



The Times-Picayune Chasing a Trail of Dreams

By Brian Allee-Walsh
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Katie Brasted steered her 2000 white Ford Expedition on to a slim shoulder of a rural road near English Turn, reached inside a mailbox and retrieved an envelope that bore a postmark from the nation's capitol.

As a crow picked menacingly at nearby roadkill, Brasted opened the letter and, in muffled speech, skipped through the "politican speak" until reaching the moment of truth.

"Please continue to keep me advised about the project's development, as well as your work with the Army Corps of Engineers. If I can assist you in any way, please let me know. Signed John Breaux, United States Senator."

"Well, at least the Senator read my proposal," Brasted said. "That's a positive."

Corresponding with local movers and shakers has become commonplace for Brasted, a 43-year-old mother of three who is trying to answer nature's call.

Her dream is to build a 19-mile multi-use trail that would encircle the levee surrounding the English Turn/Lower Coast of Algiers, then join with Plaquemines Parish and continue down to the Belle Chasse Ferry. Eventually, the trail would connect the West Bank with their neighbors in St. Bernard Parish by way of ferry.

"Woodlands Trail," as it has been named, could be

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used for running, biking, walking, sightseeing, roller-blading, horseback riding and other non-motorized uses. A parallel equestrian path is part of the proposal.

The idea came to her in 1993, shortly after she and husband Bill built a house on a wooded three-acre tract off River Road, several miles down from the gated community of English Turn.

The setting was distinctly different from their old digs on old Algiers Point where shotgun homes are pinched into every nook and cranny. But they yearned for more. For starters, an unpaved road fronted their new home. "Rides like a washboard," Brasted said. In order for their second-grader to learn how to ride a bike, they went to an empty Schwegmann's parking lot on Gen. DeGaulle to find a smooth surface.

A constant voice within kept telling Brasted: "Build and they will come." Thus, her "Trail of Dreams."

"We moved from Algiers Point out here primarily because our kids were playing in the street," said Brasted, vice-president of the English Turn Civic Improvement Association. "There was no yard, no land. I had grown up playing in the woods.

"This is such a beautiful area, with so much history. We saw people on horses, so we got a horse. You can really explore the area on horseback."

It was during these horseback rides when Brasted began to visualize the trail. On her rides she encountered the many sights and sounds the area has to offer -- historical landmarks such as English Turn, the Algiers Locks and Pumping Station, Donner Canal, World War II bunkers, the wetlands, Sugar Mill, Fort St. Leon and Wilderness Park, and countless species of wildlife.

During one ride in late April, Brasted got lost while giving a tour to Matt Rovira, resource specialist/field coordinator for the Office of Rural Development. Now she can laugh about it.

"If you don't have goals or dreams, then you never get anywhere," Brasted said. "A trail would be a

celebration of the Mississippi River, of the area. This is a good project. It would help educate our children and the general public about our wetlands. We have a lot to appreciate here. This is a good thing, how can it not happen? How can people say 'No' to this."

She paused:

"Of course, they can. It's easier to say no because then things can just continue the way they are. My husband always says -- 'The people who change the world are the people who do.' He's right. You can't change the world if you don't try. That's what I'm doing. I'm trying."

Brasted is doing more than trying. She is waging a one-person crusade, talking to anybody and everybody about her trail because, she says, "you never know who can help you out."

In the last 18 months, Brasted has corresponded with New Orleans Mayor Marc Morial, Plaquemines Parish President Benny Rousselle, State Representatives Stephen Windhorst, Jackie Clarkson and Ernest Wooton, Orleans Parish Councilmen James Singleton, Troy Carter and Eddie Sapir, and Louisiana Senators Ken Hollis and Francis Heitmeier.

"I see this project coming to fruition," Clarkson said. "I will go and testify on behalf of this project for capital outlay at the legislature next year. We're going to make it happen."

"From Plaquemines Parish's standpoint, we encourage this type of project," said Rousselle, who also serves as the president of the Regional Planning Commission. "This would be a coordinated effort between Orleans and Plaquemines parishes and provide a much needed recreational area."

Brasted has communicated with representatives from the Army Corps of Engineers, F. Edward Hebert Research Center of Tulane University, the Archdiocese of New Orleans, United States Coast Guard, the Audubon Center for Research of Endangered Species, Louisiana Science and Nature Center and English Turn Golf and Country Club.

She has left no stone unturned.

"It looks like a terrific project," said Karen Parsons, a transportation planner with the Regional Planning Commission, "and Katie is doing a good job of getting attention for it."

Having said that, Parsons added: "The project is in its infancy, in terms of getting a consensus that the community wants it and if we need to go forward with planning. We have to make sure this is feasible and if there's construction money to go forward."

Parsons estimated Woodland's Trail would cost \$180,000 per mile, with the bulk of the cost going toward a 10-foot wide, 4-inch thick asphalt road that would be built on top of the Mississippi Levee. According to government regulations, the road would have to support heavy maintenance vehicles, not merely walkers, bikers and joggers.

Total cost of the project would approach \$4 million.

The crucial first step is for the Army Corps of Engineers to script a "Master Plan," essentially an engineering and design blueprint for success that would detail everything from gaining public approval to determining cost constraints as well as environmental restraints and real estate restraints.

Finally, the "Master Plan" would identify potential funding sources from the public and private sectors.

The Army Corps of Engineers recently agreed to fund half the cost of a Master Plan, or approximately \$12,500. The Regional Planning Commission is considering funding the difference.

"Apparently, the Army Corps of Engineers came up with a ballpark figure of \$25,000 for the Master Plan," Parsons said. "This is a 19-mile path and we are thinking this is going to be woefully inadequate for true engineering and planning for this design."

Partial funding for the project is expected to come from local, state and federal governments but a sizeable portion likely would have to come from the private and corporate sectors.

"At the Corps of Engineers, we have funds to plan and design but in terms of construction we do not have funds to go out and construct recreational projects," Army Corps of Engineers spokesman Mark Wingate said.

"The kind of public funds available for a project like this are Transportation Enhancement (TE) funds," Parsons said. "But you have to understand there is competition across the state for these funds. The ones they are accepting and funding are generally \$500,000 or less. A larger project like this has to be broken up into several phases in order for it to be palatable."

Although Brasted has succeeded in actively soliciting and engaging people in discussing the project, Parsons said the time is ripe to look at the "bigger picture."

"It may be time to bring some of those potential players together and start talking about how they might work as a group to fund the program," Parsons said. "It's a big enough project that's it's unlikely that public dollars are going to do all of it. It's going to take an innovative funding program to accomplish it."

Clarkson promised her help.

"Once we get the environmental impact study and we get all these groups coordinated, I plan to take Katie to various private entities to possibly give us some support," Clarkson said. "It will have to have some corporate funding."

"We do have federal help available. There are several federal grants, the Heritage Foundation, Rural Trail funding, to name a few. We are going to try multiple avenues at the governmental levels in both parishes. There are non-profit entities and private corporations. We will get it done."

In the meantime, Brasted continues her communication blitz, hoping to reach people who can help further the cause. Although Louisiana's political machine sometimes works at a snail's pace, she remains patient knowing "Rome wasn't built in a

day."

A sand-blasted cobblestone bearing the words "Woodland's Trail" sits in front her home. One day, she says, similar cobblestones will serve as 1/4-mile trail markers. She looks to St. Tammany Trace, a 31-mile trail that eventually will connect Covington, Abita Springs, Slidell, Mandeville and LaCombe as a reason to hope.

"You can do something if you just keep at it," Brasted said. "I think it will come to fruition. It's such a good thing, how can it not happen?"

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