

# Outdoors: Q&A with JRPS trails manager Mike Burton

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When Nathan Burrell took over for Ralph White as head of the James River Park System in late April, his main concern was leaving the trails manager job at a time when Richmond was being recognized as a burgeoning urban trail Mecca.

Fewer than two weeks ago, the city took an important step toward maintaining that growing reputation by hiring Mike Burton, Burrell's right-hand man the past five years, as its new trails manager — not just for the JRPS, but for all city parks. I caught up with Burton this week to talk trail maintenance, trail building and the future of Richmond's trail-town reputation.

You've only been on the clock a few days, but what's the first order of business when it comes to trails in Richmond's parks?

“The first priority is addressing the maintenance concerns we have on the ground right now before we put in new miles of trail. It may even take one full year, but I'm pretty adamant that we focus on what we've got. We've had an incredibly wet summer, just so much rain. The trails need maintenance; they need attention. There's going to be some reroutes; there's going to be a lot more rock armoring.”

Where will you start first?

“If it's a safety issue, that's our top priority. (There are a couple of) areas in Forest Hill Park, in my mind, that are quickly approaching safety (issues). They've gotten so rutted out that they've gotten (dangerous) on the bike.”

You're not just the trails manager for the JRPS, but for all city parks. Once those maintenance concerns are addressed, is there a place you have in mind to add new single-track?

“Larus (Park) is probably my top choice for the next place to go to. That's what I'd like to see, but I can't say for certain. . . . A master plan exists for where we want to see things head. There's the Riverfront Master Plan and there are other plans . . . for connecting up different parks. Ultimately, I want to see the trail system expand out.”

You moved here five years ago from South Carolina, where you owned a private trail-building company. In that time, Richmond's system of trails has expanded dramatically. We've completed a Riverfront Master Plan and Outside Magazine named us Best River Town. You picked an exciting time to become a

Richmonder.

“It is an interesting time to be here. I don’t know of anywhere that’s got the quality of true single-track truly in the city the way we do. I’m an avid mountain biker, road biker, and hiker, so to be in a position where I have some input into seeing things develop the way that I personally would like to see it . . . it’s a pretty cool setup.”

How do you want to see things develop?

“I think what’s going on with bicycle infrastructure in general is crucial. We can only put so many miles of single-track in the city, but increasing the ability to get around from trail to trail on your bike and around town in general on your bike, I hope to see it continue along those lines. Richmond wants to be a bicycle-friendly town. There’s so much positive stuff going on.”

So much of Richmond’s trail success has been aided by volunteers over the years. Will volunteer opportunities continue to be available as the trails develop?

“None of this would happen without (mountain bike club) Richmond MORE. They deserve a lot of credit. We’ll be starting up the volunteer season on (Sept. 21) from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Belle Isle bike skills park. We’ll be all over the skills park, but primarily on the beginner pump track. After that, it’ll be most Saturdays through the end of the year.”