

Trail systems vital to health, property values

What if I told you that I could increase property values, make Dallas more attractive to new residents and businesses, improve public health, reduce road congestion, spawn active public-private partnerships, and access millions of dollars of federal and state funding with one simple transportation project? Interested?

This magic wand is our trails system. Those of us who live near trails have seen the vitality they produce in the surrounding community. This is more than mere recreation on sunny days. Rails to Trails, a national trail advocacy organization, cites multiple studies indicating that the value of property rises as it obtains trail access. *The Dallas Morning News* has reported that developers consider access to the Katy Trail to provide a 25-percent price premium over similar property without trail access.

Ask those who live near trails what they enjoy about them, and you'll hear that the easy access to recreation makes people more active and healthy. Communities also grow out of use of the trails.

In addition to being the catalyst for successful public-private partnerships, trails have led to unprecedented inter-governmental cooperation. Dallas' city government has partnered with DART, Dallas County, North Central Texas Council of Governments and many of our neighboring cities to plan and build many trails with hundreds more miles expected in the future.

So if we're all pulling together to build more trails and the benefits are large and obvious, what's the hold-up? Funding, as always, but also perhaps an inefficient lack of focus on trail priorities. First, funding: Dallas' current trails plan calls for 55 more miles of trails that are currently unfunded, and staff estimates their cost at \$111 million (with more being proposed all the time). I argue that the estimate is somewhat misleading, but as a general principle, I'm calling for sustained increases in trail funding in the next several budget cycles.

I also think we can accelerate the trail plan through more efficient construction priorities. Because of the unreliability of trail funding and a lack of a clear priority list for trail construction, Dallas currently has a disconnected system of trails. This means that our trail infrastructure can



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carry fewer users and is less useful to those users. Our trail system is going to be much more attractive, useful and utilized when it is actually a system. As successful as the Katy Trail has been, it doesn't go anywhere. In the north, it peters out at a street intersection near Beverly Drive. If you happen to be biking south, the trail shoots you out onto your choice of a sidewalk or riding the wrong way down Houston Street. Neither choice is legal or safe. When we can connect the Katy in the north to the trails around White Rock Lake and in the south to the Trinity Strand Trail, the Katy will benefit from the decrease in utilization pressure, and trail users will benefit from being able to use those trails as transportation instead of only for recreation.

Inefficient choices are also behind the \$111 million cost estimate. That figure, more than \$2 million/mile, is essentially an all-in estimate including many amenities. One great thing about trails, though, is that funding can come from many places. If we concentrate our city resources on expanding the trail mileage that is connected in a system and building trails simply, our partners in trail development will pitch in. Friends groups and surrounding land owners will fund trail amenities once they see the demonstrated benefit to themselves from the use of the existing trail, even if it starts out a little bare-boned. As we understand better the benefits to the surrounding community, trails may even be partly funded through tools structured like the tax increment financing and public improvement districts we use to incentivize other kinds of development. My proposal is that the priority list is connect, expand and improve. I believe this order will maximize the investment of the local community and stretch our public dollars farther.

Phillip Kingston is the Dallas City Council member for District 14.