See <http://www.gordonrivergreenway.org/>

Welcome to the Greenway

A scenic, paved nature trail with water access along the Gordon River, in the heart of Naples. Ideal for walkers, hikers, runners, cyclists, kayakers, birders, families, artists and nature lovers.

What's Open Now

The first section of the Greenway, from north to south, starting at Golden Gate Parkway and going south past the Conservancy and the Zoo, now open.

The Southwest Florida Land Preservation Trust is working to complete a pathway from the southern end to connect with North Road. The next section of the Greenway opened in 1992, consists of a 1 ½ mile paved loop trail adjacent to the Naples Municipal Airport and along the eastern edge of the river. In the immediate future, this area will be under construction, while the airport builds a new water management pond. When it reopens, parking will be available in a handicap-accessible lot on North Road, on the western side of the airport. New pathways will be constructed when the pond is complete.

Overview

Taking advantage of the natural beauty along the Gordon River in one of the last unspoiled areas of urban Naples, the Gordon River Greenway will stretch two miles from Golden Gate Parkway toward the heart of Naples, ending at Central Avenue. Weaving among the mangroves and other native plants, the Greenway will feature:

* paved pathways
* canoe and kayak launch scenic overlooks
* picnic shelter areas
* wildlife viewing stations
* decorative bridges
* benches
* educational signage and interpretive graphics
* restrooms and other amenities
* rear entrance access to the Naples Zoo and the Conservancy of Southwest Florida
* access to the Naples Dog Park

The Greenway is being built to accommodate individuals and families enjoying a variety of activities. The 12-foot wide pathways and 10 foot wide elevated boardwalks will be ideal for walkers, hikers, joggers, cyclists, in-line skaters, and skateboarders. They are wide enough for parents pushing baby carriages, people walking dogs as well as individuals in wheelchairs.

Greenways are attractive spots for birders, nature photographers and other artists, environmental and “greening” enthusiasts, and travelers who seek out new greenways and trails to explore.When the launch areas are complete, paddlers in canoes and kayaks will have access to a new landscape to explore.

History & Timeline

The idea for the Gordon River Greenway started in 1987 during a visit by the American Institute of Architects’ Regional Urban Design Assistance Team. The community discussions that followed about recreation and open space led to the founding of the Southwest Florida Land Preservation Trust (SWFLPT), a Florida-based 501(c)(3) not-for-profit corporation, in 1988.

In 2004 Collier County residents voted to tax themselves to acquire 140 acres of land on the Gordon River that will form the largest part of the Greenway. With that land in county ownership, the SWFLPT helped bring together stakeholders including the City of Naples, Collier County, Conservation Collier, the Naples Municipal Airport, the Conservancy of Southwest Florida and the Naples Zoo to work together in a collaborative approach in designing all the separately-owned parcels of the Greenway.

Collier County is completing construction on the Collier County Gordon River Greenway Park and the Conservation Collier Gordon River Greenway Preserve.

The Naples Airport Authority has built perimeter sidewalks around the airport that will connect to the Greenway and provide access from the main road. They have also removed substantial amounts of exotic vegetation, and are rebuilding paths and a pond near North Road.

The City of Naples has entered a contract for 30% design plans on Baker Park and the bridge that will connect to the airport.

The SWFLPT has started work on building pathways from the county segment to the city.

The Conservancy of Southwest Florida went through a master planning process and has built a new access road and prepared for interconnections with the Zoo and the Greenway.

The Zoo has also engaged in a master planning process and realigned the northern and southern boundaries of their lease with the county to facilitate an expanded parking lot.

Naples Goes Wild with the Gordon River Greenway

Still an act in progress, the project cuts right through town with a broad swath of nature for lovers of the outdoors.

**MICHAEL KORB**



**Damien Lin rows near the city of the future Gordon River Park, a part of the upcoming Gordon River Greenway, which connects the Naples Zoo and the Conservancy of Southwest Florida with downtown Naples**

**Erik Kellar**

*Editors note: Since this story went to press, Patty and Jay Baker donated $2 million to the city for the naming rights to what will be now be known as Baker Park. All told, a fundraiser for the new park raised more than $5.3 million for improvements to the land once the permits are approved.*

An embarrassment of riches. That’s the best way to describe life in Naples.

The natural gems that make up the area are far too numerous to mention, so it’s almost hard to imagine that a little known project more than 25 years in the making is about to become a very large jewel in the crownwork that is Naples. When every part is complete, the Gordon River Greenway will be one of the main features used to lure people here.

