

From Tracks to Trails

BY CHARLES LOCKWOOD



Residents and visitors alike use the Katy Trail, a landscaped trail system that links several districts in Dallas.

IN DALLAS, TEXAS, ABANDONED railroad tracks that once divided the downtown core are rapidly being transformed into the unifying Katy Trail, a linear 3.5-mile-long (5.6-km-long) landscaped pedestrian and bicycle trail system that runs through the most densely developed section of the city. This adaptive use of unused railroad tracks—long considered a public eyesore and nuisance—unifies several important Dallas districts and provides a major recreational amenity for the more than 300,000 people who live and work within a mile of the Katy Trail. It also is directly responsible for an upsurge in property values and retail/restaurant sales in adjacent neighborhoods and developments.

For 100 years, the train tracks that are now the Katy Trail formed the major east-bound route through Dallas of the former Missouri-Kansas-Texas (MKT or “Katy”) Rail-

road, which shut down in the late 1980s. The stations, which had served Dallas residents on their trips east for so many years, were torn down, but the tracks remained.

In the early 1990s, Dallas residents, businesspeople, and city and county officials proposed restoring the greenbelt along the railroad route and creating an urban park as part of the national Rails to Trails Conservancy Program, established in 1986 and based in Washington, D.C.

The Friends of the Katy Trail, a nonprofit organization, was founded in 1997 to organize public and private support for development and maintenance of the Katy Trail. “For the last 25 years, there’s been a group of people interested in promoting planned development and zoning in the area where the train tracks are,” says Philip Henderson, architect, urban planner, and president of



Friends of the Katy Trail. “When the opportunity to create the Katy Trail came along, we recognized it and started planning for it.”

Working with the Dallas office of the SWA Group, an international landscape architecture, planning, and urban design firm, the Friends of the Katy Trail created a \$23 million master plan for two trails and an urban park that connect the West End district and the American Airlines Center (home to the Dallas Mavericks and the Dallas Stars, as well as to entertainment and sporting events) near downtown to Southern Methodist University and the Mockingbird DART Station four miles (6.4 km) north.

“The railroad tracks divided two long, slim districts that had high-density zoning,” says Henderson. “With the transformation from train tracks to the Katy Trail, the tracks act as a spine for these two fast-growing, dense mixed-use areas, rather than as a fence between them.”

When completed over the next few years, the Katy Trail will have a 3.5-mile-long (5.6-km-long), 12-foot-wide (3.7-m-wide) concrete

path for bicyclists and inline skaters; an adjacent 3.1-mile-long (5-km-long), eight-foot-wide (2.4-m-wide) soft surface track for pedestrians; four major entrance plazas; seven Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant entrances (including one at the Frank Lloyd Wright-designed Dallas Theatre Centre); seven stair entrances; plus benches, landscaping, and drinking fountains for all users, including pets. “The Katy Trail master plan is creating much more than a jogging path,” says Charles S. McDaniel, a principal at SWA. “This is also an urban park with several handicap access points, including one at Lyte Street near the American Airlines Center.”

Last May, construction started on the \$1.3 million plaza overlooking Reverchon Park, initiating a complete reworking of this area adjacent to the Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children. “We worked with Friends of the Katy Trail and the staff at the hospital to design a 750-foot-long [229-m-long], 12-foot-wide [3.7-m-wide] ramp that will connect the Katy Trail to Reverchon Park, 40 feet [12 m] below the trail,” says McDaniel.

The Katy Trail—an adaptive use of unused railroad tracks that were long considered an eyesore—provides a major recreational amenity for the more than 300,000 people who live and work within a mile of it.



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“The ramp and the extension of Katy Trail will be a key element of the design and will provide access to the trail from the park for the young patients at the hospital.

“To create a safe and welcoming amenity for Dallas residents, we focused on giving the trail a beautiful and welcoming public face through the use of landscaping, lighting, and particularly in the design of nine public spaces at important crossings and intersections,” he adds. These large, well-lit, handicap-accessible public spaces have ample seating for bikers, joggers, pedestrians, and residents and workers from the adjacent neighborhoods. Many of them also have public art that adds visual interest.

“Katy Trail would not have happened except as a public/private partnership,” points out Henderson. “Public funding, like federal grants, is designed to provide a basic foundation. Private funding and groups can pay for the amenities that make a project unique.” Three miles (4.8 km) of

the Katy Trail land was donated to the city of Dallas by the Union Pacific Railroad in 1993. Initial funding for the project came through Dallas County and state grants. The Friends of the Katy Trail then created a capital campaign to raise \$11 million from government sources and \$12 million from private funding and land donations. That money is being used to design the trail, including the landscaping and public spaces, and to complete the many different components of the Katy Trail. (Each project must be fully funded before work can begin.)

At the end of 2005, Friends of the Katy Trail had raised more than \$16 million to implement the \$23 million master plan. Private contributors have included the American Airlines Center Foundation (comprising American Airlines, the Dallas Mavericks, and the Dallas Stars), Centex Corporation, Hillwood Development Corp., the Belo Foundation (owners of the *Dallas Morning News*, WFAA-TV, and the Texas Cable News Network) as well as dozens of family foundations.

