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May 21, 2005

The Monon Trail stays on the move

On foot or on wheels, Monon users enliven Carmel as other municipalities plan to extend the greenway

By **Bill Ruthhart and Cathy Kightlinger**
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CARMEL, Ind. -- Dodging traffic on the Monon is like trying to beat rush hour -- the earlier you leave, the better.

Gary Roe prefers 6:30 in the morning, even on weekends.

"I come out when it's crowded, too, but I don't like it as much," he says, sitting on his bicycle as the rising sun begins to warm the blacktop. "You have to slow down and maneuver around traffic."

Five years ago, there were none of the bicycles, in-line skaters and baby carriages that the 43-year-old Roe pedals around -- just an overgrown railbed, a remnant of the old Monon Railroad that carried passengers and freight through the rural Hamilton County of a century ago.

Carmel watched and learned as Indianapolis began a \$6 million



zoom

Wow: At the gazebo near Carmel City Hall, Joe Copeland, of Carmel, shows Max Roe, 7, Indianapolis, the seven-speed chopper bike he built. Bicyclists stopped at the gazebo to pick up continental breakfasts Friday on National Bike to Work Day. The gazebo is next to the Monon Trail in Carmel. -- Joe Vitti / The Star

TRAILS IN THE WORKS

Communities throughout the metro area are planning trails:

- **Monon extension** -- Planned in Westfield from 146th Street to 216th Street.
- **Cool Creek North Trail** -- Planned as a spur off the Monon that would wind through Carmel's northeast side.
- **Polk Hill Trail** -- Greenwood's first official greenway, which opened last month, runs from Craig Park east to near the Valle Vista Golf Course.
- **Fall Creek Greenway** -- Indianapolis hopes to extend the trail from its current trailhead east of the Monon all the way to Geist Reservoir.
- **Farm Heritage Trail** -- An agricultural-

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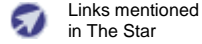
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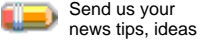
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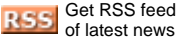
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rails-to-trails development on its stretch of the Monon, a pedestrian thoroughfare from 96th Street all the way Downtown.

By spending \$3 million to extend the Monon north from 96th, Carmel has drawn the crowds and vitality that the Monon brought to places like Broad Ripple and Nora, helping to fuel a redevelopment boom in its aging downtown.

And the Monon likely won't stop there.

North of Carmel, the town of Westfield continues to prepare for a seven-mile extension from the trailhead at 146th Street all the way to 216th. That has prompted plans for residential developments like Sycamore on the Monon, to be built near 191st Street, where the blacktop won't stretch for several more years.

In the meantime, cyclists like Roe are left to deal with the weekend bottleneck in Carmel.

Unless they get an early start, he suggests: "It's going to be so thick that you can't really keep up your pace on a bicycle."

Business is growing

Mark Westermeier has lost count.

"More people are using it now than ever before, and I wouldn't even know how to guess how many are using it," says the Carmel parks director.

"We get a lot of complaints now that it's too crowded. If there was a way we could make the trail wider, we would."

themed trail that would connect Lebanon to Lafayette along an old rail line.

- **RiverWalk** -- Noblesville's planned path along White River that will connect the downtown to its existing White River Trail.
- **Midland Trace Trail** -- Planned along the old Central Indiana Railroad, it would run from Boone County through Westfield to Noblesville.
- **Vandalia Trail** -- Work has begun on the greenway planned between Amo and Coatesville. The trail will be part of the larger, 150-mile cross-state National Road Heritage Trail.
- **B&O Trail Association** continues plans for a trail that would stretch 65 miles from Speedway through Hendricks County all the way to Parke County.

HOW THE MONON TRAIL CAME TO BE

- Trains rumbled down the Monon in 1883, whistling through Indianapolis and Broad Ripple and north to Chicago. It was part of a busy rail system that also provided freight and passenger service to Louisville, Ky., and Michigan City.
- The line once carried nearly 2 million passengers a year, but its payload dwindled over the decades. Passenger service to Indianapolis was abandoned in 1959. By the 1980s, CSX, the line's new owner, decided to abandon the line.
- In 1986, the tracks were ripped out and sold for scrap.
- In 1996, the first section of the Monon Trail, from Nora to Broad Ripple, opened.
- Carmel began acquiring property for the trail in 1998. It fully opened in October 2001. The 5.2-mile trail cost \$3 million to build, \$1.6 million in construction costs and \$1.4 million to acquire property. Carmel purchased 245 parcels to create the trail.
- Today, the Monon Trail stretches from Downtown Indianapolis more than 15 miles north to 146th Street in Carmel.
- In addition to the roughly \$9 million spent to build the trail, Indianapolis and Carmel officials budget about \$150,000 combined for annual maintenance.

