



*A newcomer's
idea grows into*

River's Edge Trail

Jenn Rowell
jrowell@greatfallstribune.com



TRIBUNE PHOTO/RIION SANDERS
Father Oliver Doyle crosses the 6th Street Bridge while using the River's Edge Trail in January. Father Doyle uses the trail three to four times per week.

Chuck and Gerry Jennings came to Great Falls in 1974 when he had an opportunity to practice orthopedic surgery. The city is similar in the size to his hometown of Hutchinson, Kan.

"To me it was Kansas with mountains," Chuck said.

The couple came to Great Falls as active outdoors people at a time when the national Rails to Trails movement was in its infancy.

They regularly rode their bikes through town and sometimes with their children. They rode over the Warden Bridge and other routes through town.

"We knew it was dangerous, but we didn't want to give up riding," Gerry said.

Chuck and Gerry were bicycling on Lower River Road one day without their kids. Chuck was riding in front of Gerry and she witnessed a near crash involving Chuck, a van, a motorcycle and a loose dog.

"I could just imagine Chuck getting hit," Gerry said.

After that, Gerry remembers thinking, "We have got to do something in this town to make biking safer."

See TRAIL. 3L



TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO
A cyclist approaches the railroad underpass near the 6.5-mile mark on the River's Edge Trail in 1999.

Trail

Continued from 1L

At the time, Chuck said, "Great Falls was bike averse."

The city started adding bike routes in the 1980s, with the first route along Fourth Avenue North, according to city records.

Chuck had always had his eye on the old railroad routes through town, and when the old rail bridge on 6th Street North between River and Park drives came down, it created a break in one often-used bike route.

By then the city had gone through the Vision 2000 community planning process and a committee had formed to establish what is now the River's Edge Trail.

The committee held its first meeting April 23, 1990, and the members present included Chuck Jennings, Howard Strause, John Swanberg, Jackie Nortman, Brin Grosfield, Michael Luckett, Shelly Addison, Barb Teberg, Bill Tacke and Sheila Connors. The minutes include discussion of developing a master plan for bike trails in Great Falls.

The group approached Burlington Northern about replacing the bridge to make an urban trail.

The bridge was replaced in late 1990.

The metal bridge, which was first put in place in 1914, had been stored for nearly a decade at an old meat packing plant east of Great Falls, according to Tribune archives.

Burlington Northern donated the bridge and volunteers moved and installed it. The Great Falls Home Builders Association donated the reinforced concrete deck and railing.

It was the first piece of the trail. "Without it, it never would have started," Gerry said.

Initially dubbed the Riverfront Recreational Corridor, the trail was to extend seven miles from the Broadwater Bay area downstream to Rainbow Falls.

Much of the trail has been constructed on abandoned railroad and road rights-of-way and structures. Miles of new trail connecting these segments have been constructed, as have many new tunnels, underpasses, bridges and trailheads.

Volunteers have undertaken an ongoing intensive cleanup of riverfront land that had been littered with debris over the past decades, and have spent thousands of hours on weed control, tree planting, maintenance and enhancement projects, according to the River's Edge Trail Foundation.

In January 1991, a name the trail contest was announced, and by February 1991, more than 400 area residents had responded and 220 name ideas were submitted in addition to the six names proposed by the trails committee.

Gerry said the naming contest was important to the early days of the trail because it got the community involved and energized.

By that time Doug Wicks had emerged as spokesman for the committee.

Wicks was a cyclist and Brin Grosfield, owner of the Knicker Biker, suggested that he become involved with the committee, Chuck said.

"I think that was the last biking he did," Gerry joked. Wicks was so busy working on building and expanding the trail, there was little



Kristina Smith cruises down a trail near the Steamboat Overlook during her morning run in June.

TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO



Adam Morsa sits on a bench along River's Edge Trail. Morsa, who recently left a day job in California, is camping across the country until his savings run out.

TRIBUNE PHOTO/JULIA MOSS



Kylie Floerchinger, 9, looks across the Missouri river during a walk along River's Edge Trail.

TRIBUNE PHOTO/JULIA MOSS

time for biking.

