Investment in greenspace restorations along Capital Trail enhances public spaces in the city

Bill Lohmann
Richmond Times-Dispatch

From an aesthetic point of view, the strip of land along Dock Street — the final western stretch of the Virginia Capital Trail between Great Shiplock Park and the floodwall near 17th Street — used to leave a lot to be desired.

"It was all just weeds and weed trees," said Meg Turner. "Just a mess of invasives."

In searching for just the right word to describe the former shabby scene, she came up with "disgustingness."

She laughed and said she might get called on that if she trotted that word out in a game of Scrabble, but her point was well-taken. The place was an eyesore.

Now?

The linear garden along the Kanawha Canal, in the shadow of a working railroad trestle, is lovely and lush, a popular green space enjoyed by the growing population of downtown residents and visitors strolling or pedaling through. Completed in 2016, it even has a name: Low Line, in a nod to its inspiration, New York City's High Line, an elevated park and greenway in Manhattan built upon deactivated trestles.

The Low Line Green, a garden plaza at the western terminus of the Capital Trail at the floodwall where the Canal Walk begins and where President Abraham Lincoln's coming ashore in April 1865 is commemorated with a historic marker, was finished earlier this year.

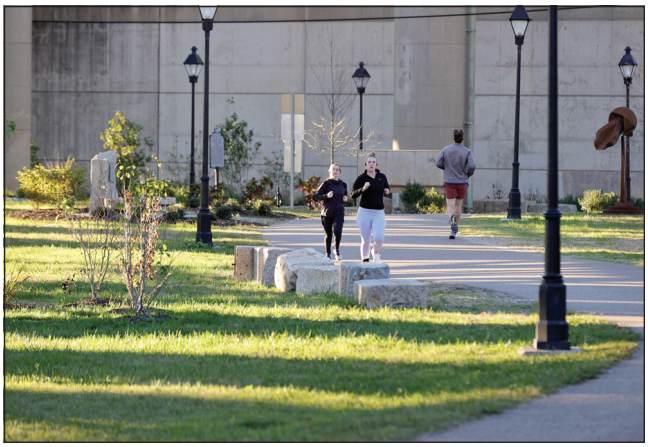
Altogether, the two projects represent a $2.1 million investment in restoration of the area. (In between the two is a narrower, austere — i.e. kind of weedy — stretch of trail directly beneath the trestle that is known to some as "The Passage," that has not yet received the nurturing attention as the patches of land that bookend it.)

The transformation is more than simply striking in appearance. Overgrown invasive species were removed, replaced with thousands of new plants that provide a biodiversity that was lacking and also filter stormwater runoff from the surface streets and overhead highways before it enters the canal and river.

"We've now really created quite a little ecosystem in the heart of what was just really concrete and weeds," said Turner, founding member and chairman of Capital Trees, a nonprofit that creates public-private partnerships with a goal of producing a more livable city and was the force behind the Low Line. "It's a very hard-working linear garden."

I masked up and took a pleasant afternoon stroll along the Low Line a few days after the flooding rains of mid-November. Those rains, Turner said, gave the garden "a great workout."

"Had a bit of mulch runoff, but otherwise it did its job, soaking up the polluted stormwater from I-95 and [Downtown] Expressway downspouts, filtering through the rain gardens and bioremediation channels before flowing into the canal and river," she said. "It will get even more effective as the plants grow and entirely fill the area. More roots equals more filtering of pollutants."



Daniel Sangjib Min/Times-Dispatch

Runners make their way on the Capital Trail.

I've written stories in recent months about public-private collaborations enhancing public spaces in the city, first at Bellemeade Park where dedicated volunteers through Friends of Bellemeade Park have pretty much built the park from scratch, and then about the woods of Dogwood Dell at Byrd Park where a private foundation has financed a reclamation project of the urban forest that was suffocatingly overgrown with ivy, kudzu and all sorts of other invasive species.

Such partnerships are critical for the city park system that doesn't have the budget for a lot of that sort of work, said Chris Frelke, the city's director of Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities, in an interview for the piece on the Dogwood Dell woods.

"We really lean on a lot of different 'friends' groups," he said, noting there are more than 40 such groups systemwide. "We try to maximize the dollars we have. Leveraging partnerships really allows us to accomplish greater and bigger things. We are really fortunate in the city to have so many different groups that really want to help improve our parks."

Capital Trees grew out of a 2010 project along 14th Street, between Bank and Main street, which brought together the Boxwood, James River, Three Chopt and Tuckahoe garden clubs in an effort to bring a measure of green space to the barren concrete corridor. The collaboration with the city worked well, said Turner, a landscape designer who was among those involved with the 14th Street venture who went on to establish Capital Trees, a broad-based organization that includes horticulturalists, landscape architects, community activists, business leaders and conservationists.

