

Arkansas River Trail:

The Trail That Has It

ALL

By Keith Merckx
photos by Trey Clark



From cityscapes to golden foliage, waterfronts to pine-tickled hillsides, the Arkansas River Trail can truly entertain—and educate—a world of visitors. Below: a view of North Little Rock from the rail-trail.



As a spring mist ascends at sunrise, obscuring the roiling and muddy water of the Arkansas River, few vantage points in Central Arkansas offer a more pleasing view than the middle of the pedestrian bridge at the western end of the Arkansas River Trail.

There was a time not long ago when the banks of the river, which separates the cities of Little Rock and North Little Rock, were virtually abandoned at this hour on any given weekend morning. Those days are but a memory, and all credit is due to the trail and its creators. As coordinator for the Headwaters Partnership for the Arkansas River Trail, Terry Eastin is perhaps *the* driving force behind development of the trail. “The trail has gotten so popular that on weekends you almost have to wear blinkers on your backside,” she says.

Planning began in 2003, and just a few years later the trail is almost 12 miles long. After the missing links fall into place over the next several years, it will complete a 24-mile loop with sections on both sides of the river.

The western end of the loop is open now, with segments connected by the scenic Big Dam Bridge that straddles the retrofitted Murray Lock and Dam. At more than three-quarters of a mile long, the bridge is the longest span in the nation designed and built specifically for pedestrian/bicycle use. Perched 90 feet above the river, it also is said to be among the highest.

The structure is a high point for visitors, too. “You almost need a traffic cop on Saturday and Sunday afternoons on the Big Dam Bridge, as people are really embracing that,” says North Little Rock Mayor Patrick Henry Hays. Little Rock resident John Fogleman says he’s been using the trail and watching it grow from the beginning. The Big Dam Bridge, he says, is a big deal. “There are days that you come down and it’s difficult to park, and that’s good. It’s helping to make Little Rock a destination.”

Scenery: Urban and Rural

Stretching from the Big Dam Bridge eastward, the trail runs through miles of city parks on both sides of the river. In North Little Rock, it meanders through massive Burns Park before slipping into the west side of the city’s downtown area. “Having jogged many miles on the Arkansas River Trail, I know firsthand just how breathtaking the scenery along the trail is,” says former governor



and presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee, whose exercise regimen during his well-publicized and drastic weight loss included plenty of time on the trail.

Local residents point to the trail as a source of civic pride, and justifiably so. It offers stunning views in some of the most picturesque and diverse geographies in the region. The eastern end of the trail lies among the downtown buildings on the flat Mississippi River Alluvial Plain. Just miles away the trail sits astride the river, tucked into the foothills of the Ozark Mountains that rise on either side. Whether the landscape is golf courses, forested parks or vast expanses of lawn, the most prominent color from one end of the trail to the other is overwhelmingly green. That includes the sweeping grounds at the William J. Clinton Presidential Center and Park.

That facility, featuring the busy presidential library and museum, is located on the eastern end of the River Market District, the focal point of Little Rock's newly revitalized downtown area. Here Arkansas River Trail users enjoy myriad historical draws along with a wide-ranging assortment of shops, restaurants and bars.

The River Market has special appeal for trail user Desiree Sheehan. "We go across the Big Dam Bridge and make the six and a half miles all the way down on the North Little Rock side, and it's just gorgeous," says the Little Rock resident. "The Main Street Bridge has a really nice ramp for bikes. Lately we've been bringing our backpacks because every Saturday they have the farmers' market at the River Market."

The Medical Mile

Adjacent to the River Market is another crown jewel of the Arkansas River Trail—the Medical Mile. Jeff Ciabotti, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy vice president for trail development, says, "The Medical Mile is innovative. The concept of rail-trails itself was a ground-breaking idea 21 years ago.

What they've done in Little Rock is to take that idea and make it better."

A 1,300-foot segment of the Medical Mile trail, which was funded initially with donations a group of area cardiologists raised in the local medical community, is billed as the nation's first outdoor linear health museum. It includes trailside benches, exhibits and kiosks that present information on how exercise benefits personal health and well-being.

Trail leader Eastin and cardiologist Dr. Rob Lambert came up with the Medical Mile idea after Lambert recognized how much attention was being paid to treatment of cardiac problems, and how little was being given to lifestyle decisions that could prevent the problems. The project began with a commitment by cardiologists practicing as Heart Clinic Arkansas (HCA) to raise \$350,000 over two years. HCA met that goal in just four months, and by 2000 had raised \$2.1 million. "Once we got enough major donors," explains Lambert, the project "caught enough momentum that



(Clockwise from left) At 4,226 feet, the Big Dam Bridge over the Murray Lock and Dam is the longest bridge in the world built specifically for pedestrians and bicyclists; the Medical Mile offers trail users creative, on-the-go exercise education; for trail users of a more bruising bent, a rugby tournament in Burns Park; Jane DeDecker's sculpture, "Touch the Sky," in St. Vincent's Plaza.





other people felt like they needed to be a part of it, too. Providing attractive places to exercise is probably going to be one of our most effective tools in combating the obesity epidemic.”

