



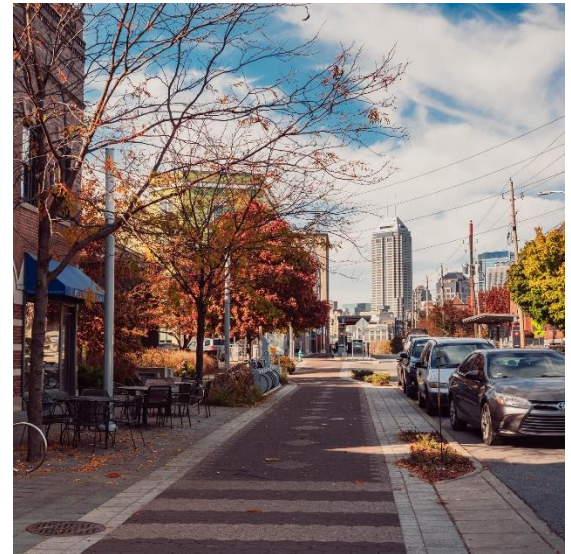
The Indianapolis Cultural Trail: Ten Years of Context Sensitive Design Connecting Communities

Introduction

Just over a decade after its completion, the [Indianapolis Cultural Trail](#) (ICT) has become a fixture of the Indianapolis downtown used by residents and visitors alike. The trail was recognized from the outset for its [use of context sensitive solutions and design practices](#), and it still provides a safe place to walk, roll, and cycle while contributing to placemaking and economic development of neighborhoods along the trail. In 2024, the ICT will expand to new parts of the city, providing the ideal moment to review its impact and evaluate the design choices that made it so successful.

Trail Background

The original ICT is a paved eight-mile bicycle and pedestrian path in downtown Indianapolis completed in 2012. The trail was first built with the financial support of the Central Indiana Community Foundation and private fundraising, in partnership with the City of Indianapolis, which provided right-of-way in the street. The ICT is currently managed by a non-profit organization, the [Indianapolis Cultural Trail, Inc.](#) (ICTI) that works extensively with the city. The ICT runs alongside the roadway, and the city gave the project one lane of the street to build on, ranging from four to 12 feet wide on different blocks. The trail is 12 feet wide for half its length where it operates as a shared path with mixed bike and pedestrian traffic, and splits into a sidewalk and an eight-foot-wide bike path lined with planted buffers the rest of the way.



The Indianapolis Cultural Trail runs through downtown Indianapolis. Credit: ICTI

The ICT runs through six cultural districts in the city, connecting important historic, commercial, and artistic nodes in Indianapolis. ICTI commissioned \$4 million in site-specific artwork as part of the trail construction, and the trail features 10 art installations including a [sculpture tracing the Black history of Indianapolis](#), [artwork made from replicas of windowpanes on Indiana Avenue](#), and [transit shelters covered with original poetry](#). In 2023, ICTI signed a partnership with [Forecast Public Art](#) to expand the art program on planned and existing trail segments.

Ten Years of Trail Use

The City of Indianapolis and the ICTI have been inspired by the ICT's success as a project. They hope it can serve as an example to show that mid-sized cities can build active transportation infrastructure that improves the community.

The ICT created accessible connections and activated different neighborhoods in new ways. Trail use has been significantly higher than originally expected, and it serves as both a recreational path and a transportation link for commuters. Notably, during the pandemic locals frequented the trail as a respite and a safe active



space. The ICT also saw more activity than anticipated outside the downtown area. It created accessible connections to mixed use residential neighborhoods and retail options outside the city center, linking residents and visitors to different parts of the city. The community has been supportive of the ICT. They consider it a gold-standard trail, and the ICTI has gotten multiple requests for extensions in the past decade.

To build on the enthusiasm, the ICTI established partnerships throughout the community. They worked with the Pacers¹ Bikeshare system, which has located all 50 stations on or near the trail, to provide free bikeshare for healthcare workers who use it to commute to one of the hospitals that the trail touches. In May 2024 Pacers and ICTI expanded this pilot into [IndyRides Free](#), a program offering free annual bikeshare memberships for all Marion County residents.

The ICTI also coordinates community projects and activities along the trail such as a free concert series for residents, exercise classes, and art installations. The trail also hosts volunteer cleaning and gardening sessions. So far over 1,000 different volunteers have spent a total of 5,000 volunteer hours a year on events on the ICT.

In addition to human connections, the ICT strengthened economic development in the city. [Economic impact studies showed](#) that the ICT was linked to an increase in property values and catalyzed \$300 million in development construction from 2008 to 2015. Since its creation, the trail has provided transportation to large events from sports games and professional conferences to the city's iconic auto race, the Indy 500. Stores along the trail saw an uptick in sales, since visitors could easily connect to locally-owned small businesses outside the downtown core. and [Surveys directly linked increased demand from trail users to 40-50 new full-time jobs at those businesses.](#)



The ICT provides safe routes through the city. Credit: ICTI

Key Project Elements and Lessons Learned

Project Successes

The ICT is especially resilient because of its joint governing structure. The trail is managed by the non-profit ICTI, with the City of Indianapolis as a financial and operational partner. This partnership allows the two entities to complement each other. The ICTI advocates for and focuses on the trail, bringing extra community outreach and fundraising to promote excellent trail operations. The city provides expertise to move projects forward and

¹ The U.S. Government does not endorse products or manufacturers. Trademarks or manufacturers' names appear in this document only because they are considered essential to the objective of this document.



supports the ICTI with additional capacity and technical assistance for project management and contract negotiations. It also links the ICT to additional government resources and connects the trail to larger active transportation networks in the region.

