



Path to the future

Thread Trail's greenways to connect Cabarrus, Stanly and Rowan to region

By Josh McCann

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The leader of the Carolina Thread Trail expects Cabarrus is ready to start planning for its role in the proposed regional greenway network.

Organizers said they hope the project, intended to span 15 counties and both Carolinas, will permanently bolster quality of life and serve as an unprecedented example of regional collaboration.

"The area has talked a lot about regionalism," said Dave Cable, executive director of the Catawba Lands Conservancy, the Thread Trail's lead agency. "I think this is the project that's going to do it."

All the communities involved have demonstrated some degree of support for the idea, but Cabarrus has an "advanced" level of interest in planning for greenways, Cable said.

The project, announced in November, will develop gradually as communities determine how they want to participate. Organizers have awarded their first two planning grants of \$50,000 each to Gaston County in North Carolina and York County in South Carolina, and they plan to distribute four more by the fall.

Cable said he hopes Cabarrus could be among the next communities to apply because the county's proximity to Mecklenburg gives it strategic importance to the project. He suspects leaders and residents are energized and likely to support the project.

In places such as Cabarrus, which has conceived its own master plan for greenway construction, the prospect of connecting with other areas should "turbocharge" efforts already under way, Cable said.

According to the Thread Trail's conceptual map, the Cabarrus portion of the project may include three spokes, leading from roughly the center of the county to the North Carolina Research Campus in Kannapolis, Reed Gold Mine in Midland and the Exit 49 corridor off Interstate 85 in Concord.

Possible destinations in other counties include Morrow Mountain, Catawba College's ecological preserve, the National Whitewater Center, Bank of America Stadium, Crowder's Mountain and Carowinds theme park.

The entire project is estimated to cost between \$100 million and \$150 million, with \$40 million from private sources and the rest from expected government grants.

Duke Energy, Foundation For The Carolinas, Bank of America and Wachovia collectively kicked off the effort with a \$14.5 million initial gift.

The project's primary partners are the conservancy, the foundation, Duke Energy and The Trust for Public Land.

Network may include planned Concord paths

Mark Kincaid, deputy director of Concord's Parks and Recreation Department and a member of the Thread Trail's advisory council, said there appears to be "tremendous" interest for the project.

"To me, it appears to be just a question of funding," Kincaid said.

Philip Morris has pledged \$50,000 to study a greenway along the Exit 49 corridor between Concord Mills and Lowe's Motor Speedway, and the city will fund the rest of the study's roughly \$200,000 cost, said City Manager Brian Hiatt.

Kincaid said the city is working with Durham-based Greenways Incorporated on plans for

the roughly three-mile first phase, which Kincaid hopes City Council will approve in February or March.

No money has been budgeted for construction, Kincaid and Hiatt said.

When complete, a Rocky River Greenway could stretch for about 13 miles, with future phases potentially extending upstream into northern Mecklenburg and southern Iredell counties and downstream to merge with Mallard Creek Greenway in Charlotte.

Concord's Harold B. McEachern Greenway, the one-mile first phase of which currently sits along Branchview Drive, could also be incorporated into the Thread Trail, Kincaid said.

The half-mile Village Greenway in the Gibson Village neighborhood is likely too short to warrant inclusion, Kincaid said.

Commissioner: Stanly will eventually welcome concept

Lindsey Dunevant, a Stanly County commissioner and Thread Trail advisory council member, said his county is not as far along in greenway development as others closer to Charlotte's core.

Many Stanly residents walk regularly and want such facilities, but construction so far has been "spotty at best," said Dunevant, former director of Albemarle's Parks and Recreation Department.

Dunevant said Stanly's 10 municipalities should be more receptive once they see the network established elsewhere.

"Over time, all of us are going to see the benefits of participation," he said. "After there's a little bit of momentum, we will see other counties including Stanly want to be a part of the process."

Long-term project, widespread impact

Whatever routes local and regional leaders pursue, they said realizing those designs will likely take years if not generations.

The Thread Trail should begin to generate fresh trails within two to three years, Cable said, and it will take 10-15 years to see substantial progress toward a unified network.

By establishing a system similar to interstate highways for alternative modes of transportation, today's communities can make a long-term impact on the region's collective future, Cable said. He cited Indianapolis and St. Louis as cities that have reaped significant rewards from similar projects.

Such a project will benefit all, Cable said, by uniting urban and rural, promoting conservation, providing a healthy outdoor environment, encouraging economic development and inviting residents and visitors to cross jurisdictional lines.

"It will connect a lot of communities together that otherwise wouldn't be connected," Cable said. "I think it's a really critical component for the future."

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