

Bicycling expands its trails, opportunities

Michael Martz | Posted: Tuesday, May 1, 2012 1:00 am

The path from Fairfield Court to Forest Hill Park isn't as far as it once seemed, at least not on a bicycle.

Ask Chris Mason, who was watching, not riding, as seven young cyclists from Fairfield competed in one of two mountain bike races that drew 50 high school and middle school students to the park in South Richmond last week.

Mason, 18, is a senior at Armstrong High School and a star graduate of the Richmond Cycling Corps, which brings bicycling to inner-city youth in the East End housing complex and gives them a new way to see the world.

"I saw places in Richmond I thought I'd never see," he said. "I said, 'Is this really Richmond?' "

Richmond is being transformed, one trail at a time, into a haven of opportunity for bicyclists and outdoor enthusiasts of all types as the city prepares to host the UCI Road World Championships in 2015.

The same army of volunteers that built the trails in Forest Hill and James River parks is preparing to build, at minimal cost to the city, a bicycle skills training course on Belle Isle for mountain bikers and road racers alike.

Helped by the Virginia National Guard, the city is preparing to cut the ribbon on the first half-mile of the Cannon Creek Greenway, built in Highland Park next to the site of demolished public housing that eventually will be replaced by a new kind of community.

Mayor Dwight C. Jones will dedicate the first phase of the greenway on Saturday.

"It's really coming together," said 6th District City Councilwoman Ellen F. Robertson, one of the driving forces behind the greenway and revitalization of the former Dove Court and Carrington Gardens housing complexes. "The neighborhoods are being connected."

The projects aren't happening because of the 2015 cycling championships, but the globally watched event is bringing a new urgency to making Richmond a bike-friendly and pedestrian-friendly city.

City officials have "stepped up big time," said Greg Rollins, president of the Richmond-area chapter of the Mid-Atlantic Off-Road Enthusiasts, a mountain biking organization that is pledging money and manpower to build the skills course on Belle Isle.

But while the city is helping make the projects happen, much of the energy behind them is coming

from the grass roots — the people who use the parks and trails.

"The users will tell you what they want," Rollins said.

The projects also promise new opportunities for the people behind the Richmond Cycling Corps, a nonprofit organization in Scott's Addition with a primary mission to help young people out of disadvantaged circumstances in the city's public housing complexes.

"We're talking about kids who don't have grass in their neighborhood," said Craig Dodson, the organization's founder and director.

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Adam Fuller Jr. was walking his two dogs along the 10-foot-wide, paved Cannon Creek Greenway from Valley Road to Dove Street. In the past, that would have meant walking on the edge of the winding, two-lane Richmond-Henrico Turnpike.

"Anybody walking from Church Hill to North Side would have to walk the road and watch out," said Fuller, 57, a retired heavy-equipment operator in Highland Park.

He was happy to meet Charles Price, a retired educator and Sierra Club official who has worked closely with Robertson and the National Guard to build the first phase of the greenway.

"Walking is the oldest exercise known to man," Fuller said. "If you give them a nice place to walk, they'll use it. It is *much* appreciated."

The Cannon Creek Greenway has been six years in the making, and Price credits Robertson with the inspiration.

"It was her idea to do something uplifting for an area of the city that had traditionally been underserved," he said.

When it's finished, the greenway will run beyond Brookland Park Boulevard to Craigie Avenue, where it will connect to street bike lanes to the Henrico County line on the north. On the south, the path will connect with street bike lanes through Shockoe Bottom to the Virginia Capital Trail being built between Richmond and Williamsburg.

Richmond has made a big investment in the greenway project, spending almost \$1 million on Phase 1, with an additional \$1.3 million expected to be spent on Phase 2.

That doesn't include the prodigious amount of work done by the 276th Engineer Battalion of the Virginia National Guard in 2010 and 2011 to clear brush and create a path for the greenway to be built next to the Armory formerly occupied by the Guard.

Last year alone, the Guard dedicated 75 people and 25 pieces of heavy equipment to the job for two weeks.

"They did a beautiful job on this," said Price, past president of the Sierra Club's Virginia chapter and current chair of its parks and public lands advocacy.

The communities around the greenway also helped. In two cleanups, they removed 20 metric tons of debris, including 400 tires, from ravines that had become a dumping ground.

While Cannon Creek isn't visible — it's encased in stormwater pipe below the ground — its lowlands will become a linear park between Dove Street and Brookland Park Boulevard.

The new greenway will extend through a new community planned by the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, beginning with construction this summer of 80 rental units, including 30 of public housing.

Price hopes that when the 1.9-mile path is completed, it will become an asset for youth on the North Side. He's looking for funding to get the Richmond Cycling Corps to extend its work to youth in those communities, based around Hotchkiss Recreation Center on Brookland Park Boulevard.

"If they can get funding, we're interested in doing it," Dodson said.

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The land beneath the Lee Bridge is flat, but it's about to get a hilly makeover. The city is bringing rock and clay to be used in shaping the course, which will simulate the experience of mountain biking on trails but in a more controlled environment for all skill levels. A separate facility is planned on the island for skills training in road biking.

"We've been wanting something like this for a long time," said Rollins, with the Mid-Atlantic Off-Road Enthusiasts.

The mountain biking organization is contributing \$13,000 to the project, as well as sweat equity. The International Mountain Bicycling Association is donating its expertise in designing the course, and the project also is getting help from the James River Outdoor Coalition, the Friends of James River Park, as well as the city's parks and recreation department.

While the city has valued the donations at about \$33,000, Rollins estimates the true market value exceeds \$100,000.

For Dodson, the skills course will be a big asset in the work of the Cycling Corps. "It's going to give us one more huge resource," he said.

The assets Richmond has now are well-used. Forest Hill Park is one of six sites in the Virginia High School Mountain Bike Series, staged last Tuesday with races of 12 miles for varsity riders and 6 miles for junior varsity.

The privately sponsored series, in its second year, is "the first of its kind in Virginia, and one of the first on the East Coast," said Peter Hufnagel, dean of faculty at Miller School of Albemarle, which

sponsored the races and brought its 2-year-old mountain biking team to Richmond.

Cycling's rise in Richmond pleases Mason, who was in the first group of youth riders from Fairfield that Dodson organized more than two years ago. Last year, he completed a grueling 100-mile ride in the Team Livestrong Challenge near Philadelphia, becoming Richmond's first inner-city youth to accomplish the goal. That earned the college-bound Mason the "Youth of the Year" award this year from the Metro Richmond Boys and Girls Club.

"It certainly brings a lot of attention to Richmond," he said.