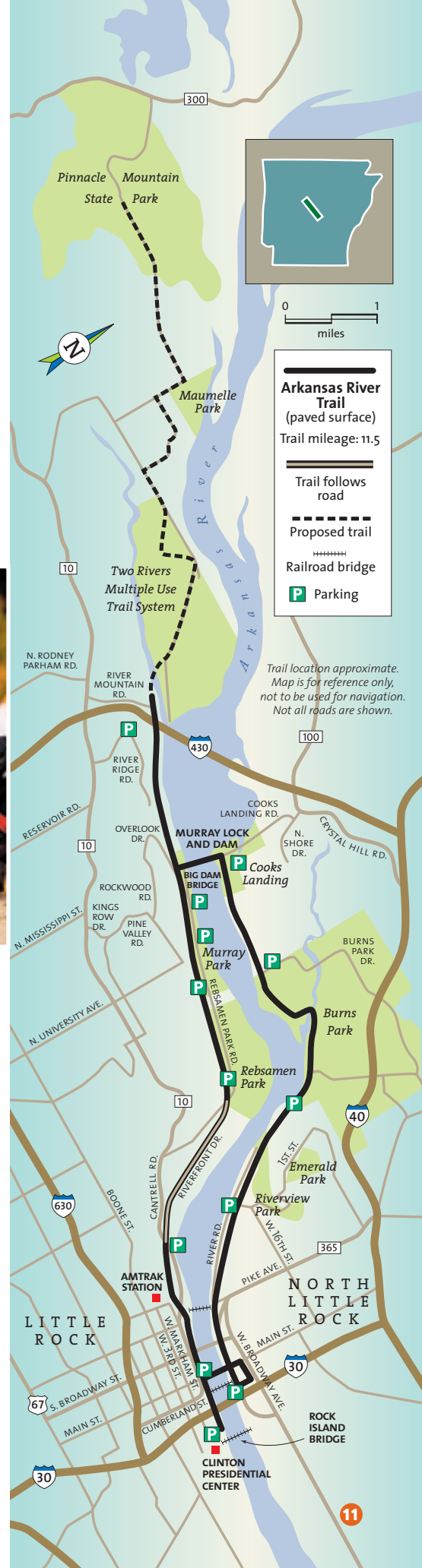
Civic leaders and the public alike praise the effort. “It improves the quality of life when you’ve got these kinds of amenities. It promotes health,” says cyclist Randy Palculict of Little Rock. Huckabee goes a step further. “The Medical Mile is a great inspiration to lure people out to the trail, and once they’re out there they’re hooked,” he says. “Whether they’re walking, running, biking or inline skating, they’re making a

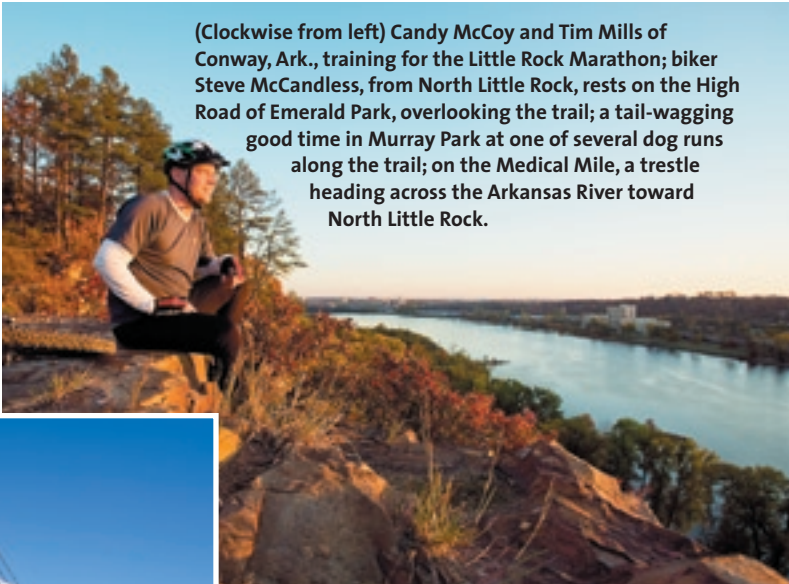


commitment to health and fitness that will no doubt inspire others to do the same.”

