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Trail path to bigger thinking

Expand bike trail, explore city's charm, end cycle of defeatism

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Too bad we couldn't put Sunday in a box and open it in February. Without the Bengals to look at, I drove around Sunday: Loveland to Miamiville to Camp Dennison. Down U.S. 50 through Terrace Park and Mariemont, through Newtown, across the Beechmont Levee. Eastern Avenue, Lunken Airport, Columbia Tusculum. Schmidt Boat Ramp, where the Delta Queen was parked. Friendship Park, just upriver from the Montgomery Inn. What a beautiful place we live. Too bad we don't use it more.

Some folks are pushing for an extension of the Little Miami Scenic Trail, better known as the Loveland Bike Trail. It ends in Newtown now, at least 80 miles from its northern terminus. They'd like to get it to downtown. That would mean an extension from Newtown, across the Beechmont Levee and over to Lunken. They claim that part is easy and, in fact, a lot of it will be done within a few years. It's the rest they're worried about. Four miles, from the airport to downtown, the final piece.

"It's workable," says Jeff Schloemer, who would know.

A year ago Schloemer, a 47-year-old attorney from Anderson Township, took part in Leadership Cincinnati, a year-long look at what ails the city and what can be done to cure it. The Chamber of Commerce sponsors it. The focus of Schloemer's committee was simple: Get the bike path extended to downtown.

We have bigger issues, you say, than worrying about a place where helmeted pedalists in funny little shorts can get their kicks. Pick one: Crime, education, dysfunctional government, massive population declines. Against all that negativity, why should we care about a bike trail?

Here's why:

People flee the city because of the perception of crime and the reality of boredom outweigh downtown's charms. There's nothing to do and you might get mugged doing it. If that changes, people will return to live, retail will follow, the tax base will increase and there will be more money to attack more problems.

Plus, the young people who now vacate Cincinnati like it was radioactive might actually stay a while.

All that, because of a bike trail?

Well, no.

"Is this the cure-all?" asks Schloemer. "No. Is it a little first step? Heck, yeah. Take little steps to solve big problems."

Those charged with seeing this through have met with Mayor Mark Mallory and council members. They have the support of the city's transportation department and Hamilton County Parks.

"All of them thought it was a great idea," Schloemer says. "My concern is, without pressure, we wouldn't see reasonable progress. It takes political will to get things done."

Our Can't Do mentality hurts us. We don't think big. As Schloemer puts it, "Too often, people here say, 'Great idea, we could never do it' instead of 'great idea, let's get it done.'"

Let's get it done.

If you've never ridden the bike trail, you should. It's flat, beautiful and timeless. I've ridden from Loveland to Yellow Springs, and I can tell you that 15 miles north of Loveland, the trail blooms like a freshly minted dream. There is nothing between you and peaceful for miles and miles. To extend it downtown might give us a small reason to visit downtown with a fresh perspective. Little steps to solve big problems.

The logistics are mighty, and mighty confusing. Let's just say the easiest option is to pave over a little-used rail line that runs parallel to and above Eastern Avenue. A recent study estimated that would cost \$8.2 million for the four-mile Lunken-to-downtown stretch. The feds have already approved \$2.6 million, if the city of Cincinnati contributes another \$600,000. That leaves \$5 million, which isn't much. The Reds pay Jason LaRue that much.

"It's too great an opportunity to let go. Unless someone takes some initiative, we'll be talking about this 10 years from now," Schloemer says.

On a gorgeous Sunday I wanted to stick in my pocket and pull out in February, I drove from Loveland to Lunken Airport. What a trip it would've been on a bicycle.

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