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Keeping it green: Carolina Thread Trail project progressing

By Mike Laughlin

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An enormous project is underway, a project that will affect millions of people across the Piedmont.

It's the Carolina Thread Trail, a regional network of greenways, trails and conserved land that will eventually wind its way through York, Chester, Lancaster and Cherokee counties in South Carolina, as well as 11 counties in North Carolina, and will intersect Fort Mill. The system, in the works since 2004 and implemented in phases, aims to connect approximately 2.3 million people to cities, towns, attractions and natural areas across a 7,300 square-mile area.

The trail system, which could take up to 20 years to complete, will vary from paved trails to sidewalks to natural dirt and sand paths. York County has been selected to be a pilot program for the project, meaning it could see a proposed 120 miles of new trails soon.

One of several local arteries, the Nation Ford thread that snakes along the Catawba River, opened nearly two years ago. The entrance is on A.O. Jones Boulevard across the road from Nation Ford High School.

A 'positive' impact

The Carolina Thread Trail project, based in Charlotte, is an organization working closely with the Catawba Lands Conservancy, which works to protect natural areas, and the Nation Ford Land Trust and the Trust for Public Land, nonprofit organizations that work in reclaiming and preserving major river corridors and creating greenway systems.

Ann Browning, the Carolina Thread Trail Project director, said about five years ago, members of the thread trail group and the CLC began searching for ideas on how they could improve the region.

"We were looking for a project, something that would have a high impact, a positive regional and environmental impact and provide the vision of a regional community," Browning said.

The group studied other large-scale trail systems in cities like Indianapolis, St. Louis and Detroit, as well as other regional systems including the Palmetto Trail, which intersects South Carolina. The group then began spreading the idea of the trail and gathering support from local communities and organizations.

Fort Mill was the first local government to adopt the plan, at a Feb. 9 town council meeting, Browning said. The thread trail is using what Browning referred to as a "funding quilt" to pay for the system. It will be financed through both private donations and public funding, according to the organization. Donations to the thread trail will be dispersed as grants to local communities as an incentive for planning, design, land acquisition and construction of greenways that will eventually connect the system.

The thread trail organization has been raising money and looking for funding opportunities from federal and state levels, since this project could qualify as infrastructure, recreation and land conservation.

Where are the trails?

The massive trail system will connect more than 40 destinations between the 15 counties, including Lake Wylie, Lake Norman, Bank of America Stadium in downtown Charlotte, and South Mountains State Park. In York County, the trails will connect Fort Mill to Lake Wylie, Kings Mountain, Crowder's Mountain, Historic Brattonsville, and myriad parks and recreation centers.

The trail system in Fort Mill would consist primarily of the Nation Ford Greenway, a 30-mile loop around the town bordering the Catawba River and Sugar Creek. It would also connect to the Anne Springs Close Greenway and the museum on the banks of the Catawba that has been in the works of several years. Located off Sutton Road in an area annexed into the town last year, the museum and a related subdivision called Kanawha have been stalled because of the economy, according to developers.

Despite those setbacks, Browning said the system is popular with residents she's heard from.

Browning said this was a reason York County was chosen, along with Gaston County, as the first locations to see the new trails.

"In York County, there were good trails already on the ground and a lot of good opportunities," Browning said. "There is also a lot of enthusiasm."

According to Brown Simpson, the director of the Town of Fort Mill Parks and Recreation Department, the Fort Mill and Clover have both approved the project, as well as the York County Cultural and Heritage Commission, but the project awaits approval from the cities of Rock Hill and York before work can begin.

"Once it's passed, we can begin looking for opportunities for grants," Simpson said. "It's not going to happen overnight but when it does, it will be awesome."

In addition to facilitating outdoor activities such as walking, running or biking, the trails will also help conserve natural areas and lower air pollution levels.

"This is a great opportunity for Fort Mill and the area," Browning said.

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