



# After bridge tragedy, Twin Cities race goes on

## New women-only 10-mile road race still set for Sept. 23

Ask any race director about the obstacles they face when putting on an event. If something can go wrong – from suddenly exorbitant city fees, portable toilets that don't show up, unplanned for road construction, computer result glitches, shortages of volunteers or bad weather – something will go wrong.

You can prepare yourself for many less-than-ideal scenarios or at least deal with them. But then there are all-out disasters for which even the best-laid emergency plans can't counter.

For example, there were questions about whether to proceed with the New York City Marathon in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Races in New Orleans were canceled for months after Hurricane Katrina hit.

Then last month came the collapse of the Interstate 35W bridge over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis killing at least nine people. In light of the massive rescue and recovery efforts undertaken, it seemed inconsequential what affect the tragedy would have on two running races that were meant to cross that bridge.

But for the organizers of the Twin Cities Marathon, the need to reroute the Twin Cities 10-mile was soon clear.

More difficult would be changing the course of the inaugural Women Run the Cities, a women-only race. Whereas the Twin Cities 10-mile is a point-to-point course, the Women Run the Cities – also a 10 mile race (with an ancillary 5K run-walk and 1 mile youth run) – was slated to be an out-and-back loop course twice crossing the point of the bridge collapse on the west side of the river.

With part of the fallen bridge still on the West River Road as of press time, Women Run the Cities faced the daunting task of trying to find an entirely new 10-mile course in just over a month.

To add to the chaos, Women Run the Cities was scheduled to start and finish on the historic Stone Arch Bridge, a pedestrian and bicycling bridge over the Mississippi. It is the next bridge over from where the I-35W bridge stood. As of this writing, the organizers were still unsure about where the race headquarters and course would go. Nevertheless, they insisted the race would take place as scheduled on Sunday, September 23.

Co-chairwomen Meghan Huber and Mary Sands are first-time race directors but they're defi-

nately up to the challenge of putting on a road race. I, for one, believe they'll meet these latest challenges with tenacity.

I had planned to write a column about Women Run the Cities since first hearing about it. I don't want to take away from the original idea or intent of the race by dwelling on the challenges the organizers now face. The impetus and goals for the race were something of great interest to me. What local woman wouldn't want a T-shirt declaring "Women Run the Cities"?

Huber and Sands both work in the commercial real estate industry. Huber is a construction manager and Sands is a chemical engineer working in environmental investigation. Both are also members of Minnesota Commercial Real Estate Women (MNCREW).

Both in their 40s, Sands ran her first marathon while in college while Huber didn't start running until she was in her mid-30s. They share a passion for the sport and an interest in sharing their enthusiasm with women of all ages.

When MNCREW was looking for new ways to promote their organization, as well as encouraging networking among members, they landed on the idea of a road race. One early idea was to run a race where participants could pass by numerous commercial real estate projects being developed in the area. That early idea quickly gave way to an idea that eventually blossomed into a 10-mile race for women only.

"Remember the days of the Bonne Bell?" Sands asked, referring to a women-only 10K and 5K in Minneapolis that lasted from the early '80s through the early '90s. "There were tons of women at those races."

Recalling that atmosphere, Sands said, "This was kind of a convergence of all those kinds of things. The whole 'women thing' seemed kind of natural (for our group)."

Huber wanted the MNCREW event to stand out in an already very full Twin Cities road-racing calendar.

"We were interested in having a feel for our event. We wanted it to be a different draw," she said. "This sounded really exciting to us, the women-only part of it. Other 10-mile or 10K races are for men and women, which is fine, but we thought this had the chance to be a really popular

and special thing."

The 18-member race organizing committee, made up entirely of MNCREW member volunteers, eventually decided on the 10-mile distance. "We thought that was a little bit more distinctive. We wanted participants to have the opportunity to challenge themselves," Sands said, "and it was a distance in between a 10K and half marathon. We thought some newer runners would find it more doable than a half marathon. We are trying to get women to think they can sort of stretch and challenge themselves a bit."

