

Pinellas Trail to link to vibrant downtown

By CRISTINA SILVA

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Construction has begun on an extension of the Pinellas Trail that will lead to the heart of downtown, city officials said.

The new St. Petersburg path will continue from where the trail ends at 34th Street S down through First Avenue S to the waterfront.

The 2.1-mile extension will be one of the first urban trails in the country, city officials say, providing for an unusual cocktail of outdoor enthusiasts, theatergoers, office workers and restaurant patrons among downtown's bustling streets.

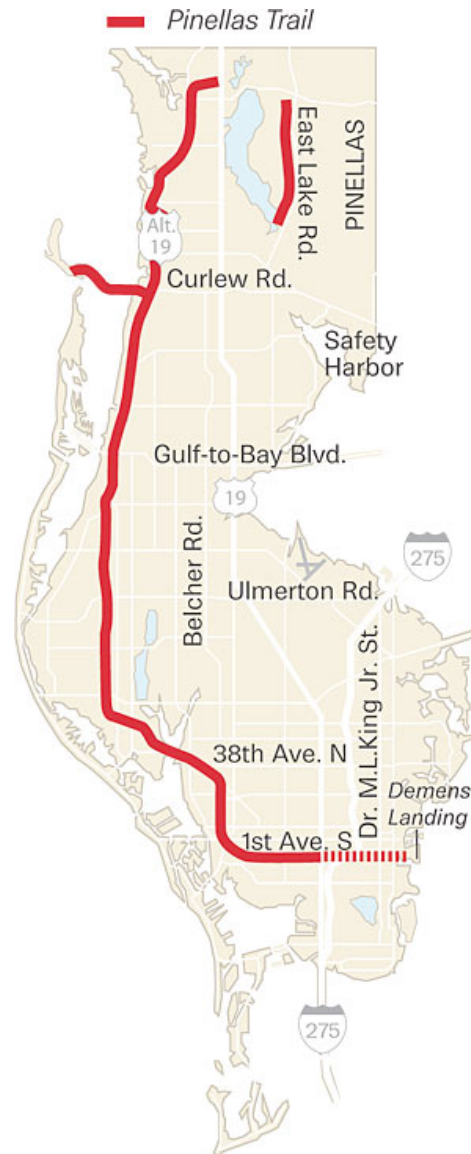
Yet business leaders are divided over whether the trail will promote downtown as a destination or simply disturb traffic in a growing area where every parking space counts.

A traffic lane on part of First Avenue S will be used for the trail expansion, which could result in fewer parking spots on the side south of the one-way road, said Joe Kubicki, St. Petersburg's transportation and parking director.

"In some cases parking might be reduced quite a bit, or in some cases it might not be reduced at all," he said.

City officials should know exactly how parking will be affected by the end of the month, Kubicki said.

The expansion is part of a countywide effort to extend the trail to 75 miles by 2020. The trail is now 34 miles long, and eight



Times files

overpasses allow users to travel above traffic at busy intersections.

In north Pinellas, a proposed leg will run parallel with the existing trail on the east side of the county.

In St. Petersburg, workers began removing part of the train tracks along the old CSX railway corridor Monday to make way for the new trail.

The path will extend along the former train tracks to 14th Street S, where the tracks stop and will then continue along an existing sidewalk through Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Street S. From there, another mile of dedicated trail, separated from First Avenue S traffic by a barrier, will stretch the route to the waterfront.

The trail will be 10 feet wide and separated from the road by a 4-foot-wide traffic divider.

Cardio addicts can plan on cycling, jogging and walking on the completed trail as early as December, Kubicki said.

Some business leaders are counting the days until its completion.

"We need more people downtown, whether they are jogging, running or whatever it might be, it is good that they are here," said Barry Rothstein, president of the Downtown Business Association.

Midtown Sundries, a bar and restaurant on First Avenue S, has its own parking garage, so it probably will not be as affected by reduced parking, manager Chuck Knott said.

"To me anything that brings more people downtown is a good thing," he said. "Who knows - maybe they will pop in for a drink."

But some business owners doubted that reduced parking would be beneficial in the long run.

"I sincerely hope they would not eliminate any street parking," said Dwight Watkins, owner of Cafe Alma, a Mediterranean restaurant on First Avenue S. "If you are really going to develop a downtown area, I think you need to include more parking."

The extended trail will cost the city at least \$6-million in design and construction costs, most of which has been provided by federal funding. The county, which oversees the trail, will cover the costs of a new trail overpass at 34th Street S.

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New trail extension already popular

By Mariana Minaya, Times Staff Writer

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The downtown extension of the Pinellas Trail won't officially open until next month, but that hasn't stopped bicyclists from using it.

Take Maurice Haynes, who parked his gas-guzzler pickup after gas prices hit \$4 and started riding his beach cruiser to work at the city's water resources department.

He loves using the 2.1-mile extension, which runs from 34th Street to First Avenue S to the downtown St. Petersburg waterfront.

"It's a safe way to travel on your bike because I remember coming up, you had to dodge cars," said Haynes, 28, who lives in Childs Park and rides to his check-in station on Burlington Avenue.

"People need a spot to safely ride their bikes, especially with gas prices," he said. "I think it was perfect timing. It really was."

David Segler's motivation for using the trail is more social than economic.

The 16-year-old teen takes it to visit friends and perform bike tricks along the landscaped medians without having to worry about cars.

"I love it," said Segler, a rising sophomore at Boca Ciega High School who lives in St. Petersburg. "It gives me enough space to go really fast."

The city won't start tracking ridership numbers until the extension officially opens, but on one recent Sunday morning, city transportation and parking director Joseph Kubicki noticed at least 20 people riding the extension.

"We've been kind of monitoring, and it's been getting good use," he said.

Nathalia Estrada, 24, an employee at Local Coffee + Tea on First Avenue S, said she sees about four or five bikers using the extension in front of the restaurant in the early morning and again at 5 p.m.

And, "I've seen five cars accidentally drive on the trail," she said.

On July 12 there will be a ribbon-cutting for the extension, which cost \$6-million, mostly in federal funds.

"All the traffic signs have not been activated, all the crosswalks have not been completed yet," Kubicki said.

"It's very close, but not done yet."

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The Pinellas Trail Extension in downtown St. Petersburg accommodates numerous transit routes.



The downtown extension will provide access to numerous businesses.



The Pinellas Trail extension made use of an existing railroad trestle near Tropicana Field.



Innovative traffic control was used to ensure the safety of Pinellas Trail users. Shown below is an example of electronic message signs installed at downtown intersections.



Pedestrian Hybrid Signal at the intersection of the Trail and 31st Street South. These signals will be fully activated July 1st.