"We dubbed ourselves 'Capital Trees,' but it had become so clear to us when we did the 14th Street project that it was so much more than about the trees," Turner said. "It's really about the bigger public greening, of which trees play a very big part."

After 14th Street, the group partnered with the Virginia Capital Trail Foundation on Great Shiplock Park, bringing in funding, expertise and the labor itself, to transform the neglected historic site into an appealing riverfront park. The Low Line projects were natural extensions of that work.

An estimated 300,000 people walk, bike, skate or otherwise use the Capital Trail along the Low Line annually, and the number might be higher for 2020 as many have discovered outdoor public spaces during the pandemic, said Frazier Millner Armstrong, executive director of Capital Trees. In its work, the 501c3 organization, now with a paid staff of three and an annual budget of $300,000, brings together the city, corporations, other nonprofits, foundations and individuals. It's eyeing other parts of the city for future projects that "create spaces that keep the community healthy and spur development around them," Armstrong said.

"Creating public landscapes is what Capital Trees is all about," she said.

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Alexa Welch Edlund/Times-Dispatch

Abrya Harrison cuts lavender in the Broad Rock Community Garden.

Richmond's poorest neighborhoods have the least community green space. These groups are trying to fix that.

LILY BETTS
Richmond Times-Dispatch

Since the apartment buildings were demolished in 2002, 13 acres of city land has sat vacant in Broad Rock, a South Richmond neighborhood off Jefferson Davis Highway.

The land has been overwhelmed by impenetrable greenery that creeps out between sidewalk cracks, and is blocked off by a fence.

Alice Dickey, 76, lives on the block. She said there aren't really any places in the community where people tend to gather.

Normally, Dickey would be at her church three evenings every week for Bible study, prayer and choir rehearsal. But the church is currently closed to in-person meetings, and she said she spends most of her time at home.

The coronavirus has exaggerated a problem that was given national attention in August in The New York Times — historically redlined communities lack green space and parks, which has led to hotter temperatures, negative health impacts and a lack of community building.

"Access to green spaces make our communities healthier, wealthier and happier," said Mayor Levar Stoney. "So is it any surprise that racist decisions have led to a built environment that favors white communities over communities of color. Neighborhoods that look like Broad Rock always took a back seat while designing our city.

"This was not an accident. This was purposeful. And it is our job to intentionally correct that injustice."

Here's why 2021 will be a rough year for first-time home buyers

Only 6% of Richmond's land is dedicated to green space, compared to a national average of 15%. While the nature of city centers puts limits on how green spaces can be integrated, recent developments prove it isn't impossible.

Stoney, along with private groups like Ginter Urban Gardeners and Capital Trees, are working to correct the problem.

The mayor's remarks came at the park during an announcement that the city plans to add five parks to Richmond's South Side. The development would add 36 acres of green space to the city and be the first major project of its kind since the 1970s.

Stoney said 22% of Richmond residents live more than 10 minutes from a public park. Executing the plan is still at the very early stages, while private groups are working to fill the void in the interim.

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Large-scale projects are not the only form of greening that can have significant impacts on Richmond communities.

While the South Side lacks significant green space like the ones Stoney's ordinance would introduce, the city's largest collection of community gardens are clustered south of the James.

Briana Stevenson is one of two managers at Broad Rock Community Garden, 2.7 miles from the lot where Stoney hopes to build a park. She lives just up the road from the garden and has been involved since its inception two years ago, with the help of Ginter Urban Gardeners.

Before the lot became an official community garden, Stevenson said her neighbors had about eight plant beds on the land, but there were challenges in maintaining the land and coordinating volunteers.

Being on a city lot has presented problems including lawn maintenance and getting water to the garden, Stevenson said, but the garden has seen more engagement in recent months.

"Especially with all the activism going on, there's been an increase in people wanting to utilize the space," she said,

"and especially with a lot of things being run down around here, so we're just trying to take advantage of the space we can get."

A community garden serves a dual purpose: providing fresh produce within a food desert, and providing a common space to the community.

Broad Rock has hosted cookouts over long weekends and regular work days on Saturday evenings. Over the first weekend of September, fall produce was put in the ground, including cilantro, mustard and radishes. The rain through the first half of the month prompted the first leaves to push above ground.

There are also benches and tables beneath a shaded awning. While the garden has two sister lots at the McDonough and Stockton community gardens, Stevenson said the garden was one of few places people could actually sit down.

Space is set aside so that people can meditate in the far corner of the lot. One recent meditation session came Oct. 6, the day after the fatal shooting of Demarcus Gregory a mile down Broad Rock Avenue.

