

Greenway trail could be coming to north Portland

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Paul Maresh and Francie Royce ride their bikes along a path alongside the Willamette River in north Portland. They are part of a group that one day hopes to have a similar path that goes all the way from the Springwater Corridor Trail in southeast to Kelly Point Park. Photo by Jake Thomas.

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Gravel cracks and pops under the bike tires of Francie Royce and Paul Maresh along an unpaved section of industrial property along the Willamette River in north Portland.

They dodge potholes along a stretch of the river that is lined with towering and gritty industrial equipment.

This isn't exactly an ideal place for a quiet walk or a leisurely bike ride. But if Royce and Maresh get their way, this part of Portland will be a very different place. And they might be in striking distance of making their dream a reality.

Since the late 1990s, southeast Portland has had the Springwater Corridor trail, which provides residents with a quiet, tree-lined path along the banks of the Willamette River.

In 2005, a group of north Portland residents, including Royce and Maresh, banded together to form **npGreenway**, which has been steadily lobbying various government entities to get funding for an expansion of the trail into north Portland.

Building such a trail just about anywhere in Portland seems like a no-brainer. There are several government reports bolstering their creation, including one by Metro that points out that trails like the Springwater Corridor increase property values, improve public health by providing a walkable space, and provide wildlife habitat.

But fulfilling **their vision** of a north Portland greenway seems like a daunting task.

The expansion of the trail would be extremely ambitious. It would pick up at the Steel Bridge where the Springwater Corridor tapers off, and then snake along the banks of the Willamette through Swan Island before heading to St. Johns and eventually Kelly Point Park where the Willamette meets the Columbia River.

It's not clear how much the trail will cost, but money is tight at almost any layer of government. Also sizable chunks of the proposed trail extension are privately owned, including a stretch owned by Union Pacific Railroad that is marked with a "no trespassing" sign, and several Environmental Protection Agency Superfund sights are near the trail.

"It's tough right now at the moment," said Royce, who serves as the acting director of npGreenway. However, there are currently a couple of stretches along the proposed route for the trail that are ready to go,

A completed portion of the trail begins in the industrial section alongside the Willamette River in north Portland just above the Rose Quarter, and ends in Swan Island near the offices of the Daimler Truckers.

On a cloudy weekend afternoon, people toss tennis balls on the trail for dogs eager to fetch them while others fish sturgeon off the banks of the river.

Royce, and her group, hopes to see similar scenes all along the banks of Willamette.

For Royce, the creation of the greenway is a matter of fairness. It will create access to walkable places in a part of town that has a large swath of the I-5 freeway running through it, she said.

"It's a social equity trail," said Royce, who explained that having easy access to serene walkable spaces gives them an opportunity to get exercise.

Lenny Anderson, the manager of Swan Island Transportation Agency and member of npGreenway, has been taking a daily walk along the stretch of trail near his office for nearly 20 years.

He said that in addition to providing a place for people to take breaks it could also serve as a means for people to make it to work, clearing up needed space on the road for freight vehicles.

"You can't just have MAX lines," said Anderson of the need for different transportation options.

The group experienced a setback last year when the city released a draft of the Portland Bicycle Plan for 2030 that designated the north greenway as a second tier project.

Members of npGreenway were present at the public comment period, and Royce thinks they made enough of an impression to make it more of a priority in the final draft.

But it might not even matter because there are other avenues for the creation of the trail. In 2005, Metro allocated nearly a half million dollars for a study that would create a comprehensive plan for the trail.

Metro Councilor Rex Burkholder said that work on the study will commence in the next fiscal year, and will provide a guiding document, which would be a big step.

He added that there are a couple other gears that are churning on the trail's creation. Metro is looking into purchasing Baltimore Woods, a property along the river, and a bridge is being built between Chimney and Pier Parks.

"That's how these things get built," said Burkholder of the piecemeal process.

But one of the biggest opportunities to make the trail happen could be in the city's River Plan. The ambitious initiative aims to make the Willamette River the centerpiece of the city, and seeks to change the balance between industrial construction and environmental concerns.

Diane Hale, an associate planner with the city, said that the River Plan could lay out the trail alignment, which would lay a good concrete foundation for its creation.

Royce's group seeks to persuade the city to help negotiate easements on properties along the Willamette allowing for construction of the trail.

Coasting along on his green mountain bike on the completed part of the trail, Maresh, a lifelong Portland resident, was skeptical of the idea when he first heard it.

"At the time it was a great pie-in-the-say idea, but it would never happen," he said.

He might be wrong.