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More public input sought on multicounty trail **Residents in Gaston, York counties can review the latest route options for a planned 'green interstate.'**

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Last spring, the public had a first shot at shaping a massive regional trail described as a "green interstate."

People spoke up in a series of meetings about where the multi-county Carolina Thread Trail should go and what sections would allow such activities as horseback riding or hiking.

This month in another round of meetings, residents in Gaston and York (S.C.) counties will be able to see those suggestions laid out on maps to review route options.

Organizers say the design effort is still collaborative, and more suggestions from the public are encouraged as the trail continues to take shape.

"We'll be funneling more feedback into the batter again," said Cecily Durrett, spokeswoman for the Catawba Lands Conservancy, the lead agency behind the project. "This is a work in progress."

The idea to build a trail connecting the 15 counties that make up the Charlotte region was first proposed three years ago. The trail will link cities, towns and regional attractions and also preserve natural areas.

So far, organizers have raised about \$17 million in private donations that will be divided among the counties and be used to leverage more funding from state and federal grants.

The project pioneers – Gaston and York (S.C.) counties – were each given \$50,000 to begin the planning.

Gaston's trail will lead from Lincoln County in the north to York County in the south. Such issues as how it looks, where it goes and what it's made of are all up to the community.

In a series of four meetings that began in late March, residents were invited to give their input about the project.

David Fogarty, a member of the Gaston 20/12 trail committee, said about 80 Gaston residents came out to share their ideas. Some were concerned their property might be taken away to build the trail. But Fogarty said that once they were assured that wouldn't happen, the focus shifted to how to connect the trail to the most important places in Gaston County in the most affordable way.

Discussion also touched on taking advantage of existing rights of way for water, sewer and power lines. Key potential connection points along the trail included Crowders Mountain State Park, Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden and the Educational State Forest on Mountain Island Lake.

"People also wanted to connect with the towns," Fogarty said.

Gastonia, Mount Holly, Belmont, Cramerton, Kings Mountain and Cherryville have existing greenway systems or have networks in the planning stages. Any or all could be connected with the main trail.

At the upcoming meetings, dubbed "open houses," residents can see all the suggested routes, along with the preferred one, on conceptual maps. Staff members will be at each station to answer questions or take additional suggestions from the public.

In August, the Gaston and York thread trail steering committees will review the information collected at the "open houses." The next step: presenting a master greenway plan to elected officials in the fall.

"Once communities adopt the plan, it will allow us to apply for state and federal grants," Fogarty said. "The trail is not something that will be built in one or two years. It will take some time, but you've got to start somewhere."

<http://www.charlotte.com/gaston/story/707913.html>