

Atlanta's BeltLine trail will one day circle the city, while (right) the Silver Comet begins 13 miles northwest of the city and heads west 37 miles toward the Alabama state line.



Show, Don't Tell:

Building a Movement

By Brian Spak

Atlanta is a city that's thinking big. Its planned BeltLine, a 22-mile, mixed-use loop of rail transit and biking and walking trails, aims to do nothing short of reshape the city's soul. And Atlanta isn't alone.

Cities and towns throughout the country have ambitious plans for trail networks that will connect residents with recreational opportunities, provide green space for children to explore and enjoy, supply safe routes for everyday travel, foster livable communities, and awaken diverse neighborhoods to all that their cities have to offer.

These trail networks will be more than safe routes to destinations; they will be destinations of their own. "Like the French Quarter in New Orleans, downtown Manhattan, or San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf, Atlanta's destination will be the BeltLine," predicts Ed McBrayer, executive director of the Path Foundation, an organi-

zation dedicated to building a network of trails throughout Georgia.

Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) wants to help make these trail networks happen. That's why RTC has set its sights on dramatically increasing the federal investment in trails in 2010. When the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU, pronounced "Safety-Loo") bill was signed into law in 2005, \$4.5 billion was set aside for trails, biking and walking; when the law is reauthorized in 2010, RTC hopes such funding will increase to \$9 billion.

SAFETEA-LU's importance to trail development can't be overestimated. Thanks in part to successful lobbying by RTC and the support of key legislators such as Congressman Jim Oberstar (D-Minn.), the bill included a \$100 million Non-motorized Transportation Pilot Program. Each of

four municipalities—Columbia, Missouri; Marin County, California; Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota; and Sheboygan County, Wisconsin—received \$25 million to demonstrate that walking and bicycling can become a big part of a community's transportation solution.

Going into 2010, RTC aims to build on that progress, says RTC Vice President of Policy Kevin Mills—doubling the federal investment in trails, biking and walking by showing how they have improved public health, the environment and the quality of life in the four pilot locations. RTC sees the link between the investment and the benefits as one of "active transportation" wherein biking and walking become a part of everyday travel.

At the same time, RTC is launching an initiative to link advocates of community trail networks and active transporta-



MAEGHAN SILVERBERG



MAEGHAN SILVERBERG



COURTESY STEVE WINSLOW

(Left and top) The Somerville Community Path links its trail users to a transit stop. (Above) A map of the region shows how the path would link to the 10-mile Minuteman Bikeway.

tion nationwide. By learning about and communicating the opportunities for trails, advocates can increase the likelihood that their communities will become sites for future federal investments in trail systems. And following the adage of “show, don’t tell,” the best way to make their case is by having successful, on-the-ground examples that demonstrate the value of trails, walking and biking.

Although not one of the pilot locations, Atlanta’s BeltLine is one of those examples. The proposed rail-with-trail, the BeltLine

will combine rail transit with biking and walking trails in a loop that connects the city’s neighborhoods, activity centers, and attractions. While the main focus is improving the city’s transportation system, the robust plan includes redevelopment of nearly 3,000 acres of underutilized properties along the BeltLine corridor, revitalizing industrial areas and traditionally

underserved portions of town, and creating up to 30,000 jobs in the next 20 to 25 years. That’s in addition to the 48,000 construction jobs that will be needed to create the BeltLine and all its connection components.

Proposed by a Georgia Tech graduate student in 1999 and building on the work of RTC in a 1991 study identifying connection opportunities, the BeltLine now has the enthusiastic support of Atlanta Mayor Shirley Franklin, local businesses and neighborhood leaders. RTC has been critical in helping the BeltLine evolve from a vision into an established plan. In 2003, RTC coordinated an inventory of abandoned rails around the BeltLine corridor, helping to define opportunities for trail implementation. As Ed McBrayer says, “With the BeltLine, it’s no longer a matter of if, but when?”

For a growing number of communities around the country, that is the question.

Somerville Community Trail, Somerville, Mass.

Developed in 1992 by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Minuteman Bikeway was the 500th rail-trail in the United States, and in 2000, it was recognized by the White House and RTC as a Millennium Trail. Hailed as the most-used rail-trail in the nation, one of the few ways to improve the Minuteman is to extend and connect it.

