

Local News



Ultimate clout

Colin Campbell: Angry moms may be more effective than conservancy in improving Piedmont Park. B2

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Trail trouble: Paths called threat to DeKalb streams

Environmental fears could stymie ambitious plan for 'greenway.'

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When it comes to bicycle paths and jogging trails, there are different shades of green.

Some environmentalists consider them alternative transpor-

tation routes that reduce car trips and help improve the air. Others call the paved routes "mini-roads" that endanger wetlands, waterways and wildlife.

This is the disagreement that's brewing between proponents of an ambitious, 125-mile series of interconnecting "greenway" trails across DeKalb County, and advocates for protecting the streams that run beside them.

It's also a vivid illustration of

how difficult it can be to make metro Atlanta greener when forces that share similar goals find themselves at odds over how to accomplish them.

"I'm looked at as a 'green' person. It's an unusual position for me to take to have green people shooting arrows at me," said Ed McBrayer, executive director of the Path Foundation. The group created the greenway trail master plan that was accepted by the

DeKalb County Commission last week.

The Sierra Club, representatives of the DeKalb Soil and Water Conservation District and neighborhood activists who live near wetlands say they support a trail system. But they say it shouldn't be built at the expense of the county's waterways, which are already threatened by overdevelopment.

They insist that the DeKalb

trail system — which will probably take many years of refinement, public hearings and up to \$80 million to complete — must stay at least 100 feet away of the county's streams and rivers. While that standard is four times the distance required by state law, it is recommended by many environmentalists, including the University of Georgia's Institute of Ecology.

McBrayer says preventing

multi-use trails within 100 feet of streams would scuttle 60 percent of the project. That would leave DeKalb with, at best, a scattered, disjointed system of neighborhood trails and not a true, interconnected transportation trail corridor for commuters and shoppers, as exists in Denver and other cities, he said.

But unless the trail builders

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Trails: Residents fear paths may mean loss of privacy

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can find solid scientific evidence that they can encroach on 100-foot stream buffers without harming wetlands and wildlife habitats, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to reach compromise, some environmentalists said.

"It's easy to ask for compromise with the environment because the environment is silent," said Dell MacGregor, supervisor for the DeKalb Soil and Water Conservation District. "People like myself have to be advocates for the silence, especially when the damage only shows up down the road — for example when children play in a stream and get an E. coli infection.

"I would like to be able to get on a bicycle and find a way beyond my neighborhood, but I do respect the need for water quality

more than I desire that opportunity for myself."

Complicating the issue is the lack of available land. Not only does the land along stream systems offer the most scenic routes for the joggers, walkers and cyclers who use them, but they are also the only available stretches that can be used to link trails together, McBrayer said.

The only other completely contiguous routing would follow rail lines, but railroad companies consistently refuse to donate land along their tracks for that purpose. And many neighborhood residents are reluctant to lose their privacy to users of paths that run through their backyards.

McBrayer says he hopes he and environmentalists can work out their differences.

"We're going to do everything we can to be good neighbors to their cause," he said.