

TRAILS AND RECREATIONAL AREAS

Overview on Trails and Open Space

This component of the McKownville Study will discuss the opportunities for internal bike/pedestrian networks, assuming that over time, the poor and fragmented designs of the arterial routes will be surmounted, through the suggestions developed with the other elements of this, or other studies. Opportunities to connect some of these short neighborhood-based trails and shortcuts to regional trail systems will also be discussed.

Four areas, all divided by the arterials and expressways from one another, will be discussed. The best opportunities for interconnection of the areas will be mentioned where they occur. These study sections will include:

1. the area to the **north of Western Avenue and east of Fuller Road**
2. the area to the **south of Western Avenue**
3. the area **west of Fuller Road and East of Fuller Road Alternate**
4. the areas **west of the Thruway and Fuller Road Alternate**

While many of the opportunities and challenges presented by the neighborhood – based routes can be secured through traditional road, bike route and sidewalk improvement projects, there are probably many more opportunities that should be secured through good community planning, wise use of existing easements and utility corridors, stream floodway and wetland protection, and the cooperation of the major commercial and public institutions in the area.

The discussion of the walking and bicycling opportunities internal to the four neighborhoods mentioned above will primarily serve these separate areas. The links between these neighborhoods and other destination points however has to be based on the assumption that transportation plans will resolve the safe bicycle and pedestrian routes along the major arterial roads serving McKownville and adjoining communities. Aside from the Western Avenue corridor (the central element of this plan), bicycle and pedestrian travel along Fuller Road, Washington Ave. and Washington Ave. Extension needs to be addressed.

In addition to the major collector roads clear, safe, consistent corridors for pedestrians and bicyclists is greatly needed through the State University properties, both east and west of Fuller Road. Further east, the crossings of the ring roads cutting off access to the State Office Building Campus (soon to be redeveloped as part of a high-tech complex) require improvement. It is a sad commentary on public policy that “high-tech” centers and major academic institutions are being developed adjoining each other without the provision of safe and inviting access between these institutions.

North of Western Avenue and East of Fuller Road

Probably the oldest section of McKownville, with some houses that date back to the mid-19th century, the formal and informal paths through this community present both issues and opportunities. Many of the houses and street layout date to the 1920s, with the layout for support services based on an internal system of alleys and storm drainage and utility pipeline system located within an intermittent stream's route. Though this design provides for excellent pedestrian mobility and well-organized services linked to back yard garages, some property owners have however extended their storage into these internal routes cutting off use. The surface easements associated with underground storm drainage pipeline route (if any) is also open for pedestrians at some locations, but it is closed at other points. The north end of dead-end streets are used for access to the State University grounds.

The following findings and recommendations pertain to the neighborhood to the north of Western Avenue and to the east of Fuller Road:

1. The dead-end streets should be connected to the State University sidewalk and bike-friendly road system. These “unofficial” paths benefit the neighborhood and should be maintained, through joint efforts with UAlbany, which owns the land between the dead-end streets and the Perimeter Road.
2. Where the alleys remain intact, they should be protected as essential elements of a successful neighborhood design. Some attention from municipal officials may be needed to protect the viability of the local resource.
3. Access to the State University open space and east-west pedestrian and bike corridors should be maintained, and perhaps reinforced with treatments such as coverage with wood chips, which are often used to keep parts intended for walking dry and free of mud. In addition, this simpler treatment sends a message that low-intensity use is anticipated. Bicyclists approaching wood chip-defined trail segments tend to choose to walk their bikes over them rather than riding over them.
4. The rights associated with the “pipeline” route require research. As it now stands this storm drainage system may not be completely successful for flood protection or as a consistent through-trail in this neighborhood. If this walking route becomes better established, an improved crossing of Fuller Road at its terminus is required.
5. With improved routes along Western Avenue and the State University, it may not be essential to secure a comprehensive “mid-block” east-west pedestrian system, however the neighborhood benefits where local pedestrian traffic is permitted and secured for the future.
6. Where alley systems are only used for adjoining land owner “storage,” this appears to constitute a trespass into a public easement. If obstructions to these alleys cannot be readily removed, then there may be little benefit to maintaining these easements. If abandoned, the

value of these easements should be determined for fair market value sale and property tax benefits to the municipalities.