Placing their race just two weeks before the Twin Cities Marathon was no accident either. Huber says they wanted to give another opportunity to people who don't get into the TC 10 Mile or other races either because they don't sign up in time or they aren't chosen through lottery systems in place at some larger races.

Once per week, from eight to 25 women meet at a designated building near the river for MNCREW weekly training sessions. "We have walkers, runner/walkers and runners at various levels go out" running together, Sands said. "Not only are they able to train together, but it's also a networking forum for members. It's a different way to get to know people," Sands said.

She added, "Our idea for the training was that we would never 'drop' anybody. Every woman who shows up always has a buddy to train with."

The idea of inspiring other women to take up running led Sands and Huber to the Ann Bancroft Foundation's Dare to Dream program.

The entry form spells out the charitable connection: "The majority of the proceeds from Women Run the Cities will benefit the Ann Bancroft Foundation's Dare to Dream mini-grants program, an organization dedicated to supporting women and girls to realize their highest dreams and potential."

"The Dare to Dream program resonated with us and our goals," Sands said. "It was again the idea of challenging ourselves, just as we did with our idea for the length of the race. It's about going outside your comfort zone," says Sands. "With Ann [Bancroft] – here's a woman who's continually challenging herself and not always succeeding. But she continues to go out and challenge herself."

"For the younger girls, we're interested in setting an example, creating an environment where all women and girls see the possibilities for themselves," Sands said. As of mid-August, the foun-

dation has said that Bancroft herself plans to participate in the 10-mile race.

The race committee is poised to deal with any problems arising from the women-only directive. "It's funny because I think when we talked about it, originally, we thought, 'It sounds so good – sisterhood, bonding; women love to help each other,'" Huber said. "Hopefully the guys will understand."

There have been challenges to women-only running events in the Twin Cities. In 1995 a law was enacted allowing for such events to legally take place.

Women Run the Cities made sure they were on sure legal footing before proceeding. The organizers stress that their goal has never been to exclude men; rather they wanted to encourage women with a less intimidating women-only event.

Girl power at its finest.

The co-chairwomen want men to know they are more than welcome to volunteer and to show up as spectators along the course.

As for where that course will be, participants will need to check the event website, [www.tslevents.com](http://www.tslevents.com), for updates. Huber and Sands are really hoping to be able to use the Stone Arch Bridge and adjoining park for their venue and start/finish area.

Huber and Sands are respectful of the fact that lives were lost in the bridge collapse and they are looking for ways to pay their respects to what they call a "wound" to the Twin Cities. Because the Stone Arch Bridge is so close to the scene of the tragedy, they understand that some people might find the event a bit unnerving.

At the same time, the duo remain passionate about their event. "We have the drive and determination to continue

on passionately with it," Huber said. "We will figure out how to have it work and still be a great event."

### This just in:

Here, at last, is apparently the final word on the event. After two days of meetings with members of the Minneapolis Parks Board people, the organizers of Women Run the Cities announced the route August 16.

The runners will not step foot on the Stone Arch Bridge after all, but they will be crossing two major bridges over the Mississippi at Franklin and Lake streets.

The Women Run the Cities course will start and finish at Minnehaha Park in Minneapolis.

Here is the course description: The start/finish line on Godfrey Road will be the same for both the 5K and 10-mile races, and the courses will be USATF-certified.

The 10-mile racers will go north on West River Road about 4.5 miles to the turnaround (about .6 miles north of Franklin bridge), south on West River Road to the Franklin Street bridge, then cross to East River Road, over the Lake Street bridge then south on West River Road to the finish.

The 5K route will also head north on West River Road but only 1.55 miles to the turnaround and back to the finish line on Godfrey Road.

The 1-mile run/walk will turnaround on West River Road 0.5 miles from the start. ■

*Teri Dwyer is a St. Paul, Minnesota-based freelance writer. She's already signed up for the Women Run the Cities 10 Mile and is eagerly anticipating this estrogen-filled event, wherever the course takes her.*

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