The Capital Area Greenway Program: Private Land Goes Public

Citizen initiative comes in many forms, ranging from legislative referendums to neighborhood sponsored "downzoning" requests. Once the hoopla that surrounds these campaigns dies, often the interest and support of the community fades. The initiative is then left in the hands of the public officials to interpret or fit into an already overburdened system.

Not so with the Capitol Area Greenway, a part of the Parks and Recreation Program in Raleigh, North Carolina. The fact that this program continues to receive regular and substantive community input and support is a reflection of the people who have backed the idea since its inception and the unique character and heritage of the program.

Greenways are linear parks constructed primarily along the major creeks and streams that pass through the city. They provide opportunities for passive recreational activities while preserving these sensitive natural resources. They also provide pedestrian and bicycle access between various forms of recreational open space (parks, schools, etc.). The standard greenway trails are either eight-foot wide asphalt paths on a gravel base or five-foot wide nature trails. The system now consists of eight trails totaling twenty miles -- fourteen miles of paved trail and six miles of nature trails. The city has over 360 acres of greenway in property or

There are two classifications of greenways; the corridor and the connector. The greenway corridor is that expanse of land adjacent to a creek in which a greenway trail will be built. The greenway connector is an overland connection along the street or sidewalk network that is used to provide a complete system of trails throughout the city. Greenways, "green fingers," and linear parks have been around since the early 1800s in Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston, S.C. The impetus for establishing such a system for Raleigh came in part from citizen concern for the fate of Raleigh's natural environment.

Raleigh, traditionally priding itself on its development as the state capital while preserving its natural environment, refers to itself as a "park with a city in it." It was not until the late sixties that this poetic description was threatened.

The city is traversed by a number of streams that feed into the Neuse River, the major tributaries of which are Crabtree and Walnut Creeks. The presence of these creeks, the total acreage of poor soil around them, and the pattern of annual flooding prompted early real estate developers to build on the higher ridges and plateaus. Thus, stretches of attractive forestland were preserved throughout the city. The regular flooding of these areas did little damage during these early years.

In the late sixties, development crept closer and closer to these creeks. Property damage due to flooding increased. Attempts to moderate floods, particularly along Crabtree Creek, by constructing dams increased the severity of the flooding upstream.

By 1969, this problem helped generate interest in preserving the floodplains. The city planning department produced a publication appropriately titled Raleigh...A Park With a City In It. In 1972, William L. Flournoy, Jr., of N.C. State University, wrote his graduate thesis

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(with a grant from the city council) on the benefits and feasibility of a greenway system for Raleigh. Ironically, major flooding occurred in the area the following year and severely damaged a shopping mall recently constructed in the Crabtree Creek floodplain. Public support for the greenway program increased. The severity of these floods and the outcry of citizens led to the passage of a strong ordinance that severely limits development in floodplains. The active support from key individuals, the Sierra Club, and League of Women Voters set the stage for acceptance of the greenway concept by the city in November, 1973.

Since citizen initiative promoted the greenway program, the city council decided to incorporate continued citizen involvement in this program. They created the Raleigh Greenway Commission, a board of fifteen appointed citizens whose purpose is "to involve individual citizens in the planning, acquisition, and development of the Capitol Area Greenway System." Ann Taylor, currently working with the N.C. Department of Natural Resources and Community Development, and one of the first commissioners, aptly described one of their more important roles as communication. "We are a semi-official body," she said. "We act responsibly, we act for the city, but we are not city officials. Earlier a proposed section of greenway was abandoned...because people were angered by the thought of implied condemnation of their land (by the city). Now, citizen members of the Greenway Commission can go to landowners on a one to one basis, discussing individual points of view with each one. There is that old image of City Hall, the 'them' and the 'us,' but the Commission tears down that barrier."

