

Group hopes to map out network of nature trails

by: Olin Ericksen
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A network of nature trails could someday connect Lincoln County with its neighbors.

A diverse group of stakeholders last week kicked off the months-long task of mapping out where those nature trails could go.

But backers of the regional greenway project — called the Carolina Thread Trail — said they would take a different path during the public process than they have in other communities — by facing controversial issues up front.

With a \$60,000 planning grant to be awarded Friday, the local steering and technical committee for the Carolina Thread Trail met for the first time Thursday at Gaston College's local campus.

From county planners to environmental nonprofit organization workers, law enforcement officials, to Lincolnton City Council members and others, nearly 30 so-called stakeholders hope to present a preliminary plan on possible local routes to County Commissioners for final approval by September.

The blueprint for where Lincoln County trails could run would be the next step in uniting the nearly 500 miles of trails envisioned to connect a winding series of "green interstate" routes across 15 counties and several cities in the Charlotte region.

Some counties, such as York and Gaston counties, went through a similar process last year, but not without some residents and landowners raising concerns about crime, land values decreasing or the taking of private lands for the project.

Looking ahead, Thread Trail proponents said they would use education to head off some of those misconceptions at the pass here in Lincoln County.

"I think they started going down this road and at the end of it, there was a lot of push back and we realized, wow, we probably should have done it a little differently," said Chuck Flink, President of Carolina Greenways Inc., which is spearheading the project.

Flink said in addition to public forums, a newsletter, a Web site, flyers and other resources would be used for outreach.

"Let's get the education out right away, let's talk about both what we are going to do and what we are not going to do, so we do not start out on the wrong foot," Flink said.

Specifically, Flink said they would seek to educate local landowners, especially farmers, about the project.

In April 2008, county commissioners signed a resolution backing the Thread Trail in concept, however, not before hearing from several local farmers who own land near Lincolnton who were concerned about the trails coming close to their property.

Proponents of the trails assured commissioners at that meeting, and Thursday again reiterated the view, that the trail would not go anywhere someone did not want it.

"Let's go where the opportunity presents itself," Flink said.

There are between 35 and 40 different strategies available to the group to gain the cooperation and trust of landowners in a way that, in many cases, they can find a compromise, according to Flink.

The regional Thread Trail, totaling between \$100 million and \$150 million, would be funded with a combination of private, state and federal funds and local contributions.

Counties and cities would likely pitch in approximately \$40 million during a 10-year period.

There is no set amount Lincoln County and Lincoln would be expected to commit to for now beyond the \$2,000 each in matching grant money that is being used to jump-start the mapping process.

The two proposed paths for Lincoln County, as they stand now, run through Lincoln and along eastern Lincoln County and Lake Norman, although specific routes have not been sketched out in detail.

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