

GREATER BIRMINGHAM'S

# TRAIL MAGIC

THE POWER OF THE RED ROCK  
TRAIL SYSTEM

BY JAVACIA HARRIS BOWSER



Alabama's Red Rock Trail System is a planned 750-mile network of trails, parks, bike lanes and sidewalks in Jefferson County being spearheaded by Freshwater Land Trust. Learn more: [rtc.li/rrts](https://rtc.li/rrts).

View a map on the inside back cover of this issue. •

**Length:** 750 planned miles; 127 completed miles

**County:** Jefferson

**Trail Uses:** Walking, running, biking, inline skating; wheelchair accessible



To people unfamiliar with the Crestwood South neighborhood in Birmingham, Alabama, the Clairmont Avenue Walking Trail might look like an ordinary sidewalk. But Elizabeth Murray knows better.

She knows this 1-mile walkway has the power to connect communities.

"We're really proud of it," enthused Murray, who serves as vice president of the Crestwood South Neighborhood Association ([crestwoodsouth.com](http://crestwoodsouth.com)), one of the organizations that pushed for the trail.

The Clairmont Avenue Walking Trail connects the Crestwood South and Crestwood North neighborhoods, giving residents easy access to a way to get in some exercise safely and away from traffic in a neighborhood that was built with no sidewalks.

Murray can look out the window of her home and see that the trail is in constant use. "People walk their dogs, they walk with their kids, they run," she said. "And people from surrounding neighborhoods use it as well."

Primarily funded by the City of Birmingham, the Clairmont Avenue Walking Trail is part of a much larger project that has been in the works for over a decade: the Red Rock Trail System ([rtc.li/rrts](http://rtc.li/rrts)), a network of trails, parks, bike lanes and sidewalks in Jefferson County, Alabama. Currently, 127 miles of trails have been completed, but a 750-mile greenway master plan is in the works.

The plan's projects range from smaller endeavors, like the Clairmont Avenue Walking Trail, to much larger undertakings, such as the Five Mile Creek Greenway ([rtc.li/fmcg](http://rtc.li/fmcg)) in northern Jefferson County that, once complete, will be one of the longest trails in central Alabama. Spanning 5.5 miles now through a lush, tree-lined corridor, the Five Mile Creek Greenway is already connecting cities. Residents can walk, run and bike between the northern Birmingham suburbs of Gardendale and Fultondale, thanks to the flat, crushed-gravel pathway.

In Birmingham itself, the Kiwanis Club's Birmingham chapter ([kcob.org](http://kcob.org)) sponsored a trail to connect the southern part of the city with Vulcan Park, a green space built around the city's famous Vulcan statue; as the Roman god of fire and forge, it symbolizes the city's industrial heritage. Birmingham's nickname, "The Magic City," is another nod to its rapid growth as an industrial powerhouse in the South, and many of its railroads from that era are the foundation of the city's burgeoning trail system today. In the city's core, Railroad Park ([rtc.li/railroad-park](http://rtc.li/railroad-park)), a 19-acre recreational public space, celebrates the city's railroad culture both past and present, bordering active railroad lines with elevated vantage points for trainspotting.

On the west side of the city, the Ensley-Pratt Greenway ([rtc.li/ensley-pratt](http://rtc.li/ensley-pratt)) connects its eponymous neighborhoods with a hard-surface trail that winds along Village Creek. Another trail in the network, the High Ore Line Trail ([rtc.li/high-ore](http://rtc.li/high-ore)), starts in Midfield at the Jefferson County Western Health Center and runs 3 miles along an old railroad line, where it ties into one of the county's most popular amenities, Red Mountain Park, a 1,500-acre wooded expanse.

### No Neighborhood Left Behind

In an area once plagued by government-sanctioned segregation and discrimination, the Red Rock Trail System has a no-neighborhood-left-behind approach. Trails and green spaces have been created or are planned for every area of Jefferson County.

In 2010, Freshwater Land Trust ([freshwaterlandtrust.org](http://freshwaterlandtrust.org)), the facilitators of the trail system project, partnered with the Jefferson County Department of Health and received funding through a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention grant to develop a system of greenways and bicycle and pedestrian facilities. The purpose of the plan was threefold: to promote active and healthy lifestyles among residents; to encourage alternate modes of transportation; and to help protect regional waterways.

