

Greenways Oak Ridge – Progress through the years

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on November 2, 2010)

When the first report of Greenways Oak Ridge, the "Task Force Report to Oak Ridge City Council," was prepared in June, 1993, there were 22 letters of support for the effort. These letters ranged from the Sierra Club, Tennessee Chapter, to various hiking clubs and wilderness groups to the hotels and even the women of United Methodist Church. This was truly a broad representative group.

I think this strong support for greenways in Oak Ridge may well have been as much a result of earlier efforts as it was of a new initiative. While the greenways effort was (and is) well organized and was (and still is) effective in its approach, and while it most assuredly has been successful, it was, in fact, preceded by three decades with the creation of the North Ridge Trail by the Tennessee Citizens of Wilderness Planning.

On June 30, 1999, Liane Russell introduced an article written for The Oak Ridger with these words, "How many cities are there that contain within their borders a secluded woodland trail, over 8 miles in length and honored by the dual designations of National and State Recreation Trail? The North Ridge Trail, now almost 25 years old, was a present to the citizens of Oak Ridge from TCWP (Tennessee Citizens for Wilderness Planning), whose members developed it, got City Council to dedicate it, and worked for federal and state designations to help protect its status."

Indeed we are fortunate that such an individual as Liane Russell lives in our midst. Not only is she a renowned Biologist and scientist credited with some of the world's most significant discoveries (think discovery of the function of the Y Chromosome – Note: the citation for the Enrico Fermi Award Lee received in 1993 states, "For her outstanding contributions to genetics and radiation biology including her discovery of the chromosomal basis for sex determination in mammals"), but she loves our natural elements, our wooded trails, our ridges and valleys and our mountains with more passion than anyone I know. What a tremendous treasure she is to Oak Ridge!

Lee went on to say, "Soon after TCWP was founded in 1966, these citizens suggested adding Oak Ridge greenbelt protection to the organization's other issues. The best safeguard for the greenbelts, they argued, was to build a strong constituency for their preservation, and that meant getting people acquainted with them. Thus, the idea of a trail was born. TCWP members explored the terrain and laid out an interesting and varied route, and when, in April 1969, city council gave unanimous approval to the trail's development by TCWP, all the planning had already been done."

So, long before Greenways Oak Ridge was created, TCWP was busy working to protect our greenways so that eventually (when the time was right) more trails could be created and more citizens could join the effort to preserve our greenways and to create some of the most beautiful and effective greenways and trails in existence anywhere.

Lee also said, "It was TCWP's philosophy that making the trail just wide enough to walk single-file would cause least disturbance to the land and give walkers a feeling of being close to nature. For the most part, the only tools used were lopping shears, spades, and hand saws. The trail runs the entire length of the northern greenbelt from Endicott Lane (eastern end) to Mississippi Avenue (western end), with additional accesses at intermediate points. It crosses two roads, Key Springs Road and Highway 62, but, except at these crossings and at the access trailheads, the walker sees few if any signs of civilization."

She went on to say, "In addition to the linear (though far from straight) trail, and connecting with it, there is also a 2-mile loop, the Delaware Trail, in the widest part of the northern greenbelt. It is just long enough, and just short enough, to provide a lovely outing after work, and its route exemplifies the variety of scenery found in the longer, linear trail. Winding through deciduous forests, it drops down to a spring-fed creek and returns up a narrow valley filled with mountain laurel, passing interesting rock ledges and a sink hole."

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Now, can you think of a more serene and quietly relaxing environment than that of the North Ridge Trail? I can't! I routinely enjoy this trail on at least as many Sunday afternoons as I can get there. I find the easy access from a number of streets on top of Black Oak Ridge along West Outer and Outer Drive a quick way to get far away from the hustle and bustle of city life to the quietness and peacefulness of wooded trails an amazingly refreshing respite.

Finally Lee stated in The Oak Ridger article, "Our trail was one of the first to be designated a National Recreation Trail under the 1971 National Trails Act. The federal inspectors who came to see whether the trail qualified were so impressed, they went off to other cities encouraging them to follow the Oak Ridge example..."

I can't leave our discussion of the North Ridge Trail without acknowledging the excellent job being done by the current Trail Steward, Susan Donnelly. She just finished helping a Boy Scout define and gain permission to do an Eagle Project where he will build a bridge over a wet area in the trail just off Wedgewood Road. Susan follows other Trail Stewards over the years who have worked to preserve the unique nature of the North Ridge Trail.



The North Ridge Trail is both a Tennessee Recreation Trail and a National Recreation Trail