



# Capital Connections:

## RTC's Urban Pathways Initiative and the Met Branch Trail

By Amy Rogers Nazarov

Many rail-trails boast of their splendid views of natural scenery. But a city vista seen from the Metropolitan Branch Trail (MBT) in Washington, D.C.—crowned by the stately dome of the U.S. Capitol—is pretty darned breathtaking, too.

With a planned length of about eight miles, the MBT is a work long in progress. When complete, it will close a loop that circumnavigates metro D.C., connecting with the other city trails and integrating into the East Coast Greenway. The trail uses the corridor of the Metropolitan Branch Line of the B&O Railroad, traversing dynamic neighborhoods, passing historical sites and flowing to the National Mall. While parts of the MBT run on

RTC's Stephen Miller helps clip on a new helmet during a bicycle giveaway along part of the Met Branch. For the October 2009 event, RTC partnered with the Beacon House—a tutoring and mentoring organization in the Edgewood neighborhood of Washington, D.C.—to give bicycles (pictured below), locks, helmets and safety instruction to 40 students.



A completed section of the Met Branch that runs parallel to Takoma Avenue near Silver Spring, Md.

BARBARA RICHEY/RTC

2008 by a three-year grant from The Kresge Foundation, UPI partners with civic, commercial and nonprofit groups to create trails, including the MBT, that will provide new and enhanced recreational and commuter opportunities for city dwellers.

The issues faced by the MBT are those any urban trail planner will encounter. Through UPI, RTC is mastering some of the most critical of these challenges: finding consensus among private and public entities that own the land envisioned for the trail, assembling a right-of-way, ensuring easy access and promoting user safety.

The initiative continues an evolution of how RTC has worked since its inception, says Jeff Ciabotti, vice president of trail development. Myriad considerations guiding the locations of urban trails, how they are built and how they are promoted to would-be users must be taken into account. Solutions are being developed, tested and implemented (often with the MBT as a test case of sorts).

"In a lot of the places where RTC worked in the past, we would not have had to worry about whether a completed trail would be used," says Ciabotti. "It was pretty much guaranteed people would come," in part because the trails were in scenic areas and could be accessed easily, usually by car. That's not necessarily the case with urban trails, where population density, commuting patterns and methods, and bike ownership levels might vary significantly from the norm with rural trails.

Awareness—that the trail exists, that there are access points close to your front door, that it's safe to ride, that others are walking and biking it daily—is critical, too. "You can build a trail," says Stephen Miller, RTC's Urban Pathways coordinator, "but they won't always come" if those potential users don't know that it's there, or that it could shave 15 minutes off their bus commute, or that their colleagues and neighbors are using it, too.

To that end, RTC is banking on community outreach through civic and neighborhood associations, churches, merchants, local listservs and the like to entice

more users to urban pathways such as the MBT ([www.metbranchtrail.com](http://www.metbranchtrail.com)).

Renowned for their walkability, cities are in many ways ideal candidates for trails that accommodate bikes, inline skates and other forms of non-motorized transportation. Against a backdrop of historical architecture and brightly painted murals, riders and walkers can take in their city from a new vantage point. UPI seeks to promote trail usage in traditionally underserved, densely populated neighborhoods so that urban dwellers can commute on trails, enjoy their city surroundings and the outdoors, and get exercise.

For UPI, "we picked seven trails that are struggling or are now being developed" in order to promote their benefits to city residents, Ciabotti says. Other trails in the project are the S-Line Urban Greenway in Jacksonville, Fla.; Morgana Run Trail in Cleveland; Camden Greenways & Trails in Camden, N.J.; Connecticut River Walk in Springfield, Mass.; Lafitte Corridor in New Orleans; and Compton Creek Bike Path outside of Los Angeles in Compton, Calif.

### Closing the Loop

Some portions of the MBT, such as those bordering D.C.'s tree-lined Edgewood and Eckington neighborhoods, are freshly paved and complete with benches and call boxes to summon aid if necessary. Other chunks of land that will bring the MBT closer to completion are in a holding pattern as the D.C. Department of Transportation (DDOT) awaits completion of certain steps.

In the 20 years since it was first envisioned, the MBT has taught supporters much about the complexities of establishing an urban trail in any city. "The conditions that created the Met Branch trail are very common," observes Patrick Hare, a city planner and one of the original MBT visionaries. "With shrinking railway service into cities, you have a lot of spare track lanes," some of which might be suited to a trail.

Hare and others who have pushed for the MBT have learned to think incremen-

Met Branch construction south of the Rhode Island Avenue Metro Station; (at right) right along the trail, a mural completed by Albus Cavus, a nonprofit art group that works primarily in California, New Jersey and Washington, D.C.

tally. Last August, when a stretch of trail from the Rhode Island Avenue Shopping Center to R Street NW was partially paved but awaiting a retaining wall, progress was being made. And when one layer of asphalt was setting and workers waited for suitable weather to lay the next, even that was a step forward.

