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P&Z approves trail system plan

By John Foster

A vision of an interconnected system of walking and bicycle trails throughout Oldham County became a big step closer to reality Tuesday.

The Oldham County Planning and Zoning Commission unanimously approved the Bicycle, Pedestrian and Greenway Trails Master Plan at their hearing Tuesday.

Greenways for Oldham County Vice-President Doug Wampler was one of seven residents to speak in support of the plan. He presented studies to the commission that show pathways increase property values and encourage healthy lifestyles.

“They add not only to property values but to quality of life,” he said.

Greenways is a non-profit organization which promotes the creation of pathways throughout Oldham County.

The first pieces of the plan should come to fruition before the end of the year – a 1.2 mile mixed-use trail along the north side of Commerce Parkway between the Oldham 8 theater and Allen Lane, and a series of graded, crushed-stone trails at Wendell Moore Park.

Wampler said Greenways for Oldham County is committed to building three Americans with Disabilities Act compliant, concentric loop trails — one .25 mile, one .5 mile and one 1. mile as well as a path along the lake. Two footbridges are also included in the plan.

Greenways officials applied for a \$173,000 Recreational Trails Grant. Wampler said a wide range of civic and business support mean the trails will come at no cost to the county.

The next two-mile stretch of trailway along Commerce Parkway lacks about \$252,000 in funding. Oldham County Planning and Zoning Assistant Director Emily Liu said funding could come from one of two grants – one a transportation enhancement grant, the other a safe routes to school grant. But the first 1.2 miles is fully funded for about \$360,000. Construction is scheduled to begin this summer and be complete by fall, she said.

But the plan is looking further into the future, Liu said. It may take upward of 20 years for all the planned pathways to be constructed. She said it has taken 10 years of work to get this far.

At the heart of the plan is an interurban greenway, which is planned to stretch from the old train depot east of La Grange 13 miles to the Jefferson County line in Pewee Valley.

A portion of that trail is already constructed, from the depot into La Grange and a small portion along the train tracks between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. That portion is a remnant of the previous greenways master plan enacted in 2003. The trail was originally planned to run along Ky. 146 to Buckner, Liu said.

Due to the difficulty gaining easements, projected construction costs and some steep slopes, the plan switched to Commerce Parkway. There, the county does not have to acquire easements because they own the land, Liu said.

The 2003 master plan included only the Interurban Greenway. This new plan includes a network of trails and bike lanes throughout the county that are a possibility over the coming decades, Liu said.

She said it is important to have trails mapped on a master plan to help with the likelihood of earning grants. Also, if a trail or bike lane is listed along a state highway, when the state expands or moves the highway – such as plans to realign Ky. 393 within the next five years – the state will consider building the planned pathway along that road.

The plan does not establish right-of-way, because the planning commission does not have the authority to establish right-of-way, planning commission attorney Stuart Ulferts said.

The plan also calls for the creation of a greenways and trails coordinating committee and greenways and trails coordinator under the auspices of Oldham County Fiscal Court.

A handful of residents expressed concern over the plan.

Chris Haunz, a volunteer firefighter with the Pewee Valley Fire Department, said he is concerned about the safety aspects of a trail system, especially since local fire departments lack the all-terrain vehicles or training to handle those kinds of situations.

Thomas Deibel said he doesn't like taxpayer money being spent on an "unattainable utopia." He pointed out that grant money may not come from local taxes, but it comes from taxes nonetheless.

Deibel said he thinks the trail system will "wind up being nothing more than another attempt to take away our private property rights."

Members of the planning and zoning commission unanimously approved the plan.

Commissioner Joyce Netherton Albertsen explained her vote. "Our title is planner," she said. "This is an opportunity to do what we're here for."

Copies of the master plan are available in the Planning and Zoning section of the Oldham County government Web site, www.oldhamcounty.net and at the Planning and Zoning office as well as through the governments of La Grange, Crestwood and Pewee Valley.