

THE MONTLIMAR CANAL GREENWAY: INCREASING AWARENESS THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

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In 2003, a one-mile stretch of land along the Montlimar Canal was transformed into an urban greenway with hopes that it would bring about a sense of connectedness to Dog River among the nearby residents. However, upon present examination, it is clear that the Montlimar Canal Greenway, as it came to be known, has failed to meet original expectations. In this project, a series of awareness polls, observational studies, and interviews are used to show that the public has limited knowledge of what a greenway is and furthermore, that the Montlimar Canal Greenway even exists. Results are used to suggest ways to improve public awareness, as well as ways to increase the functionality and effectiveness of the greenway.

Keywords: greenways, recreation, Montlimar Canal

Introduction

In 2002, ATOFINA Chemicals, Inc. funded an environmental project along the Montlimar Canal as part of a settlement in the civil action suit *United States of America v. ATOFINA CHEMICALS, INC.* ATOFINA Chemicals, Inc., which was later purchased by Arkema, Inc., agreed to establish a one-mile greenway along Montlimar Canal stretching from Airport Boulevard to Michael Boulevard (*United States of America v. ATOFINA CHEMICALS, INC.* 2002) (Figure 1). The project would include the planting of shrubs and trees as well as the creation of recreational trails and environmental education stations along the canal. The Montlimar Canal Greenway¹ project became the first segment of the Green Spaces Master Plan, which was proposed by the Mobile Public Services Department (Arkema, Inc. 2003).

¹ The Montlimar Canal Greenway is also known as the Montlimar Creek Fitness Trail and the Montlimar Canal Exercise Trail.

