

Indiana launches Ohio River Greenway transformation into a world-class urban park

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Mayor Greg Fischer discusses the latest on K&I railroad bridge crossing access



(Photo: Paul Ogle Foundation and the River Heritage Commission)

A new push to transform Southern Indiana's Ohio River Greenway into a world-class urban park builds on a \$40-million investment and a decades-old vision of connecting communities through nature and recreation.

The 7-mile bike and walking path between New Albany and Jeffersonville — linking to Louisville at the Big Four Bridge — is on pace to be completed in 2018. Now, business and open-space advocates are thinking big and charting the next steps, while modeling them after the successful Parklands of Floyds Fork.

The newly created River Heritage Conservancy led by former Parklands manager Scott Martin promises to bring an entrepreneurial, private-public partnership approach to expanding the greenway and better connecting it to adjacent neighborhoods and historic town centers.

"Our challenge," Martin said, "is how do you take a Parklands model across multiple jurisdictions ... and create a systemic, unified park experience?"

Right now, he said he has more questions than answers. "At the end of the day, the transformation could be extraordinary," Martin said.

Backed by the Paul Ogle Foundation, the conservancy recently announced its first land buy: 37 acres of the former Marshall's auto parks on Emery Crossing in Clarksville.

That may be the first of many that could eventually result in a new 500-acre Grand Park, south of Old Indiana 62 and McCullough Pike. It could eventually turn an area known for an old quarry, a closed landfill and recycling operations into a green space with meadows, wetlands, ponds, an outdoor theater and possibly camping.

All of that would connect to an enhanced Ohio River Greenway.

The vision extends out at least two decades, with success depending on funding, forging a common sense of purpose, and finding people or businesses willing to sell their property for parks, Martin said.

"We want to get something done quickly to get people excited," he added.

The idea has the backing of the business community.

"The way this plan ties our communities together makes the case for what's good for one will benefit all," said Wendy Dant Chesser, president of One Southern Indiana, the local chamber of commerce. She said it could boost quality of life and make the area more appealing to the area's workforce and business leaders. It fits in with the area's overall strategy of economic development, she added.

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Octopus arms

On a map, the future of the greenway looks something like a green octopus, one arm extending to New Albany, the other to Jeffersonville, with its bulbous head occupying southern Clarksville. Small tentacles extend out into neighborhoods or business centers, inviting more people to the waterfront.

At its center — the octopus's head — would be that totally new 500-acre park.

Walking the former junkyard property on a late fall day, Martin led a reporter and photographer along the gravel bed of an old rail line and across a bridge over Silver Creek, which he said he envisioned as a future popular paddling destination.

The wuk, wuk, wuk call of a pileated woodpecker echoed through the woods, a bottomland hardwood forest prone to flooding, its occasional waters providing nature with life-giving vernal pools.

There were also piles of tires, metal scraps, concrete slabs — even an old sink. They were visible reminders of the challenge of creating parkland in an urban area. But going from brownfields to greenfields is nothing other cities haven't already done. Across the nation, cities are reclaiming their once-industrial waterfronts, turning back doors into front doors.

Martin mentioned Seattle and its Gas Works Park, where a former polluting coal-gas plant serves as a backdrop for a popular waterfront recreational area.

In Boise, Idaho, where Martin attended college and worked for the city for six years, there is the Boise Greenbelt. It's a 25-mile-long park along the Boise River that once served as a dumping ground for trash, industrial waste and raw sewage.

Right here at home, Louisville has its Waterfront Park, once a downtown strip dominated by abandoned or underutilized industrial land and buildings, and now a celebrated jewel.

"You don't have to look far," said Martin.

The conservancy will only buy a property from willing sellers, Martin said. "This is all being done with private, donated funds," he added.

One business owner in the area — Brian Donaghy — said he didn't feel qualified to evaluate the park proposal because he doesn't know much about it. The Red Ball Recycling owner he has a lot of questions, such as how much land they will need and whether they can raise the money.

And he added: "Clarksville has a lot bigger issues than parks."

