



THINKING REGIONALLY: PARTNERS CREATE A NEW CONNECTION WITH MCKINLEY BRIDGE BIKEWAY & TRESTLE

Janet Wilding and Bryan Werner

In 1996, a broad-based public-private effort called St. Louis 2004 began a planning process to revitalize the St. Louis region as a way to commemorate and celebrate the bicentennial of the Lewis & Clark Expedition and the 100th anniversary of the St. Louis World's Fair. Among the ideas that emerged was the concept to create the nation's first bi-state, multi-county park district devoted to developing a regional, interconnected system of greenways, parks and trails for hiking, biking and numerous other outdoor activities.

Based on this recommendation to St. Louis 2004, a group of local citizens initiated Proposition C, the Clean Water, Safe Parks and Community Trails Initiative, which called for a 1/10th cent sales tax to be dedicated to the creation of a multi-county park district in Missouri and Illinois. In November 2000, voters approved Proposition C in the City of St. Louis, St. Louis County and St. Charles County, Missouri; and in St. Clair County and Madison County, Illinois.

The sales tax measure ensured that more than \$20 million annually would be devoted to developing the regional system of greenways, parks and trails under the auspices of two multi-county park districts – The Great Rivers Greenway District (GRG) in Missouri and Metro East Park and Recreation District (MEPRD) in Illinois.

Together, GRG and MEPRD created a blueprint for The River Ring, a region-wide system of greenways, parks and trails that will transform the St. Louis Metropolitan area into a clean, green and connected region. When completed, nearly three million residents will have access to a connected park and trail system, as well as to streams, rivers and other natural resources that are located close to residential, employment and recreation areas.¹

- In Missouri, The River Ring will be a 600-mile web of more than 45 greenways within an area of 1,216 square miles.
- In Illinois, it will be a 275-mile web, featuring

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approximately 25 greenways encompassing a combined area of 1,400 square miles.

Creating an interconnected system of greenways, parks and trails will greatly enhance the quality of life for residents and visitors. New parks and miles of trails will connect communities and neighborhoods, bringing people together, stimulating economic development and inspiring innovative green space initiatives.

A great example of the ingenuity that has become the hallmark of implementing The River Ring is the multiple award-winning McKinley Bridge Bikeway and Trestle, an extraordinary 1.25-mile paved pathway over the Mississippi River that opened in June 2008. The project epitomizes regional cooperation on an important quality of life project. It also is an important part of the Confluence Greenway, a 200-square mile system of parks and conservation/recreation areas.

The Confluence Greenway features trails along 40 miles of both banks of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers from Downtown St. Louis/East St. Louis, past Alton to the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers and then across to St. Charles.² The plan for the Confluence Greenway was begun in 1997 by a variety of public, private and nonprofit organizations, and endorsed in 2002 by GRG.³

Since 2002, GRG has implemented several notable projects along the Confluence Greenway. The most significant was the rehabilitation in 2007 of the Riverfront Trail by GRG and the City of St. Louis. The project included repaving asphalt along the entire length of the 11-mile trail, creating rest stops at four new pocket park-like plazas and adding drinking fountains and signage at strategic locations along the trail.

With only a few existing bicycle and pedestrian crossings over the Mississippi River, another goal for the Confluence Greenway was to utilize the McKinley Bridge to create a connection between the 11-mile Riverfront Trail in Missouri and the 18-mile MCT Confluence Trail in Illinois, both along the shores of the Mississippi River. The project would also provide a multi-modal route for residents to commute to employment, education and shopping destinations.

Because of the foresight, leadership and actions of GRG and MEPRD working together, the McKinley Bridge Bikeway and Trestle was completed in 2008, creating one of the most innovative and scenic routes for bicyclists and pedestrians in the Midwest.

Its most distinctive feature is a 3,000-ft. long by 14-ft. wide cantilevered lane overlooking the Mississippi River, providing panoramic views of the St. Louis skyline and navigation activity along the river.

On the Illinois side, the Bikeway adjoins the brand new McKinley Bridge Roadside Park. Developed by a committee of volunteers with the Southwestern Madison County Chamber of Commerce and dedicated in December 2007, the park features a nearly six-story tall steel sculpture entitled "Salute to Steel," designed by John Celuch of Inland Design in Edwardsville.

At dedication ceremonies, Celuch said the sculpture salutes the steel industry that was responsible for turning a small farming community into an industrial giant that attracted immigrants from all across Europe. He also explained that the three large rings at the top of the monument represent the Tri-Cities of Granite City, Madison and Venice, which still to this day provide the majority of the workforce in the steel industry.

