



Gaston County commissioners tackle greenway issue again

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A little more than a year after their last public debate over the Carolina Thread Trail, Gaston County commissioners tackled the controversial issue again Thursday.

Commissioners unanimously adopted a master plan for the conceptual greenway system, but only after another two more hours of debate. About 15 supporters and critics of the thread trail squared off, testifying to some of the potential benefits and problems it would bring.

Proponents believe the project will boost quality of life, increase property values and spur economic development. Detractors again warned of impending property disputes and walking trails turning into crime corridors. Many also worry that Gaston taxpayers will shoulder too much of the cost for connecting the greenway system with 14 other counties.

The discussion mirrored several meetings in early 2008, when residents wrangled over a county resolution "to support" the trail. Commissioners approved that measure after adding language to ensure the project would involve no condemnation of private land without owner consent.

The master plan presented Thursday by the Catawba Lands Conservancy offered the first concept for building the network of walking paths and greenways. Conservancy officials emphasized repeatedly that the trail routes are flexible and can be moved as necessary.

"It's conceptual," said David Fogarty, a member of the trail's planning committee. "And obviously if somebody has a problem with the way the trail would wind through their property, obviously the trail would not be able to go that way."

Commissioners added more language to Thursday's resolution to clarify that condemnation and easements -- including along abandoned railway lines -- would only be acquired from willing property owners. Future decisions about how to spend tax dollars on construction or maintenance would be decided by a referendum presented to voters, according to the added language.

Commissioners Mickey Price and Alan Fraley were absent from the meeting.

The funding model for the project is not dependent on public financing, Fogarty said.

The beauty of the project is that it depends on the support of landowners and the community, said Dave Cable, executive director of the Catawba Lands Conservancy, the lead agency behind the project. For example, elected officials in Dallas have declined to support the concept, he said.

"Dallas was fearful. So there are no trails slated to run through Dallas," he said. "That is their choice and we are totally fine with that."

Elected leaders in Cramerton, Gastonia, Belmont, Mount Holly, Cherryville, Lowell, McAdenville and Bessemer City have already adopted the thread trail master plan.

Gastonia resident Don Barkley was one of several people who spoke out against the plan. Many of the suggested trail routes span areas where property owners are unlikely to support it, he said.

"If you won't do this without (willing) condemnation, why approve a plan that would require condemnation?" he said.

But Belmont Mayor Richard Boyce was one of supporters who spoke.

"Vote on the basis of your hopes," he asked commissioners, "rather than your fears."

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http://www.gastongazette.com/news/trail_32204_article.html/commissioners_property.html