

MillionMile Greenway: Nonprofit envisions greenways far and wide

By Maria Saporta
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Imagine a million miles of greenways across metro Atlanta, the state and the nation — connecting hundreds of communities with parks, waterways and trails.

That's the vision of the newly formed MillionMile Greenway, an Atlanta-based nonprofit that will work with communities to help them develop green spaces and trails that will interlock with greenways in other communities.

The champion behind this vision is Jim Langford, a longtime entrepreneur and environmentalist.

Between 2004 and 2007, Langford served as state director of the Trust for Public Land and was instrumental in the organization's investment in buying parkland near the 22-mile Beltline around Atlanta's core.

TPL, in partnership with the Nature Conservancy, also helped preserve hundreds of acres of green space along the Chattahoochee River from Helen to Columbus.

Langford has observed the skyrocketing popularity of land conservation and greenways by the public. DeKalb, Gwinnett and Cobb counties have all passed multimillion-dollar bond referendums to preserve open spaces and parks in the midst of rapid development.

But Langford also realized there was a void in the region's environmental landscape. Some of the fastest-growing counties outside the core didn't have the organizational ability to implement a green space plan or an acquisition program.

"Looking at the spectrum of the 25 metro counties out there, only four or five are strong enough to do a bond referendum," Langford said. "I started to look around to see who could go out and help those other communities."

Although there are several conservation and environmental organizations in the state, none was designed for an outreach effort with the outlying suburban counties still trying to form a green space plan. Most organizations, like TPL, were "transaction-oriented," designed to help buy specific tracts.

So after he left TPL a year ago, Langford began talking to other environmental and civic leaders about creating an organization that could fill that void.

Langford drafted Ryan Gravel, who as a student at Georgia Tech first proposed the concept of the Beltline.

Gravel's response to Langford was: "This is like the Beltline, only bigger."

In June 2007, MillionMile Greenway was incorporated as a nonprofit.

It just announced its board: Gravel, who now practices urban design with Perkins+Will; Jesse Glasgow, program manager for Photo Science, which is helping develop technological tools for communities; Angela

Graham of Silverman Construction Program Management (and formerly with TPL); Phillip Hoover, a partner with Smith, Gambrell & Russell; Tom Parker, a vice president for Georgia Transmission Corp.; Susan Rutherford, manager of the Greenway Division for the city of Atlanta's Department of Watershed Management; Bo Spalding, a founding partner of the Jackson Spalding communications firm; and Robert Turner, who practices transactional law at Stites & Harbison.

Langford also is on the board and serves as MillionMile Greenway's president. He continues to serve as a consultant for Linger Longer's Jekyll Island redevelopment proposal (which will include a network of greenways with bicycle and pedestrian paths).

The organization has just launched its Web site: [www .millionmilegreenway.org](http://www.millionmilegreenway.org). It also is beginning a fund-raising and membership drive. It has received more than \$100,000 in pro bono services.

And it already is working on several pilot projects.

For example, the group is working with Newton County. Using mapping technology made available by Georgia Transmission, it is helping the county and its residents locate the optimal areas for greenways.

The group also is working with community leaders to provide the expertise to implement greenway plans.

"This needs to be a community-focused, citizen-focused initiative," Langford said. "We want to empower local communities."

In addition to the software and technical expertise, the organization is working on a tool kit to give its community partners on the various ways to conserve land and build greenways.

As the community groups evolve and partner with their local governments, Langford said the intent would be to connect them with TPL and other conservation groups to help acquire land, and to work with the PATH Foundation to help build bicycle and pedestrian trails.

"People love trails, and they're very inexpensive to build," Langford said. "We want to help build the organizational infrastructure in each community so they can build parks and trails."

MillionMile Greenway also has other pilot projects under way. It is working with Georgia's coastal counties to create a greenway initiative. It also is working with three counties near Athens on a similar plan.

And Langford has been working with areas in Northern Virginia on a greenway system that connects Civil War battlegrounds. The Virginia and Georgia coast pilot projects are being done in concert with the East Coast Greenway Alliance.

"We want to sow seeds everywhere," Langford explained.

For him, success in five years would be to work on projects in a number of states, help create numerous local greenway initiatives, have a membership base in the thousands and create interconnecting greenways between the various local organizations.

It's all about watching communities grow organically, Langford said. "We want people to create greenways in their own backyards."

The need for more greenways and parks is becoming even more critical, given that metro Atlanta continues to lose about 50 acres of green space every day.

MillionMile Greenway's vision can capture the imagination of communities — large and small — throughout our region, our state and our nation.