

EDITORIAL

Blazing (reblazing) a beloved Austin trail

The trail around Lady Bird Lake is a signature feature of this city, heavily used and in need of both short- and long-term attention. And it's getting it.

Saturday, January 31, 2009

The Austin City Council's adoption this week of a master plan for the 10-mile hike-and-bike trail around Lady Bird Lake was a needed step toward improving one of this city's signature features. The trail is not only heavily used but has become such a beloved part of Austin that others are willing to work for free to make it better, and not just those who contribute to periodic clean-ups along the trail.

The plan, adopted by the council on Thursday, outlines \$25 million of improvements for the trail — additional and improved restrooms and trailheads, better signs, renovated trail surfaces, new vegetation and the like.

But there's not much money in hand for doing any of those projects. Austin voters approved \$1 million for the trail in a 2006 bond election, and the city's Parks and Recreation Department already is at work to take that money as far as it can for trail improvement. City officials are also hoping for \$7 million from the economic stimulus package working its way through Congress.

Otherwise, making the improvements will take a future bond issue or new appropriations from a council already squeezed by a slowing economy.

But the trail has friends in the private sector as well, particularly the nonprofit Trail Foundation (formerly the Town Lake Trail Foundation) and RVi, a local planning, landscape architecture and graphic design firm. Both already have made major contributions to the trail.

The foundation, set up in 2003 by trail lovers, has raised the will and the money to help install the first new restroom on the trail in more than 30 years, plant more than 100 trees at the Zilker Bluffs Tree Grove, renovate Lou Neff Point and more.

RVi, led by Bob Richardson and looking in 2007 to make a gift to the city to mark the firm's 25th anniversary, linked up with the foundation, which wanted help outlining potential trail improvements. RVi took it much further, with one of the firm's principals, the aptly named Barbara Austin, leading a major effort to develop a vision for improving and expanding the trail over the next 25 years.

The Trail at Lady Bird Lake Vision Plan, released last fall, was the result of RVi working closely with city park officials and soliciting public opinion. This long-range plan gives the city a broad view for making the trail an even better asset than it already is.

The council and the foundation also are pushing for a major extension of the trail to close a 1.3-mile gap along the south side of the lake on either side of Interstate 35.

Much of the extension would be a concrete boardwalk over the water, and that is drawing criticism from some residents whose views and privacy in the heart of a busy city would be altered by it. But the lake belongs to us all, and the trail's extension is needed to open up the eastern end of the lake to easier use.

In a growing city, the hike-and-bike trail on Lady Bird Lake is that rare feature that is both beautiful and useful. The council, the foundation and RVi all are doing a service to the city in planning and pushing for its improvement.

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