For example, the ICTI monitors development projects adjacent to the trail, and provides advocacy when new construction encroaches on the trail right-of-way along the street or blocks access to a trail entrance. The City is responsible for right-of-way enforcement but has to spread its effort over 400 square miles of infrastructure to monitor and maintain. Indianapolis created a trail maintenance unit in the Department of Public Works in 2023 to have a dedicated team for weather treatments and brush, debris, and litter clearance on the trail. The ICTI works on maintaining the cohesiveness of the ICT to prevent private development or other construction activities from impacting trail use in the public right-of-way.

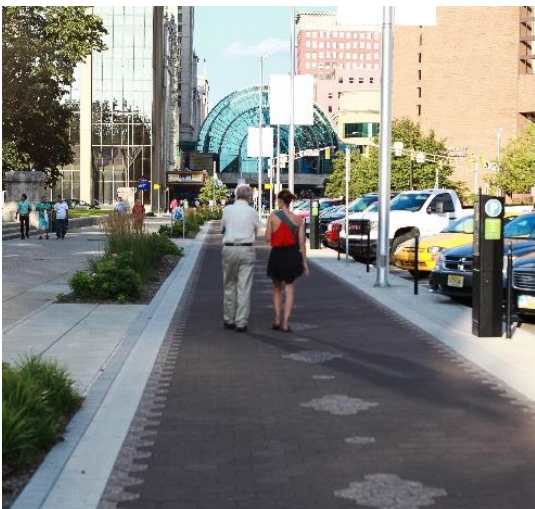
The public-private model also unlocks different types of funding.

The ICTI raises capital from private and philanthropic donations from individuals and institutions to pay for construction and to support an endowment for the trail. [Their innovative financing for the original trail construction combined \\$27.5 million in private funds with \\$35.5 million in federal transportation grants.](#) Now, the ICT is expanding with three new trail segments, one of which opened in summer 2024. In the original construction period, the City donated a lane of roadway as right-of-way for construction of the trail. For the upcoming expansion, the City of Indianapolis committed \$5 million in Tax Increment Finance (TIF) funds for the first two segments and an additional \$3 million in TIF funds for the third. The City is the lead in applying for Federal grants, such as TIGER (from past legislation) and now RAISE funds, which partially funded initial construction of the ICT. The ICTI pre-funded a portion of the new expansion and budgeted for ongoing



The ICT is lined with plantings to provide a greenery and stormwater retention. Credit: ICTI

maintenance from the endowment to reduce impact to the City's operations budget. The expansion will also draw on \$21 million from the Eli Lilly Foundation and Lilly Endowment, \$18.2 million from the Indiana Economic Development Corporation, \$1.5 million from the Indianapolis Neighborhood Infrastructure Partnership, and \$1 million from the Elevance Health Foundation. While the unconventional funding approach has added complexity, it has also resulted in financial stability.



Design and distinctive pavers set the ICT apart from the street. Credit: ICTI

Another strength is the ICT's role in the larger Indianapolis trail network. It is a hub for the City's greenways, with regional trails serving as the spokes. The ICT's success brought in \$120 million in new investment funds for adjacent and connecting greenway expansion. The City is now working with the State of Indiana to connect the ICT and local trails to state parks to form an even larger recreational network.

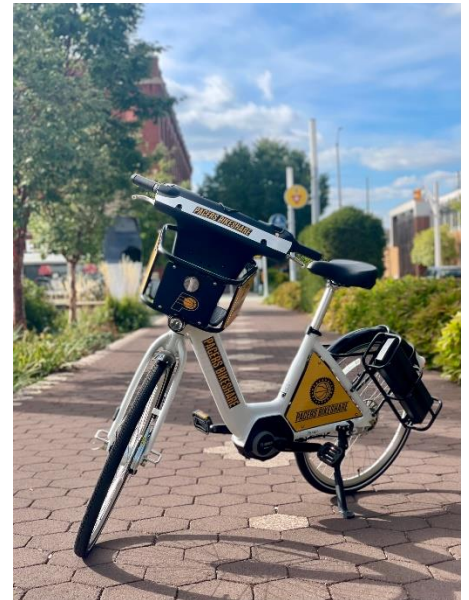


Challenges

One concern for the ICT is data collection. Indianapolis does not have a trail or bike count program, but crash data is provided by the regional [Metropolitan Planning Organization](#) (MPO). The ICTI and the City tested trail counters on the ICT, but the counters need to be permanently installed to gather more consistent data about the number of current users.

