

county news

Commissioners Accept Trails Plan

by Howard Holden

At their first official meeting of the new millennium, the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners took another step toward a new and cleaner transportation system. Including neither a bullet train nor an electric car, DeKalb's newest plan promotes old-fashioned modes of travel such as bicycling or walking, indeed any mode propelled by foot rather than fossil fuel. Accepted by the BOC last week, the DeKalb Greenway Trail Master Plan is deliberately human-powered.

Developed by the Path Foundation, the plan calls for 125 miles of trails throughout the county, comprising a complete off-street transportation system. Built primarily of concrete, the twelve-foot wide pedestrian and bike paths would link malls to MARTA trains and residential areas to recreational parks. Its ultimate goal, according to Path executive director, Ed McBrayer, is to allow for safe, non-motorized travel throughout the County, allowing folks to leave their cars parked and the air a little easier to breathe.

But finding routes throughout a sprawling urban area away from roads has been no small challenge, and though McBrayer and his staff have located utility easements and abandoned railroad tracks for possible routes, many of the planned paths follow stream beds. Others flank existing roads. As a result, some resistance has arisen from the seemingly least likely quarters — environmentalists and cyclists.

However, none of those who spoke at the BOC meeting were against the idea behind the Greenways Master Plan. In fact, all who spoke praised the general idea, but most were emphatic that such a plan be developed in conformity with increasingly strict guidelines set

forth in the County's Comprehensive Land Use Plan.

"The DeKalb Comprehensive Plan calls for the establishment of a task force . . . to plan and implement a plan for Greenways, Greenspace and Openspace," according to a memorandum submitted to the BOC by Dell MacGregor of the DeKalb Soil and Water Conservation District. "The largely stream-based multi-use trails plan . . . is but one component of [the larger] plan and should not be evaluated outside the larger context of Greenway/Greenspace protection."

Sue Ann Brenner and Bryan Hager of the Sierra Club also supported the trail ways master plan, but added, "several conditions must be met in order for the proposed Greenway Trails Plan to achieve important community goals." Such goals included sidewalks in all subdivisions and commercial developments in order to encourage pedestrian traffic, and increased bike lanes on existing roads so that cyclists can get to the trails.

But the most commonly cited concern was stream buffers. "Current science emanating from the University of Georgia states the need for 100-foot stream buffers in order to ensure that water quality is protected," MacGregor said. The Sierra Club representatives echoed that concern, calling for a minimum of 100 feet of undisturbed buffer between a stream and the trails except in specific circumstances. "Variances should only be considered in degraded stream sections where there are significant physical constraints."

Several other speakers joined MacGregor and the Sierra Club in calling for more opportunities for public input, including Dennis Hoffarth, Executive Director of the Atlanta Bicycle Campaign. Hoffarth also

expressed concern with "certain engineering and siting issues." Hoffarth said he is particularly wary of trails set alongside busy roads. "At driveways and intersections there are conflicting situations with motorized traffic that you don't have when you're riding on the road."

Hoffarth said after the meeting. "It's kind of like riding on a sidewalk at twenty miles per hour." According to members of the Atlanta Bicycle Campaign, it's safer to ride on the roadway or to locate the trails completely away from roads.

McBrayer has stated that Path wants to stay away from roadways whenever possible, and some citizens at public hearings last fall suggested that putting the trails close to streams allowed for more stringent stream monitoring. In any case, the exact positions of any of the paths have not been set, and the Master Plan calls for a great deal more public input.

In a letter sent to Commissioner Gale Waldorff, McBrayer said, "by adopting the Plan, the Commission will enable the site-specific public process of locating routes and access points for each trail to begin." The letter also stated that each trail's development would be guided by a steering committee that would address placement and environmental impact. McBrayer also suggested that adopting the plan would not imply the waiver of stream buffer regulations and that the plan should be reviewed annually for changes and amendments.

Perhaps the most telling line of McBrayer's letter is the first, which urges the plan's adoption as a "conceptual" document. There is much work to be done before the concrete trucks arrive, including funding the project, which will cost an estimated \$80 million for construction and maintenance. Since each section will undergo individual design and approval from its own steering committee, no one can say if and when the entire project would be completed.

"It's an excellent beginning," said Commissioner Judy Yates, who also made a semantic distinction, suggesting the plan be "accepted" by the BOC rather than "approved". The BOC took Yates' suggestion, which, she said, would allow Path to move forward with fund raising and planning without casting the plan in concrete.

For more information on Path, call 404/875-7284 or visit the website: www.pathfoundation.org