Yes, In My Backyard!

By Rebecca Stidham

Although people generally love parks and trails, it is not uncommon for citizens to add the caveat, "but, not in my backyard." So often is this argument presented to city councils concerning a variety of public issues that the term "NIMBY" (Not in My Back Yard) has been coined to describe such project opponents.

The Parks and Recreation Department in Columbia, Missouri, conducted an important trail survey — "Impact of the MKT Trail on Nearby Property Owners." The results of that survey overturned the presumption that people do not want a trail adjacent to their property. The purpose of the study was to survey the owners who occupied properties next to the MKT Trail to determine how the participants perceive the impact of the MKT Trail on their property and lives. The 213 owners of the properties within 200 yards of the MKT Trail were invited to participate in the survey. The response rate was 70 percent, with 149 completed surveys. The survey results were very positive, with the majority of residents expressing satisfaction with living near the trail (94 percent), while also indicating the trail improved their quality of life (89 percent), and stating that they would choose to live near a trail again if they were to move (72 percent).

Tony Harris

The MKT Trail was the perfect trail about which to collect such information as it is a well-established trail that has been in existence for more than 25 years. It was one of the first 10 rails-to-trails projects in the United States and is the city of Columbia's gateway to the 240-mile cross-state Katy Trail. Responding residents had owned or occupied their property for an average of 18 years, adding historical weight to the validity of the survey.

One of the problems that trail developers face is the anticipated fears of adjacent property owners, which can quickly turn said owners into trail opponents. To help give trail proponents ammunition to counter that threat, the following question was asked on the survey of those who purchased/occupied their home before the trail was installed: "Compare your initial reaction to the idea of living near the MKT Trail to how you feel about living near the trail today. Would you say that living near the trail is better or worse than you expected it to be?"

Thirty-seven of the respondents had occupied/purchased their homes before the MKT Trail was developed. Fifty-three percent of these respondents reported that living near the MKT was better (15 percent indicated "much better," while 38 percent indicated "better") than they expected and 47 percent reported it was the same as they expected. No one selected the choice of "worse than I expected" or "much worse than I expected."

Perhaps the most compelling piece of the survey was the residents' answers to the following open-ended question: "What would you say to people who are concerned about a trail being established near their homes (or other comments)?"

Ninety-eight respondents (66 percent) commented. Most neighbors expressed their love for the trail and indicated that they have not had any problems living near it. Hopefully, their positive comments can be used to help allay some of the imagined fears of would-be opponents. Here is a sample of their comments:

Don't be concerned. You would love it.

We had initial resistance, but today we couldn't find one person who is opposed.

The trail has improved safety in our neighborhood because we know our neighbors better.

…We love the trail and bought our home because of the close proximity to trail.

It greatly increases our enjoyment of the outdoors.

Participants were also asked about their personal use of the trail, what effect they think the trail has on the resale value of their house, whether or not the trail had influenced their choice to purchase their home, how they would rate the benefits of the trail, and to indicate their level of concerns regarding the trail. Overall, respondents ranked the benefits high and the problems low.

The survey responses from these close-proximity residents are encouraging to trail advocates. In essence, in regard to having a trail next to their property, the majority responded, "Yes, in my backyard!" Perhaps, a new acronym —"YIMBY" is in order.

The "Impact of the MKT Trail on Nearby Property Owners" report was prepared by Hua Bai, M.S., and Sonja Wilhelm Stanis, Ph.D., from the University of Missouri. The full report can be found online at www.como.gov (search: "MKT Trail Survey").

Rebecca Stidham is the Assistant to the Parks and Recreation Director for the city of Columbia, Missouri, Parks and Recreation Department (becky.stidham@como.gov).