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Trails

Dallas County, bicycles
and economic development

By Rick Loessberg,

Dallas County Director
of Planning & Development

AT A TIME WHEN COUNTIES ARE TRYING TO determine what their role should be and how they can position themselves in an uncertain economy, the answer may perhaps be found by not only taking a simple path, but by building one. That's what Dallas County first began doing back in 1993, when Union Pacific announced it was formally abandoning a three-mile rail segment located in the county's geographic center. The corridor, built by the Missouri-Kansas-Texas ("Katy") railroad in the 1880s, traveled through some of Dallas' most densely-populated and developed neighborhoods. It featured scenic views, an interesting "urban-setting" perspective and provided an uninterrupted route from downtown Dallas to the edge of Southern Methodist University.

At the time, the Dallas area did not have much of a trail network. The county had never considered or expected to "get into the trail business." But the Union Pacific announcement created a unique opportunity, and it led to a new role for the county — a role that, with the assistance of its cities, has resulted in the creation of a Dallas-area trail system that now contains over 100 miles of hard-surface trail.

It was not initially clear in 1993 whether the Dallas area would be able to take advantage of the Union Pacific opportunity. Time — the lack of it — was a major issue. Because of the federal process for abandoning rail lines, the public only had about 180 days to decide whether to assume responsibility for the corridor. If an entity did not step forward to accept the rail line within the time period, the corridor's property would revert to the adjoining property-owners. With there being about 200 parcels immediately adjacent to the three-mile segment, once the corridor fell into this phase and began being divided among the many property-owners, it would be virtually impossible to reassemble it for another public use.

Immediacy wasn't the only obstacle. Although Dallas County had an open-space program, the program encouraged passive recreation, not active. The preserves in the program's open space system were natural in appearance and had virtually no improvements or amenities, and the maintenance of the pre-

Joggers make use of the Katy Trail in Dallas County. Photo courtesy of Dallas County.

serves was provided not by the county, but by the cities where the preserves were located. Similarly, the City of Dallas, because it did not have funding readily available for such a new project, was understandably cautious about having to build an entire trail and take on a new and possibly sizeable maintenance responsibility.

Not wanting to see the opportunity disappear, the county offered to provide \$250,000 for the design and construction of a trail if the city would accept and maintain the corridor. The city, equally understanding of what would be gained if the corridor was converted into a pedestrian trail, quickly agreed. With this, the County's first trail project — now called the Katy Trail — came into being.

Even before the construction of the trail's first two-mile phase was completed (the trail has since been expanded by 1.5 miles, and funding has already been committed to double its length to seven miles), the potential benefits from this project and from others like it were becoming obvious.

Recognizing the role that it had played with the Katy Trail and understanding that, in a county with 900 square miles and 30 cities, it would be difficult to replicate the project and have it connect with other trails unless there was an entity that could "transcend" the area's many municipal boundaries, the county developed and adopted its first trail plan in 1997.

Two years later, the commissioners court formally changed the major priority of its open space program from

TOP: Cyclists make use of the seven-mile-long Campion Trail in Irving. The Campion Trail connects the county's most densely-populated neighborhoods with Irving's Las Colinas area, a major employment center and home of several Fortune 500 firms. Photo courtesy of the Greater Irving/ Las Colinas Chamber of Commerce. **BOTTOM:** The Katy Trail now passes by several new restaurants and residential developments. Photo courtesy of Dallas County.



assembling a county-wide open space system (which, by that time, contained more than 2,800 acres at 21 preserves) to establishing a comprehensive trail system where it would be possible to travel from one end of the county to another and to major destination points without the need of a car. To create such a system, the county began providing funding for trails if a city would agree to own and maintain the trail and provide for any enhancement features (drinking fountains, benches, lighting) that the city might desire. Such an arrangement was similar to what was done on the Katy Trail and what the county had traditionally done for thoroughfare projects.

When the county began its efforts to create a comprehensive trail system, it understood that it would not be possible to do so in just a few years and that there would not be trails everywhere at once. Because Dallas County is geographically so large, the county first sought to establish "beach-head" projects in key locations. Over time, the county then pursued a "connect the dots" strategy to extend the initial projects and to eliminate physical gaps between them.

In determining which projects to fund, the county has always taken into consideration where the project is located, its length (originally, projects had to have created a trail at least one mile long; now projects have to create a segment of at least two-to-three miles), whether it connects to a major destination point, the likelihood that it will be used, its cost, whether the city is providing any funding, and the amount of time it will take to design and build the project. Projects have been proposed through the formal submission of proposals from the cities, by staff, from informal conversations between a city and the county, and from ideas submitted by the public.

