

Greenways Oak Ridge – a success story

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on October 19, 2010)

For those of us living west of Illinois Avenue, the Oak Ridge Turnpike improvements just completed are a welcome change to the two plus years of single lane traffic and seemingly endless roadwork that changed the traffic flow routes routinely. We have been patiently waiting for the appearance of the promised "Bike Lane" in both directions. And even more importantly we are glad to have two lanes for motor traffic running both ways.

Now if we could just get the Nebraska stop light to quit pretending there is pedestrian traffic at every light change. There is a button to push if ever someone wants to cross, let's use that rather than the constant walk, don't walk, cycle. It wastes time with each cycle. For a time the stop light was set to actuate when a car arrived from Nebraska to turn onto the Turnpike and then quickly changed back when that car or cars had safely entered the Turnpike. So, I know there is that feature that works great...please, let us use it.

While I am at it, let me express my disappointment that city council decided to change TDOT's speed limits. Surely they don't think they are qualified to do that. They should focus on the more important issue facing our city and leave setting the appropriate speed limit on the new road to those who do that for a living. ARGH! What a disappointment. Okay, I am stepping down from my soapbox now and returning to history (something I may be a bit more qualified to do than comment on speed limits, huh!)

Getting around in Oak Ridge has been different than other towns from the very beginning. Boardwalks for foot traffic helped initially and were placed to provide easier access to schools from homes and to local retail centers. Walking, biking, running and just enjoying the wonderful East Tennessee outdoor climate at places like the University of Tennessee's Arboretum is a staple of many of our lives.

Bill Wilcox, Oak Ridge City Historian and Manhattan Project chemist who vividly recalls those early years stated in his *Oak Ridge's Role in the Manhattan Project* that "One thing about our life any survivor will tell you about is what happened when it rained. Those things Tennesseans called 'frog-stranglers' turned our thinly graveled roads into seas of sticky, slimy, slippery, shoe-sucking-off mud! And that accounted for one unusual feature of our town – its miles of boardwalks instead of sidewalks! At Y-12 I had to keep a clean pair of shoes to change to from the galoshes I wore in wet weather before going into the chemistry building.

By creating community centers rather than the normal "downtown square," Oak Ridge was set from its origin to be different than other surrounding towns when it comes to moving between home sites and retail outlets. Using trails and sidewalks or roadway edges for exercise has been going on here from the beginning as well.

Walking trails have been included in Oak Ridge with the North Ridge Trail, Haw Ridge, and the Oak Ridge Arboretum. There are other informal paths in many neighborhoods. There is even the John Hendrix Prayer Walk in Hendrix Creek subdivision.

Did you know that as early as July of 1992 the Oak Ridge City Council authorized a citizens group to create a concept of greenways for Oak Ridge? Interestingly enough, that phrase became the name of the highly successful greenway effort that has been citizen driven ever since. *Greenways Oak Ridge* evolved from that initiative into a planned and structured strategy for growth of well thought out trails for walking, biking and running. These trails are now being thoroughly enjoyed by all who use them.

In that initial citizen group were representatives of the City's Community Development and Recreation and Parks organizations, the Environmental Quality Advisory Board, the Planning Commission, the Tennessee Citizens for Wilderness Planning and the Tennessee Valley Authority. Enthusiasm was obviously high for the task of recommending to city council methods to create a system of trails in our city.

The original vision (still functional today) was, "A system of trails and bike paths, linking the community of Oak Ridge, where citizens can enjoy nature's beauty while preserving the environment and promoting

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health.” Greenways Oak Ridge met monthly and received supporting endorsements from various civic groups, schools and local businesses.

By the summer of 1993, a report was produced. The comprehensive report received unanimous endorsement of the EQAB and the Planning Commission. Recommendations from the report were presented to the City Council on September 20, 1993.

All recommendations were unanimously accepted by the council. They adopted the greenways concept as the city's concept with intentions that implementation be accomplished. These recommendations were integrated into the city's Comprehensive Plan by the Oak Ridge Regional Planning Commission on October 28, 1993.

Additionally, the city council agreed to incorporate and integrate the greenways system into ongoing city projects and review procedures. The city staff's workload was to now include implementation of the greenways system. A key element of the future plans was the stated intent to obtain community support for each specific greenway as it was implemented.

The very first official Greenways Oak Ridge trail began with a “Cedar Hill Loop Greenway” a neighborhood meeting was scheduled where residents near the proposed greenway were asked to come to the Chapel on the Hill fellowship Hall on Sunday, April 17, 1994, at 2:00 PM. Attendees were asked to “bring sturdy shoes so we can hike the loop and lay out the trail.” So, citizen involvement continued to the actual creation of the trails.

On September 18, 1994, Oak Ridge's very first greenway was ready for use. The Cedar Hill Greenway was officially opened at 2:00 PM on that Sunday. It had taken only two years to come from an idea to reality, with an already healthy future planning process in place.

Now there are 11 greenway trails with a mixture of walking, jogging, walking pets, bicycles, horseback, skates, and rollerblades on the various trails. Some of the most heavily used trails have intrinsic beauty and are easily accessible yet quickly become quiet walkways of serenity, peace and quiet.

There is a very nice map to scale printed in 2007 that is available from the city's Recreation and Parks Department. While more greenways are possible in the future, the present status after 18 years is certainly something to be proud of and to enjoy. There will be more on the origin of the idea for greenways and some of the details of how the process developed over the years in upcoming installments of Historically Speaking.

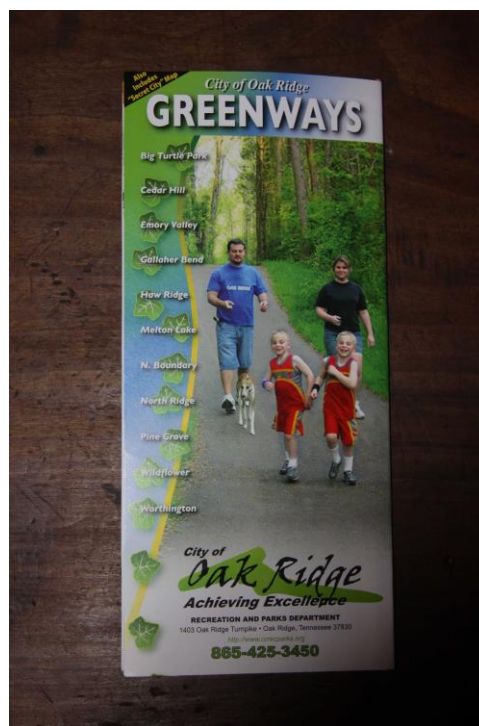
Dan Robbins, who is chairman of Greenways Oak Ridge has provided a folder of resource materials, is working with me to document the organization's history and most important of all desires to see the history of this phenomenal effort documented as a significant part of Oak Ridge history. Anyone who has been involved in creating Greenways Oak Ridge success is welcome to give me input as we attempt to document the history of this highly successful organization's efforts to form greenways in Oak Ridge.

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The Cedar Hill Greenway, Oak Ridge's first formal greenways trail officially opened on September 18, 1994



A brochure created in 1977 that continues to show the greenways trails to scale and also includes the Secret City map is available through the city Recreation and Parks Department