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## Going Green

By *Kalvin Platt*

These ribbons of green provide open space and recreation, and, on occasion, serve as protected wildlife habitats. Greenways improve property values, adding to local tax revenues. And when a greenway is part of an urban growth boundary system, it can push real estate development toward inner cities.

Greenways can take many forms. Some well-known examples include the greenbelt that encloses London, boulevards with landscaped medians like Eastern and Ocean parkways in New York, which connect Brooklyn's Prospect Park with outlying neighborhoods, and riverside parks like Rock Creek Park, which runs from downtown Washington, D.C., to suburban Maryland.

Greenways can also be carved out of less conventional sites such as canals, abandoned rail lines, brownfields, and former military bases.

### **They work anywhere**

Greenways can be created just about anywhere. The Maryland Greenways Commission, formed in 1990, is creating what it calls "a statewide, natural infrastructure" by connecting green corridors throughout the state. Over 900 miles of protected greenways already exist statewide, the commission says. Another 200 miles of greenways are being established, and approximately 1,000 additional miles are being studied as possible corridors.

In Georgia, the Trust for Public Land hopes to create a 500-foot-wide greenway along both sides of the Chattahoochee River, running from its Appalachian Mountains headwaters to Columbus, Georgia, a distance of 180 miles. The Chattahoochee Riverway will not only protect the Chattahoochee from the intense development pressures in greater Atlanta, it will string together national, state, and local parks, potentially creating the longest riverside greenway in the country.

The campaign is making solid headway in fund-raising and land acquisition. On April 16, Georgia Gov. Roy Barnes signed a \$30 million state initiative to help local governments protect threatened lands. The campaign will be a major beneficiary of that legislation. Meanwhile, the Trust for Public Land continues to coordinate land acquisition through private donations and land and easement purchases. By early 2000, about 32 river miles had been protected, 53 properties were acquired, and 100 properties were in negotiation.

In addition to establishing new greenways, some big cities are rediscovering and restoring long-neglected ones. The city of Chicago is carrying out a multi-phase improvement program for its 28-mile-long system of City Beautiful-era boulevards to link parks on the city's north, west, and south sides.

Completed work includes installation of signs identifying segments of the boulevard system, restoration of monuments and fountains in the medians and parks, and the construction of more than a dozen kiosks with maps and historical information. Some \$3.2 million in improvements have been made to date, primarily with federal funds.

The result? "In Logan Square and Bronzeville, near the convention center, boulevard improvements have spurred residential real estate investment, in the traditional way that parks do," says Blair Kamin, architecture critic for the *Chicago Tribune*.

Greenways can also transform a nuisance into a community amenity. In Houston, a meandering 19-mile

stretch of Sims Bayou regularly flooded homes and small businesses near its sandy, eroding banks. To address the problem, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers planned to straighten the bayou, widen the entire stream to 300 feet, and line the stream bed with concrete. This scheme, put forward in the early 1980s, would have controlled the flooding, but it would have killed a natural ecosystem and ruined any chance for recreation.

A compromise solution put into place in 1996 has widened sections of the bayou to better handle flood waters, replaced the proposed concrete lining with geotextile mats that help prevent erosion, and topped those mats with open-cell concrete mats that allow grasses and other vegetation to grow in the most flood-prone areas. Newly planted trees and shrubs provide habitat for wildlife and beautify the riverbanks.

The creation of this greenway has not only rescued Sims Bayou from becoming a concrete drainage ditch, it also saved an estimated \$57 million.

### **Challenges**

Despite their many benefits, greenways can be difficult to establish. One major challenge is jurisdictional overlap. A proposed greenway may fall under the control of several local municipalities, as well as various state and federal jurisdictions.

When the Newhall Land and Farming Company wanted to carry out its Natural River Management Plan along the Santa Clara River in Valencia, California, 30 miles north of downtown Los Angeles, it had to gain approvals from a maze of regulatory agencies. Included were the Army Corps of Engineers, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, the state Water Resources Control Board, and three Los Angeles County agencies. Two local governments — Los Angeles County and the city of Santa Clarita — also have responsibility for land-use decisions adjacent to the river.

But jurisdictional challenges can be overcome. Earlier this year, Newhall Land gained its final approvals for the river management plan; within the next decade, the Santa Clara will be lined with trails and protected land as part of a communitywide open space and greenways program.

Another challenge is the need to overcome property owners' fear of crime and vandalism. There is little evidence to justify their perception. Studies and interviews show that trails and other greenways have no negative impact on adjacent property. In fact, property values generally increase. According to the American Greenways Program of the Conservation Fund, one greenbelt in Boulder, Colorado, increased aggregate property values in a single neighborhood by \$5.4 million, resulting in \$500,000 in additional tax revenues.

