

Let's Get Physical

Memphis shapes up with plans for the skatepark, the Shelby Farms Greenline.

by [MARY CASHIOLA](#)

The endorphins are already kicking in.

Memphis has long had a reputation for being somewhat sedentary, but even without the Shelby Farms Greenline officially open yet — or Memphis' first public skatepark built — people are clamoring for more.

"It's a good problem to have," said Jen Andrews with the Shelby Farms Park Conservancy. "We've found in our research that the safest trails are the ones that are most popular. The cleanest trails are the ones that are most popular."

The greenline's grand opening is October 9th, with a day-long party spanning seven miles, but the trail is already getting a reputation for being packed with bicyclists and pedestrians.

"As soon as the asphalt was dry, we knew it was going to be a success," Andrews said. "We think that will drive demand for more trails."

Greater Memphis Greenline project manager and board member Greg Maxted saw at least 200 bicyclists on the greenline last weekend.

"I saw bikes that hadn't been out of the garage in 20 years," he said. "When it opens, it'll be too crowded, and we'll have to build a second one."

Given the overall excitement and the need for additional capacity, local groups are working on exactly that. The Shelby Farms Park Conservancy and Livable Memphis are working on connecting trails from the greenline to the fairgrounds and Overton Park, as well as on-street bicycle facilities.

"We want to make the greenline more of a thoroughfare than a destination," Andrews said.

The Greater Memphis Greenline just won a \$20,000 matching grant from the Community Foundation. They are looking at two miles of abandoned railway parallel to Chelsea from McLean to Second for another greenline. But their most ambitious idea is a pedestrian bridge on the old Harahan Bridge over the Mississippi River.

"What I'm hoping is now when people go out here, they go, 'Oh, this is what you were talking about. I want one of these in my neighborhood,'" Maxted said.

Consider it part of a renewed — or just new — focus on physical fitness.

"The key is this: We are seeing a gradual revolution in the city where ... fitness is rising to the top," Memphis mayor A C Wharton said at a meeting last week in Orange Mound to solicit input for the city's first public skatepark. "It's not about the size of the skatepark; it's about the depth of the commitment to changing this city."

The 10,000-square-foot skatepark, expected to open next fall, isn't built yet, but skateboarders already wanted to know about plans for expansion.

Zach Wormhoudt of skatepark design firm Wormhoudt Inc. said the site at Tobey Fields is big enough for growth. The bigger question is whether they would enlarge that park in the future or add more skateparks in other parts of the city.

In addition to talking about skate bowls, rails, half-pipes, and snake runs, participants asked about including shade, seating for spectators, electrical outlets, lights, and drinking fountains at the park.

"This is the city's first permanent skatepark," Wormhoudt said. "We need to make sure it's a success from day one."

It's hard to imagine it won't be. For the last several years, skaters have shown up at public meetings in droves to lobby for skateparks (and maybe gotten an education in government along the way). But there also is a larger shift.

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Perhaps it's because it's been so long since the city made on-the-ground, quality-of-life investments, tangible things that people can enjoy no matter their income level, but there is a new, genuine excitement. Sure, some of that enthusiasm might level off as time goes on, but who might it affect or change in the meantime? What else might it spawn? (Sunset yoga on the Main Street Mall, anyone?)

Wharton said the city used to brag about the things it built.

"I feel better about this than Tiger Lane or Bass Pro or other investments in buildings," he said. "This invests in people and their health. It's something they can pass down from generation to generation."

At the skatepark meeting, he raised the idea of an advisory fitness council and having police patrol in designated "high activity areas" to allow pedestrians and bicyclists to feel safer on city streets. (The patrols would be during so-called 'happy hours,' those times of day when crime is at its lightest.)

"I want to take away every excuse that keeps people from exercising," Wharton said. "Things are changing in our city. This is another step in the evolution."

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