

Spotlight on Treeline Collaborators: Heather Seyfarth



*Heather Seyfarth and Nan Plummer
at Bridge Community Café*

Heather Seyfarth is the Treeline’s liaison at the City of Ann Arbor. We work closely together, but this interview was a delightful opportunity to learn more about Heather’s career and inspirations.

You have a long job title: Special Projects Manager and Community Engagement Specialist in the Systems Planning Department. First of all, what is Systems Planning?

It’s a brilliant idea, actually—unique to Ann Arbor. Systems planning takes a multidisciplinary approach to projects that have aspects of several public services arenas—sustainability, water, roads, solid waste, forestry—in addition to the architecture, design, and engineering practices we think of as “urban planning.” We were founded as a think tank of sorts to look at the city wholistically and plan projects from that perspective. In my view, it’s what planning should be.

What special projects are you managing right now?

The Treeline and the Center of the City are my two major projects.

What is community engagement in the context of urban planning? Why is it important?

Community engagement creates the best environment for serving citizens. If we don’t understand the people’s needs and take them into account, why bother to go forward with a major infrastructure project? Equitable engagement is extremely important so that citizen-generated projects can be considered, and voices can be heard. Engaging the community means that this is a collaborative process, one that lets us incorporate cultural connections—the history of Allen Creek, for example, with the Treeline. It’s exciting from a planning standpoint.

You have very interesting training—a BA and MA in sociology, and two more master’s degrees in Urban Planning and Social Work, both from the University of Michigan. How did your interests evolve? How do they come together in your practice at the City?

My study of sociology included a thesis on social geography—how we impact places and vice-versa. There’s a tension between these forces that means that cities aren’t just containers for our lives. Bringing this understanding to urban planning—how to create and preserve the built and natural environments in combination—makes it into an intentional, rational process to help people realize their potential.

Are there trail projects in other cities that might serve as examples or inspiration for all of us working on the Treeline?

There's really no trail quite like the Treeline! But the Indianapolis Cultural Trail and the longer Monan Trail, a rail-trail that intersects with it, are both good examples of trails can connect various layers of the fabric of the community. For the Treeline and Ann Arbor, some of these layers are the history of Allen Creek and of how the idea for the trail came about; the multiple functions that the trail will serve, including stormwater mitigation, recreation, and very practical non-motorized transit. It's very exciting that the Treeline will elevate non-motorized transit, literally and figuratively. It's an investment of resources in shifting the balance away from the automobile and putting people first.

When you get outside, what do you like to do?

I could walk all day long in a city I enjoy! I also like to bike, to spend time by the water, in the forest, and in downtowns.

What's one thing you wish more people knew about the Treeline?

I'd like people to know more about what the history of the trail and of what it is meant to honor—Allen Creek, the city's first important waterway.