

The Observer News Enterprise

Thread trail master plan approved

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By Jordan-Ashley Baker

The Catawba County Board of Commissioners on Monday unanimously approved a master plan for a diverse collection of trails in the county and surrounding areas.

The approval qualifies Catawba County for future grant funding in the design, acquisition and construction of the master plan.

Catawba County senior planner Mary George and thread trail community coordinator Randi Gates presented the master plan to the Board of Commissioners at its meeting Monday in the 1924 Courthouse in Newton.

The master plan contains nine priority segments and includes six routes in Catawba County.

These routes include segments of:

- 1) 2.1 miles along the South Fork of the Catawba River from Blackburn Bridge Road south to the Lincoln County line.
- 2) 2.5 miles from Claremont City Hall to the Bunker Hill Covered Bridge.
- 3) 2.6 miles from the Bunker Hill Covered Bridge to the town of Catawba.
- 4) 2.6 miles from Murray's Mill to the town of Catawba.
- 5) An undetermined length within the future Mountain Creek Park on Lake Norman.
- 6) 4.1 miles from Sherrills Ford Road along Island Point Road to Raccoon Track Drive north to a Duke Energy power easement.



The routes in Catawba County will make up a larger collection of trails connecting 15 counties in North and South Carolina. Nine of the participating counties, including Catawba County, adopted their county's master plan.

About one-third of the Catawba County's population lives within half a mile of the thread trail route on the master plan.

The plan was created in about one year based on input from community leaders and citizens in participating counties. Catawba County had several community forums in Newton, Sherrills Ford and Hickory at various stages of the thread trail planning process.

Passage of the thread trail master plan will allow the county to apply for design, acquisition and construction grants for the trail from the Carolina Thread Trail organization. The plan will be implemented over time as grant and capital funding from the county's budget allow. The adoption doesn't commit any county dollars to fund the master plan's implementation.

The Carolina Thread Trail is a nonprofit organization committed to expanding a network of outdoor trails in North and South Carolina. The project is financed through state and federal funding, as well as private donors.

Commissioner Dan Hunsucker asked Gates about the total cost of thread trail implementation in the county, and he expressed concerns about developing a segmented trail that, if funding wasn't available, won't be available for citizens' use.

Gates told Hunsucker it's hard to pinpoint an exact cost for thread trail implementation because each municipality determines what surface will be used on trails in their jurisdiction.

"We realize this plan isn't going to be implemented in the next one to five to 10 years," Gates said. "It's going to take awhile."

Some of the tread trail routes include existing trails, paths and walkways in the county. Once the trails are created, local municipalities will be responsible for maintaining those trails, like existing pathways, which are located in their jurisdiction.

Gates said this maintenance could be the responsibility of the municipality's parks and recreation department, or it could be maintained by volunteer groups or other organizations.

"We don't want to adopt something that will strain future boards," George said.

Each municipality in the county, except for Brookford, reviewed and approved the master plan as it pertains to the municipality. Brookford opted not to participate. Newton made an adjustment during the planning process to the proposed thread trail design, amending a route along the Heritage Greenway.

Forums held early in 2010 allowed residents to sketch possible trail routes on large maps of the county and dictate locations they don't want trail routes. Months later, citizens could view a draft of the trail and discuss that draft with Carolina Thread Trail officials.

Officials also conducted a survey to determine what types of trails county residents wanted. Eighty-four percent of residents surveyed said they "strongly supported" the Carolina Thread Trail, and most respondents wanted walking or biking trails.

The Carolina Thread Trail routes include 126 miles of trails throughout Catawba County. The proposed trails are a quarter-mile wide to accommodate various land features, such as existing rights of way, landowner interest and other land conditions. The thread trail plan also includes 112 miles of secondary routes for alternative trails or additional connections to existing trails.

Officials involved in guiding the trail-creation process stressed the importance of a citizen-designed trail that residents want to use.

"We realize that a lot of folks don't want a trail on their land, and that's OK," Gates said. "... We realize that there are many ways to get from point A to point B."

The Thread Trail Steering Committee recommended Thread Trail Master Plan approval at its Sept. 10 meeting. The Catawba County Parks Advisory also approved the plan at its meeting Dec. 1. The Catawba County Planning Board held a public forum Dec. 6 about the master plan, and no one was present to speak for or against the plan. The board then recommended the trail's master plan for adoption by the Board of Commissioners.

Once completed, the Carolina Thread Trail will reach 2.3 million citizens. Participating counties in North and South Carolina include Anson, Cabarrus, Cherokee, Chester, Cleveland, Gaston, Iredell, Lancaster, Lincoln, Mecklenburg, Rowan, Stanley, Union and York.

George said county planners hope to have Murray's Mill signed in the coming months as one of the first Carolina Thread Trail locations in Catawba County.

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