

Opinion

Citistates report: Carolina Thread Trail one possible pathway

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Imagine a network of greenways, trails and conservation corridors, interconnected to create a continuous network of 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 as communities join the effort and designate the location of their own trail systems. In an asphalted age, with open field and forest fast disappearing, the trails could prove a powerful catalyst for conservation that many counties and communities might otherwise never undertake.

The concept, ironically, sprouted from the ashes of Voices and Choices, a regional citizens group that first suggested how a shared trail could add to the two-state region's quality of life. In 2004-05, the Foundation for the Carolinas decided Voices wasn't gaining enough constituency and quietly withdrew its funding and initiated a discovery process to determine a rallying cause. It decided on a regional trail idea, inviting the Catawba Lands Conservancy and The Trust for Public Land to shape the action plan.

Significant early money came from the Foundation for the Carolinas (to date, some \$2 million), from Duke Energy, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Wachovia and Bank of America. But the central idea was, and is, to get the counties enthused and engaged, planning, owning and controlling their own trails and figuring how they can connect to neighboring jurisdictions.

Mecklenburg County already 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 plunge into a process of engaging community members, determining the trail routes, acquiring land and building trails. The hope is to undertake parallel processes regionwide, building on recent grant awards to Chester County, S.C. and Cabarrus County.

Will the trail be for everyone? The question raises both hopes and fears. Among lower-income or minority populations, there's hope that a quality recreation resource is — unlike more exclusive alternatives — being built for them as well as the affluent. Conversely, some landowners have feared that the trails will be crime corridors. The response: Police chiefs are showing up at local hearings, educating the public that once an area is accessible and well-used, crime rates fall.

One powerful argument being used: the sparse exposure to the natural world that today's constantly auto-conveyed, soccer-mommed, "wired" children receive represents what author Richard Louv calls "nature-deficit disorder." Lack of time to explore field and stream on one's youthful own, Louv argues, is often a precursor to such disturbing childhood (and adult) disorders as obesity, attention disorders and depression. A nature trail near home can be the perfect antidote.

In Gaston County, 13 local jurisdictions that historically hadn't worked together successfully partnered on the project. Bill Carstarphen, chief executive of Pharr Yarns in McAdenville — one of the nation's last mill villages — is enthusiastic that the trail will pass through 1,300 acres and 3 miles of riverfront on the South Fork of the Catawba his firm owns.

Many developments — around Lake Norman, for example — sealed off natural treasures to everyone 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 major sections of riverfront to the public, but will help people in the region recognize how important land conservation and shared use can be for their future.