

## Trail will connect 15 counties, two states

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Glinda Coleman is excited about the possibilities.

Earlier this month, Chester County Council voted to support a proposed trail system, and that makes the executive director of the Great Falls Home Town Association thrilled.

Becoming a part of the system, Coleman said, may be a vital link in connecting Great Falls and Chester County with other trails and green spaces in the Carolinas.

The Carolina Thread Trail is a regional network of greenways and trails that will reach 15 counties where 2.3 million people live, linking people, places, cities, towns, attractions, while at the same time helping preserve natural areas.

"We're excited," Coleman said. "Maybe it will move forward some of the things we've been working on for six or seven years."

Local officials get to designate what areas they want to be in the Thread Trail system. The name comes from the textile legacy brought about like families such as the Closes and Springs. In York County, the Anne Springs Close Greenway, about 3,000 acres set aside forever as greenspace with trails and cabins and small lakes, is to be part of the Thread Trail.

In Chester County, a rail bed running up from Great Falls toward Fort Lawn is considered a possible option to be designated as a trail.

Coleman said she and Great Falls Mayor H.C. Starnes Jr. attended a meeting last fall with organizers of the Thread Trail at the Chester County Library and were introduced to the proposed trail system.

"They and we saw the potential for trying to connect the rail bed since it goes into York County. It would be a way to connect the counties," Coleman said.

Coleman said the Hometown Association had been talking with the Trust for Public Land, a national organization based in Charlotte, to see if the group could help make some headway with CSX which owns the old rail bed.

The tracks were pulled up years ago and the association has been trying to acquire the land for a walking trail as part of its tourism initiative.

The Trust for Public Land, the Foundation of the Carolinas, Duke Energy and Catawba Lands Conservancy have partnered to plan the trail system, Coleman said.

The trail can be viewed as a "green interstate system" of major trails created by connecting smaller trail systems throughout the region. The trail will link more than 40 destinations and cover 7,300 square miles in 15 counties.

Anson, Cabarrus, Catawba, Cleveland, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly and Union counties in North Carolina, and Cherokee, Chester, Lancaster and York counties in South Carolina will be part of the system.

Chester County Council voted to apply for a \$50,000 grant to do a master plan for greenways across the county. The grant will require a \$5,000 match, Coleman said.

"They all agreed it is a good thing," Coleman said. "They saw what we are doing is a good place to start."

County Councilman Archie Lucas said the county has not given any money to the program yet. The council gave unanimous approval to participate in the program, Lucas said.

Lucas said the trail system will benefit local people, promote tourism and help preserve land.

The trail system is patterned after other trail systems in the country, including the Appalachian Trail. Councilman Brad Jordan said he recently hiked along one of those trails while on vacation.

Coleman said the grants will be awarded in February and in June. Public comment will be a part of the grant process, Coleman said.

The proposed trail system will connect the rail bed at the old depot in Great Falls to areas of York County. The idea was to connect the proposed state park on Dearborn Island to Landsford Canal State Park.

"It could connect with other greenways in other counties," Coleman said.

A public walking trail is one of the projects the GFHTA has supported in its tourism initiative.

Most of the 22-mile rail bed is in Chester County with only three miles included in Great Falls, Coleman said.

"The idea is to preserve green space for people to enjoy and for health benefits," Coleman said.

"A lot of our plans depend on having money to do it," Coleman added. "Great Falls just doesn't have a lot of money and getting a grant means a match and sometimes the town and county doesn't have it."

Coleman said she hopes the trail system will aid the GFHTA in its efforts to promote tourism in the area and draw people who enjoy hiking and kayaking.

The association has pushed nature-based tourism for almost eight years. It sees natural resources as a drawing card for outdoor enthusiasts.

A recent charrette in Great Falls identified nature-based tourism as a natural plan for growth of the town and in the county.

"We're excited about this and hope it will help get nature-based tourism up and running in Great Falls," Coleman said.

This effort may go in hand with another effort, to have the Catawba River in Chester County identified as a scenic river, down to the S.C. Highway 9 bridge.

County Council saw a video presentation from Thread Trail organizers about its benefits and proposals, including a map of some possible links of all the counties.

The council was told the effort needs about \$40 million to fully pay for the effort, but has already received about \$14 million in donations, including from Duke Energy and

Editor Stephen Guilfoyle contributed to this report.

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