

Bike trail would connect Johnson County to Indianapolis

By JOSEPH S. PETE
Staff writer

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A bike path would stretch along the White River from the Center Grove area north to the Indianapolis Zoo.

That's one of the projects central Indiana planners envision as they lobby for a potential windfall of federal trails funding in 2010.

Indianapolis area officials are campaigning for \$50 million in federal funding to build trails in the metropolitan area, which could include a trail that would run along the White River from Washington Street in Indianapolis to the Johnson County border.

Area officials must develop a concrete plan that could be implemented with the funding, Indianapolis Metropolitan Planning Organization steering committee member Ron Carter said

If the federal funding is secured in 2010, a trail eventually could follow the White River from downtown Indianapolis through the northwest corner of Johnson County and into Morgan County, Johnson County council member Anita Knowles said.

That trail is the only project under discussion that is likely to be connected to Johnson County, which doesn't have suitable abandoned railroad beds or identified trail projects, meaning it won't get a share of the potential windfall, Knowles said.

When Congress most recently renewed federal highway funding in 2005, it awarded \$25 million over four years to four communities, including Minneapolis and a San Francisco suburb, to build trails that would promote walking and biking as alternate modes of transportation. With highway funding coming up again, trails activists are hoping to secure \$50 million per community in 2010.

The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, a national trails advocacy group, hopes to expand the pilot program when Congress next funds highways in two years. A national initiative aims at six years of funding per community to build and promote trails.

Indianapolis has been identified as one of the cities on the list, Knowles said.

Public support, including getting involved in planning, will help land funding that will benefit all of central Indiana, she said.

If Indianapolis receives the funding, it will give residents options other than driving and more recreational opportunities; promote health and economic development; and cut down on congestion and pollution, Carter said.

In its campaign for the funding, Indianapolis has the benefit of having a plan outlining trails priorities, as do some of the surrounding counties, Carter said.

A steering committee is identifying about 6-8 projects that could be funded in the Indianapolis metro area, including the B&O Trail that will run west into Hendricks County.

Some of the money could be used for planning, promotion, data collection and educational programs, but Carter said officials hope to use most of it on trail construction.

Though no projects are likely to focus on Johnson County, streetside bike paths could link to a trail running along the White River from the Johnson County border 11 miles north to the Indianapolis Zoo, he said. A stretch of trail now runs in Indianapolis from 38th Street to Washington Street.

Using an unrelated \$1.2 million federal grant, the Indianapolis Parks Department plans to start work in the fall on a 2.2-mile expansion of the trail south to Raymond Street, greenways manager Karina Straub said.

A southward extension to the Johnson County border would take several years to plan and construct, Carter said.

Work likely wouldn't be started until 2012, if Indianapolis got the funding, Knowles said. Johnson and Morgan county officials have had talks about continuing the trail into Morgan County.

Additionally, bike paths along Johnson County roads could link the Center Grove area to the trail, Knowles said. Johnson County officials are looking to identify potential bike paths as part of the county's comprehensive plan, some of which could link to the White River greenway trail.

"It's more a greenway than for commuting or travel," she said. "It's the scenic route, but that's a good opportunity for recreation."

By the end of June, area planning officials hope to submit a proposal to Rails-to-Trails outlining how the funding would be used and why it's needed.

Then Rails-to-Trails will start lobbying Congress. Next year, residents will be asked to write, e-mail and phone their congressional representatives in support of the funding, Carter said.

In the short term, residents could get involved by helping Indianapolis area officials with planning, Knowles said.

"Some of those who enjoy biking in the county have to put their bikes on a rack and drive half an hour," she said. "We don't have many trails, but we're trying to fix that."