On the Missouri side, the Bikeway extends from the Trestle, a scenic 2,400-ft. long by 24-ft. wide paved path that was converted from an abandoned elevated railroad track. Developed simultaneously with the McKinley Bridge Bikeway, the Trestle descends from the full height of the Bikeway to street level where it provides a direct connection to the popular Riverfront Trail.



McKinley Bridge

The Trestle, considered the “Crown Jewel” of the McKinley Bikeway development, distinguishes St. Louis as only the third city in the world--after the High Line in New York City and the Promenade Plantée in Paris--to convert a historic elevated steel trestle into a linear urban recreation amenity.

The Trestle currently is being engineered to extend the elevated park experience an additional 2.8 miles into downtown St. Louis. This new segment of the Trestle will weave through a series of environments to include active industrial and manufacturing areas over Interstate 70, and eventually to residential areas north of downtown St. Louis. The elevated deck will provide unique views of downtown St. Louis, surrounding neighborhoods, the Mississippi River and the proposed new Mississippi River Bridge.

HISTORY OF MCKINLEY BRIDGE

Built of steel and concrete with a truss superstructure sitting on four limestone piers, the McKinley Bridge was built in 1910 for \$4 million dollars by the Illinois Traction System (ITS) to extend its tracks into St. Louis. Named for William B. McKinley, president of ITS, it was designed by Ralph Modjeski, an engineer who was well-known for several bridges along the Mississippi River.⁴

For many years the bridge provided local access for the railroad’s network of freight and passenger electric interurban trains in Illinois, including local streetcars to Granite City. Ultimately, the four-lane route that served as the direct “McKinley Line” into St. Louis became a part of the historic Route 66 Highway System in the 1930’s.



The City of Venice purchased the bridge in 1958 with revenue bonds supported by toll charges. In the mid-1960's, the lanes within the main river truss spans were rehabilitated for automobile use for \$8 million, which was twice the original construction cost of the entire bridge. Over the next 30 years the bridge slowly deteriorated. In October 2001, with open holes in the deck exposing the river below, the 97-year-old bridge was shut down when the Illinois Department of Transportation deemed it too dangerous for motorists.⁵

TALE OF TWO CITIES, TWO COUNTIES, TWO DOTS AND TWO DISTRICTS

The stage was set in 2004 for the Bikeway project when the City of Venice, City of St. Louis, Madison County, St. Clair County, Madison County Transit and Metro (Bi-State Development Agency) agreed to purchase the bonds and resolve the unpaid taxes on the McKinley Bridge, which already had been closed for three years.⁶

Control subsequently was transferred to the State of Illinois to refurbish and operate as a toll-free bridge. This action paved the way toward securing nearly \$50 million in funding from the State of Illinois, Department of Transportation and the Federal Highways Administration to rehabilitate the structure. The Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) proposed work on the bridge to include structural repairs, reconstruction of roadway structures and bridge approaches, and installation of new lighting.

During the initial design process for the bridge, many neighborhood and community advocates on both sides of the Mississippi expressed concern that the plans for the refurbished bridge did not include pedestrian and bicycle access. Although both the Eads and Old Chain of Rocks bridges had pedestrian and bicycle access, the McKinley Bridge crossing was important because of its mid-way location, approximately five miles between each of the two other bridges.

According to IDOT, adding pedestrian and bicycle access required that another party be prepared to assume the title for the entire bridge should it ever be closed to vehicular traffic. Following a personal request from St. Louis Mayor Francis G. Slay, GRG agreed to be involved in the chain of title. With this agreement in place in late 2004, IDOT agreed to add bicycle and pedestrian access on the McKinley Bridge.⁷

But, creating the bikeway added new challenges to an already complicated construction project. When the decision

finally was made to add a separate cantilevered lane for the bikeway, not only had all of the engineering already been completed for a bridge designed only for vehicular traffic, but there was absolutely no flexibility on the original construction deadline. Building a separate lane for the Bikeway required extensive re-engineering and involved a number of constraints. Success resulted from a commitment to the project and ongoing collaboration between the IDOT, Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT), Metro and the City of St. Louis, as well as GRG and MEPRD.

As part of its commitment to develop trails within the Confluence Greenway on St. Louis' near north side, GRG provided more than \$5 million for construction of the McKinley Bikeway. In addition, MEPRD contributed nearly \$700,000 for engineering and construction and MoDOT provided \$1,250,000 for construction, bringing the total budget to \$7 million.