### **Public funds**

Not surprisingly, funding can be the biggest challenge of all. Many municipalities or special government entities (like open space districts) cannot afford to buy large tracts of land outright. Instead, they rely on other sources of government money.

One of the major sources of federal funding for greenways is TEA-21, signed into law in 1998 as the successor to the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991. The new law sets aside 10 percent of surface transportation funds to create transportation enhancements, including trails and greenways. While greenway projects must compete with other highway projects for TEA-21 money, one component of the act, the Symms Act Funds, targets \$270 million specifically to trails programs.

Other sources of federal funds that can be used for greenway initiatives include the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the Forest Legacy Program.

Many states fund greenways. The Delaware Greenways Program provides grants to municipalities, counties, and state agencies engaged in aggressive land protection measures. The Massachusetts Greenways and Trails Small Grants Program awards grants to communities and organizations involved in greenway and trail protection. New York State offers grants for greenway trail systems through the state's Clean Water/Clean Air Bond Act.

Sometimes, though, communities must look to other options, particularly in densely developed areas where land values are high. These include:

- **Zoning.** A local government can protect land for open space through zoning measures. However, political bodies can weaken zoned greenways if there is pressure to generate new taxes or growth. But zoning initiatives can be strengthened if they include a clear, encompassing directive—an overall greenway plan like a habitat conservation or floodway protection plan—that crosses political boundaries and enjoys public support.
- **Transfer of development rights.** A TDR allows one land owner to sell development rights to a municipality or other entity. These rights must be carefully incorporated into development and open space planning to be effective.
- **Tax incentives.** Some cities and states grant property tax or income tax credits to property owners who donate land for open space purposes. However, these contracts typically last 10 to 20 years and must be renewed.

Some federal tax policies also encourage open space protection. For example, the Internal Revenue Service's 170(h) provision allows accelerated deductions for bona fide contributions of permanent open space.

- **Land leasing.** Under a lease, the city can make installment payments on land or improvements while using the property.
- **Tax increment financing.** TIFs allow municipalities to issue bonds for investment in revitalization districts. The bonds are repaid by future property tax revenues from the increased property values generated by the revitalization.

### **Private funds**

The private sector is also supporting efforts to create new greenways. Methods include:

- **Land trusts and alliances.** Rapidly growing land trusts (typically nonprofit associations), alliances, and private associations (like homeowner associations) have helped to finance and establish greenways across the country. Land trusts range from special purpose trusts focused on a specific resource, such as a valley or river, to broad trusts, like the Trust for Public Land and the American Greenways program of the Conservation Fund, which focus on greenbelts, nature, wildlife, or public land objectives. Their success is based on their flexibility in working with private and public entities, as well as their ability to link public and private land-use goals.

Local land alliances like the Greenbelt Alliance in the San Francisco Bay Area create a specific greenbelt plan, generate broad-based support, raise funds for acquisition, and work with multiple jurisdictions to implement their plan. The Greenbelt Alliance, among the largest of such groups, has helped save 600,000 acres of greenbelt and raised \$500 million to acquire new parkland and open space throughout the Bay Area.

- **Citizen groups.** Much of the push for greenway development comes from hundreds of grassroots organizations. A key participant in the Chattahoochee greenway campaign is a group called RAPIDS, whose members are residents of the Atlanta suburb of Roswell. RAPIDS is working in conjunction with the Trust for Public Land to acquire land parcels along the Chattahoochee.

### **Looking ahead**

New towns and master planned communities are a valuable and often overlooked resource for open space and greenway preservation. Livermore, California, and surrounding Alameda County have just issued a specific plan for a 13,500-acre area that provides for development of 3,200 acres as a master planned community and the remaining 10,300 acres as farmland and open space.

If the plan is adopted, fees amounting to \$25,000 per acre from the developed areas of the community are expected to provide \$50 million to fund the rural land acquisitions and open space easements. The

plan connects 22 neighborhood parks and 90 acres of community parkland with preserves.

Another exciting greenway is on the drawing boards in San Antonio. The city is planning to extend its famed Riverwalk north and south of its downtown, thereby creating a 15-mile greenway along the San Antonio River.

Although greenways have a proud history, the best may be yet to come. The Trust for Public Land is currently spearheading a national initiative to use a substantial portion of the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund for urban greenways.

This 1965 law allows the use of over \$900 million annually from oil and gas revenues for conservation purposes. Little has been used to date for this purpose, however, and funds have been diverted elsewhere. If this resource is finally tapped, our nation could see an unprecedented surge in the creation of urban greenways.

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