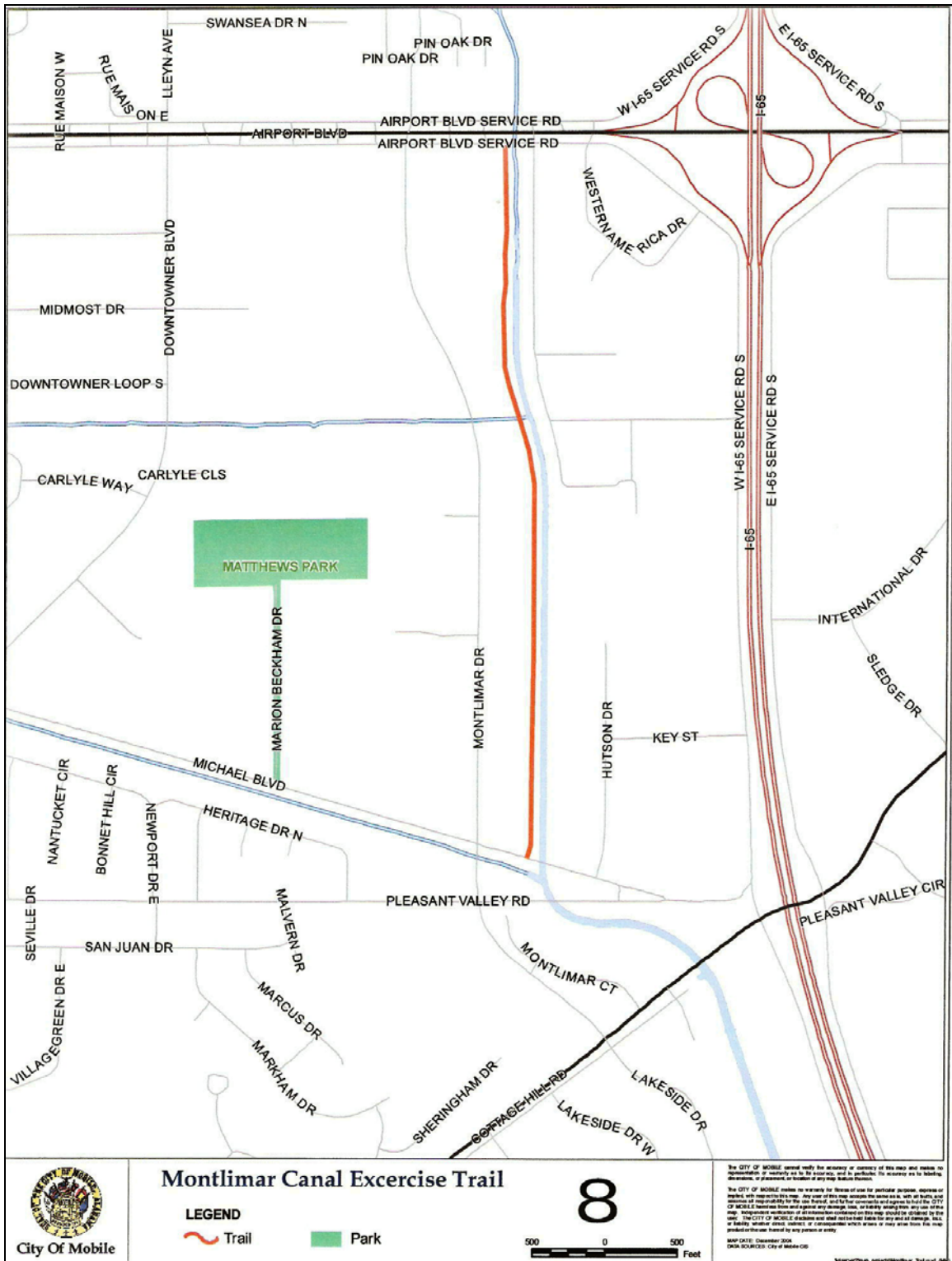


Figure 1: The Montlimar Canal Greenway and surrounding area.
 Source: Mobile United (2007)

A greenway is a corridor of open space of varying size, which is set aside for conservation and recreation purposes. These linear parks of vegetation often follow natural features, such as streams and rivers but can also be found along man-made features, such as canals. Greenways located along waterways, like the Montlimar Canal Greenway, become riparian buffers, filtering out pollutants found in stormwater runoff (Roanoke Valley Greenways, No date). If properly maintained, greenways can improve water quality, reduce stormwater runoff, decrease flooding, and minimize erosion through the stabilization of stream banks (Centre County Planning and Community Development Office, 2002). Greenways may also improve property values and attract new businesses, providing extra tax revenue (Platt 2000).

Unfortunately, the Montlimar Canal Greenway (Figure 2) was the only segment of the Green Spaces Master Plan to be completed. The original concept of the one-mile



Figure 2: South end of the Montlimar Canal Greenway

project, implemented and completed in 2003, was to generate interest among the nearby residents with the expectations that it would bring about a connectedness to the river. Therefore, residents would be more apt to appreciate

and protect “their river.” If successful, this project could serve as a catalyst, making portions of the river accessible through a series of interconnected parks, recreational

trails, and greenways. However, upon field inspection, it is clear that insufficient funding and a lack of public awareness have impeded the Montlimar Canal Greenway's contribution to the community.

Research Question

Will community polling and observational study results help confirm the low level of awareness and usage regarding the Montlimar Canal Greenway? What actions could the City of Mobile implement to increase the functionality and effectiveness of the greenway.

Methods

I used several methods to implement this study. Two-hundred forty-three University of South Alabama students were polled with the following question in reference to awareness: "Are you aware of the greenway that exists along the Montlimar Canal that offers opportunities for exercise and recreation?" The respondents were asked to choose one of four possible answers: (A) No, I do not know anything about it; (B) Yes, I know it exists, but have never used it; (C) Yes, I have used it at least once; or (D) Yes, I have used it more than once.

Bi-weekly observational studies were conducted along the Montlimar Canal Greenway beginning March 14, 2007 and ending April 7, 2007. Greenway users were counted from 11:00 A.M. to 12:00 P.M. to register activity (Figure 3). Users were asked about the frequency of which they visited the trail, as well as their opinions on the success of the Montlimar Canal Greenway and ways to possibly improve it.

Internet and library research was conducted in order to present a proper background on greenways, how they work, and how they have been beneficial to other areas of the country. Qualified professionals, such as Dr. Miriam Fearn, Ph.D., Associate

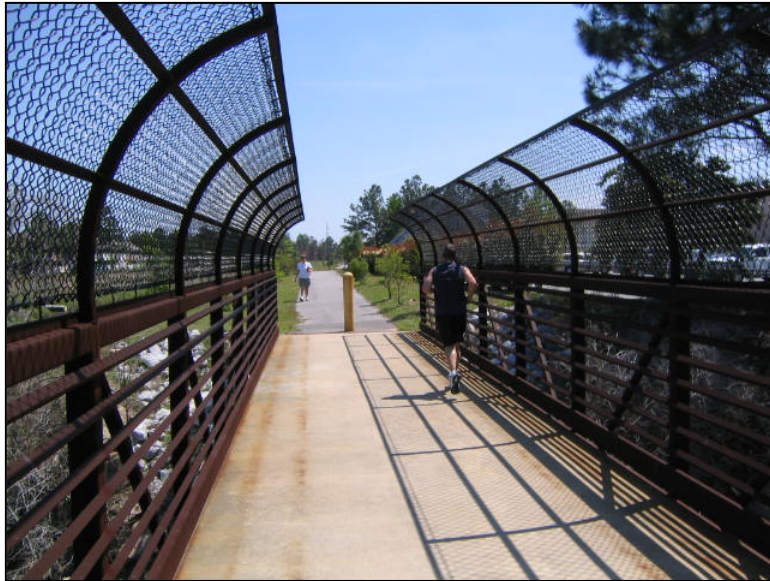


Figure 3: Greenway users

Professor of Geography at the University of South Alabama; Mr. Joel Moore, Senior O.S.P. Design Engineer with INNOVATEK; Mrs. Brigid Z. Williams, a civil engineer with LPA Group, Inc., and Ms. Sue Allen,

Executive Branch Director of the Hearin-Chandler Family YMCA in Mobile, Alabama were contacted in order to gain a better understanding of the Montlimar Canal Greenway and how it can be improved including ways to increase the awareness level within the community.