The first trail newsletter went out in the spring of 1991 and has continued ever since. The newsletters update the community on accomplishments of the past year and goals for the next year.

"He was just constant in his efforts," Gerry said of Wicks. "His passion for this project was just boundless."

For years, Chuck was president of Recreations Trails Inc., which grew out of the Vision 2000 trails committee, but he said Wicks was a tremendous asset who was persistent in his trail efforts.

RTI has since changed its name to the River's Edge Trail Foundation and Chuck remains on the board.

Despite the enthusiasm for the trail in the early days, it didn't come without its own controversy.

Chuck remembers a Tribune letter to the editor in the early days asking why the city would spend money on a trail when there were potholes to be fixed. One of the suggested names in the 1991 contest was "Money Down the

River Trail."

By 1996, the city received a planning award for the trail from the American Planning Association.

"River's Edge Trail is a model for other small communities because it shows how you can get things done," wrote award juror Bonnie Harpore-Lore in the APA magazine in April 1996. She was a landscape architect for the Federal Highway Administration.

Andrew Finch, senior transportation planner for Great Falls, said the River's Edge Trail was the first urban trail system in Montana.

"We were the envy of the state," he said. "Everyone pointed to Great Falls as a city that built an urban trail system, and if Great Falls can do it, why can't we?"

It started as the first Rails to Trails project in Montana and has since grown far beyond that. Other Montana cities looked to Great Falls as they were developing urban trail systems of their own, Finch said.

The upcoming goals are to

maintain a relationship with Preservation Cascade to eventually connect the trail over the historic 10th Street Bridge, Chuck said.

There are also extensions of the trail for unpaved biking and places for hiking.

"You don't have to go hours out of Great Falls to go hiking," Gerry said.

Going forward, the foundation will also focus on maintaining the trail for future generations of Great Falls residents to enjoy, Gerry said.

In his time working on the trail and since his retirement late last year, community members have raved about Wicks' efforts to develop the trail and hope his legacy is continued.

Jolene Bach of Great Falls Development Authority said the trail wouldn't be where it is today without Wicks.

"Doug Wicks has done an incredible job for our community. We owe him both our gratitude and commitment to carry this work forward," Bach said. "I'm excited

to see what the next few years will bring for our River's Edge Trail."

Things are changing for the trail foundation and the trail this year.

Mixed in with all the energy and excitement for the future of the trail, no one is forgetting the role Wicks has played in the trail's development.

"We're still trying to get our heads around all the work that Doug did," said Sheila Kelly, a foundation board member. "A lot wouldn't have happened without Doug Wicks."

John Juras was a member of the committee that selected the name of the trail and is now president of the RET Foundation.

"It's amazing to think that we can do it," Juras said. "We have visions and we're trying to make it happen. This is exactly what Doug did for the last 25 years. He thought ahead and always had a foot in the door whenever there was an opportunity and that's the role the foundation will continue to play."

Trail

Continued from 1A

John Juras has assumed the role of president of the recently renamed River's Edge Trail Foundation, and the everyday operation and maintenance of the trail is shifting to the Great Falls Park and Recreation department.

Park and Rec has created a new trail coordinator position and the department is in the process of selecting someone to fill the position beginning in February.

With the shifting of maintenance and operations to the city comes a shift in the focus of the trail's foundation.

Since the idea of the trail began in 1989 and construction started in 1990, the trail has grown from three miles of abandoned Burlington Northern railroad track into a community gem.

And there's plenty of space for all users of the trail, whether they're biking, running, picnicking or holding community events, Hill said.

"It's something you can do with your family that doesn't include a TV," Lichliter said. "It's a nice focal point for the city."

She turned and pointed to the Paris Gibson statue in Gibson park.

"He would like that this trail is here," she said.

And the foundation plans to continue that legacy through the trail.

"The foundation is striving to make River's Edge Trail the most excellent trail facility in the Northwest," Juras said. "We are working every way we can think of to make that happen."

According to the foundation, a conceptual plan for a riverside recreational trail in Great Falls was developed by the City-County Planning Board in 1989. Dubbed the Riverfront Recreational Corridor, the trail was to extend seven miles from the Broadwater Bay area downstream to Rainbow Falls. The trail was later renamed the River's Edge Trail following a Name the Trail contest in the Great Falls Tribune.

