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County revisits Carolina Thread Trail debate

By Michael Barrett

Fans and critics of a conceptual greenway system through Gaston County traded shots again Thursday night.

Proponents of the proposed Carolina Thread Trail spoke of how it would boost quality of life, increase property values and spur economic development.

Detractors warned of impending property disputes and walking trails turning into crime corridors. And some worried that Gaston taxpayers will shoulder too much of the cost for connecting the greenway system with 14 other counties.

The debate at the county board's work session came after commissioners questioned the thread trail last month. Several of them shied from a resolution "to support" the trail because of questions about how much money that could involve.

The board listened to opinions on the pros and cons Thursday and will reconsider the resolution Feb. 28.

The system of trails and greenways is still just a concept. Some costs and potential routes have been mentioned, but it's all speculative, said Dave Cable, executive director of the Catawba Lands Conservancy.

CLC, a lead agency on the project, estimates all of the trails could cost \$150 million, mostly funded by grants and donations. But \$40 million might be needed from the 15 counties over 10 to 15 years, Cable said.

Gaston County and York County, S.C., each received a \$50,000 "pilot project" grant from organizers of the trail effort in December.

On Thursday, commissioners expressed concerns about what it would cost them to maintain all the Gaston trails after they're built. Many residents are worried about having their land split or seized for a greenway route. Commissioner Tom Keigher proposed adding a paragraph to the resolution that assures no undesired routes will be forced on adjacent landowners.

Cable assured the board no trail would go where a landowner didn't want it to.

Three county residents spoke against the thread trail concept.

"I don't think I'm the only one who objects to greenways," said Don Barkley of Gastonia. "I'm one of the few standing up here."

Laura Stroupe of Old Dallas Road repeated her previous warnings that thieves would use the shortcuts when breaking into homes.

"It is a crime corridor to a certain degree," she said.

But officials from several agencies, such as the Quality of Natural Resources Commission and Gaston Regional Chamber of Commerce, gave the concept glowing praise.

QNRC representative Gary Mims also spoke on behalf of the county's Fitness Nutrition Council, and said greenways encourage people to exercise.

"Humans aren't hamsters," he said. "They like to have a destination."

Gaston County Police Chief Bill Farley said research in Gastonia and nationally has shown greenways don't attract crime. They tend to discourage illegal activity, he said.

"I think you'll find that wherever good people are, those are places where bad people won't go," Farley said.

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