

The Downtown Greenway and Urban Park Connector: A Public-Private Partnership to Connect Urban Parks and Greenways in the City Center

For decades, Downtown Huntsville faced a major connectivity challenge. Two of the major parks and greenway segments in Downtown Huntsville were disconnected due to historically poor urban design and planning. This disconnection prevented downtown users from realizing the health, recreational, and multi-modal transportation benefits of an inter-connected downtown greenway network.

One of the most unfortunate parts of the disconnection was that the segments contained affordable housing, senior housing, and newly developed urban lofts on each side. These disconnected downtown residents were deprived of an alternative way to travel via foot, bike, or other non-motorized options in downtown.

Realizing the missed opportunity resulting from this disconnection, the City of Huntsville and Downtown Huntsville, Inc. collaborated with Urban Design Associates and Alta Planning to update the Downtown Master Plan and specifically include the “connection” of Bud Cramer Park, the Gateway Greenway, and Big Spring Park. When connected, downtown residents and guests would be able to use over three miles of continuous trails and parks.

The connected segments would also provide pedestrian-friendly walking and biking access to numerous restaurants, offices, civic buildings, the convention center complex, and ultimately, the downtown grocery store and public library. The connected network would provide recreational benefits as well as access to essential business and government venues. The network also would be directly accessible to residents of the adjacent Old Town Historic District and multiple stations of the downtown bikeshare system.

To develop the safest and most accessible connection strategy, the City and its private consulting partners convened a series of community meetings (as part of the Downtown Master Plan process), worked directly with local biking organizations and advocacy groups, and performed extensive research on peer models. City leadership decided to fund a connection strategy that would be permanent and effective.

The planning and design team settled on a two-prong connection strategy: The first segment would be comprised of a 12-foot-wide multi-modal path that would open the previously fenced and restricted access Depot Park for pedestrians and bikers.

The second segment would install the State of Alabama’s first protected cycle track—connecting Depot Park to Big Spring Park. The new cycle track would include bike-specific road crossings as well as a curb-protected dual-lane design along the entire route, which travels adjacent to the existing sidewalks.

The result of this connection is a new pedestrian and bicycle network that links the northern and southern edges of downtown while traveling through the central core of the city and the various office, residential, retail, and government uses within. The Connector truly links the city center in a safe, convenient, and multi-modal way.

The Downtown Greenway and Urban Park Connector meets and exceeds the IDA Downtown Achievement Award Standards in each of the six categories:

Innovation: The Downtown Connector uses the latest cycle track technology including cycle-specific crossing signals activated by dedicated radar detection, which alleviates the need for cyclists to dismount to press a signal button.

Replication: The project is highly replicable because it adheres to all local, state, and federal traffic and pedestrian standards. While it utilizes innovative technology, these innovations did not require any waivers or deviations from existing standards. In other words, all the connection elements can be implemented by a municipality by right rather than requiring extensive regulatory review and approvals.

Representation: The project is highly representative and inclusive by the various constituencies that it connects along the route. Either directly on or adjacent to the route is market-rate housing, subsidized public housing, and subsidized senior housing. These access points allow residents to engage in safe recreational activities as well as connect them to their “daily needs” such as commercial, office, and government uses. This accessibility for diverse residential segments of the city center was intentional in its design and routing. It is not just a path for bike enthusiasts. It’s a quality of life and convenience asset for all downtown users.

Sustainability: The project’s sustainability is evidenced by its intentional goal to reduce excessive motor vehicle traffic in the city center by increasing pedestrian and bike movement. By connecting destinations that serve regular daily uses, in addition to recreation, the project creates an actual, alternate transportation network among commercial, residential, office, and government uses. Area residents can now travel to and between these destinations by foot or bike in a safe and direct manner.

Execution: The project (including the Downtown Master Plan) was approved unanimously by the Huntsville Planning Commission and the Huntsville City Council after hundreds of hours of public meetings, planning, and outreach. Before the project was finalized, the public was encouraged to provide feedback at public meetings, through small group advocacy outreach, and online. The inclusive and collaborative civilian interaction with the project was extensive and diverse.

Outcome: Upon approval, City workers and third-party contractors constructed both connection segments in under six months, even with the use of state of the art equipment that neither the City nor the State had previously utilized. Downtown residents and guests realized the health, recreational, and multi-modal benefits of the connection without delay. This project was the first action item under the Downtown Master Plan Update and its swift, thorough, and inclusive implementation generated a great deal of confidence among the public that the Master Plan Update was a plan of action, not just an identification of concepts.

The Downtown Greenway and Urban Park Connector received extensive print, television, and social media coverage. Examples include:

[Plans Move Forward to Bring Bike Lanes to Downtown Huntsville](#) WHNT News 19

[Protected Bike Lanes Coming Soon to Downtown Huntsville](#) AL.com

[Spragins Cycle Track Opening First Protected Bike Lane in Alabama](#) Alta Planning Blog

[Go Sightseeing Along the Downtown Huntsville 5K Trail](#) I Heart HSV Blog