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Madison, Wis.

He's proof one man makes a difference

They call him Captain Tenacity.

And if you've had the pleasure of walking or cycling on the splendid pedestrian-bike path that runs along the newly restored, mile-long Yahara River Parkway, you'll appreciate why.

Before the 12-year parkway project was officially completed June 9, biking from the north shore of Lake Monona to Tenney Park on Lake Mendota usually took 15 minutes, notes Captain Tenacity, aka Ed Jepsen, the

Rob Zaleski
UP CLOSE



driving force behind the undertaking. It also meant risking your life crossing heavily traveled East Johnson Street and East Washington Avenue, he says.

Now, the trip takes five minutes at most. "People tell me they can't believe how much quicker this makes it," says Jepsen, who last

week was acting like a proud papa as he showed off the scenic 101-year-old parkway, which connects the Marquette and Tenney-Lapham neighborhoods.



DAVID SANDELL/THE CAPITAL TIMES

Ed Jepsen (right) is widely hailed as the driving force behind the completion of two bike path underpasses that link lakes Mendota and Monona on the isthmus. Jepsen and his wife, Kristin Groth (left), had a party at their house after the bridge under East Washington Avenue (background) opened June 9.

Though the 56-year-old east side resident emphasizes the project was a "great team effort" involving hundreds (he gives

special credit to recently retired Ald. Judy Olson, neighborhood activists Richard Linster and

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Up Close

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Bob Queen, and his colleagues in the Friends of the Yahara River Parkway, a nonprofit group), the general consensus is this was Ed's baby.

Which explains why Jepsen and his wife, Kristin Groth, threw a party at their Oakbridge Avenue home shortly after the June 9 ribbon-cutting ceremony that was attended by Mayor Dave Cieslewicz, assorted city staffers and about 60 neighbors and parkway advocates.

"Ed is such a great asset because he had a clear vision of how the neighborhoods could be linked by the parkway," says David Flesch, a Dane County court commissioner and Tenney-Lapham neighborhood resident. "He went to all the planning meetings, lined up all the political support, got the neighbors involved. He planted the trees, watered the trees. He did everything."

Jepsen, who in his other life works for the Department of Natural Resources, estimates that he's contributed more than 5,000 hours to the project since it was first proposed by the two neighborhoods in the early 1990s and approved in 1997 by a city steering committee that Jepsen co-chaired.

At that time, the parkway was "like a series of sausage links that were pinched by the bridges (at East Johnson and East Washington)," Jepsen says. "This project opens the links up. Now there's no impediment each time you come to a bridge."

That's because the project features two new underpasses: a tunnel that runs under the East Johnson Street bridge at Tenney Park and another, wider underpass beneath the handsome, new Prairie-style bridge on East Washington

Avenue.

"It's made a huge difference," says Molly Reineck, who was jogging on the path one recent morning. Reineck, a 28-year-old social worker, says she and her fiancé, Reed Damon, recently purchased a home in the Tenney area and now use the path to bike to restaurants and other businesses on Williamson Street.

One quibble: "I wish they'd put more lights on it, because it's really dark at night," she says.

The total cost of the project was roughly \$4.3 million (\$2.7 million of which were federal funds).

And while Jepsen is the first to admit that that's not cheap, he suggests it's small potatoes when you consider the benefits for east side residents.

"I think you have to ask, 'What do we want the city to be?'" he says. "And if you live on the isthmus, you're very sensitive to the issue of traffic. That's why isthmus residents generally are very supportive of mass transit, commuter rail, the trolley idea and whatnot."

"The concept here was to have a greenspace from lake to lake that would be accessible for both boaters and people who walk and bike along it."

Still, there were some formidable obstacles to overcome, Jepsen says.

Among them: securing the necessary funding, mostly through grants; persuading city officials and engineers to go along with what the neighborhoods wanted; and alleviating the concerns of residents and business people who questioned whether it made sense to convert a large section of Thornton Avenue — which had served as a popular shortcut for drivers wanting to get from Williamson Street to East Washington Avenue — into a bike path-greenspace.

Jepsen says he understood the concerns.

"Change is always difficult,"

he says. "But as I said at the opening, if you're going to have a great city you've got to have great infrastructure. And that's not just roads and bridges, it's also greenspace and transportation systems, the things that knit neighborhoods together."

Jepsen acknowledges that some people are flabbergasted when they find out how much time he devoted to the project. What was the incentive?

"OK, if you want the truth, I'm obsessive," he says with a laugh. "I guess deep down I've always wanted to be an urban planner. And my philosophy is, if you really care about something, then get involved and do something about it."

In fact, if there's one thing he's learned over the years, it's

that there's nothing quite as fulfilling as volunteering, says Jepsen, who also helps out at the Luke House and the Interfaith Hospitality Network, both of which serve the homeless.

Besides, you never know where it might lead, he says.

Case in point: In 1998, while attending a parkway planning meeting hosted by the Urban Open Space Foundation, he noticed an attractive woman taking notes. Intrigued, he later called her, introduced himself and asked her out.

Two years later, Captain Tenacity and Kristin Groth were married.

"See what can happen when you volunteer?" he says.

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AND A COMMENT FROM THE COMMUNITY:

Our readers

Sound Off!

ED JEPSEN "Ed Jepsen is a great asset to both neighborhoods and the city as a whole. We truly appreciate his commitment (and his wife's support). This is a fine example of why quality of life issues are so important to our community." *Editor's note: Ed Jepsen worked to get two underpasses built so people can bike or walk from Lake Monona to Lake Mendota along the Yahara River Parkway without crossing East Johnson Street and East Washington Avenue in the Tenney-Lapham neighborhoods.*