

Where N.C. could stand some stimulating - On trails

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DURHAM -- Projects undertaken through the New Deal's economic stimulus programs during the Great Depression have become some of our nation's most enduring, treasured places.

Many are park and trail projects that enable people to get outdoors and enjoy the natural world. One of the most visionary projects was the Appalachian Trail, now world-famous and hiked by more than 3 million people each year. As Congress considers a new stimulus package, park and trail projects should again be one of the highest priorities.

Many trail and greenway projects in North Carolina could be developed quickly, and would provide jobs in construction and in the manufacturing of materials such as concrete, asphalt, bridges, boardwalks, signs, hand tools and heavy equipment.

North Carolina has four visionary trail projects, like the Appalachian Trail before them, that will benefit vast regions and millions of people. The economic stimulus package being considered in Congress would be a way to jump-start these projects and build an "interstate" system of trails, one that would link our extraordinary natural and rural lands to small towns and big cities across the state.

Long-term benefits of building North Carolina's "interstate" trail system include:

- * **IMPROVED PUBLIC HEALTH.** Walking is the most popular exercise. Research shows that people with easy access to trails and greenways are much more likely to get out and walk. Greenways are a great investment in a country with escalating health costs and rising rates of obesity from lack of exercise.
- * **REDUCED DEPENDENCE ON FOREIGN OIL AND REDUCED GLOBAL WARMING.** Miles walked or biked rather than driven mean less foreign oil used and less carbon produced.
- * **IMPROVED QUALITY OF LIFE.** People want to live near greenways and trails. Studies all across the United States show that home values are increased near greenways. Forty homes adjacent to a greenway in Apex were priced \$5,000 higher than the rest of the homes in the development, and were the first to sell.
- * **INCREASED TOURISM.** Trails and greenways can be important components of a tourist economy. A recent N.C. State University study found that \$6.7 million spent to build bike paths and wide road shoulders on the Outer Banks resulted in an annual economic impact of \$60 million in increased tourist expenditures and the creation of 1,400 tourism-related jobs.

A COALITION OF PARK, TRAIL AND ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION GROUPS has identified immediate construction projects worth \$60 million for North Carolina's "interstate" system of trails.

The Mountains-to-Sea Trail is a 1,000-mile trail stretching from the Great Smoky Mountains to Jockey's Ridge State Park on the Outer Banks. The trail is half-complete and is part of the state trail system. Funds are particularly needed to extend the trail in the Triangle, Triad, Kinston and New Bern areas.

The East Coast Greenway, a 3,000-mile multi-use trail connecting cities and towns from Maine to Key West, will go through some of North Carolina's largest cities, including Raleigh and Durham; medium-sized towns, such as Fayetteville and Wilmington; and small towns, such as Dunn and Oxford. Funds are immediately needed in Raleigh, Cary and Chatham County.

The Carolina Thread Trail is a 15-county, 500-mile regional trail system that will benefit, among others, more than 2 million people who reside in the Charlotte metro area. Trail planning is complete in Mecklenburg and Gaston counties and in York County, S.C. Work could begin in each of these counties on design, engineering, land acquisition and trail construction.

The Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail, a 330-mile trail, runs through Virginia, Tennessee and North and South Carolina to commemorate the route taken by mounted patriot troops who ultimately routed the British at the Battle of Kings Mountain. Funds are particularly needed in Spruce Pine, Altapass, Elkin and Rutherfordton, and Wilkes and Surry counties.

Leaders in Congress, and Gov. Beverly Perdue should bring jobs in the short-term and a higher quality of life in the long-term through this stimulus package -- just as their predecessors did during the Great Depression.

Seventy years ago, that vision and subsequent action brought us the Appalachian Trail. Now it could bring us other enduring, treasured long-distance trails to completion.

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