facilitate opportunities for entrepreneurs in that community to serve the cycling enthusiasts and the recreational leisure riders.

“The trail will (also) attract those who are not ‘Spandex’ riders,” Hiller said. “The trail is getting built. It’s coming through Hastings whether you believe it or not.”

Hoping to speed the economic development process, Hiller is promoting the Hastings Inventors Workshop from 4 to 8 p.m. May 31 at The Lord’s Temple City of Refuge Community Hall at 140 Gilmore St. in Hastings. Participants can receive registration information from Hiller by emailing him at [\*\*herbhiller12@gmail.com\*\*](mailto:herbhiller12@gmail.com).

Among those already convinced of the potential of an agritourism corridor near the bike trail is Jean-Sebastien Gros, owner of Rype & Readi Elkton Farm as well as Rype & Readi Downtown Farm Market in St. Augustine.

He said there’s a lot of interest in that kind of experience from both visitors and locals alike. Rype & Readi Elkton Farm has been hosting monthly events that include meals based around seasonal produce and other activities. It also has a history of hosting groups from the Vermont Bicycle Touring company.

Right now, there just isn’t enough regular tourist traffic through the corridor to keep farm tourism businesses busy everyday. He hopes the trail will bring enough people to change that. He has various ideas for attractions in the area.

“I really see, like so many other places in the state, this bike trail really being a catalyst for redevelopment,” Gros said. “I think this really is a shot in the arm for rural St. Johns County.”

With his many interactions with tourists downtown and experience with touring cyclists, Gros said he believes many visitors would be excited to enhance their trips with an agritourism experience — whether through the bike trail or just a drive down S.R. 207.

“It’s amazing how many people come here and don’t know we have a whole farming community out there — well, they know but they don’t know how to enjoy and appreciate it,” Gros said. “The bike path, all of it, it’s all interconnected in just making all of that seem more accessible.

“All the bikers that we’ve had, that we’ve spoken to about it, they are all excited about it. They are all planning on returning on future excursions here.”