Results

Polling results showed that 81.1% of respondents selected choice: (A) No, I do not know anything about it. 10.3% of respondents selected choice: (B) Yes, I know it exists, but have never used it. 1.6% of respondents selected choice: (C) Yes, I have used it at least once. 0% of respondents selected choice: (D) Yes, I have used it more than once.

Prior to the observational study, which recorded usage, a walk-through was conducted to assess the physical condition of the greenway. Damaged trees and shrubs were noted along the canal, as well as overflowing trashcans, bank erosion, and evidence of illegal paint dumping (Figure 4). The counting of greenway users began on Wednesday, March 14 and concluded on Saturday, April 7, generating the results recorded in Table 1. The majority of weekday users work at businesses within the vicinity of the greenway. Weekend users were mainly from surrounding neighborhoods.

Table 1: Recorded Greenway Usage

	Walkers	Runners	Bikers	Bystanders ²	Total
3/14	3	1	1	1	6
3/17	2	0	2	0	4
3/21	3	0	1	2	6
3/24	1	0	0	0	1
3/28	4	0	0	2	6
3/31	0	1	1	0	2
4/4	2	0	1	3	6
4/7	0	0	0	0	0

Discussion

Past studies have focused on the expansion of the Montlimar Canal Greenway; yet have failed to address the issue of the lack of commitment by the city government regarding its success. Polling results examined in this study show a high percentage of respondents that know nothing about the Montlimar Canal Greenway; while observational study results show a low number of greenway users. These findings

² This study defines a bystander as a non-exercising greenway user, i.e. smokers, readers, eaters.

indicate a lack of community awareness concerning the greenway. According to Joel Moore, Senior O. S .P. Design Engineer with INNOVATEK, there are four basic principles of marketing—product, price, place, and promotion. The Montlimar Canal Greenway has the product (recreation), the price (free), and place (the land along the canal), yet lacks the fourth principle—promotion. In order to increase awareness and recreational traffic, the greenway must be promoted. Partnership is the key to successful promotion.

The City of Mobile has failed to promote the Montlimar Canal Greenway because of a lack of funding (Pickett 2005). In order for the greenway to be successful the city



Figure 4: Paint dumped along the Montlimar Canal Greenway

will have to establish partnerships within the community. The partnerships should consist of corporate sponsors, small business owners, civic groups, schools, recreational clubs, and a network of volunteers from

the community. The Hearin-Chandler Family YMCA, located two blocks west of the greenway, would make an ideal partner in helping to build recreational awareness on the greenway. Sue Allen, Executive Branch Director of the Hearin-Chandler Family YMCA on Downtowner Boulevard, was contacted regarding the proximity of the Montlimar Canal Greenway and how its location may be beneficial to the YMCA and its cliental.

Although unfamiliar with the existence of the recreational greenway, Allen was very receptive to the idea of partnering-up with the city. A walking/running/biking trail beginning at the YMCA and stretching east along Michael Boulevard to the south entrance of the Montlimar Canal Greenway, continuing to the north end and back to the YMCA was suggested. Allen was enthusiastic about the idea and requested one large map that could be posted on the YMCA information board. She also requested smaller maps that could be passed out to YMCA members, thus, creating more awareness and more usage along the Montlimar Canal Greenway.

Could something as simple as the formation of partnerships revive the Montlimar Canal Greenway? If the revival of the greenway is successful, would it be a catalyst for future expansion? It would be interesting to revisit this study at a later date to see how increased awareness levels affect recreational traffic.

Conclusion

Despite the creation of the Montlimar Canal Greenway, much is left to be done to complete the city of Mobile's Green Spaces Master Plan. The discontinuation of the Montlimar Canal Greenway due to a lack of funding and interest is unfortunate considering the enormous benefits Mobile would reap from a system of greenways. Increased awareness and usage levels on the Montlimar Canal Greenway would create a stewardship towards the trail by the community. The community's embracement of the greenway would enhance the quality of life in the surrounding area through recreational benefits, economic opportunities, and improved environmental conditions within the watershed (Greenways Incorporated, 2006).

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