

# Warsaw's fitness-friendly future

## This town wants to be Missouri's most bike-friendly community

by Jim McCarty

**O**n a table in the basement of Warsaw's historic WPA-era community center, City Administrator Randy Pogue spreads out a panoramic drawing of the waterfront behind the building. Superimposed over the picture is an ambitious design that will replace a faulty sewer line and transform the area into a trailhead for hikers, cyclists and boaters.

"Come back a year from now," he says. "I think you will see some major changes. What we are trying to do is create a destination."

That statement might seem a little odd to the thousands of people who already consider Warsaw, with Missouri's two biggest lakes in its backyard, a major tourist destination. Why would the town need anything else?

Randy quickly explains: "When I started here 12 years ago, people said we have water and, of course, people are going to come to the water. But once you get them to the water you have to get them back off of it. And that's what Warsaw was really lacking — the ability to get people to come off the water and spend some money."

He recalls a story a former alderman related early in his career. "I remember him saying, 'When Truman Lake was built, we thought we were going to become a tourist destination and development would come. Well, they waited and waited and it didn't develop as they hoped. You build the lake, but you better have something else. That is why we started the downtown revitalization, combined with the Drake Harbor riverfront development.'"

Randy and his Parks and Recreation Director Mac Vorce are at the center of an effort to transform Warsaw into the state's most bicycling friendly town. Already, Mac has put Warsaw on the map for mountain bikers and trail runners, with 13 miles of trails and a stop on a mountain bike race circuit.

"Last October we had miles of mountain bike trail," says Mac. "By Dec. 20, we had 15 miles of trail out there. Now we are seeing youth in our town say, 'Hey, that might be cool.' They are riding out there and not playing video games, not being hoodlums in town. We are seeing people trail running and hiking there."

The next step is to link a series of channel-control levees into what will eventually be a 15- to 20-mile-long hiking and biking trail with a gravel surface like the Katy Trail State Park. When completed, the trail will connect area attractions such as the Truman Lake visitor's center, the Joe Dice Swinging Bridge, Lost Valley Fish Hatchery and Sterrett Creek Marina.

The trail the community leaders envision will form a wheel around Warsaw, a city of 2,070 located 30 miles south of Sedalia. Spokes on that wheel will eventually allow kids to ride their bikes to school and to soccer and baseball practices. Residents and visitors alike will be able to ride to the restored downtown area, home to fine dining and shops.

That Warsaw is moving forward on this project comes down to three things: planning, timing and cooperation. In 2001, city officials began working on a strategic plan.

They identified various problems the community faced. One was a sewer system designed to handle 375,000 gallons of wastewater that was often deluged by millions of gallons during a heavy rain. Another was health issues the community felt



needed to be addressed with wellness programs the trails could offer. Opportunities also were discovered. For example, Randy had spotted the network of levees while studying aerial maps in the Corps of Engineers office at Truman Dam. Their potential as a trail system became obvious when he walked every mile.

Drury University sent a team of architecture students to Warsaw to focus a master plan. "They did the visioning," Randy says. "They met with the public, the business people. They compared us to other communities. Then our engineers came in and put it to reality."

As a result of the planning process, Warsaw found itself with "shovel ready" projects at the same time the economy soured and federal stimulus money became available. Warsaw was approved for two grants from the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act. One will help fund rebuilding the waterfront once known as Steamboat Landing, including a boardwalk section of the trail and docks where boaters can tie up and enjoy the downtown.

A second grant will improve the aging sewer system, leaving the town prepared for future growth. "When the stimulus money came up, we were in

position with all of this ready to go," Randy says. "All we had to do was pass bonds for our sewer. The vote was 134 yes and 11 no. Over the years, people have come to understand that we are planning this. They are confident we are not just jumping in."

Under the stimulus plan, project bids must be released before the end of the year, and work must start by February.

The stimulus funds were just one part of the puzzle. A cooperative Corps of Engineers project manager put in a request for "handshake funds" from the Kansas City district headquarters.

The city and the Corps each agreed to share portions of the trail project, with the corps laying the trail bed to

Katy Trail specs. Close to 9,000 feet of rock has been laid, and another 9,000 remains to be done.

"It's a handshake, not a handout," says Dennis Wallace, Truman Dam operations manager. "Our headquarters office puts tools in place to use so we can work with the city. This is something that really makes a lot of sense. We combined our resources and made some great improvements. Now we can see a lot of other opportunities to improve fishing access and expand the trails."

The cooperative effort also involves the Missouri Department of Conservation and its Lost Valley Fish Hatchery, which includes trails the city hopes to link to the new ones.

When completed, the new trails will lead to a healthier community and opportunities for visitors interested in outdoor activities other than the hunting and fishing that have been Warsaw's mainstay since before Truman Dam was completed. "You gotta use what you have," Mac says. "We are not going to be able to bring in multi-million dollar theme parks. We are not going to have casinos. So what do we have to offer? Water, trails, walking and running paths, mountain bike trails. This health thing is not a fad anymore. A lot of people are planning their vacations on what they are going to be able to do physically while they are there. Randy's vision has brought that to Warsaw."

For more information on visiting Warsaw, call 660-438-5522 or log on to [www.welcometowarsaw.com](http://www.welcometowarsaw.com).



Mac tests his skills on the mountain bike park added last year. Already the town has become a destination for off-road cyclists and trail runners.