The community of Somerville plans to do just that by linking the last leg of the Minuteman, known as the Community Path, from its current terminus just outside of Cambridge with the Charles River Paths in downtown Boston. So essential to commuters that it’s plowed during the winter, the Community Path has one transit stop. During rush hour, 500 people use the trail every hour. This is a trail that embodies the principles of active transportation.

RTC has been vital to the overall development and continued extension of the

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The Springwater Corridor is part of Portland's 40-Mile Loop. (Right) The Hawthorn Bridge in Portland, Ore.



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Minuteman for years. They have provided strategic support at meetings with state and federal officials, and have been long-time proponents of the Community Trail extension, which represents the last link in the Mass Central Rail Trail, which will run for more than 100 miles connecting Boston to Northampton.

Somerville Mayor Joe Curtatone reveals the importance of the trail, saying, "The Community Path is absolutely essential to the quality of life of our residents, and we could not complete our proposed extension fast enough."

Bloomington Trail, Chicago

Chicago's Humboldt Park neighborhood provides a particularly poignant example of a community in need of more exercise, and a trail that can offer the venue for it. Infamous for its inclusion in a study discussed in the December 2006 *Journal of Community Health*, Humboldt Park has one of the highest incidences of diabetes ever reported. Physical activity, such as biking and walking can help prevent diabetes, and if the Friends of the Bloomington Trail

(FOBT) have their way, Humboldt Park will soon have increased access to biking and walking opportunities on a new rail-trail.

FOBT plans to convert a three-mile, unused elevated rail line to a linear park. Running through the heart of Chicago, the Bloomington Trail will connect neighborhoods and link residents to city parks and

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the Chicago River. Because the right-of-way is, on average, 15 feet above ground, the Bloomington Trail will provide extraordinary views of the city. After four years of advocacy, "there's now clear community support. Mayor [Richard M.] Daley loves the project," says FOBT President Josh Deth.

RTC has assisted FOBT since 2003, helping to plan the implementation of the trail, providing technical support, and awarding the project a \$20,000 grant this past March made possible by Coca-Cola North America. The 2005 RTC conference in Minneapolis also provided an opportunity for Deth to learn from other trail leaders about successful approaches to trail development, broadening the net of trail, biking and walking advocates.

North Portland, Greenway, Portland, Ore.

The site of this year's RTC conference, *TrailLink 2007*, Portland has plenty to share about trail development. In 1903, city planners envisioned a 40-mile loop of green space around Portland. Though the name stuck, the 40-Mile Loop has since become

an almost completed 140-mile loop of bicycle and pedestrian trails connecting parks around the region.

The North Portland Greenway, a planned 10-mile trail along the Willamette River, offers something new for trails in Portland. "This trail is different," according to npGREENWAY Communications Director Scott Mizée, "because it offers an opportunity to highlight and benefit Portland's industrial heritage." The trail would foster and support the variety of industries found at Swan Island Industrial Park, a major corporate center and hub for distribution, warehousing and manufacturing, by providing education about and access to the area.

Though its relationship with an industrial port makes it different, the North Portland Greenway's connectivity makes it just like all of the other trails along the 40-Mile Loop. The planned trail links North Portland neighborhoods with the Willamette River and access to jobs, while connecting with schools, parks and wildlife areas. "Downtown Portland will be connected via trails all the way to Canada and Mexico for the intrepid trail user," says Portland Metro Regional Trails Coordinator Mel Huie.

In addition to networks of connected trails that increase mobility and access, RTC also works to create networks of trail advocates from across the country. Trail advocates often benefit tremendously by sharing information. As Chicago's Deth says, "The Friends of the Highline (an elevated trail being developed in Manhattan) have been very helpful and serve as a model urban trail advocacy organization. ... The best reason to learn from others is so you don't have to reinvent the wheel when you get started."

The synergy created by connecting people and places can be extremely powerful, according to Jeff Ciabotti, RTC vice president of trail development. "When you connect many trails together, the linkages allow all of the individual trails' benefits to increase exponentially. That's not just true for trails, but for trail communities as well."

Brian Spak lives and works in Washington, D.C., as a writer and advocate for conservation.




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