“I can’t say enough about those cardiologists,” adds Jim Dailey, who was Little Rock mayor when the ribbon was cut. “That’s the kind of thing that has set us apart because there’s not another place in the United States that has an example of what we have with the Medical Mile and the partnership that created it.”

Success that it is, the Medical Mile may not be one-of-a-kind for long. Josh Deth, co-founder of Friends of the Bloomingdale Trail in Chicago, says his group is planning a similar project. “We traveled down to Little Rock at the invitation of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy to hear about what they had done in Arkansas.” Eventually the Bloomingdale Trail group hopes to unveil a Wellness Walk along a section of elevated track on Chicago’s north side.





(Clockwise from left) Candy McCoy and Tim Mills of Conway, Ark., training for the Little Rock Marathon; biker Steve McCandless, from North Little Rock, rests on the High Road of Emerald Park, overlooking the trail; a tail-wagging good time in Murray Park at one of several dog runs along the trail; on the Medical Mile, a trestle heading across the Arkansas River toward North Little Rock.



Work to Do

Of the six downtown bridges, three started out serving the railroads. Two of those will soon be part of the trail. Now being renovated, the Junction Bridge will serve primarily as an attraction for sightseers. The section of the span that must remain raised for passing barge traffic will be accessed only by stairs and elevators.

Renovation of the Rock Island Bridge will complete the east end of the trail loop. This span will feature ramps for cyclists and joggers. Long abandoned, the bridge sits adjacent to the Clinton Library, and its transformation for trail use will be funded by the Clinton Foundation. “We’re finalizing research on costs and we’ll have a plan in the near future,” says foundation spokesman Jordan Johnson. “Once completed, [the project] will be a tourism draw for both cities and hopefully bring more people to the presidential park.”

A few other gaps remain in the trail on the Little Rock side. “We’re in the process of negotiating with Union Pacific for a new [pedestrian/bicycle] bridge over the railroad at Baring Cross” to fill one of them, says Eastin. “Our engineering firm has plans and specs for two additional sections of the trail,” she adds.

National Recognition

“There’s a building interest across the nation in the quality of life aspects of communities and why people locate there, why they build businesses there, why they visit there,” says Little Rock’s Dailey. “Projects like the Medical Mile and the river trail are a part of that.” Like Eastin, Lambert and Hays, Dailey believes the Medical Mile is the chief reason Little Rock was chosen to host the 2008 National Trails Symposium. Dailey says the event will shine a new light on the city.

“I hope once we have the conference here that we become one of the designated destination trails. Getting the designation validates and gives even more exposure to people who support trails and go to other cities to see them. Little Rock will be one of those places.”

Within the next few years, most organizers expect the Arkansas River Trail to

be completed, including connections to Pinnacle Mountain State Park and the 225-mile long Ouachita National Recreation Trail beyond. Building a pedestrian/bicycle bridge over the Little Maumelle River near its confluence with the Arkansas is crucial to realizing that goal. Pulaski County Judge Buddy Villines, the guiding hand behind the Big Dam Bridge, says, “We’re looking for funding for [the new] bridge” now.

Clearly, though, the Arkansas River Trail is already a destination. If you don’t get to the pedestrian bridge at the western end of the trail in time to take in the sunrise scenery, don’t worry. Come back at sunset. Looking west, with majestic Pinnacle Mountain in the foreground, the view is just as spectacular.

Keith Merckx is a broadcaster and writer who has lived most of his life in Little Rock. He and his family reside in Fort Worth, Texas.

GETTING THERE: The trail is located almost exactly in the center of Arkansas. Little Rock and North Little Rock serve as the state's hub of culture and entertainment. Little Rock National Airport (www.lrn-airport.com) is served by seven major airlines, with nonstop flights from 18 cities around the nation. Amtrak (www.amtrak.com) serves Little Rock on the Texas Eagle Route. Several major interstate highways converge in the area. When complete, the trail will pass under I-30—twice.

The Arkansas River Trail runs westward from the downtown areas of both cities, with plenty of parking along the route.

FOR MORE: Maps and other trail information are available on the Web (www.rivertrail.org). Gather trip-planning information from the Little Rock Convention and Visitors Bureau (www.littlerock.com, 800.844.4781) and the North Little Rock Visitors Bureau (www.northlittlerock.org, 800.643.4690).

For further details to help plan your trip to the Arkansas River Trail, visit www.railstotrails.org/magazine.



On the path and off, the Arkansas River Trail serves outdoor enthusiasts of all ages and interests, from slaloming across the river, to X Games antics, to breezing along on a recumbent.

