

City has rare alternative transportation opportunity

By MIKE OWEN, September 13, 2015

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A confluence of proposed projects and newly available funding provide a chance for Columbus to make strides in alternative transportation that have never before been seen, community leaders say.

A proposal by the **PATH Foundation**, which facilitates multiuse paths all over Georgia, would add over 27 miles of such trails, including one that would **connect the Chattahoochee RiverWalk to the Fall Line Trace.**

MidTown Inc. is in the draft stage of a project called **Minimum Grid**, which would **better connect midtown to downtown.** The proposal and part of the implementation are being funded by a \$200,000 grant provided by the **Knight Foundation.** Designers from **Gehl Studios**, who are creating the plan, will be in town Monday and Tuesday to unveil their draft and seek further public input.

As part of the Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax passed in 2012, Columbus will spend more than **\$22 million on Metra, the city's mass transit department.** Consultants are fine-tuning a plan that could increase the number of buses and routes the service runs and make changes where the service is offered.

While most of the TSPLOST funds are strictly earmarked for specific projects, such as Metra, 25 percent of the approximately \$260 million expected to be collected over the tax's 10-year life is discretionary and can be used however Columbus Council chooses, as long as it is for transportation.

Community leaders involved in the various proposed projects say the opportunity created by the timing of these projects presents a rare, if not unprecedented, opportunity. And, they say, the players in each of the projects are aware of the others and how they can dovetail together.

"They are very aware of all of these pieces of the puzzle," said Anne King, executive director of MidTown Inc., which won the Knight grant for Minimum Grid. "This is not something that is happening in a void. This has been a real coordinated effort, working with the planning department, the engineering department."

Mayor Teresa Tomlinson said all three of the projects are vital and that the opportunity to add Metra transfer hubs around the city can help pull all of them together.

"The consultants with Metra are very aware of what we're doing with cycling," Tomlinson said. "In fact what we're doing with these hubs, having cycling opportunities, zip car opportunities, as well as rent-a-bike opportunities. In a lot of cities, rent-a-bikes are part of the overall transportation plan."

Local attorney Ken Henson, who helped establish the Greenway Trail Fund to raise funds for the PATH Foundation project, said the effort will be a public-private partnership, but the bulk of the funding will have to come from the public sector.

"This is infrastructure," Henson said. "So it's going to be more public than private. It's got to be mostly public."

The private sector, through his organization, has financed bringing the PATH Foundation to Columbus to study the city's needs and opportunities and to develop a draft plan. And it will finance the engineering and planning for each segment of the plan, Henson said.

"We're going to come up with private money," Henson said. "By the end of the year, we'll have half of the Fall Line to the RiverWalk engineered and ready to go. It will then be up to how we can get funding."

While the entire PATH proposal would include 12 links totaling 27.5 miles of multipurpose trails, the foundation is recommending starting off with a project that would connect the city's two primary paths, the RiverWalk and the Fall Line Trace.

The Fall Line Trace ends at 10th Avenue near Midtown Medical Center. The proposal would bring a path south on 10th to Linwood Boulevard, then west to Sixth Street, south to 14th Street, then west on 14th to the river.

The foundation also recommends that the city then undertake a longer trail, running the length of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, from Buena Vista Road to 10th Avenue. That trail would then turn south on 10th and west on Eighth Street to Third Avenue, then south a block to Seventh Street and then west to the Promenade and ultimately to the Riverwalk.

Another link would connect Lakebottom Park to the MLK trail via Warren Williams Road and then on to the RiverWalk.

Other links would include connecting the Riverwalk near Oxbow Meadows with the new Follow Me Trail under construction in south Columbus and another that would link Follow Me to the MLK Trail at the other end.

Henson said he estimates that connecting the RiverWalk and Fall Line Trace and the MLK/Lakebottom/Riverwalk section could be realized for about \$6 million and could be completed in about two years.

"When you run the trail and connect Martin Luther King across Lakebottom Park and you connect Lakebottom to downtown and the RiverWalk, you've connected midtown to downtown with a trail," Henson said.

"People who live anywhere near the trail and can get to the park, they can get on that trail and they can ride downtown on a bicycle, or they can walk, and feel safe. These trails, the reason they're successful is because they're safe."

Henson and Tomlinson both point to the success of Atlanta's fledgling Beltline multiuse trail project. The city has completed about 10 of 32 proposed miles of the Beltline, which will eventually circle the city. Developers are following where the Beltline is running and where it will run, banking on the people the path will draw, Henson said.

"I was up there last weekend. The growth along those corridors is amazing," Henson said. "Years ago, it was abandoned warehouses, and I mean miles of abandoned warehouses, and now you've got four and five story high-rises going into these corridors because they're close to the Beltline or where the Beltline is going to be."

Tomlinson said Atlanta's leaders weathered considerable criticism from naysayers when the Beltline was proposed, just as Columbus leaders suffered when the Fall Line trace was coming to life.

"People thought the Beltline was a total joke when they first proposed it," Tomlinson said. "Leaders and visionaries were being totally lambasted for even considering this type of investment. And now what's happening is you're seeing these communities being revived."

While she wasn't part of the Columbus Consolidated Government when the Fall Line Trace was being birthed, she nonetheless got an earful concerning it. While she was campaigning for her first term in 2010, people complained to her about the project and asked if she would stop it if elected.

"They said it's a waste of money and all sorts of horrific things are going to happen and people are going to move away from it and they're not going to want to live anywhere near it," Tomlinson said. "And now the biggest complaints I hear is that it's too crowded and when are you going to do another one and when are we going to extend it here or there."

King said the city should look at the projects as investments in economic development.

"There was a time where we regarded quality of life issues as nice amenities, but not essential," King said. "And now there is a recognition that quality of life and mobility and alternatives to cars and being able to walk and bicycle and having a healthy core community, those are all major economic development issues, to be able to attract and retain talent."

Henson said the investment is critical for Columbus to stay competitive in attracting jobs and the smart, young workforce that employers look for.

"To younger people, this is the kind of amenity that they want," Henson said. "They're going to move to a town that has it. If we don't have it, they're not going to move here. If we don't have it, we're going to lose people to the Greensvilles, the Charlottes, the Ashevilles, the Chattanooga and the other towns where they're doing things like this."

Tomlinson said the confluence of the different projects, along with TSPLOST and other state DOT funds available through the Transportation Investment Act create a rare opportunity for the city.

"Even before I was in public office, one of my pet peeves was missed opportunities. Watching an opportunity being squandered because of lack of information, fear of change," Tomlinson said. "We cannot lose these opportunities."

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