Project background and process
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History of historic trail development in the Kansas City Metro area

Historical interest and volunteer activity in developing and promoting the historic trails in the Kansas City area predate the designation of the three NHTs, and on a national level played a significant role in encouraging the United States Congress to designate these trails as NHTs. Local organizations including the Oregon-California Trails Association, Santa Fe Trail Association, Kansas City Area Historic Trails Association, and Three Trails West, Inc. have devoted significant resources over the past 30 years to development of historic sites and trail segments; interpreting trail stories through on-site wayside exhibits, brochures or other media, and leading in-person tours; and in continuing to develop understanding of trail history and trail places through ongoing research. Thanks to these efforts and work by local governments, the Kansas City area has a density of already existing opportunities to experience the national historic trails which is unusual if not unique in the National Trails System.

History of trail planning in the Kansas City Metro area

From the Mid-America Regional Council “MetroGreen History” web page:

The Kansas City region has always been trail-wise. From the early 1800s when a restless population of immigrants migrated west across the American frontier, all trails led to Kansas City.

Near the end of the 19th century, George Kessler, a talented landscape designer and engineer, turned the area’s trails vision inward. He worked to create a network of corridors that defined the Kansas City landscape and guided its urban destiny. Kessler’s hundred-year plan provided the city with a unique identity that linked function with beauty.

Throughout the 1900s, farsighted city leaders fine-tuned the Kessler open-space plan. In 1991, the local chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) created a new vision that built upon the concepts Kessler introduced — a vision that would connect communities in the greater Kansas City region by a system of trails, open space and parklands. That vision became a core concept in the creation of a broader and more ambitious greenprint for the Kansas City landscape and guided its urban destiny.

It continues, in reference to the 1991 vision of MetroGreen:

The Mid-America Regional Council (MARC) has served as steward and supporter of the MetroGreen vision since its inception and local communities began to implement elements of the plan. With growing community interest in trails and increased concerns about regional stormwater and water quality, MARC launched an effort in 2001 to expand the initial 1991 plan.

MetroGreen 2002 defines the critical relationship between environmental stewardship and urban growth management. The plan also articulates a future development strategy based on the cooperative efforts of the seven counties and the municipal governments included within the plan.

MetroGreen builds upon Kessler’s greenprint and the 1991 ASLA vision, adding connections leading from existing city boulevards, trails and greenways to parks and historic, cultural and recreational centers.

Among goals the plan outlines, MetroGreen:

- proposes alternative travel options for area residents commuting from home to work or school
- heightens awareness of recreational facilities throughout the region and improves access to them
- unifies the seven counties in the metro
- connects economic, cultural and historic destinations throughout the region

MetroGreen continues to be a framework for development of trails and open space throughout the metro area today, and subsequent planning initiatives are built on this foundation, including many city and county plans. The 2002 update of the plan included the national historic trails on the Missouri side of the Metro area. This plan also draws on MetroGreen and other planning already completed by cities and counties to inform both route selection and standard design guidelines for national historic trail facilities throughout the Kansas City Metro area.

Another key planning document which informed this process is the Kansas City Missouri 6th District Pedestrian Intermodal Transportation Connector plan (PITC), adopted as City Ordinance No. 100747 in 2010. This plan identified a multi-use trail route to be constructed approximating the historic route of the three national historic trails across the former 6th District of Kansas City, a distance of approximately 11 miles. Since adoption, the PITC plan has been instrumental in leveraging construction funding for many national historic trail projects, and has resulted in approximately 5 miles of completed trail to date. The current metro-wide planning project seeks to extend this level of conceptual planning to the rest of the local governments along the Independence Route (Santa Fe, Oregon, and California NHTs) as well as the Westport Route (currently Santa Fe NHT) in the interest of further leveraging trail construction funding and other resources needed to make the national historic trails a reality in the region. This concept plan is the first of its kind and is expected, if fully adopted, to be a catalyst for development of national historic trails, particularly in urban areas, nationwide.