Project implementation is handled in a manner that is the most

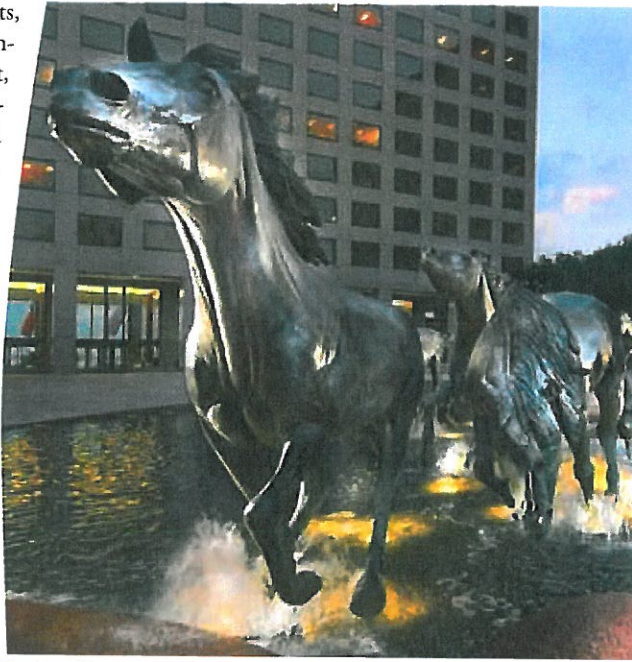
advantageous. On some projects, the county may take on responsibility of designing the project, awarding the construction contract, inspecting the work and authorizing payments, with the city acting in a secondary review capacity. On others, the roles may be reversed, and on some, the duties may be more evenly shared.

The county has been fortunate to undertake projects that generally have not required land acquisition. Both Oncor and DART (the area's transit authority) have been generous in allowing the county and the cities to utilize electrical corridors and unused rail lines for trail projects. The University of Texas at Dallas has also graciously provided an easement so that a major trail can access its campus. Other projects have utilized park land and public right-of-way that a city may have already possessed.

The county has provided about \$39.6 million in funding since first becoming involved with trails. Funding for the first two trail projects was provided from the county's 1991 open space bond program. Beginning in 2000 — when the county began funding all of its capital improvement projects from a portion of its tax rate that had been previously used to retire outstanding debt — funding for the county's other trail projects has come from both the \$1 million-\$2.5 million the trail program receives annually and from the county's thoroughfare program.

The commitment of resources has not only directly lead to the undertaking of new projects by the county, but it has also encouraged other cities who had previously begun developing their own programs to continue to do so.

To date, joint county-city projects have resulted in the construction of 30 miles of new trail that connect with another 46 miles of existing trail. Because of these projects, it is now possible to continuously



TOP: The Mustangs at Williams Square, located in Las Colinas along the Campion Trail. Photo courtesy of the Greater Irving/ Las Colinas Chamber of Commerce. **BOTTOM:** Residents use the Katy Trail during a nice afternoon in Dallas County. Photo courtesy of Dallas County.



ride a bike from where the northern suburb of Plano begins to the edge of downtown Dallas — a distance of 20 miles. It is also possible to use a trail to travel from Irving's densely-populated Valley Ranch community to Las Colinas, which is the corporate home of Fortune 500 firms like Kimberly-Clark and ExxonMobil. There are also trails that connect neighborhoods with DART light rail stations, the University of Texas at Dallas, the American Airlines Center, retail areas, parks, and the Telecom Corridor (which employs more than 80,000 people).

In addition to the 30 miles the county has already helped build, another four miles are currently under construction, and another 24 miles are either already under design or will soon be. When these various projects are completed, they will result in, among other things, a major east-west trail across Dallas, the longest trail in south Dallas, the first trail in west Dallas, the first trail in Cedar Hill, a cross-town trail in Mesquite, an extension of a trail so that it connects with Carrollton's downtown and a DART station, and the connection of a trail to Brookhaven College.

At the time that the Katy Trail was first built, the Dallas area was beginning to economically emerge from the aftermath of the savings and loan crisis and the collapse of the local real estate market. The Dallas area had also always had a challenge handling the increases in automobile traffic that it was experiencing and it had concerns about its ability to comply with federal air quality standards.

The county began facilitating the development of a coordinated and comprehensive trail system

because it thought it would help address those issues, and the evidence compiled since the effort began has shown that the trails have, indeed, lead to both tangible and intangible benefits. Improvements that were originally meant to connect destinations have become destinations themselves ("Let's meet at the Katy Trail"). The trails have become the identity for some neighborhoods, enhanced their residents' sense of pride, and lead to numerous community projects, such as the planting of more than 1,000 shrubs and trees along one trail.

The trails have also added economic value to the areas they serve. Some trails regularly carry more people than many local streets and bus routes. Restaurants that cater to trail patrons have sprung up alongside of trails. Residential developments have been built near or taken on the name of a trail. Real estate agents now prominently feature that their listed properties are located adjacent to a trail like Preston Ridge or Santa Fe.

Public safety has also been improved. Before the Katy Trail was built, for instance, there was so little rail traffic that people who did not want to be noticed used it as a place for conducting their various transactions and for "sleeping it off." With thousands of people now using the trail every day, that activity has ceased. Many homeowners are so

The trails have become such an important part of the county that it's hard to realize they have not always been here.

comfortable with having a trail touch their backyard that they've either completely removed their wooden stockade fences or they have installed a gate so that they can use the trail themselves.

In many instances, the trails have become examples of urban alchemy. They have come from nothing to become something useful and wonderful. Where once there were empty, 200-foot-wide swaths of power lines and brown grass running through a subdivision, there are now landscaped ribbons of life that are enjoyed by people of all ages and backgrounds: parents teaching their children how to ride a bike, people running to stay fit, retired couples taking a walk in the evening and people riding to work or to school.

The trails have become such an important part of the county that it's hard to realize they have not always been here. Their existence is a direct result of the work of cities that had the foresight to operate their own programs and that have worked with the county. Without those partnerships, none of this would have occurred. With the trails that are now in place and with those that will soon be added, the Dallas area has established a valuable system of amenities that its residents can enjoy and that will enable the area to remain economically vibrant and attractive. ★

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