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County may support thread trail concept this week, but future is uncertain

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Construction of the conceptual Carolina Thread Trail won't begin any time soon. It may not be finished for another 15 years.

But the move to jump start the elaborate, 15-county network of walking paths and greenways has had an inauspicious start here.

Gaston County commissioners and some residents have expressed reservations about the project. The hesitancy has created an awkward situation for the Catawba Lands Conservancy, which has pegged Gaston as a pilot for the project.

Gaston County and York County, S.C., each received \$50,000 planning grants from organizers of the trail effort in December.

The concerns have centered around three main issues: how much money Gaston will have to contribute to build and maintain trails; the effect of greenways on crime; and whether property owners will have a say in where the trails go.

Those questions may have been answered enough that commissioners will finally approve a resolution of support for the thread trail concept when they meet Thursday. But whether the sailing will be smooth from then on remains to be seen.

FINANCING QUESTIONS

Building all of the envisioned trails could cost \$150 million, mostly using grants and donations, said Dave Cable, executive director of the Catawba Lands Conservancy. Some \$40 million might be needed from all of the counties involved over 15 years.

Gaston County is not being asked to commit any funding now. And it doesn't have to be included in the project, Cable said.

"We want to know how you think we can be successful," he told commissioners this month. "We want to know if you want us to go away. That's OK, too."

Commissioner Tom Keigher said Wednesday he doesn't foresee telling trail supporters to take a hike. He and several other board members were put at ease by Cable's comments during a Feb. 14 meeting.

"The way this is appearing to play out is they're doing a great job of securing many millions of dollars from the private sector," Keigher said.

A CRIMINAL ELEMENT?

The abandoned Norfolk Southern rail line between Gastonia and Dallas could be incorporated into the thread trail. Part of it is now being developed as a Rails to Trails project.

But some people familiar with that path have said criminals use it sometimes as an access for breaking into homes and businesses and stealing personal property.

Ray Jackson owns and rents two homes near the rail line's intersection with Old Dallas Highway. His



brother was renting out a home closer to the rail line that was broken into about a year ago, he said.

It seemed obvious that thieves used the rail line as a quick access point, Jackson said. So he understands why residents along the route should be suspicious of a greenway.

"I'd be (concerned), if I lived right along the rail bed," Jackson said.

But Gastonia Police Chief Terry Sult said people are looking at the issue the wrong way. His officers oversee safety along the 2.7-mile Avon-Catawba Creek Greenway between Garrison Boulevard and Robinwood Road.

Criminal incidents on the greenway have been rare since it opened in 2001, Sult said. Crime within 500 feet of the path has proven to be lower when compared to buffers of 1,000 and 1,500 feet, he said.

"It just doesn't tend to be a magnet for crime as a lot of people might think," he said.

That doesn't mean greenways don't need to be patrolled, and they must be in use to become criminal deterrents. But the "good" people who typically use them for recreation are like unofficial police, Sult said.

"The reality is, if you can make sure they're 'activated,' it creates more eyes and ears than areas that don't have them," he said. "Anything you can do to raise the risk level of the criminal is going to deter crime."

ENSURING PROPERTY OWNERS' RIGHTS

Several commissioners, including Keigher, John Torbett and Pearl Burris Floyd, have said their chief concern is protecting property owners' rights.

"Unfortunately there are probably a few times where government has to condemn property — for highways, bridges, things of that nature," Keigher said. "But this is something that's not required."

Cable said that won't be an issue. Landowners will be under no obligation to comply when potential thread trail routes are proposed. And they will be kept informed at every phase in the coming years.

"There will be four open meetings on this that will be well advertised and professionally run," Cable said Feb. 14. "The reason is there's no other way to do this."

Keigher asked that a paragraph be added to the county's resolution of support that expresses "great concern" for residents and their property. Respecting landowners' wishes could make designing the thread trail more complicated, he said. But so be it.

"There's going to have to be some zigzagging," he said. "They're not going to be able to take the most direct route in some of these places if property owners don't want it coming through."

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http://www.gastongazette.com/news/trail_17458___article.html/property_county.html