



MERAMEC GREENWAY

Meramec River Recreation Association
Newsletter 29 Summer, 2004



Featuring
**Great Rivers
Greenway District**



Background

On July 13, 1999, Missouri Governor Mel Carnahan signed into law legislation enabling the creation of a metropolitan park and recreation district in seven counties in and near St. Louis. At about the same time Illinois Governor George Ryan signed similar legislation for four counties east of St. Louis.

The stimulus for the legislation developed through the efforts of a not-for-profit organization called Gateway Parks and Trails 2004, which focused on the future quality of the St. Louis region in areas of improved parks, increased park safety, greenways, additional trails and preservation of natural open spaces. These, the organization found, were important issues desired by area citizens based on visioning sessions and ideas submitted throughout the metropolitan area.

Under these laws, participation in the metropolitan district would be voluntary. Each county, by citizen vote, would determine if it desired to become involved. If approved, the metropolitan district would be funded by a one tenth of one cent sales tax. Actually, two districts would be formed, one for Missouri and one for Illinois, and monies collected in each state would be distributed to that state's district.

Establishment

The next step to move the concept from theory to reality was to submit the plan to voters. In Missouri, of the seven

counties eligible, the governments of St. Louis City, St. Louis County and St. Charles County authorized the issue to be included on the November 7, 2000 ballot. Of the four Illinois counties eligible, Madison and St. Clair Counties also authorized a 2000 vote. It was known as Proposition C, the Clean Water, Safe Parks and Community Trails Initiative. On election day, voters approved Proposition C by 65%.

Implementation came with the establishment of the Metropolitan Parks and Recreation District in Missouri and the Metro East Park and Recreation District in Illinois. The Missouri District established a 10-member policy board of representatives appointed from the three participating counties. Also, an Executive Director and staff were employed. In 2003, the Missouri District changed its name to the Great Rivers Greenway District.

The actual collection of sales tax began in April, 2001. In Missouri, 50% of the money collected would be returned directly to St. Charles and St. Louis Counties (and their incorporated communities) and to the City of St. Louis, based on population. The remaining 50% would be distributed by the Great Rivers Greenway District for regional projects. Annual income from the participating Missouri counties is \$23 million.

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Greenway District Website:

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In 2002 and 2003 member counties were receiving funds for capital projects within their existing park and recreational facilities. Meanwhile the Great Rivers Greenway District distributed their portion of the funds to ongoing regional projects such as the Missouri- Mississippi Rivers confluence and the Meramec Greenway.

Regional Plan

A major priority of the Great Rivers Greenway District was to develop a plan that would identify a regional interconnected system of greenways and trails. It was to serve as a guide in the distribution of funds for years to come.

Initiatives in other major metropolitan areas such as Boston, Minneapolis and Portland were examined. These revealed that benefits of an interconnected system went beyond recreational use and also encouraged increased property values, new business development, preservation of open space, more stabilized tax bases and healthier life styles.

The plan was developed in 2003. Assisting was a Citizens Advisory Committee, who toured the region, met with national planning experts, reviewed park and open space case studies and held numerous small focus group meetings. Also assisting was a fifty member Technical Advisory Committee for issues of policy and regulations that would impact development. The District also hosted a series of community forums to both inform the public and solicit input on the developing plan.



The River Ring

As the plan emerged, citizens and planners sought to link the trails and greenways to the natural, cultural and social resources of the area as well as the historical significance of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers. The map of major greenways along the region's rivers revealed a near circle with the Mississippi on the east, the Meramec on the south and Cuivre River on the north. Through the middle flows the Missouri River. The circle could be completed in the west with a greenway linking the Meramec to the Missouri and then north to Cuivre River. Indeed the Western Greenway in St. Louis County had been long envisioned in regional plans.

From this River Ring of major greenways, 47 more local or regional greenways would follow smaller streams or other corridors into the metro region, creating an interconnecting web. The entire River Ring network envisions more than 600 miles of trails. Along the Mississippi the River Ring would link to the Metro East Park and Recreation District.

The River Ring would place emphasis on confluences, points where two greenways meet. The makeup of confluences would vary both in importance and facilities featured. Much activity is currently underway on the region's most significant confluence, the joining of the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers.

The River Ring plan was completed in 2004 and emphasis will now shift to implementation. The hope is that the plan will excite both metro citizens and governments and as it becomes a reality the River Ring will become a synonym for the St. Louis region similar to the Chain of Lakes in Minneapolis.

The Meramec Greenway

The Meramec River anchors the southern boundary of the River Ring. Because this Greenway was initiated in 1975 it is currently the most developed of the major greenways that the plan calls for. The Meramec is unique in that it is the only one of the major rivers that is an Ozark stream.

Existing plans for the Meramec Greenway in St. Louis County were incorporated into the River Ring. These plans were developed through the partnership of governments and citizens that form the Coordinating Committee of the Meramec River Recreation Association (MRRA).



Already there were twenty eight public parks and conservation areas totaling more than 7,450 acres located in the St. Louis County part of the Meramec Greenway. These were owned and managed by the State Conservation and Natural Resources Departments, St. Louis County, Sunset Hills, Fenton, Kirkwood, Valley Park and Eureka. They offer a wide diversity of recreational and natural resource education opportunities as well as provide protection and restoration of their lands bordering the Meramec.

But these public lands were scattered along fifty miles of river. The Meramec Greenway plan is to close the “gaps” connecting those parks and conservation areas. This would not only provide better protection for riverfront lands but would permit development of a trail parallel to the river.

Riverfront land is known as the riparian corridor. On the Meramec River it is land from the river edge back 300 feet, and the desired goal is to protect or restore it to natural forest. As such, it reduces erosion, increases absorption, slows flood waters, filters non-point pollutants and stabilizes riverbanks. The direct benefit to the Meramec is improved water quality enhancing river recreational opportunities plus improving the overall visual aesthetics of the river and valley.

In partnership with the Meramec Greenway, the Great Rivers Greenway District acquired 22 properties totaling 118 acres at a cost of \$1.8 million in 2003. Most of these properties were filling the “gaps” between existing public lands while at the same time adding to the riparian corridor. These lands were also critical to the Ozark Trail.

