

# SEEING GREEN

**PROGRESS:** Greenways are being recognized and embraced as paths to prosperity

By PHILIP BELCHER  
For the Herald-Journal

**G**reenways often are defined as linear corridors of protected space usually set aside for recreation or active transportation purposes.

Their importance, however, transcends a simple dictionary definition. In fact, greenways may be some of the most effective avenues to healthier lifestyles, economic development and community building. They can provide connections between destinations like schools and

stores, parks and downtowns, auditoriums and arts centers. They are innovative tools for economic development that can turn unbuildable areas such as old railroad corridors into beachfront property. They appeal to young, old, rich and poor with advantages that no other conservation opportunity can match.

But let's face it: It's not a new idea to suggest that

a greenway or some other lifestyle amenity might transform our modest textile town into a place with a capital "P".

In the past, every time some well-meaning soul floated a "quality of life" improvement in Spartanburg, it seemed to waft into the room with a hint of incense and a Grateful Dead riff. Understandably, that never won over the Chamber of Commerce and others with the resources to make greenways a reality.



Above, Liberty Park in Spartanburg serves as part of the Palmetto Trail. The top photo shows a view from the Cottonwood Trail on Spartanburg's east side. Below, Ed Griffin walks along the boardwalk over the Cottonwood Trail's wetlands area.



**B EXPENSE:** Creative solutions are needed in order to pick up the tab for greenways

By EMILY CROW NEELY  
For the Herald-Journal

**I**t's a safe bet that most Spartanburg County residents want parks and greenways in their communities. Go to Milliken, Cleveland Park, the Cottonwood Trail, Barnet Park or the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind on any Saturday afternoon when the weather is nice, and you will find a wide variety of people using these spaces to walk, run, play and, simply, to enjoy being outside.

But you're likely to find some disagreement among Spartanburg residents on how to pay for these amenities. Should parks and greenways be the sole responsibility of government? Should developers contribute? Should private philanthropy foot the bill?

As state and local governments across the country try to mitigate budget shortfalls, communities increasingly must seek creative solutions to fund parks and greenway initiatives. Following are some examples of funding programs that have proven successful in a variety of communities.

## Public funding

According to the Trust for Public Land, the vast majority of parks and greenway programs in the United States are funded by tax revenues. And communities are voting to increase public funds to support these

*"You're likely to find some disagreement ... on how to pay for these amenities."*

EMILY CROW NEELY,  
Upstate Forever



# Neely: In November's election, many cast votes for funding

◆ EXPENSE continued from A17 programs.

In this year's Nov. 2 elections, voters in communities in 25 states passed ballot measures to generate nearly \$2.4 billion in public funding to protect land for parks, greenway systems and open space. Overall, 119 of 161 local and state measures nationwide were successful — an approval rate of about 74 percent.

In this year's elections — as in years past — a local sales tax option earmarked for parks and greenway programs proved popular among voters nationwide. Voters in four Georgia counties approved increasing the local sales tax for parks and greenway land acquisitions. Measures passed in Gwinnett, Athens-Clarke, Rockdale and Cherokee counties.

A measure also passed in Charleston County in South Carolina this year, as voters approved a half-cent local sales tax to improve roads and transportation as well as to acquire land for the county's parks and greenway system.

Rather than an across-the-board sales tax increase, other communities have chosen to increase the sales tax just on specific items. Texas, for instance, funds the Texas Recreation and Parks Account through a special sales tax that applies to the purchase of designated sporting goods in the state.

Bonds offer another popular revenue-generating tool, allowing local governments to borrow money upfront for parks and greenway development. In recent years, bonds have proven very successful, particularly in North Carolina communities. In 2003, voters in Raleigh approved a bond referendum that included funds for 17 new miles of greenways in the city.

## Public-private funding

Though many communities opt to approve tax increases for parks and greenway development, many communities also choose not to, leaving local governments with insufficient funds to provide for recreational needs.

In order to make up for inadequate budgets, many parks and greenway programs have turned to private funding sources. Some of these sources, paired with public funds, offer viable solutions.

Impact fees, for example, can offer important avenues of funding for parks and greenways. Since 1987, Raleigh has collected fees from residential developers to help finance greenways and parks.

The user fee also can be an effective tool. Some parks departments, for example, have instituted fees at public golf courses that are then redirected to fund other parks programs, such as greenway development. According to National Recreation and Park Association Public Policy Director Barry Tindall, "Golf courses are the cash cow for many park systems."

Sponsored events or facilities can attract philanthropic monies for parks and greenway programs. In Wheeling, W.Va., projects that bear the name of a major donor have often led to ongoing, generational support from families.

Likewise, a "Buy-a-Foot" campaign, which sold the

greenway "feet" for \$25 per foot, helped fund the construction of the High Point Greenway in High Point, N.C.

Corporate contracts also can result in funds for parks and greenway development. For example, a contract with AT&T, which allows fiber optic cables to run the length of the 45-mile-long Washington and Old Dominion Railroad Trail, has resulted in \$375,000 annually for the Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority.