DEDICATION SYMBOLIZES COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

The McKinley Bridge opened for vehicular traffic in December 2007 and six months later, in June 2008, the Bikeway was opened for bicyclists and pedestrians. At dedication ceremonies dignitaries from Missouri and Illinois led processions from each end of the bikeway to the middle for a symbolic ribbon “tying” to symbolize regional collaboration. Those who spoke were generous with praise, with remarks that included the following:


- *“The impact on the region is significant. “The positive impact of the McKinley Bridge Bikeway demonstrates the importance of regional cooperation between Missouri and Illinois and focusing the region on the wise use of its existing resources and amenities,” said St. Louis City Mayor Francis G. Slay. “In addition to reconnecting communities across the Mississippi River, the McKinley Bridge Bikeway will have a long-lasting regional impact by providing economic, environmental and social benefits on both sides of the river.”*
- *Madison County Board Chairman Alan Dunstan highlighted another important aspect of the project. “Thanks to the vision and hard work of the Madison County Transit District (MCT), we have a world-class bikeway system featuring over 100 miles of interconnected trails in Madison County. The opening of this landmark project by MEPRD and Great Rivers Greenway brings us another step closer to providing Missouri residents with enhanced access to those trails.”*

REGIONAL IMPACT WITH REGION WIDE REWARDS

From a regional perspective, GRG and MEPRD accomplished a lot more than enhancing a reconstructed bridge with a dedicated bikeway that paved the way for bicycle and pedestrian access across an important link in the region's transportation network. The McKinley Bridge Bikeway demonstrated how connecting regional assets and initiatives could have a positive impact on future economic development, environmental sustainability, social capital and healthy lifestyles.

For example, from a sustainability perspective, the re-use of the existing McKinley Bridge structure saved millions of infrastructure dollars compared to building a new bridge. Environmental benefits included replanting native vegetation and short prairie grass adjacent to the Trestle, enhancing the ecology of the Mississippi River.

In addition, fuel consumption was reduced by providing a much shorter commute between Madison County and St. Louis City for vehicular traffic and by encouraging bicycling as an alternative transportation option.



The pathway also makes it easier to promote more community interactions by eliminating the barrier of separation created by the river. And, economic development, particularly in the neighboring communities that are adjacent to the Bridge, will be positively impacted with reduced transportation costs.

But, most importantly, the project underscored the power of collaboration across state lines between two cities, two regional park districts, two regional transit agencies and two state transportation departments.

Endnotes

1. David L. Fisher, "Building the River Ring: A Citizen-Driven Regional Plan," St. Louis: The Great Rivers Greenway District, 2004.
2. David L. Fisher, "Metropolitan Park and Recreation District: Confluence Greenway Projects," St. Louis: The Great Rivers Greenway District, 2002.
3. Laura Cohen, "The Confluence: A Conservation, Heritage & Recreation Corridor," St. Louis: The Confluence Greenway, 2002.
4. David Mason, "Condition Survey of Railroad Trestle at McKinley Bridge," St. Louis: David Mason & Associates, Inc., 2003.
5. Mason.
6. Darold Crotzer, "Intergovernmental Agreement between Metropolitan Park and Recreation District and the State of Illinois for the Improvements upon the McKinley Bridge for Bicycle and Pedestrian Trail," St. Louis: The Great Rivers Greenway District, 2004.
7. Crotzer.

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About the Authors



Janet Wilding, Deputy Director for Administration for The Great Rivers Greenway District (GRG), served as project manager on behalf of GRG for the construction of the McKinley Bridge Bikeway, Branch Street Trestle and Riverfront Trail development projects. As one of GRG's original staff, Wilding assisted in creating the vision and framework that currently guides the organization's work. Her background includes 17 years in the public sector working in a wide variety of public policy initiatives, from political campaign work and congressional staffing to neighborhood housing advocacy, brownfield redevelopment, and municipal annexation and incorporations. Wilding has a Bachelor of Arts in Economics from St. Louis University.



Bryan Werner, a Planner for the Metro East Park and Recreation District in Collinsville, IL, helps coordinate planning, implementation, management, and administration for numerous regional projects the District is currently tackling. He has served in this position for the last four years. Mr. Werner holds a Bachelor of Science in Computer Management Information Systems and a Master of Public Administration and Policy Analysis from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.