

# Concrete Thoughts

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As Richard Leonard points out in his From the Desk column this month, Mobile's Trail Program is taking shape. But why, oh why have the powers that be settled on concrete as a building material? If the trails are meant to be used by runners and walkers you couldn't ask for a more unforgiving surface. Pick up any beginning runners' guide or check out any new runners' web site on the net and you'll find the same advice: Don't run on concrete!

From Asimba.com: If you are running a course where you have a choice between concrete sidewalks and an asphalt bike path or roadside, always choose the asphalt.

From a US Army physical fitness site: Since injuries can also be caused by running on hard surfaces, soldiers should, if possible, avoid running on concrete.

From kids' sports site Kick.com: Avoid rock-hard surfaces like concrete sidewalks and aim instead for grass or dirt trails. The idea, of course, is to run where the ground will absorb more shock, instead of passing it along to your legs. Try to be consistent. A sudden change to a new running surface can itself be a cause of injury. Whatever you do, though, get off the concrete. It's approximately 10 times as hard as asphalt, and is easily the worst possible running surface.

Runners World agrees, as evidenced by its ranking of surfaces on a scale of 1 (awful) to 10 (best):

Grass 9.5

Wood chips 9

Dirt 8

Cinder track 7.5

Track 7

Treadmill 6.5

Asphalt 6

Sand 4

Snow 2.5

Concrete 1

## **Follow the money**

So, if you're trying to get injured, concrete is indeed your #1 choice. But what if you're trying to save money in constructing a recreation trail?

According to a survey conducted by the Colorado State Parks' State Trails Program, asphalt is a much cheaper building material than concrete both in the short term and in the long run. According to the report, "the cost of

a 10 foot wide concrete trail is approximately \$35 per linear foot versus \$20 per linear foot for a comparable asphalt path... The long term (or life cycle costs) depend on the need for and extent of maintenance. One issue that is sometimes overlooked in the design phase is that when concrete requires maintenance, it is very costly, whether this is a slab replacement or joint grinding. Maintenance of an asphalt trail can frequently be done by agency employees at a reduced cost."

Now, I don't know much about joint grinding—except that you'll get a lot of it in your knees and lower back when running on concrete—but I do know that if a particular building material in a municipal project is cheaper than other alternatives, and the end users of the project actually prefer the cheaper choice, then the decision should be a no-brainer.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for the trails project. It's good for Mobile, certainly good for the Pacers, and very cheap for the city to implement—the federal government doles out 80% of the funds to bankroll bike and pedestrian trails through provisions of The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). I'm just uneasy that such a great asset for the city isn't going to achieve its full potential because somebody somewhere in the chain of command has a thing for concrete. I'm not suggesting that the planning commission is in cahoots with the concrete contractors—or the local orthopedic association for that matter—because I don't think that's the case at all.

I'm sure there's a seemingly logical reason for going with a concrete surface. (Better traction? Cooler during the summer?) But whatever the planners' rationale for choosing concrete over asphalt, for our sake I hope the planning commission's final decision—like the trails already constructed at Langan Park and across the bay— isn't written in stone.

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