A 2015 study out of the University of Pennsylvania found that residents' well-being — from stress, mental health and threats of violence — can be tied to the amount of green space available in their communities.

The study measured the heart rates of local residents and found that their heart rates were on average 9.5 beats per minute faster when walking by vacant lots compared with greened lots.

A follow-up study in July 2018 by Eugenia South, an assistant professor at Penn, found a 41.5% decrease in feelings of depression and a 63% decrease in reports of general poor mental health within a quarter-mile of these "pocket parks." A February 2018 study revealed that gun violence decreased by 29%.

While the community benefits are undeniable, integrating such spaces into the community is not seamless.

There have been some issues with drug use and trash being left on the grounds within the Broad Rock garden, but it's part of the learning curve in bringing mindfulness to the space, Stevenson said.

"We're trying to find solutions and change the mindset," she said. "It's not about just slapping something down and saying we did something."

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Capital Trees, an urban greening nonprofit, focuses on larger, transformational projects.

The group formed from a collection of all-volunteer gardening clubs, said Frazier Millner Armstrong, its executive director. "We thought early on that we would be focused on our declining — frankly decrepit — tree canopy, and that was our philosophical base."

That base motivated its first project, on 14th Street downtown. Along with greening a previously gray landscape — "your traditional curb and gutter, asphalt and concrete" — the newly planted trees helped filter rainwater draining downhill before it hit the James River.

Preservation of the James played a significant role in planning Capital Trees' third and most recent project, Low Line Green, which was completed in April. Located beneath Interstate 95 and the Downtown Expressway, the garden works as a filter for rain runoff from the ramps before it drains into the James.

While functional, the green space has also been a boon for the surrounding community.

"Really, with the pandemic, what we've been hearing most from people is the benefit of having that green space," Armstrong said.

The Low Line, which starts at Great Shiplock Park and features functional greenery, benches and open grassy areas, connects downtown with the riverside along the western end of the Virginia Capital Trail.

Bridget Huff and her daughter, Bebe, were one of several families to visit Great Shiplock Park on Sept. 13.

"It's something we've been waiting for for a very long time," Huff said. "It's odd that there are so few places within the city of Richmond to access the riverfront, so having this spot is really great. It's really our main draw as a city."

And with Bebe being in online classes, the fresh air is a refreshing change. "Being on the computer all day is really tiring, just looking at the screen. Like, even if I can just open my window, that's nice."

While Capital Trees works closely with the city's Department of Parks and Recreation, its projects remain under the organization's control, meaning that Capital Trees is responsible for their upkeep. And, as they are not public parks, green spaces like the Low Line strip are not subject to the same local government regulations.

The Richmond Planning Commission voted earlier this month to turn two medians around the Robert E. Lee monument into public parks. The ordinance would add a daylight hours curfew to the land and disallow firearms.

While the Lee monument itself acted as a lightning rod for this past summer's demonstrations — for both peaceful gatherings and clashes between protesters and police — the medians often acted as a transitional zone. Critics say the regulation could be used to douse protest.

Confederate monuments stood as metaphorical and literal figures of inequality through the protests, but Monument Avenue's effectiveness and fluidity as a meeting space highlighted an inequality in itself: accessibility to safe, public green space and the community welfare it offers.

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Social distancing has disrupted even the most basic modes of connection, as evidenced by the closing of Alice Dickey's church in Broad Rock. While restrictions have eased in Phase Three of the coronavirus protocols, outdoor spaces remain a valuable — and safe — way for people to get out of the house.

However, work remains to be done to win over skeptical residents like Dickey, who have lived through similar promises before.

Despite being happy to hear about the possibility of a park coming across the street, she said she is hoping to move from the home she has lived in for the past 23 years.

"We really don't have anything around here," Dickey said. "Nothing. Not even shopping."

Dickey said driving and the bus system have become less accessible to her as she's gotten older, and she now depends on her daughter when she needs transportation. Her nearest supermarket, a Big Apple, requires crossing six lanes of traffic.

And while Dickey loves her community, she cited the prevalence of drugs and gun violence as a significant factor in her decision.

The Broad Rock parcels used to hold apartment buildings that Dickey said were a "horrible" source of crime, and while access to parks is linked to greater wellness, it can also be linked to higher crime if the parks are not properly maintained.

A 2019 article from The Conversation emphasized findings similar to the 2015 University of Pennsylvania studies, but it also found that neighborhoods adjacent to urban parks — like where Dickey's home is — could experience up to 64% more violent crime and 63% more property crime when proper design and maintenance aren't in place.

Relocating is not an easy decision for Dickey, but one she said she has been deliberating for a long time.

"I hate to consider moving because my church is right there," she said. "But it's time for a change."

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