## Severe shortage

While private sources of funding — such as philanthropy and private contracts — can go far to jump-start projects or to supplement larger parks and greenway program needs, depending solely upon them can be risky.

Spartanburg provides a case in point. We have relied upon the generosity of a few benefactors — the Milliken grounds, Barnet Park and Boiling Springs Community Park offer prime examples — to make up for our collective unwillingness to invest in our community.

And we continue to do so even though we are sorely lacking parks and greenway facilities for both active and passive recreation. According to the current County Comprehensive Plan, Spartanburg County has a "severe shortage of park acreage.... The severity of the park deficit... is such that the need is virtually three times the size of the existing county inventory."

It seems we need to rethink our course of action. County Council and the county's parks and recreation leadership, as well as their counterparts in the city, are trying to improve our parks system in Spartanburg County. But we, as a community, need to grant our local governments the tools to do so.

*Emily Crow Neely is program manager in Upstate Forever's Spartanburg office.*

# Belcher: Greenways reflect a healthy, active, prosperous community

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◆ **PROGRESS** continued from A17

Then, a few years ago, some of the country's leading economic development scholars began to explore the once "unquantifiable" connections between community prosperity and place-based amenities like recreation opportunities, natural resource protection and cultural destinations. Suddenly that incense didn't smell so silly anymore.

## Next generation

In today's economy, communities that can offer cultural diversity and recreational amenities like greenways and pedestrian-friendly environments will be the places that appeal to the next generation of young working families. Smart, young workers want Wi-Fi ports in their neighborhood coffeehouses, but they also want places to run, bike or push their kids in jogging strollers. Make no mistake, greenways are important for their "green" value. But they are even more valuable for what they represent, which is a healthy, active and prosperous community.

In his work on how cities will thrive in the 21st century by attracting and retaining the "creative class" (the "fast-growing, highly educated, and well-paid segment of the work force on whose efforts corporate profits and economic growth increasingly depend"), Richard Florida, now Hirst professor in the School of Public Policy at George Mason University, says these workers "favor active, participatory recreation over passive, institutionalized forms." They value outdoor recreation, including bicycling, jogging and trail running. Sports stadiums are not necessary.

## Facing obstacles

All this begs a question, of course: What are we waiting for?

Well, nothing actually. Forward-thinking planners, community leaders and college professors have been promoting greenways since the 1980s. We even have some model projects, including the Cottonwood Trail and Mary H. Wright

## Greenway.

The main obstacle to their continued development has been one of scale: Like thousands of other communities across the country, Spartanburg grew quickly while infrastructure lagged, preventing us from making the bicycle and pedestrian connections we're seeking today.

Another problem is, as always, money. Local governments are trying to solve problems of the 21st century with budgets modeled on 1970s problems. Back then, bicycle and pedestrian projects were viewed as expensive afterthoughts. Even today, as more local politicians warm to the idea, it's a tough sell in lean times.

One partial solution to these problems is to stop looking at greenways in the traditional sense: as long, linear ribbons of protected green space. This idea is limiting and, thus, counterproductive.

Most of our ideal natural connections, especially those along waterways, are simply gone. Although we should continue working to preserve those endangered community resources, we should focus also on how to weave new bicycle and pedestrian connections into our existing urban, exurban and suburban fabrics.

Some communities are experimenting with "transit greenways," which are nothing more than corridors between key destinations retrofitted with bicycle lanes, wide sidewalks and the occasional off-road shared-use path. The wide, buffered sidewalk on the St. John Street extension is one fine example of a "transit greenway." Another important project will be the shared-use bicycle path on Highway 29S.

By focusing on these types of pedestrian and bicycle connections, we'll improve our existing transportation corridors primarily by reclaiming them for people, not just cars.

At the same time, it helps us identify the green spaces (both linear and "fat" spaces like parks) that deserve our attention as true destinations.

## Enhancing growth

The best thing these active living amenities have going for them is that market forces respond when communities ante up and create greenways. In a 2003 article in *The (Indianapolis) Star*, reporters found that commercial property immediately adjacent to the town's popular 10-mile Monon Rail Trail was selling for \$3 per square foot more than comparable property elsewhere.

When the *Herald-Journal* hosted a Weekend Walkabout earlier this year on the former Norfolk Southern rail corridor that will soon become the Mary Black Foundation Rail Trail, a sign mysteriously popped up on the back of a building facing the trail. It promised walkers that a new barbecue joint would open on that spot soon.

The café at Little River Roasting Company has opened just a few steps off the trail.

All this merely suggests that bicycle lanes, transit greenways and similar quality-of-place projects are an idea whose time is more relevant now than ever. Still, should Spartanburg leaders really consider these amenities to help us maintain and improve our quality of life compared to neighboring counties? Greenways aren't the only answer, but they can help.

Communities that actively seek new ways to work bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure into their urban fabric will be the ones that thrive in the 21st century economy.

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*Philip Belcher is president of the Mary Black Foundation in Spartanburg. He is a graduate of the Duke University School of Law, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Furman University.*

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