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Midweek Perspectives: A real bikeway around the city

Don't let the Port Authority be shortsighted again. Build a trail alongside the East Busway

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By Brian Nogrady and Maurice Doss

When the Martin Luther King Jr. East Busway was designed in the late 1970s and constructed in the early '80s, the Port Authority rejected proposals for a bike trail adjacent to it. It was a missed opportunity to provide a safe, level corridor for recreation and commuting off crowded East End streets. As the Port Authority proceeds with its East Busway extension, it is about to make the same mistake again, permanently obstructing not only a safe bike trail through the East End but the completion of a 22-mile trail greenway around the city.



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A wonderful network of multiuse bike trails is developing along our region's riverfronts and railroad corridors. These trails, like the popular Eliza Furnace Trail along the Parkway East, provide tree-lined havens to walk, run, rollerblade or bike for recreation, exercise and commuting. According to a recent Carnegie Mellon University study, these facilities are vital to our region in supporting leading-edge high-technology industries by attracting a young, educated work force.

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We now have an opportunity to build a multiuse bike trail along the historic railroad main line through Wilkinsburg, Edgewood, Swissvale, Rankin and beyond, where the Port Authority is building its busway extension, and to continue the trail along the existing busway/railroad corridors through Homewood, East Liberty and Shadyside.

With direct connections in Swissvale and near Highland Park to the future trails running along the Monongahela and Allegheny rivers, this Main Line Trail would make possible the completion of a continuous 22-mile trail loop-greenway around the city of Pittsburgh. Such a unique, tree-lined bicycle "beltway," tying together Pittsburgh's East End, South Side, North Shore and Downtown on one trail loop, would serve as an attraction for visitors wanting to see Pittsburgh's landscape

and neighborhoods, and as an enticement for young families to stay.

Unfortunately, a section of the busway extension threatens to block the development of this regional asset. Trail and transit can coexist. Port Authority studies confirmed feasibility of a corrected busway alignment that would preserve space for the trail. This corrected busway would cost \$70 million instead of \$62 million budgeted for the current inadequate plan. However, the Port Authority has been unwilling to make the investment -- although the increase is less than 1 percent of its nearly billion-dollar investment for light-rail expansions, north and south.

It is particularly lamentable that the imminent gap in the bike-trail circuit will fall along the East End, whose residents already have diminished access to transportation and recreation facilities. Pittsburgh's lower-income and minority eastern communities like East Liberty, Homewood, Wilksburg, Rankin, North Braddock and Braddock deserve equal access to the trail system's recreational, health and transportation benefits. Moreover, as numerous studies have shown, the trail's high use, exposure and quality-of-life benefits would leverage much needed residential and commercial reinvestment for the affected communities.

The Port Authority justifies its enormous capital expenditures for LRT elsewhere by stating that "the generation of economic benefits in the community is directly related to the amount of capital and operating funds spent on the project." Clearly, the struggling East End communities deserve the same consideration.

In the East End, the Port Authority has considered only the cheapest transit option -- polluting diesel buses on a busway -- that it rejected as a "lesser alternative" for the South Hills. The Port Authority asserts that the integrated, clean and quiet option -- conversion to LRT from Downtown to Rankin at a cost per annual rider of \$27 -- is "too expensive." Meanwhile, it is spending \$103 and \$107 for LRT in the South Hills and to the North Shore stadiums, respectively. That the much narrower LRT alternative would also conserve space needed for the trail only compounds the inequity.


The Port Authority has received over 6,000 support letters for the trail. Sadly, it is misleading the public with fliers and statements to the effect that its current busway extension plans incorporate a "bike trail." Multiuse bike trails, like roadways, have clear design specifications for width, buffer space, usage levels and continuity that were established for safety and efficacy by the American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials. Perhaps this is why the Port Authority's legal documents include the disclaimer, hidden from the public, that its use of the term "bike trail" is "in no way intended to imply that those terms have specific meanings or requirements as may be described in federal, state, county or local statutes, ordinances or other standards."

Examination of the busway plans reveals that its 6-to-10-foot-wide "bike trail," wedged between the busway and moving traffic on a major street for almost a mile, is narrower than most Downtown sidewalks,

with less than half the minimum width of 20 to 24 feet called for by AASHTO guidelines. The whole point of a bike trail is to provide functional urban living space, not a constricted obstacle course. The Port Authority's version of a "bike trail" is simply too narrow for safety or utility.

This region can ill afford the loss, due to a myopic, outmoded approach to transit, of the tremendous asset that this 22-mile bike trail-greenway would provide. And the region cannot accept segregating many of its residents and communities from the trail system and accompanying recreational, health and economic benefits.

It is not yet too late for PAT to make the proper investment in its busway project to preserve the space needed for this critical link in the region's bike trail network.

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