Statement Regarding the Van Atta Segments of the Bikeway Master Plan to the
Meridian Township Environmental Commission
John Hoehn, President, Van Atta Neighborhood Association
January 31, 2001

Good evening. My name is John Hoehn. I am president of the Van Atta Neighborhood Association.

The Van Atta neighborhood is a rural residential area. It is rich in wildlife and open space. Our members are avid walkers, hikers, park users, wildlife enthusiasts, and, of course, bicyclists.

So how do we stand on the issue of off-road paths and the widening Van Atta Road? Is this the way to protect and enjoy our rural open space? No, we think not. We oppose both the off-road paths and the widening of Van Atta Road.

The pathway Master Plan galvanized our neighborhood and sparked the formation of our association. Ninety percent of the members signed petitions opposing the off-road pathways and widened shoulders.

Why do we oppose pathway Master Plan for our neighborhood?

1. First, the bike paths convert open space to asphalt. The pathways are not greenways. They are not rails to trails. They are small asphalt roads, 10 feet in width with 2 foot shoulders on either side. They are designed to take the weight of an ambulance or heavy truck. Each mile of pathway covers 1.2 acres in solid asphalt. After the successful open space millage, it is shocking that the pathway Master Plan would put asphalt roads in roadless, open space areas.

2. Second, these asphalt roads cut through prime wetlands and wildlife habitat. The wetlands in our area are large and unimpaired. The Van Atta wetlands run along the length of the Consumers Energy easement for 1000s of feet at a time and reach out from the easement for 100s, and in some places, 1000s of feet. The Consumers’ easements and properties are critical wildlife corridors serving a significant portion of the Township.

The Van Atta wetlands and surrounding uplands are a quiet refuge area for shy wildlife such as ruffed grouse, turkey, great horned owl, sandhill crane, hawk, fox, and coyote. The wildlife that breed in these secluded areas enrich our lives on a daily basis. The presence and commotion of a paved pathway are certain to disturb breeding patterns and scare these shy wildlife away.

The Van Atta bikeway area is also a refuge for fragile plant species, such as Michigan lily, Jack-in-the-pulpit, gentian, trillium, and iris. Without a long-term study to document their location, the paved bikeway is certain to bury these ephemeral species in solid asphalt. Over time, the injury will spread out from the pathway as trash, bikes, and people stray from the pavement. Rest areas, asphalt maintenance, and snow removal will magnify the damage in areas that are now close to pristine.

3. Third, the Master Plan puts the Van Atta pathways on private land. The Township has no right to put pathways on private property. If a pathway can be put on our property, pathways to backyard rose gardens may be next. Property owners uniformly oppose this plan.

Widening Van Atta Road is not a solution:

4. Widening the road will increase traffic speeds. Faster speeds will reduce the safety of walkers and bikers.
5. In addition, bike lanes do nothing for walkers. State Law gives walkers no right to use a roadway, bike lane or not. Apparently, if a walker is hit in a bike lane, the walker is at fault.

6. Finally, Van Atta Road is a designated Michigan Natural Beauty Road. The giant trees that line the road are an asset for all Township residents. Widening the road is likely to kill the trees that give the road its natural beauty. We have already lost 4 giant oaks in the last 3 years to environmental stresses. Additional stress is certain to kill more of these giant trees.

We ask the support of the Environmental Commission in helping to remove the off-road pathways and widened shoulders from the Van Atta neighborhood. Residents want to find ways to improve access for pedestrians and bicyclists--but not at the cost of scarce wildlife habitat, open space, ancient trees, and faster traffic.

Thank you very much.