MCT finishes latest segment of 128-mile bike trail system

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▦ Published: 07 June 2015

▦ Last Updated: 07 June 2015

▦ Created: 07 June 2015

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By ALAN J. ORTBALS

The Madison County Transit District cut the ribbon last month on its newest bike trail project, the reconstruction of the 12.23-mile MCT Ronald J. Foster Heritage Trail in Glen Carbon.

Originally developed and owned by the Village of Glen Carbon, ownership was transferred to MCT in June 2012. In addition to grading, paving, signing and striping the trail, MCT also made critical repairs to 12 bridges and three tunnels.

Part of the 128 miles of scenic bikeways that comprise the MCT Trails system, the Heritage Trail runs from Main Street in Glen Carbon to Marine Village Park in Marine and

(/images/articles/june2015/p03_Bike_Trail.jpg)
The Madison County Transit District Trails now play host to nearly 400,000 users annually.

connects to the MCT Nickel Plate Trail and the MCT Goshen Trail. The $4.2 million project was funded by a $2.7 million Illinois Transportation Enhancement grant, a $300,000 grant from the Metro East Park & Recreation District, $55,000 from the Village of Glen Carbon and $1.17 million in MCT Local funds.

Madison County Transit has one of the most extensive and inter-connected bikeway systems in the country, according to Jerry Kane, managing director of the Madison County Transit District, and the only one he knows of that integrates the trails with its transit system. The district has been working on it for more than 22 years.

"On Jan. 1, 1993, we received statutory authority to own, operate and develop trails," Kane said. "That paved the way for the acquisition of abandoned railroad right-of-ways and the construction of a new network of bikeways in Madison County. Twelve days later there was a Transportation Enhancement Grant deadline. We submitted an application to develop the Confluence Trail running from Alton to East St. Louis. We got the largest award in the state and, all of a sudden, we were in the trail business."

Kane credits then-Chairman Nellie Hagnauer and the MCT Board of Trustees for having the foresight to position the transit district to be able to create the trail system. In the 19th and 20th centuries numerous rail lines were built through Madison County that funneled together to cross the Mississippi

River. In 1980, Congress deregulated the railroad industry triggering a wave of railroad right-of-way abandonments under which the right-of-way would be ceded to the adjacent property owners.

In an effort to protect these right-of-ways for possible future use, Congress amended the National Trails System Act to create a program to preserve rail corridors (called "railbanking"), through which corridors that would otherwise be abandoned could be preserved for future rail use by converting them to interim trails. Under this system, the inactive railroad route survives but is repurposed for other — potentially temporary — trail uses.

"Corridor preservation was key to the trail development," Kane said. "It served as the foundation of the right-of-ways that would allow us to expand the trail system that we have today. Since the right-of-way has been preserved, it could be used for light rail in the future. It made a lot of sense to preserve the right-of-way because one of the major expenses of a light rail extension is property acquisition especially in an urbanized area. It gave us what I believe are several possible corridors for light rail expansion and, in the interim, we have these wonderful trails that people really enjoy."

The nine trails in the MCT Trails system have become a magnet for visitors of all ages and skill levels and a sought-after amenity for new home buyers, Kane said.

A recent on-trail survey, conducted by "Trails of Illinois" revealed that the MCT Goshen Trail, just one of MCT's nine trails, averaged more than 112,000 users each year. System-wide, the MCT Trails host nearly 400,000 users annually.

Surveys also indicate that a large number of all MCT Trail users are visiting from outside of Madison County, many of whom are from outside of Illinois as well. An MCT-initiated online survey of MCT Trail users revealed that 50 percent of respondents live outside of Madison County and 26 percent live out of state.

The next major trail project on MCT's trail agenda, said Kane, is a southerly extension of the MCT Goshen Trail to link up with trails St. Clair County is working on in O'Fallon.

"We're working in partnership with the Metro East Parks and Recreation District because their jurisdiction spans both Madison and St. Clair Counties," Kane said. "There's currently no trail that joins the two counties. We've acquired 99 percent of the right-of-way. Hopefully, we'll wrap up the acquisition process very soon so that we can get started on the construction of that trail."   It's the largest contract in the 19-year history of the company, which bills itself as a Small Disadvantaged Business, a self-certification that makes it eligible to compete for certain federal contracts.

The company, which had limited presence in O'Fallon prior to winning the contract, now has a substantial one — leasing a 14,000-square-foot building on Pierce Boulevard, hiring dozens of team members and spending several hundred thousand dollars on computer equipment.

"It feels a lot like a startup," Technical Lead Jeff Peterson said of the enthusiasm in the building.

Company executive Ron Howard said the firm was expecting to have around 70 employees in place in O'Fallon at the end of May.

"We started from scratch," he said. "If we execute, which we plan to, we expect to eventually maintain around 100 FTE."