South of Western Avenue

Perhaps the most interesting opportunity for the development of a central neighborhood trail system in McKownville is comprised of the narrow stream valleys and occasional wetlands located to the south of Western Avenue. The Krum Kill has eroded the postglacial sandy soils throughout this area, to form steep ravines and narrow flood plains at the bottom of these linear depressions. Utilities, use these corridors, often including a dirt maintenance road used by the public for walking and access to surprisingly pristine stream-side green spaces. Unfortunately these green corridors do not form any comprehensive system of trails, so only the most adventurous teen-agers appear to use this network for true transportation. This limited spectrum of users generates some trespass, trash dumping and other nuisances.

In the vicinity of the offices and restaurants near Western Avenue, the one-time stream has been replaced by storm drainage pipelines and fill. Occasional fences disrupt pedestrian routes in this area. Though paved, the back of these parking lots shows little use, but as with some of the streams, trash and debris is common at these “unused” inhospitable spaces. Former access to residential areas, adjoining the commercial properties to the south is visible, but is now severed at many locations. People who at one time walked from their neighborhood to stores and offices now drive the few blocks to Western Avenue.

Schoolhouse Road, from the Thruway Bridge to Western Avenue, has a serviceable sidewalk. At Strawberry Lane, trails extend from Abele Park into the woods, and then using water line alignments, connect to McKown Road via a crushed stone path and a small bridge that leads east along dirt trails. Some faint trails also go north from this Park, connecting to the Krum Kill open spaces. As with other trails in this area, it is not clear when these trails are on public or private property.

The most appropriate material for the paths next to the Krum Kill need to be explored further as part of the final design effort (outside the scope of this study). The material will need to stay in place under flooding conditions, with geo-textile and other support likely required in spots. The approach should be to choose as fine a material as practical to allow a good surface for walking and wide tire bikes, but which at the same time is coarse and heavy enough to remain in place in case of flooding. The gravel used near Abele Park appears to be standing up well and provides a comfortable surface. Different stream sections may however require different solutions based on drainage and soils issues.

The previous point raises a note regarding a possible approach to the ultimate development of trail concepts: the Town Pathways Committee can assist Town technical staff in determining what trail surface treatments best fits projected use, construction budgets and the need to access underground utilities. Trail groups such as the Adirondack Mountain Club may also be able to provide skilled advisors to assist such efforts.

The Krum Kill trail heading toward Albany along Wood Avenue becomes a gravel road leading to a wastewater utility plant. Bricked-in windows and broken fences indicate minimal concern with maintenance. No other development exists along this road. This streamside route can be an excellent trail corridor, even with carefully planned adjoining development.

Perhaps broader opportunities for regional trail systems can be developed to continue a trail route along the Krum Kill, over the Thruway via the Route 85 Bridge and into Albany. From this point this regional trail concept would extend into park properties to an existing trail system along the Normans Kill along the Albany Municipal Golf Course and the Stevens Farm. The neighborhood trail along the Krum Kill can be designed to serve local needs, or as a part of a broader regional trail. Though bicycles are permitted along the shoulder of Route 85, this route needs considerable improvement before use for a desirable trail connection. Other routes traversing the Thruway will also need to be explored.