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Thinking big

Together with Waterfront Park, which Louisville officials are expanding to the west, an enhanced southern Indiana greenbelt will showcase the Ohio River for recreation and environmental protection at the core of a metro area that's at 1.3 million people and growing, Martin said.

"It's an incredible project," said Dan Jones Jr., Martin's former boss at 21st Century Parks, the nonprofit that developed and manages the Parklands of Floyds Fork, which expects 3 million visitors in 2017.

Jones, consulted with the Paul Ogle Foundation on how to refresh the vision for the southern Indiana greenway.

"If you think about the landscape ... it's anchored on each end by two old, intimate downtowns (New Albany and Jeffersonville). You have these great bookends, with Clarksville in the middle (and) a lot of space."

The Falls of the Ohio River State Park is there, with its 386 million-year-old fossil beds. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers controls a 1,400-acre Falls of the Ohio National Wildlife Conservation Area, home to a nesting pair of bald eagles and popular with bird watchers. Nearby is the historic George Rogers Clark home site, where the American Revolutionary War hero once lived, and 70 acres of forest lowlands already owned by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources.

"You put all that together and don't just think about it as a bike path, but think about it as a linear park," Jones said. "Then you have the Big Four Bridge and maybe someday a connection (to Louisville) in the west."

A gondola crossing?

Such a connection has long been sought by city and county officials on both sides of the Ohio, who have focused on converting a former car lane on the K&I railroad bridge between New Albany and Portland.

With the river below rushing over the fossil beds at the Falls of the Ohio, two cyclists from Louisville were taking a break, enjoying late fall mild weather, and wondering whether that will ever happen.

"We would like to go across that bridge before we're too old," said Norton Allen III, who was with his friend, William Hamblin Sr. Both men, in their 60s, had pedaled their bikes 12 miles from western Louisville, across the Big Four Bridge, and would prefer a loop instead of turning back.

Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer "continues to support the idea of seeing the K&I used to complete a loop for pedestrians and cyclists between Louisville and Southern Indiana," said his spokeswoman, Jean Porter. "But we're not aware of any shift in Norfolk Southern Corp.'s reluctance to allow it, based on their concerns about safety."

David Karem, president of the Waterfront Development Corp., which owns and manages Louisville's Waterfront Park, praised the conservancy's plans, saying they could increase public pressure for railroad bridge access.

"The connectivity with all these communities — it will be wonderful," Karem said.

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Regional cooperation

The Ogle Foundation has suggested a possible gondola and others say that at some point, the Sherman Minton bridge on Interstate 64 may need to be refurbished or replaced, offering another opportunity for another pedestrian and bike crossing.

Those are long-term prospects, maybe even pie in the sky ideas.

"We have to start with the art of what's possible now," Martin said.

For now, the Ogle Foundation is solidly behind River Heritage Conservancy. It polished up new maps in 2014 for the expanded greenway with a commitment to embark on a new master planning process next year with the public. It's also provided initial funding for the conservancy.

"We were trying to figure out what we could do for the regional cities, quality of life and the greenway," said foundation president Kent Lanun. "This project made sense to us."

The maps, part of he called a "greenway refresh" effort, "show people what could happen if you do something like this."

The expanded vision is intended to push regional cooperation where that doesn't always happen, Lanun said.

The greenway project has already fostered cooperation, said Philip Hendershot, chair of the Ohio Rivers Greenway Commission, which was formed in 1993 and given federal authorization to construct greenways segments in 2002.

A final greenway link over Spring Creek in Clarksville is scheduled to be in place next year.

The conservancy should be able to take the greenway "to the next level," with more recreational opportunities and grander park features "that we wouldn't be able to construct with our grant funding," he said.

A top Clarksville official agreed.

"The conservancy is going to be a great partner," said Clarksville Town Council President Paul Fetter. The city is planning development for its south end, and the grander greenway vision will augment that, he said.

"We are going to work with the other entities that are involved to build a project that helps everybody," he said.

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River Heritage Conservancy Plan



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