

Tying the region together

Chester Co. leaders hope to link old Great Falls rail line to Carolina Thread Trail

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GREAT FALLS -- Don Privett walks over the thick chunks of gravel near the Great Falls reservoir, making his way along the swath of rocks where trains once traveled.

Several times each week, the 69-year-old Great Falls geologist takes this trek, going about two miles on and around the path.

If some Chester County leaders get their way, this abandoned rail line will be a link to the Carolina Thread Trail, a proposed 15-county network of greenways and trails in

North and South Carolina. The Chester County Council recently joined the list of other governing bodies in supporting the project. Chester County leaders also are seeking a grant to fund a greenway plan for the county.

"The more trails, the better," said Privett, who hopes the community's natural assets will lure folks looking to hike or kayak.

The initial, rough design for the Thread Trail included York, Chester and Lancaster counties, but the trail didn't actually run through Chester. Then, community leaders started talking to trail planners about the 22-mile rail bed.

Owned by CSX, the tracks were pulled up years ago, and local leaders have been trying to acquire the land for a walking trail since the early part of the decade, said Glinda Coleman, executive director of the Great Falls Hometown Association.

The association has emphasized nature-based tourism since 2000, hoping to preserve Great Falls' natural resources and generate income by attracting outdoor enthusiasts to the area, Coleman said.

Some of the projects the association has supported include a state park around Dearborn Island, trails along Rocky Creek and, yes, a public walking trail on the old rail line.

So when Thread Trail planners came to talk to local folks about potential links in their area last year, the gravel path came up.

The CSX line begins at the former Great Falls rail depot and follows the Catawba River to York County. If it becomes part of the Thread Trail, the rail bed would serve as a link between Landsford Canal State Park and the planned state park at Dearborn Island.

Local proponents of the Thread Trail see the project as a way to bring people back to Great Falls, an area still suffering from the thousands of jobs lost when the J.P. Stevens mills closed in the 1980s.

"This is our economic development," Coleman said. Nature-driven tourism, she added, "can really put Great Falls back on its feet because we have all of the elements that will make it work."

County Councilman Archie Lucas, who represents the Great Falls area, also sees that potential.



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Glinda Coleman, executive director of the Great Falls Hometown Association, walks down a rail bed that Chester County leaders hope will become a public trail.

"We've got the waterways," he said. "We've got good hunting. We've got good fishing. We've got the ideal situation (for) tourists viewing the islands."

But the trails don't have to be contained to Great Falls.

One reason Chester County paths weren't initially included in the Thread Trail's concept map was because trail planners wanted local residents to share their thoughts about where the greenways should go, said Ann Browning, the Thread Trail's project director. The idea is that the Thread Trail will serve as a backbone for the network while local leaders design their area's natural thoroughfares.

"We started out with sort of an educated guess to show the concept," Browning said of the initial design. "As we've been around and talked to the communities, it's become more informed. But there's more to be done."

Some folks in Chester County would like to see trails spread west from Great Falls, perhaps running through Chester State Park or venturing down some undeveloped land along the Broad River. There are other sites being discussed, places along Fishing Creek and Lando.

Jack Sink, the city of Chester's parks and recreation director, said he would love to see some city parks connected to a trail or greenway. He said the rural county is a prime area for bicycle trails or waking paths.

"Bottom line ... more and more land is just disappearing," Sink said. "And that's what's great about this (Thread Trail project), trying to get with some groups and conserve some of these areas and make stuff like this."

What is the Carolina Thread Trail?

Major regional destinations

Trail routes

The Carolina Thread Trail is a 7,300-square-mile network of trails and greenways connecting 15 counties and more than 2 million people in North and South Carolina.

This "green interstate" will use public and private money to link existing trails and attractions with paths and greenspace.

Building the trail could cost from \$100,000 to \$600,000 per mile, depending on its size and intricacies. A rough project cost estimate is between \$100 million and \$150 million over 10 to 15 years.

York, Chester and Lancaster are among the 15 counties that could receive grants to join the trail system.

The trail also could pass through Anson, Cabarrus, Catawba, Cherokee, Cleveland, Gaston, Iredell, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanly and Union counties in the Charlotte region.

Legs of the greenway, or undeveloped land preserved for environmental protection, should grow together. Key connections between them could unfold during the next few years and be completed during the next 10 to 20 years.

The name for the trail, Carolina Thread Trail, is taken from the textile industry that's been historically prominent in the region.

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