

Thread Trail weaves communities together

Network of trails, which will be open to all, could be antidote to 'nature deficit disorder' affecting many of today's children.

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Imagine a network of greenways, trails and conservation corridors creating continuous pathways covering the entire Charlotte region, easily accessible to all 2.4 million residents.

That's the dream of the Carolina Thread Trail, conceived as a set of pathways to be knitted together over time. Communities would designate the location of their own trails. In an asphalted age, with open field and forest fast disappearing, the trails could prove a powerful catalyst for conservation that many localities might otherwise never undertake.

The concept sprouted from the ashes of Voices and Choices, a regional citizens group that had proposed a shared trail. When it closed in 2004, the Foundation for the Carolinas began trying to determine a regional rallying cause. It picked the regional trail idea, inviting the Catawba Lands Conservancy and The Trust for Public Land to help plan.

Significant early money came from the Foundation for the Carolinas (\$2 million so far), Duke Energy, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Wachovia and Bank of America. The central idea still is to engage counties in planning, owning and controlling their own trails.

Mecklenburg County has 43 miles of Carolina Thread Trails on its official map, with 10 miles already built. With Thread Trail grants of \$50,000 to \$60,000 each, the Catawba Lands Conservancy has helped Gaston and York counties start a process to engage residents, determine trail routes, acquire land and build trails. The hope is to undertake parallel processes regionwide.

Will the trail be for *everyone*? The question raises both hopes and fears. Among lower-income or minority populations, there's hope for a quality recreation resource built for *them* as well as the affluent. Conversely, some landowners fear the trails will be crime corridors. In response, police chiefs are speaking at hearings, educating the public that once an area is well-used, crime rates fall.

One powerful argument: Today's children – constantly “wired” and auto-conveyed – lack exposure to the natural world. They have what author Richard Louv terms “nature deficit disorder.” He argues that lack of time to explore nature on one's own as a child can lead to childhood (and adult) obesity, attention disorders and depression. A nature trail near home can be an antidote.

In Gaston County, 13 jurisdictions that historically didn't work together partnered successfully on the project. Bill Carstarphen, chief executive of Pharr Yarns in McAdenville, is enthusiastic that the trail will pass through 1,300 acres and 3 miles of riverfront that his firm owns.

Many developments – around Lake Norman, for example – sealed off natural treasures to all except private buyers. One big plus for the trail, says Dave Cable, executive director of the Catawba Lands Conservancy, is that it will not only open big parts of riverfront to the public, but will help people recognize how important land conservation and shared use can be.