

Among the challenges: buying land and getting easements

By Ellie Rodgers - Idaho Statesman
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With a plan in place, the city created the Greenbelt Committee on Sept. 29, 1969.

The committee was to work independently from other park projects and existed solely for developing the Greenbelt, as it had become known.

The Greenbelt was "getting marvelous support around town, " recalled Gordon Bowen, parks director at the time.

"Everybody worked on the Greenbelt, " said Bill Onweiler, a former city councilman who became the Greenbelt coordinator.

The City Council had already begun grappling with funding for the Greenbelt, voting in 1968 on an initial budget of \$182,000.

Already in place were donations, made in 1966 and 1967, of three parcels of land. One, a .43-acre parcel on the north side of the river just east of Americana, was donated by the Taubman Corp.

Onweiler, who also had expertise in real estate appraisals, began negotiations to acquire additional property in the early '70s.

Initially, the goal was to buy land or obtain easements in the area stretching from Gate City Steel, just west of Table Rock on Idaho 21, to the Boise City Sewage Treatment Plant, about 10 miles downstream. That goal later was changed to lengthen the Greenbelt so it would stretch from Lucky Peak Reservoir to Eagle Island State Park.

"Bill was just awesome, " said Gay Davis Hammer, a founding member of the committee who took over as Greenbelt coordinator when Onweiler left. Also on the committee: Keith Gilmore, Edna Adams, Jack Barney, Stan Burns, Earl Reynolds Jr., Morgan Masner, Orland Mayer and Larry Jackson.

Hammer credits Onweiler with being a skilled negotiator and one of the hardest workers among the "dozen fathers of the Greenbelt."

Hammer, who now lives in Grand Junction, Colo., remembers how hundreds of other people offered their expertise, sweat and brains to move the project forward.

"Those were challenging times for us, but not one of us believed it wouldn't happen, " Hammer said.

Jane Foreman remembers being about 13 years old and riding her horse, "Art Buchwald, " while showing Hammer around a horse pasture near Adams Elementary School that was slated to become part of the Greenbelt.

"It was so amazing, " said Foreman, who still lives in Boise and now works for Hewlett-Packard Co. "I remember the open grassy fields, and it boggles my mind we were able to make this happen."

Near-disasters played a part in the early years.

At one point, Hammer and other Greenbelt officials were looking at a lake behind Veterans Memorial State Park. Hammer was wearing a dress and high heels.

"A canal ditch rider pulled a shotgun on us, and there I was in high heels with all these men, " she said. The group quickly left the area.

Another time, Hammer stood along the Boise River with members of the Idaho National Guard, who had donated time to clear the riverbanks.

"Their backhoe and driver went into the river. It made a great splash, " she said.

By 1974, the first section of the Greenbelt, from the site of the current Wheels 'R' Fun bike rental shop to Americana Boulevard, was complete. Other sections near downtown followed.

From there, it was a matter of building the path wherever the land could be obtained and when funding became available.

Some landowners fought viciously to keep the public from crossing their back yards and other parts of their land via the Greenbelt. When those roadblocks were encountered, plans for those sections of the Greenbelt were put on hold until that property owner sold the land.

From the mid-1970s on, the Greenbelt was built eastward on both sides of the river, including in the Municipal Park area and land off ParkCenter Boulevard. It also was extended west near Fairview Avenue and Main Street.

Through 1977, the city had obtained 17 riverfront tracts for a total of 72 acres, according to historian Susan Stacy.

From the mid-1980s to the early '90s, areas around the Warm Springs Golf Course and Spring Meadow and River Run, subdivisions off ParkCenter Boulevard, were added to the Greenbelt.

In the late '80s, the Boise River Trail Foundation was founded at the request of Judy Peavey-Derr, then an Ada County commissioner and an early supporter of the Greenbelt.

Ward Parkinson, a co-founder of Micron Technology Inc. in 1978 with his brother, became director of the trail foundation.

The foundation set out to extend the Greenbelt by whatever means possible. Parkinson said the committee worked with federal and state officials, real estate developers and others in the community to obtain property, construction materials and the labor to build new sections of Greenbelt.

"I thought it would be a massive fund-raising effort, " said Parkinson, now in a second career as a Canyon County prosecutor. But money, donated land, materials and labor flowed easily into the foundation.

The group built the section of path from the Eastern edge of Warm Springs Golf Course to Lucky Peak.

The foundation also built two bridges, one in Garden City and another in the Willow Lane area. In the Willow Lane area, the city had struggled for 15 years against property owners who didn't want to provide access for the Greenbelt, said Debowden Bauer, former superintendent for design and development for the parks department.

By building the Willow Lane bridge without the city's approval, the foundation provided the momentum to develop that section further because it allowed more people access through that area on unpaved paths.

"It helped the city identify that there was a great need out there for continued pathway, " Bauer said.

In August 1997, the city began work on another of the most-needed links in the Greenbelt, a pedestrian bridge under Capitol Boulevard.

Without the tunnel, Greenbelt users on the north side of the river had to leave the pathway and cross often-busy Capitol Boulevard.

Once completed, the tunnel also provided access to the Boise Art Museum and Idaho Historical Museum on the east side of Capitol Boulevard, and the Log Cabin Literary Center and Boise Public Library on the west side.

Construction of the tunnel, a partnership of the city, Ada County Highway District and Idaho Transportation Department, had been planned since 1993.

The path, including unpaved sections, now is 28 miles long. But countless groups, agencies and individuals still have big plans for the Greenbelt. The work is far from finished.