Hare got to know part of the trail corridor by observing it as a commuter on D.C.'s Metro subway system. "You see this abandoned corridor and you think, this is gonna be easy," he says. "But the ownership interests in that land" by the rail route, which runs from Washington's Union Station north to Silver Spring, Md.—"are just incredible."

In the late '80s, Hare wrote a letter to *The Washington Post* proposing that the land, owned predominantly by CSX railroad company and the local transit authority, WMATA, be used for a trail. Paul Meijer, another D.C. resident, read it and contacted Hare. In 1989 they and others began meeting at Tsim Yung, a local Chinese restaurant, to talk about how to make the bike trail/walkway happen.

"For years, it went awfully slow," says Meijer, now chairman of the Coalition for the Metropolitan Branch Trail. "But thanks to Heather, it's made enormous progress in the past few years."

Heather is Heather Deutsch, DDOT's bicycle program specialist and trail planner (and a former RTC staffer). Through the efforts of Deutsch and others at DDOT, RTC, the Washington Area Bicyclist Association and various public and private groups—not to mention those long-ago chats over *kung pao* chicken—the trail now sports solar-powered lights and inviting

stretches of freshly paved asphalt.

### Work in Progress

Quarter-mile by hard-won quarter-mile, the MBT is coming to life. Among other perks, a stroll or ride along the trail is chockablock with landmarks from Architectural History 101.

Where Fourth Street NE meets S Street NE is a splendid trailside view of the Romanesque dome of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. Moving south, the MBT culminates at Union Station, a 19th-century Beaux-Arts masterpiece designed by famed architect Daniel Burnham (and the site of a new bike parking and repair station). Southeast of the station, the neoclassical U.S. Capitol, looms on the horizon.

Getting more congressional officials on board by creating a trail within easy reach of their offices was no accident. But it's the citizens who live and work in the neighborhoods edging the MBT for whom the trail is being developed.

Building an urban trail requires patience, diplomacy and persistence. Deutsch has all three. Over coffee at Big Bear Café, a hipster coffee shop a few blocks west of the MBT in Washington's Bloomingdale neighborhood, she describes the momentum building behind the MBT. "We are definitely in the excitement stage," she says. "People really believe we will get it finished."

That's not to suggest the work is finished. Indeed, Deutsch is still in the thick



KELLY PACK/RTC

of it, encouraging developers to make design and architecture choices beneficial to users of planned or existing trail segments; negotiating with CSX about how far the bike trail needs to be from the active rail corridor; figuring out how D.C. street-cleaning trucks can be retrofitted to remove litter from the trail; meeting with neighborhood associations to address any lingering concerns about the potential for crime on the trail; and dealing with plenty of other matters.

"Ideally people use these trails like they would any transit system," Deutsch observes. "But there's not a lot of history of good development along bike trails" for reference. That's because developers working in urban areas have not always configured buildings, parking lots and other development features around the needs of trail users. Yet with modest changes, many components of creating an urban trail can be readily addressed.

Deutsch points to a cautionary tale in the Southwest Commuter Path in Madison, Wis., which backs up to a downtown apartment complex. While the building's developer included bike parking next to the trail, it did not create a connection from the parking area

to the path, so residents bushwhacked their own unplanned trail through the landscaping. “If the developers had known their landscaping was going to be destroyed as people tried to access the trail, they might have designed it differently,” she says.

Another problem on urban trails: the possibility for a different kind of collision. A new hotel adjacent to the MBT includes an emergency exit door that opens right onto the trail. “Imagine if you were biking by at the moment someone swings it open,” Deutsch says. Potential wipeouts aside, when land is privately owned, neither DDOT nor RTC can force a developer to reconsider such details as door placement. DDOT has more say when the trail crosses public land.

Late last winter, one of the last two remaining sections of the MBT—which stretches from New York Avenue to R Street NW—had just received the necessary permits. Meanwhile another portion of the trail, finished but not officially open, had already been discovered. On an Indian summer afternoon a family of four—mom in running togs, dad pushing an infant in a stroller and toting another on his shoulders—was out enjoying the trail. Two teenagers raced on their bikes. A woman walking her dog stopped to view the Metro commuter rail train rumbling past to the east.

“Everybody deserves a place where they can get around using non-motorized means that are pleasant and safe,” says Deutsch, pushing her own bike up the MBT on the way home. “I saw the same kids biking on the trail several days in a row, skidding and riding and having a great time, just like kids are supposed to do. That was beautiful to see.”

**Confirmed city dweller and freelance writer Amy Rogers Nazarov lives, walks and works east of, and sometimes on, the MBT.**

Learn more about RTC’s Urban Pathways Initiative at [www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways](http://www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways) or call 202.974.5123.

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