

The Indianapolis Star May 19, 2003 Monday City final Edition

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HEADLINE: **Cultural Trail** could set new course;

The city is considering a \$15 million to \$20 million walking, skating and biking path of a dimension unparalleled in the United States

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BODY:

The city of Indianapolis is at a crossroads.

Residents and officials are deciding whether to drastically change Downtown by creating paths for bikers, skaters, walkers and joggers, eliminating traffic lanes on some major arteries in the process.

Experts say the city's decision isn't only about cosmetics. It's about changing Downtown from a car-driven one to a destination for health-conscious residents and new companies.

But some who live and commute Downtown say shrinking the width of the roads will create traffic problems and more parking headaches.

Dubbed the **Cultural Trail**, the estimated \$15 million to \$20 million path would be built on busy Downtown streets. The final decision is still months away, but the city is spending more than \$330,000 in tax money as it ponders the direction it wants to go.

Mayor Bart Peterson favors the **Cultural Trail**, calling it one of the best ideas he has heard "to take Downtown to the next level."

He said it could separate Indianapolis from most other cities, giving it a world-class amenity. A mixture of grants, donations and tax money would pay for the trail, which could take two to 15 years to build, depending on funding.

"There is a reasonable chance this will happen," Peterson said.

Conceptual drawings show the trail snaking around Downtown, connecting White River State Park and the Canal Walk with Downtown shopping, monuments and government buildings, and the city's arts and entertainment offerings in the Fountain Square and Massachusetts Avenue areas. On the north, it would follow Walnut Street or North Street; the east leg would follow Alabama Street; the south leg would follow either Washington Street or Market Street; and the west leg would continue along Canal Walk or West Street.

One offshoot would stretch to an eventual Monon Trail segment near 10th Street and Bellefontaine.

"It really is going to be one of the gems that we have as a community," said Mary Peters, director of the Office of Cultural Tourism. She said connecting the cultural areas would add another amenity to the city's sports and racing offerings.

While many cities have amenities like multi-use paths in their plans, Indianapolis' idea is unique in this country, planners say.

Civil engineer Peter Swift said building an elaborate, looping boulevard specifically for biking and skating, separated from a companion walkway on one side and from a street on the other, could set a precedent.

Swift, whose business is in Longmont, Colo., is one of 200 civil engineers writing a book about traffic engineering for "walkable" communities. He said these types of paths are prevalent in Amsterdam, Netherlands, but not in the United States.

Health behavior experts say such a trail could make more Hoosiers aware of exercise -- not a bad thing for a state that ranks high nationally in obesity and smoking.

"I have been to over 200 communities in the last couple years, and I have not heard of anything like this," said Rich Killingsworth, director of Active Living by Design at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill.

Killingsworth studies how infrastructure, such as a **Cultural Trail**, affects residents' health behavior.

As Indianapolis officials grapple with the decision on whether to move forward with the project, they also must figure out who will pay for it.

Deputy Mayor Jane Henegar said all the costs will not fall to taxpayers.

She said tax dollars could be used as seed money to help secure grants to pay for more than half of the project. Private donations would account for the rest.

The idea is an intriguing one, said Gretchen Wolfram, director of communications for Lilly Endowment, which awards millions of dollars each year for community projects. But that's no guarantee that the endowment, among the five largest in the country, will help pay for the trail.

"There are a lot of intriguing ideas out there, and there are a lot of major campaigns going on for other purposes," she said. "I'm not sure where this would fall into play on the priority list."

So far, the Indianapolis Metropolitan Planning Organization -- which gets 80 percent of its annual \$1 million planning budget from gas tax money and 20 percent from the city -- has spent \$180,000 on preliminary plans.

The planning organization will spend an additional \$152,000 this summer on more designs that should help nail down the exact route and construction costs.

A report from that study will be instrumental in determining whether the trail becomes reality, said Mike Dearing, the planning organization's manager.

Two public workshops have been held to present the plan to about 300 area residents and business owners, and officials discussed it with about 300 others who attended neighborhood association meetings last winter. At least one more meeting will come this fall after the next report is completed, Dearing said.

Criticism likely will surface when people begin to realize that transportation dollars, traditionally earmarked for motorists, are being used for pedestrians, Swift said.

Under the current proposal, the trail would rob traffic lanes and money from cars. Transportation funds traditionally used to improve roads would be used to build and maintain the trail. But officials insist the reallocation of some funds would not affect necessary road projects.

There has been wide support so far, city officials say, but some residents and commuters believe the trail would cause more headaches than it's worth.

