



Greenway on track for 2011 construction start

March 5, 2010

[Hugh Fisher](#)

Mount Holly's long-planned riverside greenway will begin construction next year, if all goes well.

The Mount Holly Riverwalk, a scenic 13-mile route along the Catawba River between the Stowe YMCA and Mountain Island Lake, has been in the works for more than five years.

Bob Suttentfield, a member of the Riverwalk planning committee, said he's ready for the project to come to fruition. Suttentfield said construction on the first leg of the Riverwalk is expected to start in the summer of 2011.

"The greenway will be built in phases," he said. "The first phase will begin at Tuck Park and run to Highway 27."

Although the route has been laid out, the process of getting easements from companies with land along the Catawba has taken substantial time.

Clariant Corporation became the first to sign over easements for land for the Riverwalk last month. And Suttentfield said negotiating with American & Efird and Duke Energy are under way.

"The foundation has already spent about \$275,000 of its own funds on design and planning," Suttentfield said.

The total cost of the finished Riverwalk, he said, will be around \$13 million to \$14 million. None of it, he said, is slated to come from taxpayer funds. Donations and grants will fund construction.

Karen Heroy, executive director of the Mount Holly Community Development Foundation, said the community is getting excited about the project.

"There are a lot of people who know about it, and of course, we want to continue educating people," she said. "It's an ongoing process."

As part of that effort, Heroy said more signs will go up in the months ahead to show residents where the Riverwalk is set to run.

Look for those to appear at an existing trail segment at Mountain Island Lake, which Heroy said will be incorporated into the span.

The entrance to the riverside trail at Tuckaseege Park already sports a sign for the Carolina Thread Trail. Described by its planners as a "green interstate," the Carolina Thread Trail is a network of current or future greenways across 15 counties in the Charlotte metro area. The Mount Holly Riverwalk will be one of the newest, and possibly most interesting, links in that chain.

Not only is it close to Charlotte, but plans also call for a pedestrian bridge across the Catawba for a primary connection to other cities and parks.

"We see this as a major economic driver for Mount Holly in general," Heroy said.

"When people come to visit the area for something they want to do, like hiking or biking, some will come for an afternoon, and others will stay overnight at a bed and breakfast or a hotel."

And those visitors, she said, will shop and eat during their stay, supporting local businesses. The Riverwalk's projected route takes it within a block of the Mount Holly Citizens Center.

"It's going to spur development. There is the opportunity for a lot of growth," Heroy said.

Also important, Heroy said, is the process of continuing to educate the public about the benefits of having the greenway in their community. At a recent public forum, Police Chief David Belk addressed residents' concerns that a greenway might increase crime.

Heroy said greenways actually reduce crime by drawing more people into the area and have a beneficial effect on the surrounding property. The other important benefit, she said, is conservation.

"We've got some beautiful segments of the Catawba River," Heroy said.

She said the planned Riverwalk will preserve those areas while allowing residents and visitors to enjoy their beauty. Suttentfield said residents who know about the Riverwalk have asked him time and again when it will be built.

"I knew early on that it wouldn't be a slam dunk," Suttentfield said.

But planners agree that when it's finished, it will have been worth the wait.

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