

15-COUNTY WIDE PROJECT

Carolina Thread leaders seek input to assure happy trails

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Would you like a bike trail to Crowder's Mountain?

How about a walking path to Daniel Stowe Botanical Garden?

Or maybe you could care less about trails, as long as they don't cross your property.

Whatever your opinion, the masterminds behind Gaston's portion of the multi-county Carolina Thread Trail project want to hear it. Residents are invited to learn about the project and give input during a series of four public meetings that start Tuesday.

The idea to build a massive trail connecting the 15 counties that make up the Charlotte region was first proposed three years ago.

"With our rapid rate of growth, particular in the metro area, we have become more and more disconnected in the region," said Cecily Durrett, spokeswoman for the Catawba Lands Conservancy, the lead agency behind the project. "This will allow us to be closer." And, she said, "it will get us out of our cars."

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

Gaston and York (S.C.) counties will be the project's pioneers, or as Durrett puts it, "an on-the-ground laboratory." Each was given \$50,000 to begin planning.

The only rule: Gaston's trail must lead from Lincoln County in the north to York County in the south. Everything else -- how it looks, where it goes, what it's made of, and so on -- is entirely up to the community, which is why these public meetings are so important, Durrett said.

Residents "have a voice in the whole process," said Randi Gates, with the Gaston Area Metropolitan Planning Organization.

The meetings will start with presentations on the project and the benefits of trails. Then, participants will break into groups to discuss three key questions:

- 1) Are there existing destinations, whether a downtown hub, museum or natural park, that residents want to connect through a trail?
- 2) What kind of trail should the community design? Would it be paved or gravel? Designated for walkers, bikers or horses?
- 3) What concerns do you have about building a trail?

After public input is gathered, a committee of residents from Gaston 2012 will work with local planners to come up with possible routes. Then, they'll scout the land to see which sites would work best.

Ideally, maps of potential trails would be ready to present to the public in early June, Gates said.

But it could take years before Gaston's trail opens and even longer for the entire project to be completed. Durrett said the trail will continue building momentum as two more pilot counties are announced later this year. She said she's hoping for 100 miles of trail to be open within the next decade. The whole thing is estimated to eventually cover 500 miles.

Last month, Gaston County commissioners passed a resolution supporting the project, after voicing concerns that the trail might cut through private property and cost the county money.

But David Fogarty, a member of a committee working on the trail, said he thinks support is building. The trail would give the community a way to improve land and water quality, he said, as well as a place to get outside and exercise.

Thread Trail meetings in Gaston

All meetings start at 7 p.m.

Belmont

- Tuesday

Belmont Abbey College, The Haid Theater; 100 Belmont-Mount Holly Road

Gastonia

- Wednesday

Schiele Museum of Natural History; 1500 E. Garrison Blvd.

- March 31

Tabernacle Baptist Church, Fellowship Hall; 519 W. 19th St.

Bessemer City

- April 22

Bessemer City Hall; 132 W. Virginia Ave.

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