



Thread trail public hearings continue

Written by Jordan-Ashley Baker (O-N-E Staff Writer)

Thursday, 10 June 2010

The Carolina Thread Trail in Catawba County is one step closer to becoming a reality. The draft route of the Carolina Thread Trail will be available at public forums around the county starting Monday.

"We need feedback from citizens to see if we got it right," said Randi Gates, Carolina Thread Trail community coordinator.

Citizens can view the draft route during the open house forums, and Carolina Thread Trail officials will be available for questions or comments.

The drop-in forums are Monday from 6-8 p.m. at Sherrills Ford Elementary; Tuesday from 6-8 p.m. at the Newton Depot; Wednesday from 6-8 p.m. at the Highland Recreation Center; and Thursday from 6-8 p.m. at Mountain View Elementary School.

The drop-in forums are designed to allow residents to come and go as their schedules allow.

"Thread trail consultants will be on hand, as well as local and county officials," Gates said. "Folks can comment on the draft, like 'Yes, this is exactly what I want,' or 'No, this isn't what I want.'"

Citizens' comments, good or bad, won't fall on deaf ears, said Mary George, Catawba County assistant planning director.

"We're trying to find as to where these trails will go," George said. "The plan has to start somewhere, and we really listen to what citizens have to say."

The public comment forums are part of the thread trail's larger vision of community self-determination. The Carolina Thread Trail is created not by government officials, but by citizens, Gates said.

"It is the local citizens that determine where these trails are located," she said. "The trail is all about respect, not only for the land, but the land owner as well."

Thread trail officials created the draft route based on citizen input from the thread trail's public forums in January.

The thread trail draft also includes “opportunity corridors,” which are quarter-mile wide sections in the trail to allow revisions in the plan.

“It still allows for flexibility,” Gates said.

The thread trail is paid for in part by state grants and other donations. The thread trail’s largest donation came in January from the North Carolina Clean Water Management Trust Fund. Gov. Bev Perdue allocated more than \$1.5 million for the thread trail.

“It’s inspiring to see engagement and collaboration among communities as they determine how the trail will be woven throughout the region,” said Ann Browning, Carolina Thread Trail project director.

More than 120 people attended the January forums, and George hopes even more people will attend the upcoming forums.

“We had a really great response (in January), and we encourage people to attend this open house, even if they didn’t come to the first session,” George said.

Also during the forums, citizens can provide input about the type of trail surface they want on the trails running through Catawba County. The trail surface varies depending on the trails’ usage, which could include hiking, biking, running and many other activities.

“Just go by the YMCA in Conover, and you’ll see how many people use those walking trails. People will use the thread trail,” George said.

After the public forums, the Carolina Thread Trail draft route will be reviewed by trail officials, and the necessary changes will be made.

George said she anticipates the final draft to be available in mid- to late-September. Once the draft is finalized, it will be sent to area municipalities for final approval.

Before approving the thread trail route, the municipalities can make their own revisions.

“Even after the plan is adopted, it can be amended by the local community,” Gates said.

Once completed, the Carolina Thread Trail won’t be a place for Catawba County residents to only exercise. George said the trail has potential to be a economic-development opportunity for the county.

“We’re always trying to find new businesses and bring them to Catawba County,” George said. “Those businesses look for things to improve the quality of life for their workers, and the thread trail will do that.”

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