But this is only part of the story. The Red Rock Trail System is also connecting the communities of Jefferson County, and not only geographically.

The Greater Birmingham area consists of 35 different municipalities in Jefferson County alone, and for decades, those cities have either operated in silos or competed with one another.

In 2019, a group of city councilors from Birmingham and surrounding cities such as Mountain Brook, Bessemer, Vestavia Hills and Homewood started meeting monthly—at first just to get to know one another and, later, to discuss issues such as recycling, teen vaping and census participation. Eventually, the group became a formal organization—the JeffCo Councilors Coalition—and one of the group's primary goals is to help push the buildup of the Red Rock Trail System.

"We all see the big picture," said Jennifer Andress, a City of Homewood councilor and member of the county coalition. "We can all stand in our own little individual municipalities, or we can link hands and look at the bigger, regional projects that we can advocate for—that's what brings people to this area, that's what drives the economy."

### Unique Ecosystems

Jefferson County lies within a dramatic geography of 1,119 square miles made up of the southern extension of the Appalachian Mountains. The valleys and ridges of the area create a drainage system of several rivers and creeks, such as the Locust Fork of the Black Warrior River, the Cahaba River, Turkey Creek, Five Mile Creek, Village Creek, Valley Creek and Shades Creek. The Red Rock Trail System master plan—led by design firm Goodwyn Mills Cawood, who organized dozens of stakeholder meetings throughout Jefferson County to discuss prospective trail routes—is organized into seven corridors that parallel those ridges and valleys. Freshwater Land Trust hopes that the project will not

THE JONES VALLEY CORRIDOR, ONE OF SEVEN IN THE RED ROCK TRAIL SYSTEM, BOASTS SOME OF THE MOST POPULAR TRAILS IN THE GREATER BIRMINGHAM AREA.

PHOTOS: (Bottom) The entrance to downtown Birmingham's Rotary Trail features a 46-foot-tall sign modeled after the historical "Birmingham the Magic City" sign. (Opposite page) The District 8 Walking Group meets every Thursday morning for a 1.5-mile trek.

only reconnect neighborhoods but also help people get reconnected with nature.

"We are a land trust, first and foremost, which means we were formed for the purpose of conserving land that would preserve water quality and habitat," explained Carolyn Buck, director of the Red Rock Trail System at Freshwater Land Trust.

The trails would help stave off developments that get too close to—and thus threaten—water sources.

"People need to be able to appreciate nature and the unique ecosystems that we have here in Alabama," Buck said. And she believes the trail system can help make that happen.

**"We see families, we see the elderly, we see people pushing their babies—within the first couple of months, we had over 300 people using the trail a day."**

Carolyn Buck, Red Rock Trail System Director, Freshwater Land Trust





## MOVEMENT MOTIVATION

Birmingham City Council member Carol Clarke is on a mission to get the residents in her district moving. That's why she started the District 8 Walking Group ([rtc.li/d8-walking-group](https://rtc.li/d8-walking-group)) that meets every Thursday morning for a 1.5-mile trek. And, to encourage participants to make walking a regular habit, the University of Alabama Minority Health & Health Equity Research Center provides swag bags with information on how walking can improve health.

But her walks have another objective, too. Clarke's district, located on the west side of Birmingham, will one day be home to the Valley Creek Rails to Trails, part of the Red Rock Trail System, and she uses the walks to make residents aware of the pending project, inviting Freshwater Land Trust—the facilitators of the trail system—to share with the group their vision to create a 750-mile greenway spanning Jefferson County.

When completed, the Valley Creek Rails to Trails will begin near the Birmingham Crossplex, a multipurpose athletic facility that hosted several events during The World Games 2022, and connect to the city's popular Red Mountain Park and Midfield's High Ore Line Trail.

"I want to get them excited about it," Clarke said—excited about walking and about one day having a new place to get in those steps. •

"There are all these birds and different wildlife that are utilizing that [area], and if you slow down and you get on the trail, you realize how much we really have, and it's really special," she said of the Valley Creek Corridor.

