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SEEKING PIECE OF CAROLINA THREAD TRAIL

Greenway a desire but must compete for funds

Residents say they want trails, but leaders warn of growth's demands

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Local residents, businesses and governments will have to pitch in for Union County to get a major share of a 400-mile network of trails and greenways planned for the Charlotte region.

The proposed Carolina Thread Trail, unveiled last month, would connect 15 counties in the Carolinas to give residents easy access to the outdoors for walking or biking.

Sherry Cantrell of Union County, a member of both the Catawba Lands Conservancy and the Union County Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, expresses enthusiasm about the idea.

She hopes to band together other supporters to coordinate the Thread Trail's development here.

But some political leaders and other observers say that fast-growing Union County is struggling now for money to build enough new schools and provide sewer and water service. So far, a big greenway has been a low priority.

The Carolina Thread Trail is an effort by a group of regional nonprofits. They include the Carolinas Thread Trail group, the Foundation for the Carolinas, Catawba Lands Conservancy and The Trust for Public Lands.

The estimated cost across the Charlotte region is between \$110 million and \$150 million. Private donations would comprise \$40 million; the rest would be from private and government grants. Planning for the Thread Trail is just beginning. It could take as long as 15 years to complete most of it.

So far, a conceptual map shows a single arc of trail in southwestern Union County, near Cane Creek Park. The early routes in some other counties -- Cabarrus, York and Gaston -- are more extensive.

Dave Cable, director of the Catawba Lands Conservancy and of the Thread Trail, points out that the map is preliminary and is "based on existing greenways, plans for greenways, or any information we had about logical connection points."

Interest from residents

There is strong demand for greenways in Union County. They are among residents' top wishes in a series of public input sessions in late 2005 to update the county's parks and recreation plan. And demand is likely to rise: Union's population is projected to add more than 100,000 residents, or 56 percent, between 2006 and 2020, according to the N.C. State Demographics office.

The area around Cane Creek Park near Waxhaw is a logical connecting point, but actual trail paths will be decided by the local governments, Cable said.

Cantrell, of the county's parks and recreation advisory board, said a grassroots effort is needed to raise the Thread Trail project's profile.

Business groups and residential developers also must be convinced that greenways make property more desirable -- and valuable. If developers who buy farmland are aboard, farmers who currently own the tracts would be more willing to dedicate parts of their land to conservation, Cantrell said.

The development industry already recognizes the appeal of greenways. A 2004 nationwide survey by the National Association of Home Builders found that walking and jogging trails are by far the most desirable amenities.

Some Union County developers have created walking trails for residential subdivisions. But they lack a larger arterial trail to connect to, said Rick Becker, mayor of Mineral Springs and a greenway proponent.

Elton Braswell, a Unionville-area farmer, said dedicating land for greenways has a downside.

"If you give away your easement, you lose the value of your land if it increases in the future," said Braswell, who also is vice president of the N.C. Farm Bureau. Farmers like Braswell also are wary about giving strangers easy access to their property.

"They were afraid to give easements because they were afraid of four-wheelers rambling across their land," Braswell said.

Concerns about spending

In 2006, Union County updated its comprehensive master plan for parks and recreation through 2015. It envisioned numerous trails looping and interlocking, from Marvin to the Anson County line.

But so far, only about 20 miles of trails, greenways or linear parks exist. These are operated by the county and municipal governments. Thirteen of the 20 miles are in Cane Creek Park.

The master plan, adopted by county commissioners this year, recommended the county float \$39 million in bonds to pay for parks-and-rec capital improvements. Part of this would have gone to acquiring land, including for greenways. But little has happened so far.

Commissioner Allan Baucom said he doesn't recall "any dedicated conversation" about putting the bonds up for a referendum.

"I don't see it as a burning issue," Baucom said.

Any greenway initiative would have to compete with other needs such as water, sewer and schools. Three bond questions already could end up on next fall's referendum ballot, county finance director Kai Nelson said -- for libraries, community colleges and public schools.

Said Baucom: "We gotta be real cautious because there are property-rights issues that need to be addressed. But it goes (to) fiscal responsibility, as well."

Baucom, a farmer, raised those concerns when the board adopted the master parks and recreation plan. The plan outlined a possible greenway connecting Mecklenburg, Cabarrus and Union counties. According to the minutes, Baucom said this came across as taking private property for public use.

He moved to adopt the master plan but exclude the regional greenway "and any other greenways that would use private lands," according to the minutes. The five commissioners adopted the motion unanimously.

Responsibility for acquiring land and maintaining any new greenways also will fall to municipal governments.

Mineral Springs recently received a \$300,000 state grant to preserve 58 acres of woodland that will become part of the town's greenway. Becker said he hoped the town could one day feed into the Thread Trail, but the town hasn't had formal conversations with the Thread Trail group.

Weddington Mayor Nancy Anderson said she hopes her new Town Council will be more receptive to designating land for greenways.

"We got way ahead of ourselves with growth," she said. "We're having trouble funding basic public needs -- i.e. water and sewer. Unfortunately, parks and rec gets what's left over."

Carolina Thread Trail

To learn more about the Carolina Thread Trail, visit www.carolinathreadtrail.org, or call Ann Browning at 704-376-2714.

<http://www.charlotte.com/union/story/387686.html>