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Will new push finally close the parkways'

missing link?

Planners seek to fulfill a 124-year dream to complete the missing link in the Minneapolis parkway system.

By [Steve Brandt](#), Star Tribune


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A \$450,000 effort will be announced today to tackle a task that has eluded generations of Minneapolis park planners -- closing the missing link in the Minneapolis parkway system.

It has been 124 years since the first plans were sketched for the parkway ring that became the Grand Rounds, as the parkways are now known. Not even legendary park builder Theodore Wirth could get the job done.

The parkway gap between Stinson Boulevard in northeast Minneapolis and the Mississippi River is less than 3 miles as the crow flies. Yet it is a design problem fraught with densely populated neighborhoods, railroad lines and a huge university. Previous plans have been derailed by a national depression and World War II.

But former park commissioner John Erwin, who will lead a citizen committee that will advise the Park Board on a route, remains optimistic.

If a route is found, the Park Board plans to ask the Legislature for construction money in a bonding bill request. "It's going to be our No. 1 legislative priority," said Walt Dziedzic, the area's park commissioner.

Dziedzic is one of a slew of local elected officials who will gather today on Ridgeway Parkway, overlooking the gap, to announce their plans. But the most important figure there will be U.S. Rep. James Oberstar, D-Minn. "Oberstar's role is getting federal funds," said state Rep. Phyllis Kahn, DFL-Minneapolis. "He's like Mr. Bicycle in Congress."

Erwin said he is going into the route-finding enterprise with the assurance from the Park Board that all possibilities are open.

At least half a dozen routes have been identified since H.W.S. Cleveland unveiled plans for the circular ring of Minneapolis parkways in 1883.

All have fallen into a corridor between the present-day routes of Interstate Hwy. 35W and Hwy. 280.

Cleveland drew a route down Stinson, 18th Avenue SE. and SE. Oak Street, the eastern border of Minneapolis in his time. Wirth sketched several gap-closing plans between 1928 and 1946. He focused on an 80-foot right of way that cut through the Marcy-Holmes and Como neighborhoods. The Great Depression intervened, and the war claimed men and materials. The postwar period emphasized recreation over parkways.

The effort revived briefly in 1971 when a citizen committee recommended to the Park Board both a temporary route cutting through Dinkytown and a more permanent parkway around the rail yard nearer Hwy. 280.

The most recent route possibility was raised in the mid-1990s in a master plan for redevelopment of the industrial areas adjoining the rail yard.

Essentially, a planner faces two choices for how to complete the parkway. One is ramming it

through residential neighborhoods and the congested university area, as Wirth tried. That risks arousing intense opposition in areas where many homes are just 30 feet from the curb.

There are fewer political risks in an industrial-area route. But crossing tracks requires an expensive bridge, and a more eastern route, where the rail yard is narrower, would lengthen the parkway.

Dziedzic can testify to the difficulties of getting park improvements through established neighborhoods. It recently took him 18 months to help the Park Board negotiate a four-block section of path past homes on St. Anthony Parkway.

Those difficulties could multiply with a section of new parkway, plus pedestrian and biking paths, that is almost 3 miles long.

"I'm not 100 percent sure that public resistance won't rise up again," Dziedzic said.

But Erwin said the confluence of political support and the opportunity to openly sift through alternatives augurs well for the chances of finding a route.

"It's a fantastic project to work on," he said.

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