

Fresno moving fast on growth blueprints for trails, parks

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Fresno is gearing up to rewrite its master plans for trails and parks.

The working theme: More of both, but make sure they complement each other and have money for maintenance.

Fresno Public Works Director Scott Mozier speaking at a 2014 news conference about street widening. He says it's time for the city to get rolling on a trails and parks plan. JOHN WALKER Fresno Bee file

"Trails and parks are important to a city's quality of life," City Manager Bruce Rudd says.

But grab your hats. The challenge is always in the details, and few City Hall policies cause as much turmoil as these two.

Mayor Ashley Swearengin returned from summer vacation with a to-do list (she is termed out in January 2017). Near the top is a big push on trails.

The city already has a trails master plan, approved by the City Council in late 2010. Public Works Director Scott Mozier (the city's trails boss) says it's time for an update.

"We've learned some things in five years," Mozier says.

Mozier says the first step is building a consulting team to oversee things. Community meetings will follow. That's where Fresnoans say what they want, what they will spend and how long they will wait. The plan could land on the council dais in a year or so.

We'll do it with a lot of community engagement and input.

Public Works Director Scott Mozier on the new trails master plan

City Hall called the 2035 general plan approved by the council in December an "update." The result was actually a top-to-bottom overhaul. The same might be true for the trails plan.

And over at the Development and Resource Management Department, officials are heading down a similar path for the parks master plan: sign up consultants, set up community meetings, write up the report.

The council and mayor asked for the parks plan during June budget hearings. They pitched the idea as something new, although city shelves already had a wish list very close to a master plan created when Randy Cooper was in charge of parks some 10 years ago.

Here, too, expect something more than an update that heads to council by fall 2016.

The two plans "will complement each other," Rudd says.

Walkers, unite

These are complex land-use issues. Here are four things to keep in mind as we move forward:



- The official name of the current trails blueprint is the [2010 Bicycle, Pedestrian & Trails Master Plan](#). Note the first noun. City officials five years ago wrote and approved something primarily designed to make Fresno a bicycling community.

The introduction says the plan's purpose is "to guide and influence bikeway policies, programs, and development standards to make bicycling in the City of Fresno more safe, comfortable, convenient, and enjoyable for all bicyclists. The ultimate goal of this effort is to increase the number of persons in the City of Fresno who bicycle for transportation to work, school, and errands, or for recreation."

I think we can hook our trails into our parks and make Fresno a more interesting environment.

Parks Director Manuel Mollinedo

Council Member Lee Brand says that "probably was overkill." He says Fresno has more walkers than bicyclists, and most likely always will. He says the next trails plan should reflect that fact, while serving both groups.

- Mozier says almost the same thing.

The 2010 trails plan "was a bit more aggressive on road diets," Mozier says. "I think a few of these will drop out" of the new plan.

A "road diet" is a reduction in the number of lanes for cars. You have a four-lane street, two lanes in each direction. The city repaves the street, then paints new lines. Suddenly, you've got a two-lane, two-way street. The rest of the street is devoted to bicycle lanes.

Proposed road diets for parts of Palm Avenue, Fresno Street and Gettysburg Avenue sparked bitter City Council debate. Some council members said the diets create traffic jams while failing to juice bicycling.

City officials listened. It's been a spell since they brought a road diet proposal to the council.

- This year's budget spends \$2.23 million to advance five trails projects and pay for the new plan.

For example, there is \$809,000 for the Copper Avenue Trail in north Fresno (total project cost – \$2.29 million).

City officials are especially keen on Bankside Trail.

Fresno's geography helps fuel the political fire over trails. Trails by all accounts are a good thing. Every area of town wants its fair share (a desire usually expressed through the seven council members).

But north Fresno – home to newer (and sometimes master-planned) growth, located next to the San Joaquin River and fast-growing Clovis – has more trails than inner-city Fresno.

There are fewer places in the middle of Fresno to carve out a two- or three-mile trail.

But the center of town does have Fresno Irrigation District canals with wide banks. People walk there all the time. Turn a canal bank into an improved trail, city officials and trails advocates have long said, and more people would walk (and bicycle) there.

This year's budget includes \$93,100 to design the first stretch of what is called the Bankside Trail, the half-mile of the Herndon Canal (on the north side) between First and Fresno streets next to Shields Avenue. Construction should begin next fall.

Granted, it's only a half-mile of a trail that in theory could go for miles.

But that first half-mile is the big one.

“From there,” Mozier says, “we keep going.”

- Keep an eye on the progress of the Parks Department’s \$500,000 grant application to the California Natural Resources Agency.

Trails are expensive. The city has an excellent parks grant writer in Irma Yopez-Perez. Success with this grant request would be a sign that Sacramento supports City Hall’s effort to bring trails to disadvantaged areas.

The money would pay for restoration of the habitat along a portion of Fancher Creek in southeast Fresno. There are a lot of moving pieces here. Fancher Creek also is the name of a proposed mixed-use development by Ed Kashian in this area. The project includes a trail. The creek’s habitat restoration would make for a better walk.

What counts here is the potential teaching moment. City officials are at pains to show how trails and parks can connect to each other and the broader scope of urban life.

The words tumble out of City Hall mouths: The Clovis Old Town Trail connects to the Fancher Creek Trail, which connects to the McKenzie Trail, which connects to the Bankside Trail, all of it connecting to the revitalization of Fresno.

At some point we have to have a community discussion. What is the community willing to invest in these assets?

City Manager Bruce Rudd and Fresno’s desire for more parks and trails

“I look at trails as one of the main ways you access your parks system,” city Parks Director Manuel Mollinedo says. “People are going to drive. But if we could come up with a dynamic trails system that hooks into parks, that would be a major selling point for Fresno.”

Hidden gem

The McKenzie Trail in southeast Fresno hints at how this could work.

“It’s a beautiful little trail,” says Council Member Sal Quintero, who serves much of southeast Fresno. “It’s a hidden treasure.”

The 1 1/2 -mile paved trail goes from Clovis Avenue in the east to Willow Avenue in the west. Quintero says the stretch used to be a rail line.

The trail parallels McKenzie Avenue for about a quarter-mile. The rest of the trail covers ground that would be McKenzie if the street went to Clovis Avenue.

City officials say a \$500,000 state grant for Fancher Creek habitat restoration would lead to a healthier environment.

City officials say the trail’s total cost was about \$660,000, spent from 2008-10.

I walked the McKenzie Trail on Thursday. It’s clean – I found just five pieces of litter (and grabbed all five). There are lights, trash cans and benches. There’s some graffiti, but also signs that graffiti-removal crews try to stay ahead of taggers. Mozier says the budget allows landscape maintenance three times a year.

I bumped into 66-year-old Ed Torres. The retired Postal Service employee manages family property in the area. He says he has walked the McKenzie Trail every day since June 6, logging as many as seven miles per visit.

“I’ve lost 25 pounds,” Torres says. “I’ve got a daughter getting married pretty soon.”

Torres has some gripes. He wishes there were more trash cans and the lights were brighter. He says a cop or two might drop by occasionally to put some fear in riders of the motorized bicycles who typically tear along the trail at 30

mph-plus.

Looking at the big picture, Torres says, the McKenzie Trail does all he asks of it.

He has one hint for City Hall.

“I didn’t know it was here,” Torres said. “I wish someone had told me sooner.”