“We still need about \$6 million to finish the trail,” says Henderson. “We’ve gotten good contributions from foundations, but when it comes to private funding, you really need to look to the development community—which is creating the built environment—to be a participant in this. Thus far, we’ve gotten mixed support from the development community. Some developers understand this as a good investment in maintaining the value of their own projects, and some developers just roll their eyes and walk away.”

But the public/private partnership goes far beyond financing. “Friends of the Katy Trail has worked closely with the Dallas Parks and Recreation Department and its board throughout the project to implement the master plan and adhere to the department’s codes and guidelines,” says Eric Van Steenburg, executive director of the Friends of the Katy Trail. “We continue to partner with them on a regular basis to make sure that everyone is working toward the same goal of creating a great American park for the people and city of Dallas.”

In addition to turning train tracks into an urban park, the Katy Trail master plan focuses on environmental stewardship, particularly on the protection and enhancement of the existing adjacent native environment and wildlife habitats.

“Between 50 and 80 feet [15 and 24 m] of right-of-way is being landscaped along all 3.5 miles [5.6 km] of the Katy Trail, not only

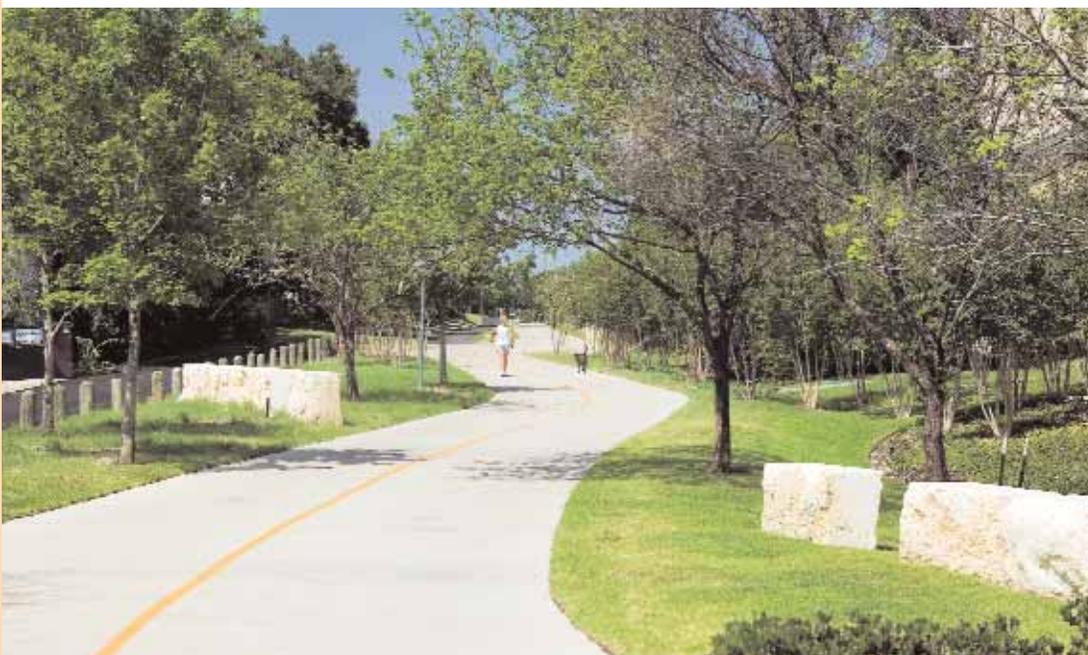


to beautify and shade the trail, but also to lure wildlife—particularly birds—into the urban corridor,” says SWA’s McDaniel. “The planting plan, developed in conjunction with local landscape architects Chris L. Miller and David Ralston, is dominated by native Texas trees and plants, including chinquapin and lacey oaks, perennial grasses, flame acanthus, and numerous species of native salvias and other plants that conserve water.” All of

the grade levels were adjusted to maximize surface drainage for groundwater recharge. Where surface drainage was not possible, underground drainage was added at critical points along the trail as part of a flood control system.

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More than just a jogging path, the Katy Trail is an urban park with accessible entrances for people with disabilities.



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a major metropolis. Of particular importance, the Katy Trail will act as the spine of a city and countywide trail network that will cross Dallas and link the trails at the White Rock Lake and the Trinity River.

Real estate developers, retailers, and homebuyers have taken particular notice of the Katy Trail. For example, developers are marketing commercial and residential proj-





ects by touting their proximity to it. Hillwood principal Ross Perot, Jr., is developing major components of the 75-acre (30-ha), high-end mixed-use Victory Park project near the Katy Trail trailhead. “A lot of high-density residential projects are coming into the area because of the trail,” Henderson adds. Stores and restaurants in developments and neighborhoods adjacent to the Katy Trail also report increased sales. Real estate values in general are rising. Property values of homes two or three blocks from the trail are climbing significantly, while values of homes that face it have risen 30 to 40 percent.

The Katy Trail offers a model that any city with abandoned train tracks can adopt to give its citizens, visitors, developers, and businesses what they crave—beautiful and transformational open space. **U**

CHARLES LOCKWOOD is an environmental and real estate consultant based in New York City and southern California.

When completed over the next few years, the Katy Trail will feature several entrances, benches, a concrete path for bicyclists and inline skaters, an adjacent soft-surface track for pedestrians, and drinking fountains for all users, including pets.

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