**The Greenway—a two-plus-mile collection of paved pathways, bridges and elevated boardwalks featuring kayak launch stations and scenic overlooks—will stretch from Golden Gate Parkway south into downtown Naples, ultimately ending at Central Avenue. At its terminus is the newly planned Gordon River Park—a spectacular 15.2-acre expanse city officials hope to complete within five years at an approximate cost of $15 million. Soon, hikers, bikers, joggers and the like can experience a section of Naples that has been in private hands since long before the area’s growth spurt.**

Best of all, a majority of it remains natural, untouched by development because of its wetland status, the environmental impact to gopher tortoises, and the fact that the bridge spanning the Gordon River at U.S. 41 has less than 12 feet of clearance, making it un-navigable for all but the lowest of boats. The river follows a habitat of pine flatwoods, scrub and mangrove fringe as it runs past the Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens and the Conservancy of Southwest Florida to the west and the Naples Municipal Airport to the east, eventually flowing into Naples Bay at the bridge. It’s a pristine area that’s home to everything from bald eagles to bobcats. The river itself is home to snook, tarpon, mullet, snapper and a host of other fish, turtles and amphibians.

Championed by the Southwest Florida Land Preservation Trust (SWFLPT) in the late 1980s, the 180 acres of conservation lands will soon be accessible to the public from multiple entry points. You may have noticed work being done on the eastbound side of Golden Gate Parkway just east of Goodlette-Frank Road. That will be the northernmost parking lot for the Greenway. Its main parking area will be next to the Naples Zoo at Caribbean Gardens off Goodlette-Frank Road, while a smaller lot is off North Road behind Naples Municipal Airport.

But the true brilliance of the Greenway is that it will actually connect several of Naples’ most prominent attractions—specifically the Naples Zoo and the Conservancy of Southwest Florida—with each other and downtown. It will also make each of those accessible from the east side of the river, specifically the Naples Municipal Airport, where a new expandable parking area will connect to the pathways and an upcoming bridge linking it directly to Gordon River Park.

Conceivably you could park your car behind the airport and walk to the zoo or Conservancy (fresh off its $20 million renovation) or even downtown Naples.

“I am ecstatic,” says Ellie Krier, director of SWFLPT since 2004 and a member of the board since the ’90s. “I have been actively in the trenches on this for 10 years. And I want to cut the ribbon before I retire—that’s almost everybody’s goal at this time.”

**How It All Started**

To say it’s been a struggle to pull off would be an understatement. When the SWFLPT first had designs on the project, the Gordon River was not considered prime real estate or of any significance. **The majority of the property behind the zoo from Golden Gate Parkway down to approximately Seventh Avenue was owned by the famed Fleischmann family**, and they weren’t planning on giving it away. It wasn’t until 2004 that 73 percent of Collier County voters accepted a $40 million bond referendum to purchase the 157 acres, which included the upland and wetland habitats along the river.

But if voters were on board in 2004, why are we only now seeing this become a reality?

“You have three government entities,” Krier says. “Collier County, and you have two departments of Collier County; you have Parks and Recreation and Conservation Collier. They each have their own advisory boards, their own funding sources and their own staff. Then you have the City of Naples. And then you have the Naples Airport Authority, which is a government entity. Then you have two nonprofits; the Naples Zoo and the Conservancy of Southwest Florida.”

And therein lies the rub. The Gordon River Greenway is expected to be complete by the end of the year, with most accounts suggesting September. But even though some of the parking lots are nearing completion and a majority of the paths cleared, there remain hiccups due to various zoning issues that still need to be worked out. In fact, because it lies across so many different governmental entities, some of the more pressing details of the Greenway—hours, security, accessibility— remain elusive even to those in charge.

Krier has been tasked with finding out the management plans at two other multi-jurisdictional greenways in Florida: the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway (across Central Florida) and the James A. Van Fleet State Trail (crossing Lake, Polk and Sumter counties) so they don’t have to reinvent the wheel.

“I just think we are inordinately lucky that this stretch of open space exists,” Krier says. “Partly because you can’t see it from anywhere and partly because it remained largely in private ownership making it available for this sort of a vision. A lot of cities don’t have that; their waterfronts get gummed up normally with low-end commercial early on and then you have to recover from that. We didn’t have that problem.”

**Credit the Conservancy**

**Much of the thanks for the vast amount of unspoiled land can be directed at the Conservancy. Rob Moher, president and CEO of the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, is understandably proud of the role of his organization in pulling this together.** Before the Fleischmann land was purchased (the Conservancy was instrumental in educating the public in order to get the $40 million bond approved by voters), the Conservancy and other activists sued Collier Enterprises/Collier Development Corporation over the proposed mangrove impacts of the Hamilton Harbor Marina project. That suit not only reduced the impact of that venture, but also resulted in Collier Development Corporation offering 55 acres of land for public acquisition—43.5 of which are now part of the Gordon River Greenway Preserve.

