

The case for a North Memphis Greenline a key anchor to strengthening the New Chicago community

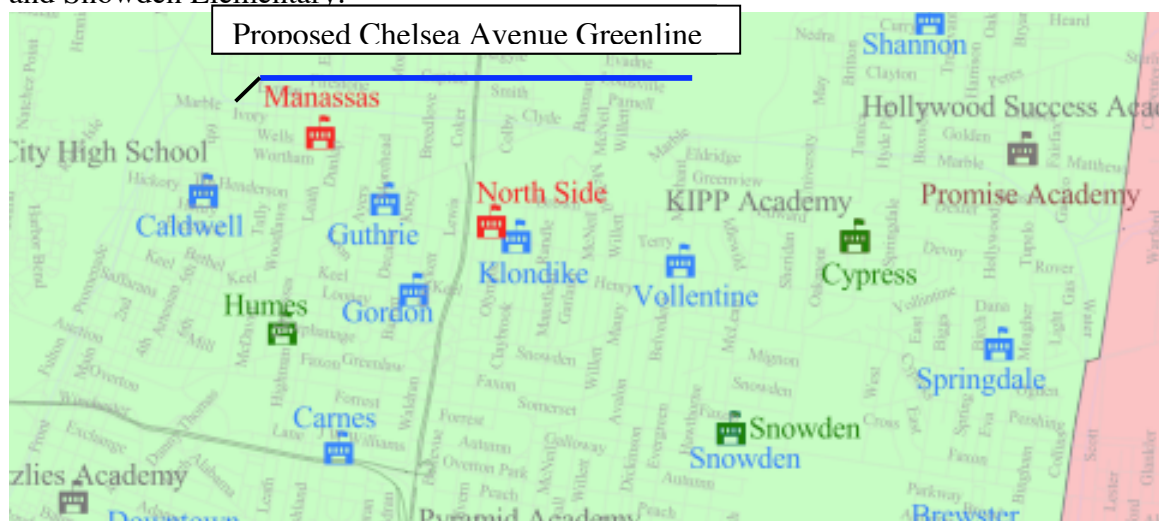
We have an opportunity to convert an abandoned rail line owned by Union Pacific into a multi-use trail for non-motorized vehicles. The corridor runs along Chelsea Avenue from North Evergreen Street westward toward the uptown area terminating on Second Street at Washington Park. The western terminus is near the northern entrance to Mud Island, Bridges, Girls Inc., Buckman Boys and Girls Clubs, St. Jude Medical Center, and the Wolf River trail system as well as new uptown multi-income housing developments

The proposed walking and bicycling corridor offers a unique piece of geography.

The corridor is placed within an easy bike ride of the Wolf River trail, which is presently under development, the north end of Mud Island, and the Great River Road trail system which tracks the Mississippi River from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. The path is also a short bike ride from St. Jude Medical Center and the MATA Bus Depot. This northern route through downtown and mid-town Memphis could connect to the Shelby Farms Greenline in the future. Since the area is relatively flat, ADA compliance should be achievable without incurring extra costs. The new path can serve as a significant transportation link while simultaneously providing a much-needed amenity promoting active, healthy living in a part of the community that needs revitalization and fresh infrastructure.

Accessibility to neighborhood schools.

Along this 2.3-mile stretch the route passes within a block of the new Manassas High and is adjacent to the old high school building now owned by the Memphis Housing Authority. Also within a mile of the corridor are Northside High School, its neighbor Klondike Elementary, along with Guthrie Elementary, the KIPP Academy, Vollandine Elementary and Gordon Elementary, which are also within a mile of the proposed project. Located less than 2 miles from the site are Shannon Elementary, Hollywood Success Academy, Promise Academy, Cypress Middle School and Humes Middle School and Snowden Elementary.



The Social Aspects of the area.

The New Chicago area is considered disadvantaged by any reasonable definition of the term. Over 80% of the students attending public schools in the area are considered to be disadvantaged (according to the Tennessee Department of Education). Poverty rates in this neighborhood are among the highest in the city. The area suffers from a 30% vacancy rate and the signs of foreclosure are present on many blocks. The population is almost entirely African American. Unemployment is high throughout the area. Gang activity is present in the area of Watkins and Breedlove—in the path of the proposed walking and biking trail. There are few amenities in the area. There are some city parks dotted throughout the area and two community centers. There are few restaurants and no grocery stores. There are a handful of convenience stores and liquor stores and many vacant buildings. Residents of the area have few recreational opportunities in their neighborhood that promote healthy living.

