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Trail project in holding pattern

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Two months after Gaston was chosen as one of two pilot counties for a regional trail project, county commissioners have put off supporting the effort amid concerns about its possible cost.

The Carolina Thread Trail is planned as a system of greenways, trails and parks linking 15 counties in North Carolina and South Carolina. Organizers have raised about \$17 million so far for the effort, which was announced last year.

In December, Gaston and York counties were chosen as the first to receive \$50,000 grants for planning the trail through their counties.

But the Gaston commissioners last week held off backing the trail effort.

The board was set to vote on a resolution of support for the project at its regular meeting. Commissioners asked County Attorney Charles Moore if the resolution would commit them to paying for part of the project. Moore said no, the resolution was not binding.

Commissioner John Torbett led the drive to table the issue and asked the county manager to bring back numbers on what the potential financial impact could be for the county.

Also at the meeting were hundreds of parents and students who came to protest the school board's decision to end two magnet school programs because of lack of money.

"We've got a crowdload of individuals here that are here because of financial issues that would affect them," said Torbett, who represents the Stanley area. "I'd rather focus on them before I focus on greenways."

One resident who came to the meeting said there was an abandoned rail line that ran through her property. The line, she said, is used by vagrants for traveling back and forth and committing crimes.

Greenways are "drug corridors," said resident Laura Stroupe. They promote theft and crime, she said.

Commissioner Pearl Burris Floyd, who represents the Dallas area, said that the town did not want to be involved in the project and she was bound to represent those residents' concerns.

Commissioner Joe Carpenter had asked the commissioners to express their support for the project.

"I think it's a great opportunity," he said. "It's part of quality of life and economic development, and it's an opportunity to participate regionally."

It's not clear what, if any, effect the commissioners' delay will have on the trail planning process. They'll talk more about the project at a Feb. 14 workshop, and they could have another vote at their Feb. 28 meeting.

Groups in Gaston and York counties have to come up with a \$5,000 match for the planning grants. The York County Council committed that money earlier this year, said Council Chairman Buddy Motz.

"If you don't incorporate these trails into your county now, you won't be able to do it later, because land costs will be too high," Motz said. "It just makes sense to do it and the sooner the better. Plus they've got some big bucks up there -- to be able to tap into that is just great."

A key Carolina Thread Trail organizer said the group was eager to explain more about the project to the commissioners.

"This is an invitation to participate and to tap into private capital and expertise," said Dave Cable, executive director of the Thread Trail and the Catawba Lands Conservancy. Cable said part of the project's challenge is to get out and educate communities about the benefits of participating.

"We hope all 15 counties will endorse this because of the incredible benefits of having a regional network of trails," he said.

For more information, visit www.carolinathreadtrail.org.

<http://www.charlotte.com/236/v-print/story/471021.html>