

Chamber hears good news about trails

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WESTFIELD -- Trails are fun to navigate but can also impact each resident and business economically, Carmel City Council member Ron Carter said.

Trails can bring tourism to the area and attract businesses around the trail, but they can also be used as part of a town's economic-development package, he told members of Westfield's chamber of commerce economic-development committee.

The chamber asked Carter, who helped get the Monon Trail extended through Carmel, to speak about the economic impact of recreational trails.

Westfield and Washington Township are working to extend the Monon and the Midland trails -- both abandoned rail corridors that can be used for hiking or biking -- through town. Officials hope to complete maps and cost estimates early next year for the trails and a possible downtown hub.

Carmel uses the Monon as a marketing tool because recreational amenities often pique the interest of executives who want to live near their offices, Carter said. The trail connects the city's Meridian Street office complexes with shops, art galleries and restaurants in its Old Town area and has attracted many businesses and residential developments along its path.

Two bike shops, townhomes, upscale apartments and restaurants with pedestrian access have opened along Carmel's trail, Carter said. One developer told him the trail is such an amenity that land along it has increased value, similar to oceanfront properties in coastal states.

Dan Kloc, an architect with Schmidt Associates, said he's seen the same phenomenon in Broad Ripple, where dozens of small businesses opened to cater to the recreational traffic. The firm helped design the Carmel extension and has applied to help Westfield plan its section, he said.

Carter said restaurants along the trail have seen increased business, and the city's farmers' market has seen an increase of patrons riding bikes. Of the 36,000 people who visited the market from June-September, 15 percent rode their bikes to get produce or browse crafts, he said.

Jeff Lazar was one of those residents to visit Carmel's market this summer. The insurance salesman believes lots of people will use the Westfield extension, which can only mean more revenue for area businesses.

"Anytime you can stay off the roads is wonderful," he said. "We need it."