VIEWPOINTS

"It's kind of in the middle of town, but then you don't get the hustle and bustle of the traffic."
Bill Doron, 48, Carmel

"I'd say it's much more crowded in Broad Ripple."
Tim Bartemus, 23, IUPUI student, Starbucks employee, Indianapolis

"I've been (using) the Monon since it first

Oran Sands isn't complaining.

He manages the Carmel Schwinn shop, a business on the front end of a development boom around the Monon, expected within a few years to include a new park and concert hall as well as a hotel, shops, homes and apartments.

opened, and it has been nicer since it has gone further; but it needs to go further north, too."
Michelle Malament, 22, veterinary assistant, Indianapolis

In that stretch through the new downtown area known as City Center, there are plans for a Carmel-scale widening of the trail -- 16 feet across, with two lanes separated by landscaped medians.

The anticipated development on the Monon will mean more customers, and they're already coming. Sands' business is up 200 percent from 2004.

"Already in April," he said, "we had warm enough weather to literally have every bike in here rented out in one day."

Mahdokht Jasmine Jalaie rented a side-by-side tandem, braving the midday crowd with her mother.

The 22-year-old student at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis said she had never been on this part of the Monon.

"I like it, but it's hard to manage two people at the same time," she said, pedaling north through Carmel's Old Town neighborhood.

From ghost town to arts

Ron Carter remembers when Old Town -- now an emerging arts district -- looked more like a ghost town.

"I love to just sit at one of the picnic tables at Bub's," says Carter, a Carmel city councilman, "and just look down the trail toward Main Street and smile."

At Bub's Burgers and Ice Cream, the wait for a table is usually longest on the weekends, especially around lunchtime.

Donna Karsnick and her 7-year-old son, Brandon, stopped in for ice cream.

They'd love to see the Monon extend toward their home near Westfield.

"I would really like to just get on my bike and ride to the Monon," she said. "We can do that, but there is the stretch between where we live -- there is no sidewalk, so it's really dangerous."

Using about \$1 million in state grants, Westfield already plans to pave the Monon as far north as Karsnick's neighborhood near 156th Street.

They hope to use a second grant to take the trail to Ind. 32 -- far enough to intersect with the planned Midland Trace Trail, another pedestrian thoroughfare extending west to Boone County and east to Noblesville.

Plans for smaller intersecting trails are in the works as well, including a Cool Creek North Trail that would connect the Monon to Carmel's northeastern neighborhoods.

Carmel and many other suburban communities, such as Noblesville and Greenwood, have developed trail master plans for their communities. The Indianapolis Greenways Master Plan is a 200-page booklet discussing about a dozen future trails.

Indianapolis is moving forward with plans to extend its Fall Creek Greenway from a current trailhead east of the Monon all the way to Geist Reservoir in the northeast corner of Marion County. To the south, Greenwood just completed its first greenway last month -- the Polk Hill Trail, a mile-long path through the city.

Leaders there hope the trail will be the beginning of a much larger system. Westfield planning director Kevin Buchheit envisions a similar network of smaller trails, branching off the Monon.

"We know the traffic jams the Monon experiences now in Broad Ripple and Carmel on beautiful weekends," he says.

"Being able to give people the opportunity to jaunt off in different directions and, over time, bring people up through Westfield and over to Noblesville will be great."

Yes, in his back yard

Bruno Pigott would be excited merely to see the Monon extended as far as his back yard, just north of 146th Street.

There, the old railbed is overgrown with weeds and littered with trash.

"People go back there and use that area to dump stuff," Pigott said. "If it were fixed up like the part south of us here, I think it would get a lot of use."

Dean Huntington once was in a similar position -- living in a subdivision that was near an abandoned railbed.

At the time, he didn't want to see it become a trail.

"I was one that thought it was a waste of money, but now it's unbelievable," said Huntington, whose subdivision backs up to the Monon at 106th Street.

"Now we're out here all the time, and I thought I'd never step foot on it."

Call Star reporter Bill Ruthhart at (317) 444-2606.

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