Also in 1989, a volunteer group that advocated local bike trails as part of the Vision 2000 community planning process began working with the city to develop the first segments of the trail. That group became Recreational Trails Inc., now the River's Edge Trail Foundation.

Juras said the foundation is hoping to make a presentation during a City Commission work session in the near future to discuss some specific plans and to help the commission understand how the foundation perceives its role and the commission's role.

"With Doug's retirement, that role is changing," Juras said. "He was Mr. River's Edge Trail, no question about it."

But that model won't work going forward, and the city will take on a more active role, Juras said.

Over the last 25 years, Wicks and the folks at Recreational Trails Inc. fundraised, developed and implemented trail improvements.

Going forward, trail maintenance, expansion and im-

provement will go through the Park and Rec and Public Works departments, said Joe Petrella, city park and rec director.

"We're the day-to-day managers of the trail, operator of the trail," Petrella said.

But nothing will change for the regular trail user, and the foundation will continue raising money to help maintain and expand the trail.

Every mile of trail costs about \$11,000 for maintenance annually, according to industry data, Petrella said.

The new trail coordinator position will be funded by the city's general fund and transportation funds from the city planning department. The two funds will split the cost.

Since the position is starting mid-budget year, it will be \$31,830 for five months' pay plus benefits in the 2016 fiscal year. In the next budget, that figure will double to about \$70,000 with each department funding about \$35,000.

The person in that position will be the liaison between the city and the foundation, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, as well as other involved agencies. The trail coordinator will work on developing long-range plans for alternative transportation, inventory trail assets and work with nonprofits to raise money.

"It's a start to developing a crew that can manage that trail and free up time for parks crews to take care of city parks to a higher level of standards," Petrella said. "It all helps with the beautification of the city."

And there's a lot happening out on the trail.

In 2015, the foundation:

- » Repaired gravel shoulders along the most popular trail segments.
- » Installed a new concrete colored ramp and stairs from Giant Springs Road to the river.
- » Rerouted a steep trail from Giant Springs Park to the Heritage Area.
- » Improved West Bank Park, including new trailheads, a restroom and replacing narrow and asphalt trails with concrete.
- » Started construction on a new Sun River Connection Trail and started design for a new concrete trail from Warden Park to 10th Avenue South along the southside of Overlook Drive.

In 2016, the foundation has big things planned, as well. Along a narrow portion of River Drive South, the trail makes a convoluted jog around Electric City Water Park and through the Great Falls Police Department parking lot. The foundation is working with the city to build a new stretch of trail along the river from Broadwater Bay to the 1st Avenue North Bridge near the Great Falls Tribune.

Juras said the foundation put together preliminary designs for the project and now the city is working on the project and securing additional funding.

Juras said they expect to start construction in 2016.

They're also planning to complete a new south loop of the trail with the River Drive South project, the Sun River Connection and the Overlook Drive project. Another major goal is a continuous trail on the north side of the river.



Members of the Montana Conservation Corps install Epoch decking, a composite wood and plastic material that doesn't require treatment, on the Weissman Trail Bridge.



Doug Wicks, assisted by Ron Siefke, removes railings in 1999 from the old Milwaukee Road bridge for refitting work.

The foundation is working with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and others to complete the trail so it would run from the Fox Farm intersection with 10th Avenue South all the way to Morony Dam.

"It's amazing to think that we can do it," Juras said. "We have visions, and we're trying to make it happen. This is exactly what Doug did for the last 25 years. He thought ahead and always had a foot in the door whenever there was an opportunity and that's the role the foundation will continue to play."

To achieve those goals, the foundation is launching some new initiatives, and chief among them is TrailCare.

Sheila Kelly is a foundation board member and co-chair of the TrailCare initiative.

"We're so excited about all of this happening," she said. "A few years ago, I couldn't visualize what this transition would look like. This has changed at a very deep level where we focus our energy."

When she joined the board a few years ago, "What stunned me was how much

happened every month with so few people involved," she said. "I spent six months just listening and thinking about what happens if Doug decides to retire."

