

Posted on Thurs., Dec. 6, 2007

Gaston green efforts pay off **It's 1 of 2 counties chosen to pilot the Carolina Thread Trail project**

REBECCA SULOCK
rsulock@charlotteobserver.com

Gaston County has mountains, rivers and undeveloped land. It has at least five groups actively working on greenways.

Its green assets and residents' efforts have garnered a regional distinction: Gaston will be one of two pilot counties for the Carolina Thread Trail project. The project's governing board has given Gaston a \$50,000 grant to begin mapping where the trail would go through the county.

The mapping will start in January, and a series of public meetings will be held to get residents' ideas and suggestions.

Planners of the Carolina Thread Trail envision a network of greenways and paths linking 15 Carolinas counties. They're putting money into the idea, beginning with Gaston and York County, S.C.

"We have a running start in Gaston County in protecting some key natural areas," said Dave Cable, executive director of the Carolina Thread Trail and Catawba Lands Conservancy. He estimated the conservancy has helped protect a 22-mile corridor of riverfront along the South Fork in Gaston.

More than that, Gaston's municipalities have started their own greenway projects -- a major factor in Gaston's selection.

Mount Holly is working on a 10-mile greenway along the Catawba River. Over the summer, the city bought 220 acres of riverfront property from Crescent Resources, paying the bulk of the \$2.8 million cost with a Clean Water Management Trust Fund grant.

Gastonia has the popular 2.7-mile Avon/Catawba greenway and more trails in the works. Cramerton has the 1.5-mile Riverside Greenway. In the Western part of the county, Cherryville is working on biking and walking paths.

The smaller municipal greenways could eventually link to the Carolina Thread Trail.

Carolina Thread Trail organizers have raised \$14.5 million from businesses and foundations, to help with leadership, capital and technical support, Cable said.

Gaston is in an "advanced state of readiness" for the project, he said.

Groups around the county have been working on greenways and parks for more than 15 years, said Gary Mims, an outdoorsman, Scout leader and organizer who has been involved with the efforts.

The county may be growing more slowly than some others near Charlotte, but that could turn out to be a big advantage, Mims said.

"I don't want to see Gaston County turn into one of these communities where it's just back-to-back cul-de-sac neighborhoods," he said. "I think we have an opportunity to avoid that. We have a chance to preserve some open spaces, and down the road, we'll be glad we did."