



Staying in the *Loop*

Plans push forward to complete SR 207 Rail-Trail Project

By Stephanie Rieselman

Whether you're looking to bike, jog, or walk, the scenic Palatka-to-St. Augustine State Trail offers a world of beautiful contrasts. Located in northeast Florida, this 12-foot-wide multi-use recreational trail boasts agricultural landscapes as well as thickly wooded areas. The diversity of these surroundings is well matched by the area's growing system of interconnected multi-use trails that allow users to get around by foot and bicycle.

Daryl Myers of Ayres Associates has been working on the 18-mile-long trail since 2004. Also known as the SR 207 Rail-Trail, four of its six segments have been constructed to date: from Vermont Heights to Spuds (three separate segments totaling 8.5 miles) and from Hastings to East Palatka (one segment totaling 7 miles). The remaining two sections are under construction; the incomplete 3-mile segment between Spuds and Hastings separates the completed sections of trail.



“It’s taken 13 years to do all that,” Myers said. “While I was working on the project, my project manager at FDOT was out on maternity leave at one point. Last year our paths crossed outside of work, and I ran into her at a Florida gymnastics meet, and her daughter is 10 now.”

Myers has worked alongside Amy Williams, project manager at the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) for this trail project throughout the entire process.

“Daryl has been a key member for this trail project,” Williams said. “He’s been involved since the beginning. It’s been very helpful to have someone who’s been there from the get-go and to have that consistency throughout the duration of the project.”

The asphalt trail was constructed along an abandoned railroad right-of-way, with some portions adjacent to city streets and others in wooded areas. Ayres Associates also designed the Armstrong Park Trailhead for St. Johns County, a public facility near the trail that provides a welcome center, restroom facilities, parking lot, and learning/education center. Eventually, the trail will tie into three area trail networks: Palatka to Lake Butler State Trail; St. Johns River to Sea Loop, and East Coast Greenway. Once the Palatka-to-St. Augustine trail is completed, it will be part of the 260 miles of multi-use trails that make up the River to Sea Loop.

“It’s essentially a network of trails,” Myers said. “Every segment is one little part of the greater plan.”

This greater plan came to fruition after FDOT decided to replace the abandoned rail corridor, formerly known as the Florida East Coast Railway, with the trail.

“The trail has a great deal of historical significance,” Myers said.

In 1885, Henry Morrison Flagler moved to St. Augustine to build hotels and purchase short line railroads in a region that had been lacking in infrastructure and transportation facilities before then. The outlying farming communities of Hastings and Armstrong were a local source to provide vegetables and other produce. The railroad (that is now the Palatka-to-St. Augustine trail) carried this fresh produce and other goods to and from St. Augustine more than 130 years ago. Interpretive signage along the trail tells the rich history of these communities and how the railroad made their expansion possible.

When the railroad right-of-way was abandoned, FDOT seized the opportunity to purchase the property, recognizing how it could streamline the process for developing a trail replacement.

“The abandoned railroad right-of-way is great for trails – it’s straight, fairly level, and they don’t have a lot of obstructions or cross traffic,” Myers said.

That doesn’t mean there weren’t challenges, however. Designing around wetlands and wildlife was a big factor to consider when it came time to construct the trail. In fact, gopher tortoises, had to be protected during this process.

“We didn’t end up having to relocate any gopher tortoises and we avoided wetland impacts, which was a good thing for the environment,” Myers said.

Coordinating trail design and construction efforts with the FDOT structures office was also a challenge. The design team had to systematize multiple projects at once, including the design of the two pedestrian bridges that were built as part of the trail, as well as coordinate a midblock crossing of a four-lane divided highway.

“With the trail crossing a roadway with posted speeds of 55 miles an hour, the midblock crossing had to be up to the latest DOT standards,” Myers said. This required that a HAWK (High-Intensity Activated Crosswalk) signal be installed to increase pedestrian safety; when a pedestrian pushes the crosswalk button, a flashing yellow light that turns to solid yellow and then solid red signals traffic to stop.

One of the more complex efforts was the collaboration needed with the geotechnical engineer regarding the soils underneath the trail.

“Pesticides and arsenic were used back in the day to keep the weeds from growing near the train tracks,” Williams said. “With this trail being built on a railbed, we had to coordinate with FDOT’s environmental office so the arsenic wouldn’t potentially spread when it came time to dig up the soil.”

But the benefits of the trail replacement have far outweighed any challenges.

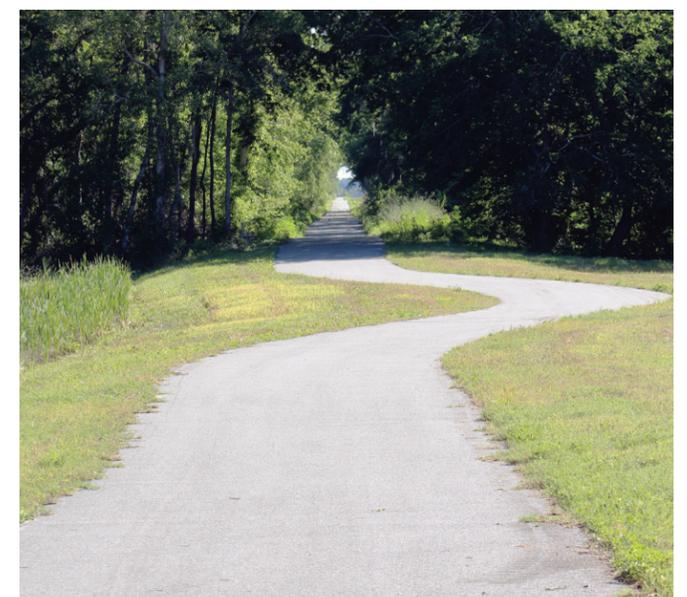
“There are many health and economic benefits when it comes to building a trail,” Myers said. “But there is also a huge community benefit. Once the trail is completed, there can be any number of planned events by the community – trail rides or trail runs, which bring people from across the state. It helps people get out and be active.”

The completion of the Palatka-to-St. Augustine State Trail has been a much-anticipated event for not only recreational users, but also for Myers.

“It will be rewarding to see a long project – both in length and time – come to completion,” he said.

After almost 13 years in the making, Williams shares that sentiment.

“We are getting close to completing the last segment,” Williams said. “Finishing the trail will feel like quite the accomplishment.” ■



Closer to Completion

Construction on the remaining two segments of the Palatka-to-St. Augustine trail began in August 2017 when funding became available. Once complete, these trail segments will provide much-anticipated connections through the Town of Hastings. A trailhead in Hastings, where users will find a restroom facility and picnic tables, will serve as an access point for the unconstructed trail segments.

The first of the two segments will total 2.397 miles in length; the last will be a 1.088-mile-section. Both trail segments will include a pedestrian bridge designed by the Florida Department of Transportation District 2 Structures Office.

Total cost for both segments is estimated at \$5.8 million, and construction is slated to be completed by fall 2018.

 Ayres-designed portion of River to Sea Loop

 Remaining River to Sea Loop

River to Sea Loop

