

## **St. Louis Post-Dispatch**

### **Trails blossom in Meramec Greenway**

By ***Phil Sutin***

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Monday, Nov. 26 2007

From south St. Louis County to Wildwood, the pace of building trails in the Meramec Greenway along the Meramec River has increased in recent years.

A segment of the biking-hiking trail through Fenton is virtually complete. A new, one-mile segment has recently opened in Lower Meramec Park, not far from Interstate 55 and Meramec Bottom Road.

The St. Louis County Council recently approved a lease to Wildwood of nearly 255 acres near the river, including Packwood Park. The action is part of a \$1 million project to build by 2009 the 2.2-mile Rock Hollow Trail that would connect the southern subdivisions of the city with the Al Foster Trail along the river.

The Rock Hollow Trail will go to the river down a steep valley covered with bluebell plants. They "produce vibrant flowers in the spring. It is as beautiful as any place can be," said Joe Vujnich, the city's planning and parks director.

On a recent Sunday, a Meramec Greenway trail in Lower Meramec Park was quiet.

"The river is really nice. It's peaceful," said Steve Potje, a nurse who was walking on the paved trail with his wife, Tammy, and their three daughters. "It's a way to show kids nature. If you live in the county or the city, there are not a lot of places to explore," said Potje, who lives about 1.5 miles from the trail. The trail "shows kids the need to take care of" nature, he said.

On that chilly, cloudy Sunday afternoon, the trail segment was largely empty. But that's unusual, said another hiker, Debbie Prange of Oakville. She is a second-grade teacher at Green Park Lutheran School who is often on the trail. "A lot of people hike, walk their dogs or bike," she said.

In St. Louis County, the Meramec Greenway stretches along 51 miles of the river from the Mississippi River to the Franklin County line near Pacific. Eventually, a trail could run along the entire north side of the river. Steep terrain and industrial uses limit the trail on the south side.

St. Louis County approved a Meramec Greenway master plan in 2003, and the Great Rivers Greenway adopted it a short time later. It calls for 60 miles of trails. About 15 miles are complete. The current trails are in segments from Interstate 55 to Route 66 State Park at Interstate 44.

Plans to put the Meramec in a park-like setting with trails go back to 1975, when local officials and civic leaders established the Meramec River Recreation Association to promote and coordinate the revival of the waterway. Then the state called the Meramec the most polluted river within its boundaries.

Voters established the Great Rivers Greenway in 2000 and authorized a 0.1-cent sales tax to finance development of trails and open space. The Meramec Greenway became one of organization's first projects. The tax revenue accelerated work along the Meramec.

The Great Rivers Greenway has spent about \$3 million, mainly on land purchases, for projects along the Greenway. Todd Antoine, the district's deputy director for planning, estimated that his agency might spend another \$4 million to carry out the Meramec Greenway plan.

Most projects result from partnerships with state and local governments, Antoine said. The partnerships may include a municipality, St. Louis County and the state departments of conservation and natural resources depending on the project, he said.

psutin@post-dispatch.com | 314-863-2812