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Exploring the Intertwine

1,250 miles of parks, trails, and natural areas

by Ramona DeNies

Imagine commuting by canoe from Estacada to Vancouver. Or trekking trails from Forest Grove to Forest Park. Or biking from a backyard in Battle Ground to Beaverton and back.

Imagine a seamless network of urban parks and trails in the Portland/Vancouver metro area—one that connects 32 cities, six counties and two states. One that makes metro-wide non-motorized travel—by water, by foot, by bike—a real alternative to cars, buses, trains.

Would you save money? Be healthier? Come to count on that daily dose of ferns and birdsong, along with your morning coffee on the go? Feel even greater pride of place, living within The Intertwine?

“More and more, this is a mainstream idea—that cities need nature, that people need nature as part of their daily lives. That’s what we’re doing,” says Michael Wetter, Executive Director of the Intertwine Alliance.

The new Portland-based nonprofit has a vision to enhance, stitch together, and then expand, over 1,250 miles of existing bike and pedestrian trails. The Intertwine—the name Alliance partners gave to the vast network—could ultimately stretch from Canby, Oregon, to Cowlitz County, Washington, defying manmade jurisdictions and redefining regional identity.

“We’re trying to change the investment paradigm—that a trail is as valid a form of transportation as a street,” Wetter says.

But more than paradigms will need to shift if the Intertwine Alliance is to realize its vision within our lifetimes.

According to a 2011 letter from Wetter to Intertwine stakeholders, “At current rates of investment, it will take more than 190 years to complete a basic regional trails network.”

THE INTERTWINE ALLIANCE

Founded in 2009 with a skeleton staff, start-up capital from Metro, and a mandate to “build and protect the region’s network of parks, trails and natural areas,” the Intertwine Alliance now counts nearly 70 public and private organizations—from the city of Gresham to KEEN Footwear—as partners in the coalition.

“We’re in our infancy with the Intertwine Alliance, literally coming out of the birth canal. But we’re light years from where we were in 1980, in terms of the public demanding access to nature in the city,” says Mike Houck, a founder of the Intertwine Alliance and Director of the Urban Greenspaces Initiative.

Houck is referencing the conservation efforts that he and other locals have supported for years—from our sprawl-retarding urban growth boundary, established in 1980, to Metro’s 1992 adoption of the Metropolitan Greenspaces Master Plan—a document that later formed the template for the Intertwine Alliance.

“The basic philosophy of the urban growth boundary was to protect nature from the city. Now we understand that we

"We're trying to change the investment paradigm—that a trail is as valid a form of transportation as a street."



Salmon Creek in Clackamas County. Photograph courtesy of Mike Houck

need nature in our urban spaces,” Houck says.

Following successful ballot measures spearheaded by Metro in 1995 and 2006 that raised public funds for parkland acquisition, then-Metro Council President David Bragdon called for regional government to support the creation of “the world’s greatest system of parks and trails” through an independent nonprofit.

“Each campaign required a huge amount of energy. One idea behind the Intertwine Alliance was to keep the energy of those one-offs,” Houck said.

Launched with 17 partners in 2009, the coalition now claims 66 partners—and

counting—among those actively invested in furthering the vision of the Intertwine.

With a broader base, the Intertwine Alliance is fast gaining resources and leverage. Yet the young organization, say staff, must expand carefully—to accommodate the diverse goals of coalition partners, while achieving results tangible enough that the organization’s four-petaled daisy continues to elicit that precious “aha” of recognition from trail users, legislators, and grantmakers.

THE VISION

As of spring 2011, the Intertwine consisted of 1,250 miles of designated bike

and pedestrian trails; 12,000 acres of developed parks; and 24,000 acres of publicly-owned natural areas. The Alliance estimated that over the space of that year, 8.3 million users visited the region's parks, trails and natural areas.



Cycling along the Columbia Slough. Photograph courtesy of Mike Houck

"We know that we need to acquire more land to create more parks and trails, and we also know that park providers have insufficient money to manage those spaces. The Intertwine Alliance is the regional table to come up with strategies for making the pie bigger, to figure out how to get the resources to manage the system," Houck said.

Yet growing the pie—securing the federal funding necessary to acquire land, enhance parks, and build trails—might prove more difficult than Houck, David Bragdon and other Intertwine Alliance founders anticipated back in 2007.

"The Intertwine Alliance is the regional table to come up with strategies for making the pie bigger..."

"There's the perception that this kind of work can only happen in good economic times," says board member Judy Bluehorse Skelton, a Portland State University faculty member in Indigenous Nations Studies.

Skelton, Houck and Wetter each acknowledge that federal funding for urban trails and natural areas can suffer from political and economic shifts. The Intertwine Alliance's formation during the nation's economic downturn has meant that in addition to rigorous urban planning, strong messaging plays a crucial role.

