

Old railroad trestle in St. Louis may become a park

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"Crossing I-70," part of a public presentation of the Great Rivers Greenway District proposal for a raised railway public park called "The Trestle." Credit: Kiku Obata & Company | the HOK Planning Group

ST. LOUIS • New York has the [High Line](#), and Paris has the Promenade Plantée.

Both are lush linear parks on top of old railroad trestles. They snake through urban landscapes and attract millions of pedestrians a year.

If the Great Rivers Greenway District has its way, St. Louis will have one too.

Whether it'll be the third in the world, however, remains to be seen.

Chicago and Philadelphia also are planning to turn abandoned railroad trestles into raised linear parks.

"It is a growing trend," says Tim Ahern, spokesman for the Trust for Public Land, a national group that conserves land for parks, gardens and other green spaces. "We're doing a project in downtown Atlanta right now called the Belt Line. It's an old abandoned railroad at grade level that's 22 miles and encircles the city."

In 2004, the Great Rivers Greenway District bought the Iron Horse Trestle, just north of downtown, from Illinois Terminal Railroad for \$1.5 million. The elevated rail, which sits about 25 feet above ground, was built about 100 years ago for electric-powered passenger trains that ran between downtown and the Metro East until 1958.

The group will have to rustle up more than \$50 million to complete the plant-lined pathway for cyclists and pedestrians.

Right now BSI Constructors is studying ways to build the project in phases, but there's no time line, says Todd Antoine, deputy director of planning for the Greenway District. The group is looking for private and public funding for project.

They applied for a \$7.44 million grant to the U.S. Department of Transportation, but did not get it.

The district plans to develop a conservancy to raise funds for building and maintaining the trestle, said Susan K. Trautman, executive director of the District, but she wouldn't pinpoint a precise time when they'll do so.

"We want to be respectful of what's happening on the Arch grounds," she said. "We recognize we're part of a broader vision that would connect people from there north to The Trestle and north again to the Chain of Rocks Bridge."

Plans call for The Trestle, as it will be known, to link to The River Ring, a web of interconnected greenways, parks and trails that will eventually be about 600 miles long and reach into the Metro East and St. Charles County.

"But we want the trestle to be a park experience, more than just a way to get from one point to another," Trautman said. "We want people to stop and explore the working riverfront, such as Produce Row and the recycling industries."

SLOW GOING

Neither of the groups planning trestle parks in Chicago or Philadelphia have time lines for construction, either, an indicator of just how slow the process can be.

All have been working on plans for several years, but note that it takes time to sell potential funding sources on such a unique vision, particularly while vying against higher-profile projects in hard economic times.

Beth White, director of the Chicago regional office of the Trust for Public Land, stated with certainty earlier this week that the Bloomingdale Trail in Chicago would be the world's third linear rail park. Mayor-elect Rahm Emanuel, she said, has committed to having it finished during his first term, which ends in 2015.

"And I think it's very doable," White said.

She laughed when she heard that the Great Rivers Greenway District said the same thing about The Trestle here.

"Well, we hope we're going to beat them," she said. "There's nothing like a little friendly competition."

Paris was the first to create an aerial park when it converted an abandoned 19th-century railway viaduct into the Promenade Plantée during the 1980s and 1990s.

Two years ago, New York completed phase one of the High Line, a park on a trestle that runs along the west side of lower Manhattan. Phase two of the three-phase project is slated to open in early June. The two phases cost \$152 million to complete.

It's been wildly popular and is credited with helping fuel a renaissance in the neighborhoods it traverses.

Plans for the 2.65 Bloomingdale Trail in Chicago call for creating three ground-level parks and expanding two current ones to provide access to the elevated trail. White estimates the project will cost \$75 million.

White says organizers are in the final steps of buying the trestle from Canadian Pacific Railway.

She believes trestle parks are becoming popular because they're transformative.

"And not just as park space but as a way to reuse a piece of our industrial heritage," she said. "The elevation gives a whole different perspective of the city."

ST. LOUIS PROJECT

The Greenway District has already invested \$12 million in refurbishing the Branch Street Trestle, which runs about a half-mile from the McKinley Bridge to Branch Street where it touches down and provides access to the Riverfront Trail. It's outfitted with shiny black railings and a smooth concrete path, but is otherwise austere.

The 1.5-mile unfinished portion, which will be known as The Trestle, resumes elevation just south of Branch Street and continues to Cass Street.

The design plan, by architect Dennis Hyland with the Kiku Obata firm in University City, includes a park that will anchor the trestle at the intersection of Hadley and Howard streets on the southern tip, just blocks from the planned approach to the new Mississippi River bridge.

"It's really going to change that whole area from a development standpoint," said Antoine. "Right now it's not really a part of St. Louis that people or families with children go to."

The design shows plants native to the area lining one side of the 25-foot-wide trestle and concrete for cyclists and pedestrians on the other side. Ramps and elevators will provide access from street level.

LED lights, festive banners and colorful wind ornaments will hang above the path.

Solar and wind power will help run the lighting, and a rainwater collection system will hydrate the landscaping. Benches will offer resting places, and large curved trellises at several points will provide shade. Information boards overlooking Produce Row and recycling and scrap metal yards will explain the working riverfront.

A new trail will eventually link the southern end of the trestle at Cass Street through downtown to the Gateway Arch grounds, Antoine said.