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## **Walking trails key to healthy lifestyles**

MOBILE, Alabama — According to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, parks and trails are an important part of a city. In a well-designed community, homes, parks, stores and schools are connected by safe walking and biking routes. Such routes allow all residents a chance to enjoy the outdoors while getting physical and mental health benefits.

The Mobile County Health Department (MCHD) and Women Making a Difference (WMD), its public health advisory board, have worked for many years to promote physical activity among all residents. Discussions for a walking/biking path along Three Mile Creek from Langan Municipal Park to the Mobile River began in the 1980s. WMD got things rolling in 2013 by applying for and receiving a grant from the Sybil H. Smith Charitable Trust.

“These walkways are like the highways of the world,” said Dr. Bernard H. Eichold II, Health Officer for Mobile County. “It is an interconnection between human beings. You can use these trails regardless of age, race or social status.”

While Mountain Brook is one of the most affluent communities in Alabama, their paths link Birmingham and most of their suburbs. More than 100 miles of trail have debuted in the eight years since the Freshwater Land Trust and the Jefferson County Health Action Partnership began developing a greenway master plan.

“Trails bring vibrancy to cities and to people,” said Mary Beth Brown, Communications Director for Freshwater Land Trust. “They encourage us to get outside, to walk or bike to work instead of driving, to check out restaurants and parks and small businesses in neighborhoods we’d otherwise miss.

“Trails connect us to nature, enhance our infrastructure, and improve our physical and mental health. Advocating for more trails, more connectivity, is a no brainer.”

The Red Rock Ridge and Valley Trail System has a goal for 750 miles of trails and paths that follow six corridors, mostly along waterways. When completed, it would connect all of Jefferson County. A grant from the CDC aimed to reduce obesity and tobacco use helped the Jefferson County Department of Health fund the 148-page plan for the Red Rock system.

Atlanta’s Beltline reported 1.87 million users on its 3-mile Eastside Trail in 2017. The bike trail along the Charles River is adjacent to the most expensive property in Boston. The Riverwalk in San Antonio is a major tourist attraction. The 125-mile Great Allegheny Passage from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C., is located on abandoned railroad beds.

“Many other cities like Atlanta and Birmingham are providing safe places for people to exercise,” said Dr. Eichold. “Having walking trails through neighborhoods is a great benefit to the residents.

“Our Three Mile Creek trail will make Mobile a healthier place for everyone.”