

PATH Wants to Build Trails in DeKalb

Environmentalists Say Stay Out of the Stream Buffers

by Aileen Harris Miller

The PATH Foundation, a non-profit organization that builds and maintains trails in the state, is proposing to build 127 miles of inter-linking bicycle and pedestrian trails throughout DeKalb County at a cost of \$59 million for construction (not including land acquisition) and \$14 million for continued maintenance.

PATH officials hope to garner funding from local, state, federal and private sources. "There are all kinds of new opportunities for funding popping up," said PATH Executive Director Ed McBrayer.

According to the executive summary, the proposal, The DeKalb Greenway Trail Plan, will promote cleaner air, calmer traffic and a renewed sense of

community. They also see the project as an important component of a county comprehensive alternative transportation plan and a model for the state.

PATH literature defines "greenway trails" as a continuous, 8-12 foot wide, paved surface, separated from the street.

"Each trail corridor will become a linear park, where citizens can safely ride their bikes, walk to school, push baby carriages or jog and skate with friends," the executive summary states. "The trail corridors will forever be green, thus preserving ribbons of trees and precious wetlands along urban streams."

However, some environmentalists, while supportive of an effort to put trails in the county, are concerned about the project's impact on county waterways.

"The current proposal bases the path network on the county's network of streams, so that most paths would be in or near stream corridors or buffers," said Kathryn Kolb of Trees Atlanta. "I think we need to keep in mind that these paths are essentially one lane roads that require heavy construction, and the PATH plan proposes that they run through the most sensitive green spaces in the county. I am very supportive of the idea of bike and pedestrian trails, as long as the paths are constructed well and use alternative pervious materials when necessary to avoid damage to streams. Since they intend to showcase these streams, I'm sure they don't want to damage them. This whole thing can be very successful if paths are constructed with care, if extremely sensitive areas can be

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avoided and other sensitive areas protected."

DeKalb Soil and Water Conservation District Supervisor Dell MacGregor said she is also concerned about the proximity of the trails to the stream buffers.

"The science tells us that 100 feet away from the stream gives us enough protection so that damage wouldn't be easily done," she said. "Those sorts of paths—concrete, within 100 feet of the stream, are too close."

Generally, the county limits building activity to outside a 75-foot buffer around streams.

MacGregor said that in the last 70 to 100 years, waterways have suffered tremendous damage from practices such as the piping of small streams, polluted runoff from streets, and increased storm water into the stream.

"The concrete bike and pedestrian paths could acerbate environmental issues that are already affecting the streams," she said.

Commissioners have deferred the proposal, citing concerns about the impact on the stream buffers.

In their master plan summary, PATH cited building trails near or within stream bank buffers as an obstacle to the plan. Greta Gallagher of PATH acknowledged that there is a conflict between PATH and environmentalists. "We are trying to protect air quality, other groups are trying to protect water quality," she said. "We intend to stay out of the buffer area as much as we can."

Though she is supportive of trails in the county, MacGregor doesn't see the PATH's plan delivering what it promises—improving the region's traffic and air quality—both among the worst in the country.

"What really raises my anger is to hear the multi-use trail plan being touted as a transportation or air quality solution," she said. "[The PATH plan] is neither in my view. The trails would never be used to any significant degree that would make a difference in air quality or transportation. But that's how its being promoted."