

A good walk celebrated Tuesday

Events in Gaston County will dedicate new paths along the Carolina Thread Trail, which will link 15 Carolinas counties someday.

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Labor Day is over, I'm back at work, and the stress is trying to kick in.

It'll get to me again soon enough. But right now, I've still got soothing memories of the walk my wife and I took on the Gastonia greenway over the holiday.

The therapy you get on the trail lasts for a while.

Lots of folks were on the greenway that morning, bicycling, jogging, pushing baby carts, walking dogs.

We left most of them behind when we turned off the main trail at a fork just below the 1-mile marker. (A landmark is the portable toilet.)

The trail has been expanded with a new .8-mile section that loops around the municipal golf course through a residential neighborhood and winds up at Ferguson Park.

Actually, this new extension of the greenway along Catawba Creek doesn't open until Tuesday – the same day another addition to Gastonia's greenway system, the 1.4-mile Highland Rail Trail at Broad Street and Long Avenue, will also be dedicated.

These additions nearly double the size of Gastonia's paved greenways.

Both grand opening ceremonies are part of the Marking of the Thread celebrations being held Tuesday in 11 communities in the North and South Carolina. Symbolically, this is a big deal. New signs are going up for the Carolina Thread Trail, a 15-county network of trails and conservation areas.

According at the Catawba Lands Conservancy, the Charlotte-based land trust that's the lead agency for the project, the trail will weave together more than 2 million people in the Carolinas.

The completed Thread Trail – still years away – will stretch for hundreds of miles across the region. For now, it's in different stages of development, and all the sections aren't completed yet. Bits and pieces are scattered about.

On Tuesday, signs will be placed in communities where the Carolinas Thread Trail master plan has either been fully adopted by local officials or communities have identified sections that will be part of the trail. Gaston and York, S.C., are the two counties that have fully adopted the plan.

Dean Thompson of the Catawba Conservancy explained what's happening Tuesday like this: The new signs will make a visionary project more real. People will realize they are part of a regional system.

Gaston County will have five Marking of the Thread celebrations Tuesday:

Two begin at 9 a.m.: Riverside Greenway along the South Fork River in Cramerton and in Mount Holly at the Catawba River Greenway at Tuckaseege Park.

At 10 a.m. at the J.M. Carstarphen Bridge in McAdenville, the focus will be on the new Spencer Mountain-R.Y. McAden Blueway on the South Fork River. My friends who'd canoed this stretch of river tell me it's a great experience.

At 11 a.m., the Rotary Pavilion in downtown Gastonia will be the gathering place for ribbon-cuttings for the Highland Rail Trail and the Catawba Creek Greenway extension. You can watch both on a live video at the Rotary Pavilion.

New adventures

Greenway walks are like hitting the same old beach you've visited a million times – always invigoratingly new. You can't wait to get back for the next outing.

The Catawba Creek Greenway extension and the rail trail have been in development for years. Coming up with the grant money took time.

Gastonia Planning Director Jack Kiser told me the rail trail cost about \$230,000, much cheaper than the \$550,000 greenway extension project.

The original rail bed was built in 1870 for a track running between Chester, S.C., and Lenoir. For the rail trail, Kiser said, the city had a good grade and base to work with, drainage already in place and no bridges to build on the route.

But the Catawba Creek extension required a pedestrian bridge and extensive work on a culvert so folks could get under Union Road. Not to mention blazing a trail through the woods and creating a 6-inch stone base.

I haven't been on the rail trail yet. On the way to work early one morning last week, I spotted a lone walker coming up the ribbon of pavement – and it made me want to get out there soon.

Meanwhile, I went back for another look at the Catawba Creek extension – this time in late afternoon.

For the first half of the walk, I hardly broke a sweat. Muscadine hulls scattered on the pavement made me scan tree limbs overhead for wild grape vines. Sunlight slanted through the woods where chirping crickets didn't miss a beat. Up ahead, leaves shook as a slight breeze unrolled down the trail. For me, it all spelled fall just around the corner.

But the sun reminded me it was still summer. By the time I left Ferguson Park, headed back to the car, I regretted not having a bottle of water. I made it OK, remembering each outing on the greenway is a new adventure.

We're lucky that Gaston has so many evolving trail systems that someday will be tied to a regional network. That means future generations will have the chance for even greater adventures

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