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The 50-mile Dallas Loop trail aims to transform the city. It's getting there

Architecture critic Mark Lamster on the biking and walking trail that will connect Dallas to Dallas.



Construction workers install a bridge on the Loop Trail that's now being blazed around Dallas. The 50-mile route will join 11 separate trails into a single circuit around the city. (The Loop Dallas)

By [Mark Lamster](#)

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Walking will always be my first option, and I will admit that I enjoy a leisurely drive, but the simple truth is that the most enjoyable and efficient way to explore a city is on a bicycle.

“A bicycle is the ideal city vehicle because it moves at the perfect pace for urban navigation and exploration — fast enough to beat the traffic and get you where you’re going, slow enough to take in all the details of the cityscape,” says Jody Rosen, author of *Two Wheels Good*, a history of the bicycle.

Dallas, at least for the moment, is not a city where this axiom easily applies, as cyclists know well. Our streets are broken and potholed, bike lanes are few and unprotected, drivers are either negligent or actively hostile to cyclists. The current city budget allocates a paltry \$2.5 million for cycling infrastructure, a rounding error on what is spent on highways and other road-building projects. The nonprofit [People for Bikes](#) ranks Dallas 155 out of 163 large American cities, placing it in the 5th percentile.

There is reason to believe that those numbers will improve over the next few years, as the final links in the 50-mile [Dallas Loop](#) are completed. The project, which advocates hope to finish by 2027, will join 11 separate trails into a single circuit around the city. From White Rock Lake to the Trinity River, from prairie to forest, and residential, commercial and industrial neighborhoods, the Loop will offer riders (and walkers) a full experience of the city’s diverse landscapes.

“Our mantra is Connecting Dallas to Dallas,” says Jeff Ellerman, chairman of the Loop’s board of directors. “We’re very proud of this legacy asset that we are creating.” A majority of the Loop will run south of Interstate 30, and it will eventually link with five DART stations, giving commuters easy rail-to-trail access. Over the last decade, the group has raised some \$90 million in funding from public and private sources to complete the project.



SOURCE: City of Dallas

Michael Hogue/Staff Artist

Last month, the first section of the Trinity Forest Spine Trail opened to the public. (A formal ribbon-cutting is scheduled for October.) This 1.5-mile stretch runs from the Santa Fe Trail and White Rock Lake south to Samuell Boulevard. The Spine Trail will eventually reach all the way south to Roosevelt Heights, where it will meet the Pemberton Hill Road Trail.

Designed by Half Associates, the meandering section has a 12-foot-wide concrete path set up on a slight berm to prevent flooding. It is marked by several attractive steel bridges, and will eventually be forced to cross over the Union Pacific rail line, just south of Military Boulevard. Designers had initially hoped to tunnel beneath the rail line, but UP refused permission, the resultant bridge adding well over \$15 million to the project cost, according to Ellerman. (Did Union Pacific offer to pick-up the extra tab? Nope.)

A new plaza is also in the works across town, at the foot of the Katy Trail, where Victory Avenue intersects Houston Street, just steps from the American Airlines Center. Billed as the Loop’s new “front door” — or at least one of them — it will link the Katy to the forthcoming Hi Line Connector, which will cross through Victory and the Design District to the Trinity Strand Trail. The design, by the local firm TBG Partners, would bring the Katy to ground level along a curving bridge, landing in a 0.29-acre plaza marked by a quasi-sculptural installation that, in early renderings, features three large mushroom-shaped metal structures that would be illuminated at night.

“They really act as almost this iconic beacon,” says Mark Meyer of TBG, noting that “there’s still a lot to be done.” The plaza design will go before the city’s Urban Design Peer Review Panel in the coming weeks. A more fully realized vision of that installation should be required before it is approved.

Another plaza will be added at the northern end of the Katy Trail, funded by the Friends of the Katy Trail, a separate nonprofit. (The Loop acts as something of an umbrella or backbone organization, supporting the various “friends” groups that oversee the 11 constituent trails it links.) The plaza is the work of SWA, the Dallas-based landscape architecture firm that initially converted the Katy from a derelict right-of-way into a pedestrian park. It will bring open space and calm traffic where the trail intersects with Harvard Avenue.



A rendering shows the intersection of Oak Lawn Avenue and Hi Line Drive in the Design District with the planned Hi Line Connector in the mix. (The Loop Dallas)

SWA is also responsible for the design of the Hi Line Connector, which is scheduled for completion early next year — if [cost problems](#) with its construction can be resolved. It might be the most complex stretch of the Loop, from a design standpoint, as it must navigate the heavily trafficked vehicular corridor of Houston Street, make its way under I-35E into the Design District, wind through the median of Hi Line Drive, and then cross one of the city’s more unforgiving intersections at Oak Lawn Avenue.

The design manages to do this artfully while shifting the primacy of these spaces from automobiles to pedestrians and cyclists — a considerable achievement. Throughout, sidewalks and cycling paths are expanded and protected from vehicular traffic. The rail and highway underpasses linking Victory and the Design District would be given new illumination and signage, transforming these dank passages into ceremonial gateways. Some of these changes are [under threat](#) due to conflict between the contractor and the city, which is funding part of the project. All efforts should be made to safeguard the design.

The most exciting development is the remaking of the yawning intersection of Hi Line and Oak Lawn. “I’ve almost lost my life a half a dozen times crossing through that intersection,” says Chuck McDaniel, who led the project for SWA. The new design will introduce a paving system to calm traffic, and new signaling will stop automobile traffic in all directions to allow cyclists and pedestrians to cross without fear. “That’s something that we just have never seen here in Dallas,” says McDaniel. “It’s going to frustrate some drivers, but that’s not the point of this. The point is to make our trail users safer.”

It is a welcome and necessary change in thinking, and one the city at large should adopt. Dallas will soon have a trail that is genuinely “world class,” a perennial Dallas obsession. Getting to it safely? That is the next — and far greater — challenge.