Among the small group of people, there was a deep breadth of institutional knowledge and an understanding of the maintenance needs.

Though that small group of people had done extraordinary work in the last 25 years, it wasn't a sustainable model for the future of the trail.

Kelly and Becky Nelson got to talking about the issue and TrailCare was born.

"It is a true gem and a wonderful addition to Great Falls," Nelson said. "From the artwork, bridges and benches along the trail — what better way to enjoy the outdoors? It is a privilege to be involved and partner with trail enthusiasts."

The foundation had just finished the trail maintenance plan, which covered year-to-year maintenance needs, laying out the pavement lifespan and known maintenance needs. Plus, board members and volun-

teers keep an eye out for anything that needs repair.

"If we can fund the maintenance plan, the trail will be good for many years," she said.

The foundation has a broad outlook of the trail, its operations, maintenance, expansion and it's future. TrailCare will focus on funding the ongoing operations and maintenance of the trail.

"From my point of view, the trail is the most successful public-private partnership I've ever seen in Great Falls," Kelly said.

The TrailCare initiative will look to develop multi-year partners, Kelly said.

Jolene Bach of the Great Falls Development Authority said the city has a lot of opportunity to expand trail tourism. She and her family are also regular users of the trail.

She's spoken with many out-of-towners who said they've come to town specifically to bike the trail. One woman makes an annual trip, Bach said.

"My family loves the trail for biking and running. We've been told that when the weather's right we should cross country ski it as well. The trail is more than just our path along the river," she said.

The foundation has invested in planning for projects so that when funding becomes available, it has a better chance at getting it.

"We've got projects stacked up and ready to go," Kelly said.

A major factor in that is a deep understanding of different agencies and what they fund.

"That's a talent Wicks and Juras has shared.

"They've done a spectacular job," Kelly said. TrailCare will do more to educate the community about how the trail is maintained, operated and funded, Kelly said, and that will include revamping the foundation's website and beefing up social media efforts.

"And as all of this is happening, we're seeing big changes at Park and Rec," she said.

Petrella has exposure and experience with managing urban trails, she said.

"He's willing and eager to take more responsibility," Kelly said.

With Wicks stepping away as the driving force behind many trail projects, it's good timing to have the city willing to take on more responsibility.

"We need to hand this over and now we've got city lead-

ership willing and eager to do more," she said.

Kelly said foundation members have been meeting with city staff to better understand operations and how to move forward.

"We're going to try different things and measure their success," she said. "We have to do it in a way that trail users are going to be best served."

Chuck Jennings, one of the founders and early supporters of the trail said that since the railroad bridge over 6th Street was replaced 25 years ago, he and his wife have used the trail.

"It is an integral part of our daily lives and the life and identity of the Great Falls. We appreciate the work of Doug Wicks, the city of Great Falls, volunteers, and the thousands of citizens who have contributed money to this most outstanding feature of our city," he said.

Cal and Gail Morley agree that the trail is an important part of the city.

The Morleys are regulars on the trail, usually walking their dog.

Gail Morley brings a bag of peanuts to feed the squirrels along the way.

"It's a peaceful place to come," she said. "The dog likes to come and see all the other puppies."

Cal Morley said it's great to have the trail accessible for everyone in the city.

"It's a city gem if you like getting out and enjoying the fresh air, and we do," Cal said. "You read more and more that big cities are trying to put in trails like this."

Gail is from Great Falls and Cal was in the Air Force, and the couple has been back in Great Falls for about 40 years.

"I think this is a big attraction for Great Falls," Gail Morley said.

Jennifer Rogers of GFDA also lives near the trail and uses it regularly.

"Running on the trail is the highlight of my day and my stress relief. It's my gem and definitely Great Falls" as well. I miss the trail terribly during winter months, and cannot wait for spring to roll around so I can get back on it. To say the trail is a huge part of my life is an understatement. It's my favorite place to be," she said.

"It's a wonderful way to showcase the beauty of Great Falls and the river. I know that Doug has done a tremendous amount of work to grow the trail to what it is today. I appreciate his and many others' work every time I run on it."

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