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Greenway coming west?

Proposal would create trail from uptown to U.S. National Whitewater Center

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Lakewood Community leaders in western Mecklenburg have handed in a proposal for a major greenway system across that portion of the county.

The proposal asks the Mecklenburg Park and Recreation Department to modify its master plan to include a trail from center city Charlotte to the U.S. National Whitewater Center, winding through Lakewood along the way.

The proposal also calls for Lakewood's neighborhood park to be redeveloped as a regional park with mountain bike and hiking trails.

"The biggest piece is obtaining recreation infrastructure for the west side," said Dave Nichols, Lakewood Community Development Corp. executive director.

Nichols and other neighborhood leaders spent more than two years working with the Park and Recreation staff to develop the proposed greenway trail.

Other participants were Lakewood residents and youths, Michael Harper of the Lakewood Neighborhood Association, Harry Johnson of Trips For Kids, Tom Matthews with Carolina Trail Blazers, and Dave Cable with Catawba Lands Conservancy.

Their proposed trail would allow pedestrians and cyclists to travel for roughly 12 miles along a combination of city streets, park and creek-side trails, and along what are currently undeveloped and private properties.

The proposed route starts at Ray's Splash Planet at West Fifth Street near Irwin Avenue and continues west to Frazier Park to Martin Luther King Jr. Park to a proposed greenway in Lakewood to the proposed Paw Creek Greenway to Little Rock Road Regional Park to the Whitewater Center.

The actual route between those trail destinations would be determined if the proposal is included in the master plan.

The county would need to acquire multiple properties to complete a trail to the Whitewater center.

"This is all very conceptual," said Julie Clark, senior greenway planner. "What we like is that he's (Nichols) helping to create a vision for a connection through the western part of Mecklenburg County, which is something that doesn't exist today."

The group's proposal is timely. The Park and Recreation department is in the process of updating its master plan, as it does every five years.

Park and Recreation staff reviewed the proposal and has submitted it for inclusion in the proposed master plan update, which goes before the county commissioners for approval in May.

One strength of the proposal, Clark said, is that group members relied on approved land-use plans to help them draw a course for a greenway trail.

It incorporates bike lanes proposed or planned by the Charlotte Department of Transportation as well as city sidewalks.

The proposal also incorporates improvements for Lakewood Park recommended in the city-approved Lakewood Area Plan.

The group also consulted with the Catawba Lands Conservancy, the lead organization for development of the Carolina Thread Trail, a regional network of greenways and trails that ultimately is expected to link 15 counties.

To make the plan more compelling, a Lakewood neighborhood alliance and Trips for Kids have a \$15,000 grant from REI, an outdoors outfitter, to assist the Carolina Trailblazers in building mountain biking trails in the expanded Lakewood Park.

"They've done their homework to make sure that it was based on adopted plans and they were connecting with the right agencies, the city and county and Carolina Thread Trail," Clark said. "It was impressive."

Without a doubt, creating a trail that spans western Mecklenburg makes it more likely that Lakewood's park will get improvements the community wants.

The park resides along the eastern third of the proposed trail and is about three miles from the center city.

The group's proposal asks the county to redevelop the neighborhood park and expand it into a regional park.

The group proposes a greenway trail along Stewart Creek through the expanded park. It would allow bikers to travel to or from the center city in about 15 minutes. They could ride mountain bike trails in Lakewood Park.

"Our neighborhood plan included a small expansion of our neighborhood park," Nichols said. "They did not go as far as we have to developed detail in the park trail system and all of that. This is taking what had been approved in theory and adding to it."

Nichols said including a well-connected greenway trail in the master plan would allow his organization to move forward with a push for the improvements at Lakewood Park.

The group is especially anxious to start acquiring land to expand the park.

"The land and the opportunity to buy it will disappear within a short period of time," Nichols said. "This needs to be a high priority on the master plan so we don't lose this opportunity for connectivity."

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