

City puts its money where its trail going

By Jennifer Sale, Times Staff Writer

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ST. PETERSBURG — North Bay Trail, the city's branch of the regional trail system, has gotten \$1 million worth of work, but the city of St. Petersburg hasn't paid for any of it, yet. Last week, the City Council agreed to contribute toward the bill.

On the consent agenda, the council approved moving \$350,000 from the Transportation Impact Fees fund to the North Bay Trail project.

The trail will eventually stretch from Demens Landing to the Friendship Trail at Gandy Bridge, if the Friendship Trail Bridge is repaired and open. Joe Kubicki, the director of St. Petersburg's Department of Transportation and Parking, said he hopes the whole 12-mile system will be completed within the next five years.

The \$1 million already spent on North Bay Trail was grant money from the Federal Aid Highway Act. And the city money that was just approved will be accompanied by another \$2.4 million in federal grants.

The Transportation Impact Fees fund, which the \$350,000 was taken from, is a pot of money that also fuels projects like the widening of Gandy Boulevard and improving conditions for pedestrians. Within that pot is

money earmarked for trail-building.

The movement of this large sum of money might look surprising, but Kubicki said that's because "the project just came along faster than we had planned." According to Kubicki, the \$350,000 wasn't set aside in the 2009 budget because officials hadn't expected to need it so soon.

Still, City Council member Karl Nurse said appropriating the city funding was a move and an amount that had been foreseen. "It was on the list of things coming up," he said.

"Our expectation is to build the vast majority of our trail systems with federal grants," said Kubicki. Still, budgets are tightening on every level. "The grant funding is slowing," he said.

However, the \$2.4 million for the next step has been approved, Kubicki said, and he doesn't expect serious problems with continued funding at this point. If federal grants should run out, the project will likely be slowed to wait for money, from whatever level, to become available. "It's just like you would do with your personal budget," Kubicki said.

The \$1 million spent thus far has been used on Rio Vista Bridge and a 2-mile section of trail from First Avenue S to Coffee Pot Park. This stretch is nearing completion and should be finished by late April, said Kubicki.

The next two legs to be constructed are near Fifth Avenue across from the Vinoy and along the east side of Bayshore Drive near Soreno Park. Their cumulative length will be one-third of a mile. When the North Bay Trail is completed, it will connect to the system that includes the Pinellas Trail.

The elements in trail-building are relatively simple. "The big cost is concrete, and it's gone up in cost," said Kubicki. He said this simplicity is one reason there have not been surprises in the budget. "It's fairly easy to anticipate," he said.

Although it takes money to build them, trails can actually serve as economic stimulus by getting people out, Nurse said. "In Dunedin, it's been the single most important thing to bring their downtown back," he said.

Kubicki stressed that trails merit funding in economically tight times because they help solve a serious safety problem. "St. Petersburg and the Tampa Bay area are always rated among the highest for pedestrian and bicycle accidents in the nation," he said, explaining that the federal "Mean Streets" report has ranked the bay area the No. 1, 2 or 3 most dangerous ever since 1996 when they started keeping track.

In recent years, though, these numbers have been improving, and Kubicki says this is at least partially due to trail-building endeavors. The trails that are in place now aren't enough, he said, because it takes a whole grid to really function properly. "You need a system of streets with safety for bicycles and pedestrians built into their design," Kubicki said.

Beyond these things, Kubicki and Nurse said, people enjoy the trails. "I can tell you that the trails have been very popular," said Nurse.

"It's been overwhelmingly supported and used," Kubicki said.

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