The partnership between Indianapolis and the ICTI provides strengths. It also brings its own management challenges. The City and the nonprofit are still working to find a smooth, reliable way to coordinate on issues so that activities such as right-of-way enforcement happen seamlessly. Both entities are committed to building the administrative structures to support their long-term partnership and the future of the trail.

The City and ICTI are working together to address challenges regarding trail sustainability and the best way to ensure its longevity in Indianapolis. This strategic planning work is ongoing, and includes considerations such as a zoning designation for the trail or a city trail-oriented development policy. Building the trail was a huge success. ICTI's new goal is protecting and funding it over the next decade and beyond at the same level.



Pacers bikeshare locates its stations on the trail. Credit: ICTI

What To Consider When Building a Trail

The City and ICTI's experience with the ICT illustrate three takeaways for other jurisdictions looking to replicate Indianapolis' success.

- Ensure that maintenance of the trail is considered at the onset of the project. Ask what funding sources are available to construct and maintain the infrastructure.
- Work carefully and proactively with any project partners—within or outside government—to establish structures that support long-term financial and administrative stability.
- Include placemaking as part of the project. Strive to reflect the needs, art, and culture of your community to best serve users.

New Trail Expansions

The three new trail segments use largely the same design as the original length. The Indiana Avenue and South Street segments broke ground in 2021; Indiana Avenue opened in June 2024, and South Street will be completed in late 2024. The White River expansion was announced in May 2023, with construction planned to begin in 2024 and completed in 2026. The new trail segments will have minor adjustments to turning radii and bollard locations; new stormwater retention planters will be built into the trail; and some pavement features will be changed at specific cultural locations to highlight each site with a custom color and design. The largest addition is the 10-year plan to develop a program for more public art along the trail.

The [expansion](#) to the South Street trail will connect the ICT to major institutions including the convention center and football stadium, adding an active transportation connection for major professional and sporting events.



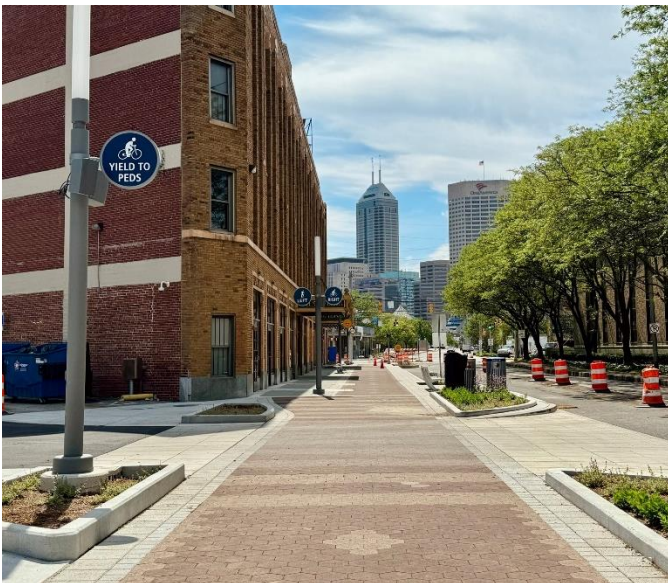
The third and newest expansion across the White River will connect communities in west Indianapolis that are cut off from the rest of the city by highways and the river to the downtown core. This expansion is part of the Indiana [Next Level Trails Program](#), a \$180 million investment in trail networks in the State.

The Indiana Avenue trail expansion [opened on June 20, 2024](#) and links the existing trail network to the Indiana University Health University Hospital, the new Innovation District known as 16 Tech, and three other local greenways. It adds new active transportation and recreation opportunities to one of Indianapolis' historically Black neighborhoods on Indiana Avenue and runs in front of the historic Madam CJ Walker Legacy Center. ICTI, with input from the community, designed a trail plaza in front of the center with interpretive signage and decorated pavement patterns to highlight it as a point of significance.

ICTI selected expansion locations that were hubs of commerce, art and culture, and the City of Indianapolis identified development potential. For example, one of the new segments runs through a stretch of empty parking lots. The ICT can bring new interest and opportunities to that neighborhood and be a “beachfront” for growth there. The White River expansion also has the potential to connect residents to underutilized parts of the waterfront. The City identified neighborhood stakeholders and engaged with community organizations and large institutional stakeholders like Eli Lilly and Indiana University for this expansion. The nonprofit led the fundraising for these expansion projects. ICTI refrained from expanding the trail until they had a significant

percentage of funding for ongoing maintenance through the endowment. However, the trail was already popular with many residents. When ICTI team members attended community meetings, people approached them to ask if the trail would be coming to their neighborhood. The White River expansion announcement was welcomed by the community, which is eagerly anticipating its opening.

The ICT is a point of pride for the City. Residents know that the trail will bring better infrastructure to their neighborhood. As part of the project, more traffic lights will be added, sidewalks will be fixed, connections will be expanded, and the areas will be made more comfortable for all road users. Ultimately, Indianapolis found that the trail is its own best promoter, providing for a more complete active transportation network while blending the fabric of the city and communities into the design, safety and mobility of trail users.



New trail pavers outside the Madam CJ Walker Legacy Center on the Indiana Avenue ICT expansion. Credit: ICTI