



Carmel resident discusses economic development impact of trails and greenways

(Talk of the Town photo by Jennifer Zartman Romano) Four-term councilman and president of the Carmel redevelopment commission, Ron Carter talked with Columbia City Rotarians about the benefits of trails and greenways on economic development.

By Jennifer Zartman Romano

Ron Carter has seen the benefit of trails and greenways in his community just outside Indianapolis.

Carter, a four-term councilman and president of the Carmel, Indiana, redevelopment commission, spoke to Columbia City Rotary members last week not about the obvious health and recreational benefits of trails and greenways – but instead Carter spoke about the economic sense of providing such amenities in a community.

Aware of some of the issues locally with the proposed development of the Eel River Trail, Carter hoped he could share an outsider's perspective on what makes trails great and why every community should at least consider the possibilities of trails and greenways.

“As I have been involved in government's service over 20 years, I can see what trails and greenways can do for a community,” Carter said.

After seeing the positive ways Carmel has benefited from trails, he now travels the state speaking on the economic development impact of trails. From the standpoint of a struggling economy, Carter feels trails and greenways are, “tools that can help a community immeasurably.” He adds that such amenities are a viable economic entity and help a community differentiate itself from its neighbors. Carter was very involved with the development of the Monon Trail, a stretch of non-motorized trail that passes through Carmel.



Carter shared that like the local Eel River Trail, there were opponents to the project when it began there several years ago. But, he added, even some of the most influential opponents to the project are now some of its biggest supporters – particularly when it comes to boasting about the economic impact the trail has had on the surrounding community and the growth in real estate values for properties adjacent to or adjoining the Monon Trail.

According to Carter, the property within a six block radius has become a magnet for \$1 billion dollars in investment.

He said that there are now properties valued at \$800,000 to \$1 million adjacent to the trail and that a \$400,000 per property housing area has been constructed specifically to be near the location and to have access to it for their residents.

“It has been proven that residential property values increase dramatically near trails,” Carter said.

“A trail makes for beachfront property when you don’t have those physical attributes,” he said. “This can be your attribute.”

Carter spoke about companies drawn to Carmel because of the trail, including an employer that brought with it 850 jobs. “We offered nothing in the way of tax incentives, but we did offer a full package of amenities that all of our residents enjoy,” Carter said. That employer, enticed by amenities such as the Monon Trail, has since reinvested further in the community.

Carter found that some of the most vocal opponents to the project are some of those who’ve benefited most from its development, finding unique ways to capitalize on the space.

One opponent, who used the proposed trail space personally and didn’t want anyone else using it, fought against the project. Later, after the project moved ahead and was completed, he said,

“This is the best thing that’s ever happened to our community.”

“This is one of the best anecdotes I can share about trails and greenways,” Carter said.

Carter described abandoned railways in Indiana as former “economic generators,” main arteries for the movement of goods and a vital part of the economy.

“We’ve taken out those economic generators, but when we add them back in (with trails and greenways) – they become economic generators again to revitalize towns,” he added.

Talking about concerns about the safety of trails, the type of people who use them and what surrounding property owners can expect, Carter was adamant that safety is not much of an issue once trails are in place.

“It’s really hard to carry a Smith & Wesson in spandex bicycle shorts,” Carter said. “It’s not bicyclist shooting holes in signs or tossing beer cans along the road.”

“There’s nothing to fear from people who bike up and down streets and trails,” he said.

While police initially patrolled the greenway, the police explorer post occasionally patrols the trail on busy holiday weekends. “We have no crime on the Monon,” Carter said. “It is the safest place in our community.”

Carter also shared that there are laws in place to protect adjacent property owners.

“Trails are easy to maintain, too,” Carter said. “Plus, once it’s built, you don’t have to program it...people already know what to do.”

Carter, a Rotary member in Carmel, shared that the local Rotary there was among the first to donate for the building of the Monon Trail and, today, everyone still remembers that organization’s \$6,000 gift.

Carter sees trails as a vital part of a community’s total economic development initiative. “I think that transfers to most communities,” he said. “We want to be able to offer as many amenities as we can.”

“Basically, you’re taking a linear junk yard (abandoned railway beds) and transforming them into linear parks that lots of people can enjoy,” he added.