The following suggestions can bring about an ideal trail system and open space preservation project located to the south of Western Avenue:

1. The major utility lines, easements and service roads need to be reviewed for a potential trail system, either on a neighborhood basis or as the connection to regional trails systems.
2. The Krum Kill storm drainage system, floodways and wetlands needs to be protected and managed as high quality, linear open space, for their value as a natural area enhancing adjoining properties and the neighborhood.
3. The connection of the Krum Kill trail system should be reopened along the unused sections of blacktop behind commercial properties that front on Western Avenue in order to access Fuller Road, Stuyvesant Plaza, and an existing trail connection behind Burger King to Country Drive loop area (however a trespass situation may exist at this location).
4. A few strategically located sidewalks along McKown Road and in the vicinity of the east end of Western Avenue will be required to connect the Krum Kill greenway trail to Western Avenue destinations. In some cases, private property would need to be crossed, necessitating either easement negotiation or right-of-way acquisition. Where these sidewalks end, safe crossing of Western Avenue will have to be provided.

West of Fuller Road and East of the Northway

The area between the Northway and the residential, academic and commercial development linking to Fuller Road and Western Avenue is somewhat neglected, but offers great opportunity. Demand for a connection in this area is evidenced by a number of worn paths as well as the Team's noticing some unauthorized use of a culvert under the Thruway as a walking route.

In this area of McKownville an extensive strip of open space, with overgrown "pine-bush" vegetation characteristics is located to the north of Stuyvesant Plaza and south of Washington

Ave Extension, and a small, but neglected area exists next to the reservoir located south of Stuyvesant Plaza.

The McKownville Reservoir

The reservoir, dating to early development along the Great Western Turnpike, is silting in and neglected. This reduces its ecological, silt-retention, aesthetic and recreational attributes. The Stuyvesant Plaza stores turn their back to this amenity, even where it offers attractive and grassed lakeside greenspace. This reservoir offers potential community opportunity for considerable improvement along the following concepts:

1. The area between Stuyvesant Plaza and the reservoir starts off and ends as attractive lakeside open spaces but a middle section is a paved area used for the storage of garbage and truck parking. A design should be considered that screens the garbage storage from the reservoir and provides for a lakeside walk and perhaps outdoor spaces to be used in conjunction with some of the adjoining coffee shops in the Plaza.
2. A sewer right of way has recently been worked on to the west of the reservoir. It can be used as a trail to connect to Western Avenue, and hopefully a safe crossing to Schoolhouse Road. A crushed stone surface on this alignment can keep sand from entering the reservoir and offer part of a loop walk around the lake.
3. Stuyvesant Plaza plows snow to the head of the reservoir, adding silt and debris. A silt retention basin at the head of the reservoir, with a shallow year-round pool can offer an aesthetic amenity, and safe winter ice-skating opportunities.¹

East of the Northway

A large area of sandy soil with some remnant scrub pine forest and wetlands next to the Northway exists north of Stuyvesant Plaza and east of the Northway. The area has many characteristics of former Pine Barrens, with occasional pitch-pine found among the more recent vegetative growth. Access trails exist from behind Ann Street, SUNY Freedom Quad and the misused areas behind the new CESTM development. High tension electrical transmission and gas lines operated by National Grid (formerly NiMo) run north – south, offering well used trails between the SUNY properties, Mercer and Providence Streets and Stuyvesant Plaza. This area and existing trail alignments offers opportunities for preservation and trail connections.

Bicycle and pedestrian connections from this area to the commercial areas to the west will probably have to be via Western Avenue and the Washington Ave. Extension, though both of these routes are encumbered by significant constraints and challenges. A northbound elevated ramp crosses the Northway and the Thruway from Crossgates Mall Road in the vicinity of the office park at Stuyvesant Plaza. The potential of this bridge to accommodate bicyclists and pedestrians has been mentioned at workshops; this link is unlikely to be feasible. At nearly one-

¹ The USDA Soil Conservation Service may be willing to design this small improvement to the Krum Kill basin and reservoir.

third of a mile in length, the slender one-lane bridge accommodates high-speed traffic that negotiates a tight turn, with poor sight distances. Problems also exist at both the western and eastern landing points of this ramp precluding desirable or safe connections to walkways in the two shopping plazas.

