

# Introduction



Cyclists ride on a portion of the Grand Forks Greenway in downtown Grand Forks, North Dakota. Source: Greater Grand Forks Convention and Visitors Bureau.

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IN THE FALL OF 1997, I was charged with leading part of the disaster recovery efforts in two flood-ravaged communities—Louisville, Kentucky, and Grand Forks, North Dakota. My client in Louisville, the executive director of a public utility that managed the community stormwater system, wanted to use greenways to resolve problems associated with repeated flooding. In Grand Forks, the North Dakota congressional delegation asked the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to employ a greenway solution as part of the flood recovery process. From my perspective, these disaster recovery projects marked a shift in national perception regarding the function and value of greenways. The greenway was not viewed

simply as a linear park, a recreational amenity, or a pathway through the woods as a component of the community park system. The landscape imperative for greenways had changed. Communities were now interested in building greenways to be more resilient to a dynamic and rapidly changing climate, to be more sustainable by conserving rather than exploiting natural resources, and for their economic return on investment. My clients in Louisville and Grand Forks were interested in the ability of greenways to save lives, protect public and private property from flood damage, and resolve critical public health, safety, and welfare issues.

My introduction to greenways began in 1984 when I was employed as the City of Raleigh Greenway Planner. In the mid-1980s, the term “greenway” was not well known and not widely used across the country. There were few communities with constructed greenways and less than a handful with adopted greenway system plans. Raleigh, North Carolina, launched its Capital Area Greenway System in 1969 based on a community plan that defined greenways as the “green fingers” of the city park system. In 1972, North Carolina State University graduate student Bill Flournoy’s thesis gave purpose, form, and direction to the greenway plan as multiobjective corridors, established in part to combat urban flooding. More than a decade later, by the time I was hired to run the city program, greenways were viewed by most residents as a subset of the community park and recreation system. The primary purpose of my job was to build urban trails, as defined in the original city greenway plan, to achieve 200 miles of constructed trail by the year 2000. Not long after I began work as the greenway planner, I viewed the opportunity of greenways in a more holistic manner, similar to how Flournoy described them in his thesis. Raleigh’s greenways provided pathways for bicycling as alternatives to automobile transportation, conserved natural landscape buffers throughout a community, and protected native species of plants and habitat for animals. With ample vegetation, they helped clean the air of pollutants and trapped sediment before it reached streams and rivers, and when they were as wide as floodplains, helped absorb excess rainwater during storm events. From my perspective, greenways were much more than a path through the woods and addressed more than just the recreation needs of Raleigh citizens.

Today, I continue to find that people across America still think of greenways in constrained terms, again considering them to be, for the

most, trails, pathways, or travel corridors for hiking and bicycling. This view of greenways shortchanges their true function and value and is a departure from their historic foundation. So what exactly is a greenway? Why should communities build greenways? How and why do people benefit from greenways?

The classic definition of a greenway is as follows: “Greenways are linear open space established along a riverfront, stream valley, or ridgeline, or overland along a converted railroad corridor, historic canal, scenic road, or other route. Greenways conserve open space, protecting water, vegetation, soil, and natural habitat essential to healthy and sustainable ecosystems. Greenways normally include shared-use trails that serve to link people to community resources, providing health and wellness, recreation, and transportation benefits. Greenways have become an essential landscape of successful, engaged, and progressive communities.”<sup>1</sup> This definition is taken from *Greenways for America*, authored by Charles Little. In 1989, Little was hired by Patrick Noonan, founder and chairman of the Conservation Fund based in Washington, DC, who asked Little to chronicle the emerging American greenway movement. Noonan was a member of President Ronald Reagan’s 1985 Commission on Americans Outdoors and was convinced that a groundswell of interest and support for greenways was building in rural communities, the suburbs, and large cities across the nation. Little devoted the last chapter of his book to the future of the greenways, concluding with the following statement: “greenways come into being one footprint at a time through individual choice and collective action. And who is to say that such modest steps as these will not begin a historic journey with ethical possibilities unimaginable.”<sup>2</sup>

As I reflect on my thirty-five-year professional career devoted to planning, designing, and developing greenways in more than 250 communities located in thirty-six states, I understand and appreciate that our nation has undertaken a historic journey during the past three decades, accomplishing what some thought was unimaginable. Greenways have become a well-known landscape typology for communities large and small. They do in fact help save lives and reduce impact from flooding; they have become essential green infrastructure, while at the same time shaping the way people travel within their communities, supporting active living, conserving thousands of acres of irreplaceable greenspace

that otherwise might have been developed, and boosting the economies of cities and towns where they are developed. The common thread and foundation for the vast majority of greenway projects are the people who share a vision for the future and the land that they have chosen to steward. This is what makes the American greenway movement an important chapter in our nation's history.

There are more than a dozen published books devoted to the subject of greenways, most of these written in the past twenty-five years. The majority of these books define and describe the technical, scientific, and design theory for greenways. These books were created to appeal to planners, landscape architects, engineers, academicians, and others who wanted to know more about the technical aspects of conserving resources and building greenways. This book, *The Greenway Imperative*, is an intentional departure from my previously published technical resources and presents the human side of greenway planning and design. To better understand the imagined and unimagined benefits that greenways have bestowed throughout America, this book describes a few of the most interesting greenway projects that I have been blessed to work on, with the goal of sharing the stories of the people, landscapes, and imperatives that made these projects come to life. *The Greenway Imperative* represents my personal reflections on a career that has connected me with extraordinary people who led important greenway initiatives. These stories describe the achievements of an individual, a family, a group of people, and a community. What motivated them to develop greenways? What challenges did they overcome? How have these projects shaped the American landscape in terms of public health, transportation, conservation, historic preservation, and economic development?

I provide the intimate detail about how each project evolved—from vision to reality. What were the different paths taken to greenway development and how were landscapes transformed into economically successful green infrastructure projects through lengthy, often challenging processes? Each chapter reveals the back story behind the subject, ideas, and concepts that led to the initiation and making of a greenway. Within each story, you will learn how these projects were shaped by geopolitical forces, funding, landscape resources, and community needs.

I begin with a story about philanthropy and the gift of a greenway. Chapter 1, “A Close Family Legacy,” profiles Anne Springs Close, an