"I don't think the streets need to be narrower," said Carole Keppler, 67, a retiree who has lived in Downtown's Lockerbie area since 1984. "The idea of bringing people Downtown and trying to take them to all the interesting places is a good idea, but I'm a little concerned with traffic."

Keppler, who attended one of two public workshops, said she fears parking spaces around her home would disappear.

Susan Dice, 45, a saleswoman who lives on the Far Southside and travels Downtown almost daily, said she doesn't think the timing is right.

"Because of the economy, we don't need to be spending money on that at this time," Dice said.

But proponents say now is the time for such a trail. Creating the path would encourage tourism, make the city a more interesting place to live and help attract new businesses, they say.

"The bottom line for the project is economic development," said Meg Storrow, of the design firm Storrow Kinsella Associates, which designed the current plan.

She said it's a "wave of the future" as cities try to create environments where businesses want to locate -- places where employees would want to live.

To some Massachusetts Avenue business owners, the money spent on a trail could mean more customers -- and profits.

Stout's Shoes owner Brad Stout said he likes the idea, partly because it will bring more pedestrian traffic into his store.

Stout, a bicyclist, also likes it because it would give him another place to ride.

"I think it's an investment in the community. It enhances lives," said Stout, 45. "It seems like a fair chunk of change. . . . At what price would it be too expensive?"

He said the canal project near the Statehouse and the Eiteljorg Museum is an example of how Downtown can be enhanced.

"It's beautiful," he said of the project, which cost \$113 million to complete.

Douglas Bostic, 67, a security guard at a Downtown office building on Ohio Street, said he favors the plan "if it takes the bikers out of the car traffic."

That's the point city officials want residents to consider.

"The whole frame is whether we want to be a 'car' Downtown or a 'pedestrian' Downtown, and that's one of the decisions we're asking the community to help us make," Storrow said. "It's a very bold idea, a very bold statement about values -- about quality of life."

What's next?

A decision by city officials on whether to move forward on construction of the **Cultural Trail** is expected as early as this fall. Before they make the decision:

* Designers and engineers will complete a \$152,000 study of the trail plan. The study will examine infrastructure along the proposed route, suggest modifications and update cost estimates. At present, the trail is expected to cost \$15 million to \$20 million.

* City officials will conduct another public meeting to discuss the new plans.

Project designer Storrow Kinsella Associates has identified some of the pros and cons of developing a trail system that links Downtown areas. Some segments offer a choice of possible street uses.

The Canal

1a Canal (already in existence)

PROS: Only minor adjustments are needed to the existing area.

CONS: It is primarily for walkers and runners now. The addition of bicycle and skating traffic could lead to accidents.

1b West Street (Possible use with option 1a)

PROS: No driving/parking lanes would have to be removed.

CONS: Improving pedestrian connections at North and Walnut streets could affect vehicle traffic flow.

Memorial Mall

2a Walnut Street

PROS: Bridge access to the Canal is available.

Provide an easy connection to the Central Library.

CONS: Signals to cross Meridian or Illinois streets are not in place.

Removal of a driving lane would be necessary.

2b North Street

PROS: It has traffic signals, making it a safe pedestrian crossing.

It could connect with Madame Walker Theatre by way of a new bridge over the canal.

CONS: City doesn't have the right of way.

Alabama Street

3 Alabama Street

PROS: The street connects to the Murat Centre, Massachusetts Avenue and the City-County Building.

CONS: A driving lane must be removed.

The trail would go through a Virginia Avenue parking garage, possibly eliminating some parking spaces.

Virginia Avenue

4a Virginia Avenue

PROS: It connects with the Fountain Square Cultural District.

CONS: Added cost beyond the main loop.

4b College/Louisiana loop

PROS: The loop would create more neighborhood connections.

CONS: College is a narrow street.

Market Street or Washington Street

5a Washington Street

PROS: It connects to White River State Park, the Wholesale District, IRT, Indiana Government Center, Circle Centre mall and the Artsgarden.

CONS: In the future, the trail would have to share space in the street with a mass transit people mover.

5b Market Street

PROS: It connects important destinations like Monument Circle, the state Capitol and City Market.

CONS: Introducing a dedicated bicycle lane could cause bike/people conflicts.

6 Massachusetts Avenue Connection

Massachusetts Avenue

PROS: It would engage the Massachusetts Avenue retail and arts area without much effect on parking.

* No driving lanes would be removed.

CONS: Parking would be taken out between College Avenue and Bellefontaine Street, reducing it by 50 percent.

Source: Storrow Kinsella Associates Inc. for the Indianapolis Metropolitan Planning Organization

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