According to Wetter, key to the coalition's ability to flourish is making the case that growing the Intertwine is not only an issue of conservation, but economic necessity—that the bucket in which policymakers should place the work of the Intertwine Alliance is not Forestry, but Transportation.

Skelton agrees that a paradigm shift is in order.

"The old extraction and exploitation approach has high financial costs down the road. Part of our problem in the past is that we haven't looked far enough down that road. We're very much at a time where regardless of economic highs and lows, we have to invest," Skelton says.

Houck says financial and political uncertainty strengthens rather than hurts the rationale for a non-partisan organization like the Intertwine Alliance.

"Government is essential to what we're trying to do. We provide stability over time, a buffer as political winds shift—that's one of the Intertwine Alliance's major functions, as far as I'm concerned," Houck says.

THE FUTURE OF FOUR PETALS

To look at the productivity of the Intertwine Alliance since inception, one might think that federal funding had been plentiful for the young coalition.

Among the highlights from the past two years: in 2010, the Intertwine added to its total mileage the 21-mile Banks-Vernonia State Trail. Metro gained more than 750 additional acres of parkland in Multnomah County, in addition to the 1,100 acre Chehalem Ridge acquisition. In June, the Alliance saw the opening of the Trolley Trail—a historic streetcar line transformed to trail, from Gladstone to Milwaukie.

Organizational visibility is also growing—and not just through the proliferation of wayfinding and trailhead signage. A recently relaunched website earned the Intertwine Alliance a national award for Education and Communication from the Coalition for Recreational Trails, as well as the President's Award for Tourism from Travel Portland. In July 2012, a collaboration with *Portland Monthly Magazine* produced a glossy “Intertwine edition,” complete with maps and trail adventure opportunities.

Over 300 people attended the Alliance's October 2012 Partners Summit, which featured as keynote speakers Congresswoman Suzanne Bonamici and Mickey Fearn, Deputy Director of the National Park Service. Summit attendees witnessed the unveiling of a Regional Conserva-

tion Strategy—representing a coordinated effort between over 130 original contributors, from the Audubon Society to the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife—that canvasses biodiversity over the nearly 3,000 square miles that comprise the Greater Portland-Vancouver Region.

The partners also previewed the IA's pioneering Urban Forestry Strategy that, once adopted, will be the first such strategy in the nation.

Such momentum springs hope that, with continued support, the IA may be able to move the needle on Wetter's projection of 190 years to complete the proposed six-county, bi-state trails system.

The enormity of that timeframe, reasonably enough, has the nonprofit focusing on nearer-term goals in its 2011-2012 Annual Report. Planned for the nearer term are campaigns to grow the partner base in size and inclusivity, expand the na-

The enormity of the [190-year] timeframe has the nonprofit focusing on nearer-term goals.



Exploring Oaks Bottom north meadow wetland. Photograph courtesy of Mike Houck



Contemplating the view from Oaks Bottom. Photograph courtesy of Mike Houck

tional visibility of the Intertwine Alliance and its sister coalitions through the Metropolitan Greenspaces Alliance, provide more publications like 2011's *Wild in the City*: Exploring the Intertwine, and promote Intertwine adventures and contests with partners like KEEN and TriMet.

Wetter would also like to see the state replenish the Urban Trails Fund—a 2009 Oregon Department of Transportation program that, among other projects, disbursed \$300,000 to extend Gresham's Springwater Trail Spur.

Mike Abbaté, Portland Parks & Recreation Director and an Intertwine Alliance board member, is voting for more interactive website features like smartphone apps, and a hopeful focus on grant seeking, despite the scarcity of federal funds.

“What I'd like to see is the IA land a large appropriation or donation that could then be disbursed to the partners to enhance natural areas and trails, as opposed to building a new neighborhood park. It could be land acquisition, improved access, habitat restoration,” Abbaté says.

For Skelton, short-term goals for the

Intertwine Alliance include expanding education opportunities for youth—field guides into the Intertwine, inventories of edible and medicinal native plants—as well as welcoming new partners, like the Native American Youth Association (NAYA), into the fold.

But Skelton maintains that despite the overwhelming timeframe projected for the Intertwine's completion, the original vision is both politically and economically tenable.

“If you look forward seven generations, it really begins to guide what is the most sustainable approach to economics. Right now you have a group of people that recognize that the cost is too high, that we have to look at a sustainable economy. Part of it is communication, part of it is transitioning from one way,” Skelton says.

Seven generations, or approximately 190 years. Yet what if we could really push that paradigm shift—maybe achieve the Intertwine, maybe in time for our children's children? **M**

Ramona DeNies is a Portland area freelance writer.

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