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The Onondaga Creekwalk: Blossoming with the spring

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Mike Greenlar/The Post-Standard

Walkers on Thursday enjoy a new section of the Onondaga Creekwalk, near Herald Place.

It works.

That's the highest praise for any project in downtown Syracuse, and it certainly applies to the new Onondaga Creekwalk, a 2.6-mile greenway from Armory Square to Onondaga Lake. During Thursday's lunch hour, dozens of walkers and joggers came and went from the trail through a Herald Place access point.

As an aside, here's a suggestion for that particular spot: If city landscapers were to cut down the scraggly brush just to the south, it would create an unobstructed view of a 19th century stone bridge underneath West Genesee Street, a bridge hidden from public viewing for too long.

Such revelations, after all, provide the basis for Creekwalk, one of those rare projects — much like the Clinton Square ice rink — that take off simply because they make good sense. Steve Buechner, at 75, is akin to the proud father. Buechner, a landscape architect, **was asked 47 years ago** by then-city parks commissioner Jim Heath to draw up initial plans for a creekside trail that would link several city neighborhoods.

In those years, the creek was walled off from Syracuse by a fence and tall weeds. In an era when civic planners were infatuated by automobiles — and too often embraced designs that choked the life from neighborhoods — Heath understood the importance of tying together urban communities for those on foot. The idea he nurtured would take almost a half-century to reach fruition, but one thing is made evident by every runner, biker or walker on the trail:

Heath, who died in a plane crash as a young man, was decades ahead of his time.

On a practical level, Creekwalk finally provides a sensible pedestrian connection between the city and Carousel Center, near the lake. "If I walk fast, I can use it to get to the mall and back during lunch," said Katie Walter, a National Grid employee who strolled the Creekwalk Thursday with her boyfriend, Carmen Mufale.

The trail was also used Thursday by a runner named Marty, whose training allowed for only a momentary pause. He said Creekwalk answers a fundamental need for downtown workers seeking exercise:

No cars.

"It opened in October, and since then we've gotten an overwhelming response, really encouraging," said Andrew Maxwell, the city's director of planning and sustainability. "The mild winter allowed people to be out there a little more than they would be otherwise, and now this warm spring is upon us, and the number of people who are using it is really impressive."

Maxwell said the next step is identifying a source for the estimated \$10 million required to connect the Armory Square section of Creekwalk with Kirk Park. And the Onondaga Historical Association is developing a sequence of interpretative signs and markers to help visitors understand how the creek and nearby landmarks influenced the city.

Dennis Connors, the OHA curator of history, is also trying to resolve one nagging design problem with Creekwalk, which entirely misses an extraordinary creekside feature — a 19th century Erie Canal bridge with elegant stone arches that is all but hidden beneath Erie Boulevard.

Buechner said original plans called for running the trail beneath that bridge, which is surrounded by land owned by National Grid. But the idea was scuttled by complications from the need for major bridge repairs. Connors said that he and OHA executive director Gregg Tripoli met this week with National Grid officials to discuss the chance of someday creating an overlook to allow easy viewing of the bridge, located roughly a block from the main Creekwalk.

"There's a swath of green space nearby, and you've got an original Erie Canal culvert that no one can see, and our thought is that it would be nice to incorporate some kind of spot where people could look down," Connors said. A spokeswoman for National Grid said the project is "a wonderful idea," but talks remain at an early stage.

As for the existing Creekwalk, Buechner said it will reach a scenic crescendo in the coming weeks. The modern version of the trail really began in the 1980s, when Buechner worked for developer Bob Congel during the restoration of Franklin Square. After Buechner explained Heath's dream for a walkway along the creek, Congel told him to add a creekside trail to the plans.

At the time, Buechner lined the streets of that area with flowering trees. He had an early vision of what runners, walkers and bikers from downtown will soon experience as Creekwalk's spring blossoms hit their peak.

"It will be about as close to heaven," Buechner said, "as you can get."