The greenway program is unique in a number of ways. First, acceptance of the responsibil-

ity for this program did not necessitate a reorganization or major expansion of the city bureaucracy. Coordination responsibility belongs to the planning department while maintenance and construction duties are handled by the parks and recreation department. The planning department also serves as staff support for the Greenway Commission, translating their recommendations and suggestions into operating policy or action, and supplying advice, materials, and information as requested.

Other requirements of the program are handled by other city departments as extensions of their present duties. For instance, security is handled by the Park Rangers. This keeps the administrative costs of the program minimal. Maintenance and construction costs are relatively low because volunteers are recruited to help maintain the nature trails. Few structures are erected except as needed, to avoid interfering with existing patterns of site drainage (bridges) or to take full advantage of natural features (decks). In fact, the 1980 Trail Evaluation of the Greenway Pilot Projects: Lead Mine Creek and Garner Branch indicates that the material costs of construction (paving, bridges, culverts, etc.) amounted to $.29 per linear foot -- comparable to average costs for sidewalks.

Funding for this program has been provided entirely by city and Wake County agencies. The program originally received $350,000 in revenue sharing monies to use for initial purchases of land, equipment, construction materials, and field surveys. Currently, the program submits an annual capital improvement budget for $100,000 which is taken out of the City Parks Improvement Fund. Grants totaling $104,000 have also been received from the County Parks and Recreation Board for materials and acquisition costs of constructing trails near the city limits that would benefit county residents. These monies are then spent on trail construction along corridors where sufficient land has been acquired to construct a significant length of trail.
Sections of corridor are acquired in a number of ways. Initially, property was purchased, but the majority of the greenway land presently under city control was dedicated by private developers. In some cases, developers donated land directly. What generally happens, however, is that commissioners and city staff negotiate with developers after they submit their proposed developments to the subdivision review process.

Raleigh has an ordinance requiring that subdivisions submitted for review that affect land indicated for use as greenways on the accepted Greenway Master Plan be reserved for six months from the date of original submittal. This allows staff and the Greenway Commission time to negotiate the dedication of the property or a greenway access easement. Such gifts of land and access for public use are tax deductible.

The immediate objective of the greenway program is to complete acquisition and at least some trail construction on the major corridors of Crabtree, Walnut, Lead Mine, and House Creeks. This will require the development of new land acquisition strategies. The problem with the subdivision review process is that it only reviews property affecting greenways as of ongoing development -- areas where tax deductions for dedication of unbuildable flood plain have significant impact. There is less appeal to owners of property either not being developed or mostly in the floodplain. Strategies must also be devised for extending the trail network into corridors developed prior to the acceptance of the master plan.

Recently, the Greenway Commission held a one day workshop to look at the future of this program. They invited city staff, city council members, and members of the Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission to come and share their views. Also in attendance was Robert Mosher, planner in charge of the environmental planning section of the planning department, the section responsible for the greenways. He summarized the directions coming out of this seminar as:

(1) Staff and the commission should continue to work for the dedication of land where reasonable, but, if all else fails, purchases of property should be undertaken. This is particularly true of those parcels of land that are considered by staff to be key to the completion of proposed trail segments.

(2) Communications should be improved, not only with the public at large, but also with developers and financial and real estate interests. Staff should develop a brochure and other media to impress upon these groups the proven benefits of this program and the willingness of all involved to work with them to achieve stated program goals.

(3) The commission should strive to work more closely with the Raleigh Parks Boards in situations where greenways come near or pass through city parks. Also, the board should be encouraged to work closely with the Greenway Commission when proposed park development interfaces with or otherwise affects greenway, and to formalize communications between these two groups.

In sum, the progress of the greenway program is due to the following factors:

- The concept of greenways as adopted by Raleigh is sound.
- Successive city councils have given the program strong financial and other support.
- Developers and citizens have donated land.
- The Greenway Commission has been active.
- The program had received capable and steady staff support.
- Citizen interest and participation in the program began and has continued at a high level.

With the continued active interest of the city administration, the Greenway Commission, and the many volunteers, this program will continue to grow.