1. https://www.marc.org/Environment/MetroGreen-Parks/AboutHistory
2. Due to redistricting, today this plan spans parts of both the 5th and 6th districts.

Project background and process, continued

**Origins and organization of this project**

In March of 2014, the Oregon-California Trails Association, Santa Fe Trail Association, and Kansas City Historic Trails Association jointly hosted a meeting focusing on development of the three NHTs in the Kansas City Metro area. In addition to trail association leadership and members, attendees included staff from (NTIR-NPS), Mid-America Regional Council (MARC), several local governments, and Three Trails West, Inc. Input from participants at this meeting indicated broad interest in pursuing a plan for NHT development that would extend the work of the PITC plan across the entire Metro area.

In March of 2016, MARC and NTIR-NPS entered into a cooperative agreement to complete a planning project with the affected cities and counties to define a route for developed and retraceable NHTs across the Metro area. This agreement outlined the following project phases (see below). These phases have since been followed with some minor schedule adjustments. Phases 2–5 also followed a more iterative process than originally expected, with overlapping start and end dates. The meeting initially planned for Phase 6 was postponed in the interest of spending more time gathering feedback on a draft document directly from the local governments.

- **PHASE 1**: Start-up meeting and initial site visit: May–June 2016
- **PHASE 2**: Research and data gathering (including base mapping, one regional meeting, gap analysis, and mapping of initial alternatives based on this phase): June–October 2016
- **PHASE 3**: Analysis of alignment gaps and evaluation of alternatives (including an in-person meeting with NTIR-NPS staff to evaluate initial alternatives relative to NHT goals, a second regional meeting, and documentation and mapping of revisions to alternatives based on these meetings): October 2016–February 2017
- **PHASE 4**: Trail design guidance (development of conceptual trail cross sections for various conditions, locations and concept designs of trailheads, signage and branding recommendations, and order of magnitude implementation cost estimates): March–April 2017
- **PHASE 5**: Transfer of project information to NTIR-NPS (assembly of materials and maps, photography, preliminary report, and further collaboration during NPS review as needed): April–May 2017
- **PHASE 6**: Final meeting (preparation and facilitation of final stakeholder meeting, and documentation of feedback and implementation strategy): October 2017 (later revised to March 2018)
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Meetings and stakeholder engagement

To serve as coordinator and design consultant on this project, MARC engaged Vireo, a landscape architecture firm with extensive background in NHT work in the area (including development of the PITC plan) as well as many regional planning initiatives for MARC and area local governments. In addition to the kickoff meeting and other regional group meetings, as part of Phase 2 and 3 Vireo held many one on one meetings with cites and counties to elicit their input and develop draft trail alignments.

Regional meetings served as opportunities for local officials to gather and discuss project progress, proposed alignments, or design concepts with MARC, NTIR-NPS, and other stakeholders, and to express concerns or ask questions.

First regional meeting at MARC 7/19/2016
Project introduction and kick-off

Individual city/county meetings
Olathe 8/26/2016
Independence 9/29/2016
Raytown 10/10/2016
Gardner 10/11/2016
Leawood 10/12/2016
Lenexa 10/13/2016
Johnson County 10/14/2016
Jackson County 10/17/2016
MARC 10/17/2016
Oregon-California Trails Association, Santa Fe Trail Association, Freedom’s Frontier National Heritage Area 10/18/2016
3-Trails West, Inc. 10/26/2016
Fairway 1/10/2017
Westwood, Westwood Hills, Mission Woods, Mission Hills 5/16/2017
Roeland Park, Mission 5/18/2017

Third regional meeting, June 12, 2017. Photo: NPS

Second regional meeting at MARC 11/30/2016
Discussion of proposed branding and interpretive elements to be included in final document for the use of cities/counties and implementers

Fourth and final regional meeting at MARC 3/7/2018
Discussion of draft document, and city/county feedback on the draft

Second regional meeting at MARC 11/30/2016
Review and discussion of alignments proposed in individual meetings