

## Getting trail wary: Critics and supporters of rails-to-trail plan have questions as development nears

By Michael Kelley

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Development of a running-cycling trail from Midtown to Shelby Farms and beyond has been such an elusive goal for so many years that recent progress has left Shelby County government feeling like the dog that caught the car.

Very soon, decisions will have to be made about what to do with the thing.

Shelby County, with Mayor A C Wharton leading the charge, is responsible for turning the long-time dream of a multi-use, cross-town trail into a reality.

The dream will come true along an idle CSX Corporation railroad right-of-way that stretches for 13 miles from the Poplar and Union viaduct to a point near Houston Levee Road.

The private group Memphis Community Connector has agreed to purchase rights to a section of the right-of-way that runs from the viaduct to the north edge of Shelby Farms Park.

The \$5 million sale is expected to be completed within the next three months, at which time county officials are expected to begin some in-

house preliminary design work running up to a formal search for a project designer, developer and manager.

So far, the project has been financed by private money.

It's not clear if and when public funds will kick in, but the development has left Memphis' rapidly growing cycling and running communities more hopeful than ever. They've been lusting for years for an unimpeded, no-motorized-vehicles, multi-use trail that would connect Midtown to Shelby Farms Park and every neighborhood in between.

What's creating ecstasy among runners and cyclists, however, is making people nervous in neighborhoods along the trail's route, where CSX has been busily removing tracks and ties in the last few weeks.

That's not surprising. Anxiety has been the mood surrounding virtually every one of the 1,534 open rails-to-trails projects that stretch out across 15,346 miles of America's exercise highway. There is no reason Memphis should be any different.

An announcement of the preliminary purchase agreement just over a week ago stimulated a lively debate among residents over trail issues ranging from "Who's going to cut all the kudzu?" to "Cutting all that kudzu's just going to give burglars easier access to my backyard."

There is a lot of skepticism about national studies that have found positive effects on property values when trails are blazed through urban neighborhoods.

A typical study, conducted eight years ago along what was then a 67-mile system of trails in Omaha, Neb., found 65 percent of the nearby residents confident that the trails made their homes easier to sell and 77 percent believing that the trail enhanced their quality of life.

So what, the skeptics say. Maybe real estate agents are giving tours from the seats of their bicycles in Boulder. But Memphis?

"We really don't want the trail here in High Point Terrace," said Mary Alice Inzer, a vocal opponent of the CSX trail who lives a few blocks north of the right-of-way. "It would just be another inlet for criminals. I think it would open up this area to an undesirable element."

Inzer looks back with more than a little doubt on a community meeting at which trail advocates predicted higher property values and lower crime rates for her neighborhood.

"You know, in these Power Point presentations they're only going to express the point that they wish to endorse," she said. "They're not going to tell you the negatives."

The project has allies in the neighborhood, as well. Carol Stout, whose backyard abuts the south side of the right-of-way in High Point Terrace, is looking forward to the day the trail opens.

"I'd like Memphis to be in step with Dallas and all these other places that have trails," she said. "It would help the city tremendously."

It's not so much that her neighbors are overwhelmingly against the plan, Stout said. But many have questions. Will the trail have police officers on bicycles like those you see on big-city trails? Will it be lighted at night? Will its elevation be lowered to block views into people's backyards?

To the west of High Point Terrace and on the south side of the railway, the Poplar-Highland Community Association is "strongly in favor of the old CSX railway being converted into a trail for bikes and walkers-runners, as long as the trail is maintained," said president James Stubbs.

That means cutting the grass, picking up the litter, making sure trees and bushes are not allowed to grow out of control and the kudzu is eliminated, "and there is some guarantee of safety on the trail, especially on the section in our area," Stubbs said.

All along the trail's path, in fact, from Binghamton on the north bank of its western sector to the leafy affluence of East Memphis, there is guarded support but also many questions about what the trail will look like, how it will be maintained, how it will be lighted and what the police presence will be.

Advocates at Memphis Community Connector and [Greater Memphis Greenline](#) expect to be able to answer those questions in time. There is little doubt, however, that when planning for the trail begins there should be vigorous efforts to engage the public in the process.

"Residents of the neighborhoods can get involved early by participating in decisions about the trail itself -- seating areas, recreational areas and the like," said Katie Test, manager of public relations for the national [Rails-to-Trails Conservancy](#). "Promoters should encourage members of the community to have meetings around the trail design. They'll also become more comfortable as they see the same people on a regular basis -- walking their dogs, running, etc.

"Some neighborhoods have developed trail ranger programs with volunteers to keep an eye on things. Trails need solid friends groups. They can help with maintenance, light installation, brush clearing and other tasks."

