

GASTON COUNTY

## **Trail concerns appear lessened**

Commissioners put off project support, but residents got behind it

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When the Gaston County commissioners again take up whether to support the Carolina Thread Trail, they appear likely to favor the project -- but may include a provision that their support comes with "great concern" for residents' property rights.

The board last month put off supporting the regional trail and greenway project, after concerns about obligating the county financially. One commissioner said her area didn't want it.

Last week, dozens of residents turned out to champion the project, which would link 15 counties. Gaston and York counties were chosen to be pilots for the project, each receiving \$50,000 grants for planning.

Gaston was chosen because of its wealth of preserved land, its natural attractions and the momentum built from greenway projects going on in cities such as Gastonia and Mount Holly, officials said.

The project's organizers have raised \$17 million privately, to be divvied up among the counties and used as leverage for state and federal grants.

"We didn't set this up to be dependent on local government funding, because we knew that would fail," said Dave Cable, executive director of the Thread Trail and the Catawba Lands Conservancy. Cable spoke to the Gaston commissioners last week, to address the concerns from their last meeting.

This time around, commissioners voiced little opposition. But commissioner Tom Keigher said he'd want to add wording to the county's resolution that said its support was "with great concern for our county residents and the rights of their properties.

"Any one of us, if some project from the state or local or federal government wanted to dissect our property and have traffic come through it, would have concerns," Keigher said.

Some Dallas residents have worried about incorporating the old Norfolk Southern rail line right of way into the Thread Trail project. Criminals already use that corridor, and other utility corridors, to travel back and forth and commit crimes, said resident Laura Stroupe.

But Gaston County Police Chief Bill Farley said converting utility rights of way into greenways actually discourages criminal activity, according to his department's statistics.

The board is scheduled to vote Feb. 28.

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