Howard is assistant vice president of Solution Engineering and Development and oversees the division that is executing the Scott AFB contract. He came to SuprTEK as a result of the new contract, after engineering and software-development stints with McDonnell-Douglas, Edward Jones, Enterprise and NCI. SuprTEK called him last fall while he was laid off and made him its first local employee, working initially at Scott.

Since then, SuprTEK has gotten three additional, smaller contracts at Scott and established the O'Fallon site.

Landing the largest of the contracts was a coup because there was a lot of competition for it, Howard said.

SuprTEK provides IT engineering and professional service to government and industry customers. According to its website, it specializes in strategic business planning and management; information security and assurance, IT solution engineering and delivery, IT operations management, health IT,

service center operations and system integration services.

Since 1996, the company has executed a multitude of contracts ranging from short-term management consulting engagements to fully-managed IT outsourcing efforts.

SuprTEK is frequently called upon as a cybersecurity provider, "one of the hottest things going right now," Howard said.

SuprTEK has other offices across the country that in the past five years have performed on more than 50 contracts for entities that included the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Army, Defense Information Systems Agency, Department of Justice, Environmental Protection Agency and intelligence groups. The company is privately owned by Brandon Park, of Washington, D.C.

While SuprTEK has several specialized technology divisions at the O'Fallon office, Howard's unit is devoted to solutions that effect all of the divisions and cuts across multiple technologies, he said.

In 80 percent of its projects, including the large one at Scott, SuprTEK serves as prime contractor. It is partnering on tech support on this project with two other companies, Science Applications International Corp. (SAIC) and Tapestry Solutions, a subsidiary of Boeing.

The contract calls for SuprTEK to do "agile software development" for Air Mobility Command. Agile development is a new methodology the industry is following that allows customers to be a more integral part of the team and provides the flexibility to meet the customer's changing priorities, ensuring a better chance of success.

"You get a rapid buy-in of what the user — the customer — actually wants," Howard said. The majority of software contracts fail in part because of a lack of frequent and transparent communication, he said.

Right now, SuprTEK is working on building a Resource Finder application that will enable Air Mobility Command to dynamically re-plan missions and manage aircrews during the execution phase. Much of that procedure is now manually intensive, and AMC is wanting to develop a system that makes it easier to change missions, move aircrews and communicate between air bases.

"We have a group at Scott AFB that manages missions all day long, every day. worldwide. They are excellent at what they do," said SuprTEK Business Analyst Wayne Keiser. "They've very good at fixing problems but what a human is not very good at, is seeing the domino effect eight missions down. That's what this (application will do). It shows eight steps down the road what could happen — as well as just today,"

Keiser pointed out that something as simple as an East Coast snowstorm could disrupt the military aviation schedule around the world. In redirecting personnel or aircraft, schedulers have to be aware of such things as work hours, airfield availability and fueling sources. Nothing is routine.

"The nature of what the military does is not routine. If it was routine it would be a civilian mission, not a military one," Keiser said.

Military missions can involve medical, military, equipment or people delivery, from hauling cargo to hauling VIPs.

As part of the team on this project, Keiser helps convert AMC requirements into technical speak so that the developers know how to design their application.

One of the two initial apps being worked on by SuprTEK is scheduled to be released for government testing in early June, and the next in late August. A previous company, based in South Carolina, had the contract for a couple of years and had made substantial progress on two of the first apps before turning it over to SuprTEK when the decision was made to rebid the contract to a more local contractor, Howard said.

To say the work is complex is an understatement. The writing of the code involves some 70-plus computer technologies. Not every person knows every technology, but every person is at least a specialist along the way.

"We've got people I'd put in the genius category," Howard said. "We made a conscious decision to hire very, very talented people."

Many — but not all — of the workers have a military background. A clause in the contract mandated that SuprTEK have an operation no farther than 20 miles from Scott AFB, which eliminated St. Louis as a

location and made it possible to hire a few more Scott veterans. One of those is Greg Schwartz, a retired colonel from the U.S. Air Force and a former pilot of C-17s, among other aircraft. He's in charge of business development, seeking out opportunities for additional contracts under Howard's division.

SuprTEK hopes to gain a foothold with other Air Mobility Command units here and across the country by going above and beyond in execution of its current contract, Howard said.

To understand SuprTEK's own mission is to understand the setup at Scott AFB. U.S. Transportation Command is the top military entity at the base, while Air Mobility Command is the top Air Force entity, with the 18th Air Force organized beneath it, and the 618th Tanker Airlift Control Center organized under the latter.

Air Mobility Command's job is to organize, train, equip, issue policy and provide operational mobility capability, Schwartz said. 18th Air Force's job is to task and execute operational and day-to-day missions. Command and control of those daily missions is done through the Tanker Airlift and Control Center, the entity with which SuprTEK is working most closely on its present assignment.

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MCT Trails definitely kick some ass.

By the way, the article appears to be cut off and a second article is stuck in there. Please fix. I was wondering why the new trail "feels a lot like a startup".

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