“A lot of the area where the pathways cross or access wouldn’t be there had we not had a settlement as a result of the Hamilton Harbor legal battle that we had for many, many years,” Moher says. “So, through our advocacy we added about 43 acres back there. It’s not our property, but it wouldn’t be there if not for the Conservancy. … And the benefits (of the Greenway) are multiple and significant: Here you have new opportunities to enjoy nature—and not way out somewhere far but literally across from Coastland Center Mall. It also protects all the land from development, so it will improve water quality. And thirdly is this green zone that, from a tourism or visitor point of view, you can visit one place, experience our nature center, which we just invested $20 million to make it one of the finest nature centers in the Southeast United States.”

It’s fitting then that the Conservancy backs up to the Greenway.

Another thrilled participant is the zoo. It’s a “must-do” for visitors and locals alike, and to have another way for people to access it can mean only good things for the venerable institution.

“We are really excited, for a number of reasons,” says Jack Mulvena, the zoo’s president and CEO. “A family could come to the zoo and enjoy a zoo experience and later in the afternoon walk the pathways and access the Gordon River.

I think the concept was to provide multiple opportunities for family and kids to get outside just to enjoy nature and play and just be outside together. There is actually a kayak launch that is part of the Gordon River Greenway project and there is kind of a dedicated area for parking for kayakers.”

For its part, the zoo contributed $1.3 million to the $9 million project. In addition to the larger parking area, there’ll be added curb appeal of the entrance area, featuring two larger ponds and lush landscaping. A separate $20 million capital campaign by the zoo will eventually raise enough funds to build what Mulvena calls “our gateway to Naples Zoo entrance experience.”

Though it will have little impact on the Greenway itself, it serves as yet another example of how area attractions recognize the impact that the Greenway will have on them and the area.

“Together, we are greater than the sum of our parts,” Moher says.

**A Legacy Park**

At the Greenway’s southernmost spot falls the Gordon River Park. Once complete, the 15.2-acre park will be the largest park within Naples city limits. **Though it’s not expected to be finished for almost five years, it will still be a part of the Greenway as soon as the bridge across the Gordon River is built.** That bridge will connect the park (off Riverside Circle) to the path that runs the length of North Road, both along the river and around the airport. There’s even another five acres of mangroves connected that might also become part of the footprint.

The passive park (meaning there’ll be no basketball or tennis courts), designed pro bono by architect Matthew Kragh of MHK Architecture and Planning, will include multiple water features along with a pond replete with island and waterfalls (using re-circulated water), a picnic area, boat slips, a viewing platform that will also house **the Rowing Association of Naples**, a tiki hut, pavilion, children’s splash area, a kayak and paddleboard dock, café, restrooms, various terraced landscaping for sitting, and a 40-foot tall hill from where park users can look down the river. “It needs to be 40 feet,” says **Mayor John Sorey.** “We took a tape measure and measured and we couldn’t see the river enough until we got to 40 feet. … I see lots of weddings and that sort of thing here.”

Whatever else the mayor sees for the park will rely solely on the private money the park can raise. “What goes in here is dependent on what people will step up and fund,” Sorey says. “We have people that want a carousel and my answer is, ‘Show me the money. If you want a carousel, a children’s splash area, a croquette lawn, outdoor dining area or whatever, you need to come up with the money.’” To that end, the city is selling everything from naming rights (for a cool $2 million) to engraved brick pavers for $100 each.

**The entire project is expected to cost approximately $15 million**. Of that, it’s already paid $3 million to purchase the 6.7-acre parcel that is adjacent to an 8.5-acre area already owned by the city. There was some controversy in that the 6.7 parcel was formerly owned by John Pulling, who offered it to the city free of charge with the covenant that there be another traffic bridge over the river and that the city build a marina on site.

“He wanted a road with a bridge going from Third Avenue South to North Road,” Sorey says. “The citizens of Naples continually fought that and … from an environmental standpoint, it wouldn’t be possible.” Nor was the water deep enough to allow for a marina without significant dredging. Because of those factors, the city couldn’t do anything with the property.

“When he died, his son Alex filed litigation against the city to take it back,” Sorey says. “We settled and got all of the covenants removed from the 8.5 acres and right of first refusal for the 6.7 acres.” When the developer of Mangrove Bay decided that they wanted to build an additional group of houses on that lot, they forced the city’s hand.

The mayor hopes construction will start before the city council goes on recess in August—working on elevations, etc. “I would hope that we will get the walking paths in (soon) so we can even use this before the bridge gets built,” Sorey says.

“There were some folks who thought selling (this land) to developers and putting houses on it was a prudent thing to do from a tax generation standpoint,” Sorey says. “My basic thing was, we only get one opportunity at this, and if we don’t do this now, there will be houses here and you will never have this park. And to me, it’s all about the young people. And I don’t care whether it’s city or county, but that (people have) a place to go throw a Frisbee and run around.”

And once all parts are in place, there’ll be plenty of room to run.