

## Cycling Research

### **THERE GOES THE NEIGHBOURHOOD...**

Safe off-road (segregated) cycle paths between key locations are generally seen as a good idea. But when paths are proposed away from the road (e.g. through reserves or along railway corridors) there are often many concerns by neighbours about the problems that the path might attract, such as crime, vandalism, litter, and so on. More specifically, many homeowners often fear that the neighbouring pathway will adversely affect their property values. Is this concern justified?

In the US, the development of "rail-trails", i.e. paths along abandoned or current railway corridors, is a big industry and a number of references have cropped up to explore the kinds of problems mentioned above. The Trails & Greenways Clearinghouse (1999) identifies the significant economic benefit that can arise from popular new trails to small communities. It also identified a number of studies that confirmed the positive effect on property values that trails tend to have. Another review of over 300 rail-trails by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (1998) found that crime was not a significant factor along the routes. Only 3% of trails had experienced any "major" (personal) crime and only a quarter reported "minor" crime (burglary, vandalism, litter, etc), with crime rates very low compared with national rates. Indeed, many respondents cited heavy trail usage as a crime deterrent in areas of former isolation.

Lagerway & Puncochar (1988) investigated an 8-year old urban pedestrian/bike rail-trail in Seattle. An estimated 600,000 cyclists annually used the 7-mile long track, which was not patrolled and had no special lighting. Interviews were carried out with nearby residents, real estate agents, and local police. About 70-88% (differing between groups) felt that proximity to the trail was an advantage or had a neutral effect when selling homes. Fewer than 10% of homeowners believed they would sell their home for less because of the trail, with houses close but not immediately adjacent to the trail generally having a more positive reaction. Homes along the trail did not experience a higher rate of break-ins or vandalism. Perhaps most significant of all, 100% of the residents along the trail felt that it should be kept open.

Another study of three trails in Denver, carried out by Macy & Alexander (1995), gave similar findings. Residents were generally either positive or neutral in their outlook towards property values and public safety. Indeed, over 20% were positively influenced by the trail in their decision to move to the area. The most serious security issues were graffiti and tagging at underpasses, but none of these incidents were focused towards other trail users and usually occurred when there were no other people on or around the trail.

Sustrans have carried a lot of research of the likely impacts of their national cycle network in the UK (Sustrans 1999). Their studies found that people who live close to a cycle path do not suffer problems and most actually enjoy having the facility nearby. Landowners who have a path on, or adjacent to, their land reported similar views and again, real estate agents and property owners alike generally saw such paths as an amenity, not a drawback. The community benefits of useful transport links, recreation options, promoting health & fitness, and possibly additional business trade were all identified too.

Sustrans noted that visual appearance of the finished product will have an effect on the perceived and actual benefits. Often the land used has been derelict or poorly maintained before, so a new pathway can generally improve the appearance of the district. The effect on privacy for adjacent homeowners also has to be considered; selective use of fencing and planting can usually resolve both surveillance and trespassing by path users. Of course it has to be remembered that having additional eyes on a nearby path can also be a great security tool for both the path and its neighbours.



The studies mentioned above contain numerous other examples of the effects on specific locations. There is a common thread in all of it that points towards segregated paths producing a positive experience overall for all parties. And this applies whether we're talking about an inner-city path or a long-distance tourist trail.

### References

- Lagerway P. & Puncochar B. 1988, "Evaluation Of The Burke-Gilman Trail's Effect On Property Values And Crime". *US Transportation Research Record 1168*.
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