

## **St. Louis Post-Dispatch** **Bike trails taking shape across area**

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The Mother Trail was blazed 30 years ago along the Great River Road up from Alton. Bicyclists drove their cars many miles to enjoy a spin past wooded bluffs and burly towboats.

Other slivers of urban trail followed: The North Riverfront Trail along the Mississippi River north of downtown in 1990. Grant's Trail in south St. Louis County in 1994. The Nature Trail from Granite City to Edwardsville in 1995. The old Chain of Rocks Bridge in 1999, reopened to walkers and cyclists.

But the metro trail map was striped with lines, mostly unconnected to others. The idea of a two-state web of interwoven bicycle trails existed on planning easels and in forward-looking speeches.

These days, the big vision is beginning to take form. Tax-supported local agencies on both sides of the Mississippi are, like the railroad builders of old, extending a network that will allow riders a choice of routes for pedaling the breadth of the metro area.

"Trails connect us," said David Fisher, director of the Great Rivers Greenway District. "They let us be healthy together. And they have become very, very popular."

Riders already can start from Laclede's Landing and pedal to Pere Marquette State Park, north of Grafton, or to near Hamel, northeast of Edwardsville. Each is a one-way ride of more than 45 miles. Madison County, the region's leader in trail-making, in October opened the Goshen Trail, which intersects with six other county trails.

When the McKinley Bridge over the Mississippi north of downtown reopens to traffic next year, a separate bike-and-hiking lane will allow a rider to cross the river and wheel back on the Chain of Rocks Bridge upstream along an eight-mile loop of trails.

On the Missouri side, design work is under way for a trail that will run 14 miles from Forest Park to Creve Coeur Lake Park. From there, a trail already crosses the Missouri via a special bikeway on the new Page Avenue bridge and connects to the Katy Trail, the 225-mile odyssey from St. Charles to Clinton, Mo.

This year alone, work has begun or grand openings held for another dozen extensions or new trails, with many more on the drawing boards. The two-state area offers about 120 miles of designated trail pavement, not counting those entirely within parks. That's roughly double what the total was a decade ago.

### Riverfront trail

"When I look back 20 years, I can't say I saw all this happening," said Ann Mack, director of Trailnet Inc. "It's thrilling to see so many partners make so much progress."

Trailnet, a private group, was founded in 1988 and began working on the North Riverfront trail, running past chemical plants, coal stations and junkyards. Said Martha Conzelman of Clayton, a Trailnet board member, "The early days of (Riverfront) trail were ghastly. You could have died out there and not be found for years."

Things got better. Trailnet and St. Louis eventually pushed North Riverfront to the Chain of Rocks Bridge. The group built the first leg of Grant's Trail along a former roadbed of the Union Pacific Railroad. The Madison County Transit District, the agency that runs the green-and-white commuter buses to and from downtown, began its ambitious trail system in 1993.

The Madison County Transit District has made good use of the 1976 federal Rails to Trails Act, which allows communities to "bank" abandoned rail lines on the theory that America might need them again for trains. Opponents may have a point in scoffing at the legal pretense, but it has made possible the Katy Trail and Madison County's Nickel Plate Trail, also named after a former railroad.

Jerry Kane, managing director of Madison County Transit, said the next big goal is building short links between trails and neighborhoods.

"There was a time when residents saw a trail as an invasion of privacy," Kane said. "Now people see it as a huge improvement in the quality of life. They want connections to trails. They want to live near trails."

Public sentiment pushed the development into high gear in 2000, when voters on both sides of the river approved 1/10th-cent sales taxes for parks, which makes available roughly \$10 million annually on the Missouri side and \$2 million in Illinois. State and federal grants increase the pot.

#### Projects under way

At the Union Station office of Great Rivers Greenway, the agency for St. Louis and St. Louis and St. Charles counties, staff members are working on almost 40 projects, with 10 under construction. Among them are restoration of the Branch Street trestle to carry cyclists from the McKinley Bridge and the first phase of a trail along Dardenne Creek in St. Charles County.

The most ambitious plan is Centennial Greenway, the link between Forest and Creve Coeur parks. Fisher, Great Rivers' director, says he hopes paving can begin in 2008.

The big dream is the "river ring," connecting trails around the edges of the three Missouri counties, with a series of interior loops. For example, Fisher said, the district wants to connect its new \$4 million trail across the River des Peres in south St. Louis with nearby Carondelet Park and Grant's Trail in South County.

Fisher said the new extension of Grant's Trail into Kirkwood could be pushed to trails along the Meramec River, then downstream to the Mississippi, where five miles of trails already are being paved in Cliff Cave Park.

And on and on, he said, toward a system that could grow to 650 miles on the Missouri side alone. For Fisher and Kane, who meet monthly to discuss the grand design, loops make all the difference.

"Loops don't repeat the experience," said Fisher. "They tend to draw more people, so there is safety in numbers. And you tend to go farther."

"With a loop, there's a point of no return."

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#### Area trail projects

**Mississippi River:** Work is under way on a separated 14-foot-wide bike-and-hike lane across the McKinley Bridge, to reopen to traffic next year. The Madison County Transit District will seek bids in spring to extend

its Confluence Trail to the bridge. The Great Rivers Greenway District on the St. Louis side is resurfacing an old trestle connecting the bridge with the North Riverfront Trail.

**Madison County:** Work is under way to extend the Nickel Plate and Heritage trails. Bids will be sought next year to build a trail connecting Hamel, Worden and Staunton, and extend the Schoolhouse Trail to O'Fallon.

**St. Clair County:** Work is near completion on the one-mile Richland Creek Bikeway in Swansea. Work will begin soon on a trail at Southwestern Illinois College.

**St. Louis County:** Design is under way on the 14-mile Centennial Greenway, from Forest Park to Creve Coeur Lake Park through several parks, along utility rights-of-way and an abandoned rail line near the Inner Belt (Interstate 170). Trail-paving along the highway is set for 2008. Work is under way on five miles of trail in Cliff Cave Park in South County.

**St. Louis:** Work is under way to improve surface and alignments of the 11-mile North Riverfront Trail. Trailnet is negotiating with a developer to renovate the old Laclede Power Co. building north of downtown for a cycling visitors' center and other services.

**St. Charles County:** Work is under way on a trail and recreation area along Dardenne Creek at BaratHaven development. The long-range plan is for the trail to run along 36 miles of the creek, with connections to the Busch Wildlife Area and the Katy Trail.