### City Connections

The Jones Valley Corridor boasts some of the most popular trails in the Greater Birmingham area. In downtown Birmingham, there's the Rotary Trail ([rtc.li/rotary-trail](https://rtc.li/rotary-trail)), a gift to the city by the Rotary Club of Birmingham ([birminghamrotary.org](https://birminghamrotary.org)), one of the largest Rotary clubs in the world. Completed in 2015, the \$3.5 million project transformed a vacant and blighted railroad right-of-way into a four-block pathway and community asset—now a popular place to snap pictures.

Picking up where the Rotary Trail ends, the Hugh Kaul Trail ([rtc.li/hugh-kaul](https://rtc.li/hugh-kaul)) connects Birmingham's Avondale neighborhood to the city's downtown district. Completed in 2022 and primarily funded by the Hugh Kaul Foundation, it gives cyclists a safe way to commute while also offering a space for recreation.

"We've got a lot of railroads in Jefferson County, and we had heard that a lot of bikers had been severely injured while trying to roll over some of the rail lines," Buck said. "And also, we just have really fast traffic. Now, we see families, we see the elderly, we see people pushing their babies—within the first couple of months, we had over 300 people using the trail a day."

Claire Speegle, development coordinator for the Red Rock Trail System at Freshwater Land Trust, started a running group that meets each week on the Hugh Kaul Trail.

"It's right outside our office," Speegle said. Each day she can look out and see why she and others at Freshwater Land Trust do the work that they do. The trail is well lit, making it safe for evening runs, and it ends at Cahaba Brewing, a popular brewery in town.

"That's always really nice to have a spot for everybody to hang out afterwards," Speegle said.

### Good for Business

In 2021, at the request of Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey, the Hoover Institution submitted a report to the Alabama Innovation Commission, providing recommendations on how the state could become a national leader in fostering scientific and technological innovation. The report concluded that one of the best ways to attract highly

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David Fleming,  
President and CEO,  
REV Birmingham





PHOTO: Railroad Park in Birmingham, an attraction along Alabama's Red Rock Trail system

skilled workers to the area is to have vast outdoor recreation offerings. Thanks to the Red Rock Trail System, those offerings continue to expand.

"We have seen the impact of well-designed and well-placed trails in Birmingham—from the Rotary Trail and the hiking and biking trails that wind up to Vulcan," said David Fleming, president and CEO of REV Birmingham ([revbirmingham.org](http://revbirmingham.org)), a nonprofit focused on revitalization and economic development to make Birmingham a more vibrant place. "Popular and well-utilized trails can lead to a response in the development market, as we have seen commercial and residential projects spring up all along the Rotary Trail. Even more important is what they can do for attracting our workforce to Birmingham."

REV is finding creative ways to use the trails to promote local businesses, such as putting together the Magic City Brewery Trail, which highlights local breweries located along some of the most popular trails in the city.

"Promotional trails like that can be used by residents and visitors as a fun resource to get to know the city," Fleming said. "We have plans to add more topical trails to [downtownbhm.com](http://downtownbhm.com) soon to support our local businesses and highlight the places that make Birmingham unique and authentic."

### The Trail Ahead

One of the projects Freshwater Land Trust is working

on next is the Valley Creek Rails to Trails, a pathway for Birmingham's west side that would provide more recreation and transportation options for low-income residents. U.S. Congresswoman Terri Sewell recently secured over \$42 million for 15 community projects in Alabama's 7th Congressional District, and \$400,000 of that will go toward the rail-trail.

Buck said Freshwater Land Trust is also working with the City of Birmingham to create a trail through Birmingham's historic Civil Rights District that would make the area more biker and pedestrian friendly. The trail would also connect to City Walk ([citywalkbham.com](http://citywalkbham.com)), a 1.5-mile linear park in downtown Birmingham located under the Interstate 59/20 overpass bridges, and eventually to Birmingham's Smithfield community.

While city leaders, community organizers and the staff at Freshwater Land Trust are proud of big projects that have been birthed from the Red Rock Trail System, Andress said she still looks to the little things to remind her why this project is needed. In the Shades Creek Corridor, there is a small pond surrounded by a short trail that always catches her eye.

"I'm telling you that if you drove by there right now, there are people walking around that trail," she said. "And to me that is the very definition of 'if you build it, they will come.' I really believe when you put infrastructure in place like that, people use it." •



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