The following recommendations may help develop an important open space and trail connection in this area:

1. The State University, CESTM and Stuyvesant Plaza should cooperate on securing trail easements for routes along the north-south utility corridor. Students use this corridor² to avoid the dangers posed by walking and bicycling along Fuller Road. In addition, this corridor provides an alternative to Fuller Road for walking trips to UAlbany.
2. Given the complaints regarding the recent destruction of vegetation during the construction of a new residential quad along Fuller Road, the University should probably review the impact of current CESTM construction³, and consider the protection of some of the remaining open space in this area.
3. The potential to extend trails along Washington Ave. Extension is greatly enhanced if the route could traverse Albany sewer line right of way near the north end of this open space, beginning an important link to SUNY, Pine Bush Preserve and Albany trail systems. At least a desirable right of way should be secured for this bike/ped link at this time.
4. An improved bicycle and pedestrian connection between the University campus on the east side and CESTM and housing on the west side is essential if these units are to function well in a cooperative manner. Though a sidewalk connects Freedom Quad to the campus next to a utility building, the walk is long and uninviting with an unsafe crossing of Fuller. Students report that those who own cars will mostly drive between these two adjacent areas.

West of the Thruway and Fuller Road Alternate

There is little that can be done that will do more than provide basic safety in the sections of McKownville to the west of the Thruway. The minimum current standards indicate at least the provision of good sidewalks and bike friendly road shoulders along the collector roads such as Church Street, safer routes along Western Avenue, road crossing safety and better access for bicyclists and pedestrians into Crossgates. The dilemma of providing these improvements lies more with good road design than with imaginative trail solutions.

The potential of trail routes along the landscaping located on the south side of Crossgates Mall Road and / or along the Thruway was considered, but rejected because of unsafe crossing points posed by any of these routes.

² Though the University has put up fences to keep the movement of pedestrians between Freedom Quad and the power / gas line corridor trails, it is clear from the many breaks in this fencing that this is a futile attempt to keep students from using their best route for travel to their destinations.

³ Construction debris has been piled up around mature pitch-pine vegetation, ultimately killing these trees.

Though not examined for this study, it is likely that the tributaries linking the street ends at Hanley Road and Gertrude Street to the Normans Kill may present similar opportunities as do the Krum Kill tributaries. If considered, these trails must connect to serviceable sidewalks linking to destinations in the neighborhood and ultimately to Western Avenue. The attributes of the stream corridors should be considered with any planning, subdivision and zoning regulations for this area to maximize and rationalize the benefits that can be provided by such enlightened policies.

Aside from the sidewalk along Schoolhouse Road, and the segments of often disconnected bike/pedestrian facilities along Fuller and Western Avenue, there are few streets with sidewalks. Sidewalks along the secondary streets are generally of dated vintage, not ADA-compliant, heaved by trees, and seldom where there is great need for pedestrian connections.

Recommendations

Note: Recommendations TRL-1 through TRL-9 are summarized in Figure 2-1 on the following page.

TRL-1: Freedom Quad – Stuyvesant Plaza Trail Development

- Description: Develop ~2000' stone dust trail along Niagara Mohawk right of way between UAlbany Freedom Quadrangle and Stuyvesant Plaza. Additional potential for extension to CESTM and SUNY Intergenerational Village, as concepts progress.
- Estimated Cost: \$20,000
- Additional Notes: Approximately 1125' of this trail would be in the Town, and the remainder in the City of Albany. As the municipal boundary line is not a logical terminus for the trail (that is, it would need to continue northward to Freedom Quad to fully accommodate the targeted travel route), coordination between the Town and the City will be necessary to complete development of the entire trail.

TRL-2: Western Avenue – Schoolhouse Road Trail Development

- Description: Develop ~475' asphalt trail from eastbound side of Western Avenue at the east end of the Thruway bridge to Schoolhouse Road. Consider installation of a pedestrian/cyclist-activated signal at the Schoolhouse Road intersection.
- Estimated Cost: \$10,000; add \$75,000 for signaling the Schoolhouse Road intersection.