If the history of Memphis' only other rails-to-trails project, the 10-year-old [V&E Greenline](#) in Midtown, is an accurate predictor, a lot of change will come to neighborhoods along the route.

Renate Rosenthal, whose home abuts the 1.7-mile V&E, was "highly skeptical" about the project when the right-of-way was purchased by the Vollentine & Evergreen Community Development Corporation in 1996.

When the line was abandoned in the early '80s, she said, the path became a dumping ground for tires and building materials, and vagrants moved in. They climbed over people's fences, stole lawn mowers and started fires.

"They used a stolen ladder from my house to climb over the fence and steal more. They were brazen," she said. "One of their fires spread to my backyard. Someone was back there throwing cigarettes down."

Neighbors communicated little about crime or anything else. "People came out saying we've had this problem and it's just going to get worse," Rosenthal said.

But the trail was built, and after 10 years it is getting steady use by neighborhood dog walkers, Midtown runners and people simply looking for a nice place to take a stroll. Trees, brush and tall fences obscure most of the backyards.

A committee of the Vollintine-Evergreen Community Association is in charge of the trail. Its chairman is Rosenthal, the former skeptic, who says the neighborhood is united more than ever now, and not just by a trail.

With the trail, she says, has come a new commitment among neighbors to communicate and work together to make sure the trail is more of an asset than a liability.

"The trail has become a catalyst for neighbors to talk about what is going on in our backyards," Rosenthal said. "When it was first cleaned up, there continued to be a concern about what was it going to do now that it's open. Will things get better? Will things get worse? There continued to be sporadic issues about people coming in over the fences.

"That was nothing new. But we became much more aware of it. We talked to each other about it. There was a core of about 15 people, and then various groups of volunteers at different times would show up.

"There was a committee that oversaw planning and development and one for day-to-day things. 'There's a fallen tree. Who can come with a chain saw?' People started to notice things.

"The neighborhood became like a family -- everybody up and down the green talking to each other."

There are still people in the neighborhood who don't care much for the greenline, Rosenthal said, and people who won't venture onto it alone. There are areas along the trail that can feel isolated at certain times of day and night.

The trail along the old CSX line will be no different. Some people will use it, and some won't. It would be futile to expect unanimity of support in neighborhoods that lie along the path.

For a lot of people the trail will be a dream come true. Hopefully, it won't be anybody's nightmare.

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## CSX line: more than a trail

**After the sale goes through, neighbors should be consulted about the linear park's design**

By Staff Reports

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Midtown's 1.7-mile V&E Greenline is a nice little soft-surface track that lures exercise buffs from as far away as Cordova. It's also an intangible thread through the neighborhood that has helped improve communication and cohesion among residents since it was cleared a little over 10 years ago.

The same thing can happen in neighborhoods to the east, where planning could begin soon to convert the western half of an abandoned 13-mile CSX railroad line into a linear park with a multi-use trail.

Purchase of the path is imminent, thanks to the efforts of Andy Cates, attorney Charles Newman and others associated with Memphis Community Connector. When the deal closes, Shelby County government will begin looking for a developer.

Then, a test: How well the trail is planned will be critical to its success. It will be immediately embraced by the growing ranks of people with active lifestyles, but efforts should be made to include as many residents of the area as possible in decisions regarding the design, maintenance policies, lighting, policing and the like.

It's a sure bet the trail will attract people from all over Memphis. It will give cyclists and runners a safer route between Shelby Farms and Midtown. It will help bring the city up to speed with other urban areas across the country that are doing what they can to attract information-age workers and professionals who are more active and environmentally conscious than the generation that came before them.

Memphis, it seems clear, should catch a ride on a trend that can only gain traction with the growing awareness of climate change and high gas prices. There is a direct link between urban trails and a community's vitality, its potential for growth and the health of its people.

As Memphis cyclists can verify, this community is not the most bicycle-friendly place they've ever pursued their hobby. A trail could only improve cycling safety.

In places like Clearwater, Fla., trails blazed along abandoned railroad rights-of-way are being used as much for trips to work, school and shopping as they are for recreation.

In places like Atlanta, they're driving up property values, changing how real estate companies market the homes they sell and affecting how new houses are designed. Their proliferation has helped drive a 28 percent increase in the number of people who use bicycles to commute to work in the United States between 2000 and 2006, according to the latest Census Bureau data.

Development of the trails they ride were preceded by some of the same discussions that are occurring along the path of the CSX right-of-way in Memphis -- a mixture of eager anticipation and fear.

Those are legitimate concerns that must be addressed. The more people a trail is able to attract, the safer it will be.

With careful planning, proper design and features that enhance security and safety, any urban trail can raise the quality of life for people who use it and those who live nearby.



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