Safety Issues for potential users

This area of Memphis is known to have gang-related activity. This is not surprising given the poverty that plagues the residents of New Chicago. Trail lighting must be considered essential to insure line of sight access. Video cameras can be used along the new corridor to aid law enforcement personnel and complement area patrols. A new police precinct with public parking facilities is planned on the site of “old” Manassas High School. The site is next to the proposed walking and bicycling greenway.

Transportation for neighborhood residents

Recent nationwide studies show that among low income city dwellers transportation cost can be as high as 1/3 of total income.

By promoting the use of a walking and bicycling corridor as a legitimate form of transportation among local residents, this path in combination with MATA bus services could move a significant number of people across a large area of the city at a reasonable cost. MATA has already equipped all buses on scheduled routes with the necessary bike racks.

Dealing with health concerns in the community.

Childhood obesity among the area’s residents is a major health risk. One approach that is being successfully used in urban communities all over the county is developing healthy places for recreational opportunities. Clearly the built environment, such as the proposed walking and bicycling path, will affect some people’s behavior. The effect of NOT having places that promote active play is an increase in the number of obese children. If the Greater Memphis Greenline can develop an active recreation space within the New Chicago area - the entire community benefits. With amenities so lacking in this community and opportunities for healthy activity so limited the Memphis community must act to actively reverse the social effects that a lack of activity among the residents of the community promotes. In meetings with the various schools and the community agencies contacted, all groups strongly favor such activity areas. Community engagement

(the active participation) of local institutions will be vital to the ongoing success of this project.

The message is clear - things can get better.

The re-use of the abandoned rail corridor, can serve as an anchor for community development. People both inside and outside this community recognize the need to help average citizens be healthier. The governor has stated through policy that Tennesseans need to be more active. Not only has Memphis been called out as one of America's most obese communities, Memphis has also recently been listed as among the worst cities in the U.S. for bicyclists. The Memphis community needs to invest in infrastructure that promotes healthier living. Our project can address both issues. Recent studies show that poster campaigns do little to affect peoples' behavior. Changes in the built environment have proven to have effect, however. How much effect the changes will make clearly depends on the level of community involvement and financial muscle.

Active engagement of the community through schools, churches, community centers, health clinics and governmental organizations such as City Beautiful and the New Chicago Community Development Corporation and the Shelby County Health Department will leverage our effort to produce a walking and bicycling path that promotes active living. The Greater Memphis Greenline and its partners have conducted and will continue to conduct meetings throughout the project period to insure "adoption" of the trail in the community.

There is a considerable amount of academic interest in this project. A professor from the University of Memphis School of Public Administration wishes to conduct a Health Assessment. Students and a sponsoring professor at Rhodes College will also be assisting in project development of the trail.

Current status of the project

The City of Memphis continues to be a willing partner in the process of acquisition. We also have general support in the Shelby County Mayor for this specific project. The Greater Memphis Greenline has engaged The Trust for Public Land as our agent in dealing with Union Pacific and they have agreed to provide bridge financing for acquisition of the right of way.

Union Pacific has recently reviewed its offer for sale of the right of way. The revised asking price is \$1.5 million. The appraisal, which the Greater Memphis Greenline funded last year, indicates that the property is worth half that amount.

Engineering and Environmental Challenges

The corridor will need to insure pedestrian and bicycle safety at the Evergreen Trailhead near Chelsea Avenue, and a crossing light will be needed at Thomas Street as well as a new crosswalk across Chelsea Avenue west of Watkins.

There is one small railroad trestle, which appears to be sound, but needs a structural assessment and will require an upgrade including new guard rails and new roadbed surfacing.

An environmental assessment is needed, since the corridor passes through a Brownfield target area as a result of its proximity to two abandoned manufacturing sites and the Wolf River corridor.

Sustainability

A management authority will be needed to insure that ongoing funding and maintenance challenges can be successfully met after initial construction. Unlike the first of our projects, there is no “white knight”, such as the Shelby Farms Park Conservancy, to step in to maintain the facility. The City of Memphis has no available funds for ongoing needs of the corridor to insure its cleanliness, safety and community adoption.

The creation of this management authority, built from the fabric of local community leaders, representatives of the area’s businesses as well as other local interested parties, such as schools and churches will insure the Chelsea Avenue Greenline’s role as a catalyst for future economic development as well as making the area more attractive to potential home owners, which would increase the tax base and help the area to return to the days of its more prosperous past. The timeline for creation of this body should coincide with the ongoing acquisition and development efforts and be ready for business by the new trail facility opening, projected for April, 2014.