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Blazing a trail to a better city

The most ambitious of the local linear park projects, the Wolf River Greenway promises to enhance the quality of life

By Staff Reports

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It has taken too long, but Memphis is fortunate that its leaders are catching on to the wisdom of investing in and developing greenways for their recreational, economic, social and environmental benefits.

The most ambitious example is the city's planned 22-mile section of the Wolf River Greenway, one of the most eagerly anticipated new public amenities here in some time and part of a long-sought dream of the Wolf River Conservancy.

Behind the scenes, promoters of a 13.4-mile trail on abandoned CSX Railway right-of-way from Cordova to the fairgrounds area are optimistic about negotiations that could result in the acquisition of the property.

And as staff writer Tom Charlier reports in today's Viewpoint cover story, expansions of popular stretches of existing greenway are planned in Germantown and Collierville, as well.

A lot of Memphians have gotten a taste of what greenways are like along short stretches in Germantown and Collierville. Some are familiar with a short Midtown trail known as the V&E Greenline and incorporate Mud Island's short but scenic Greenbelt Park in their workouts.

Those who like to hit the trails for exercise when they're traveling on business or pleasure have long wondered what has taken Memphis so long to offer its citizens more in the way of linear parks, though.

Investment in such recreational amenities has been slow throughout local government, however. It's slowing further as a result of revenue problems that have placed a damper on new projects and prompted Shelby County government to try to get out of the park business altogether.

The problem is not confined to Memphis. Anyone who has visited a national park recently can see the results of a tight-fisted federal approach to parks and recreation.

Memphis was already well behind such cities as Nashville, Louisville and St. Louis, however, in its spending on parks and preserves.

As local government pulls back even further, private sources of funds for development and maintenance are becoming more important -- the private conservancy in charge of Shelby Farms Park now being the most obvious local example.

Development of the Wolf River Greenway, too, is getting help from at least two private sources.

Mostly, however, it is a publicly funded project that will enhance the city's reputation for the quality of life here, provide a car-free corridor in which cyclists, runners and the like can enjoy their hobbies and improve public health.

The greenway, which will run along the north side of the Wolf from Mud Island to Houston Levee Road, bordering a 10-foot-wide paved trail, will raise awareness of a river that has played a formative role in the history of Memphis.

It will link Memphis with Germantown, Collierville and other communities along the 90-mile length of the river to its source in Benton County, Miss. And it will provide better access to the river itself for boaters and nature enthusiasts.

Short, individual segments will be completed as right of way and construction funds become available and eventually linked together -- a project that is projected to take at least 10 to 15 years.

The greenway will be a valuable civic amenity, and it will be a statement, as well -- a declaration that Memphians value good health, they value the environment and they value the things that enhance everyone's quality of life.

