

A rail trail might run through it

Belmont greenway proposal would connect Belmont Abbey College and Sisters of Mercy.

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By Joe DePriest



Belmont City Council member Martha Stowe, a longtime supporter of the rail trail, says there is more support now than in years past. The proposed trail would link the Belmont Abbey College campus, in background, and the Sisters of Mercy campus, south of Interstate 85.

Photo by John D. Simmons.

Good news from Belmont: the idea for a greenway along a former railroad corridor is back.

For years, I thought it had been sidetracked - permanently.

But the proposal has not only been resurrected, it actually has some funding, at least for design and engineering.

Adrian Miller, Belmont's assistant city manager, told me the city recently got a \$30,000 grant from the Carolina Thread Trail. Next month, the council will appoint a steering committee that will include property owners along the 1.4-mile stretch of the old might Piedmont & Northern track running from Woodlawn Avenue north of Interstate 85 to downtown.

Meanwhile, the city has applied for a \$300,000 grant from the N.C. Department of Transportation for the project. If approved, the city would have to put up \$60,000.

Miller said the focus is on promoting walking, reducing traffic and improving air quality. The proposed trail would connect the Belmont Abbey College campus north of I-85 to the Sisters of Mercy campus on the south. Some Abbey students attend classes at the Sisters of Mercy. A trail would allow them to walk to classes instead of driving.

Aside from that benefit, the trail would, in my opinion, become a popular community resource.

A trail connecting two scenic campuses on either side of a busy interstate highway with a lively downtown that has restaurants and shops sounds like a great idea to me.

Miller said the railroad tracks would remain intact and covered with compacted gravel topped with asphalt sloped on either side. The DOT requires the tracks to be kept intact in case commuter light rail service was ever activated in the future.

Miller said the turning this Belmont spur of the old P&N line into a walking trail wouldn't interfere with current plans to develop the main line between Gastonia and Charlotte for freight service.

Regular, scheduled train service on the spur line stopped in the mid-1980s.

I remember the idea for a rail trail coming up around 2000 but getting nowhere. Two years later, when Belmont Abbey proposed developing 130 acres between I-85 and Wilkinson Boulevard for a shopping center, the trail idea resurfaced.

I was at the City Council meeting the night that Martha Stowe made the suggestion. At the time, she was a board member of Connect Gaston, a nonprofit group that helped build Gastonia's first greenway.

Stowe suggested it was a good time to take another look at a rail trail. Two private donations of \$5,000 came in but general support wasn't there.

Stowe, still a Connect Gaston board member and now on the Belmont City Council, said things have changed. People are more concerned about exercise and eating right and environmental issues.

Plus, there's a lot of interest in the projects springing up around the Carolina Thread Trail, a 15-county network of trails and conservation areas.

Belmont's rail trail would be its first greenway. The path crossing an existing bridge over I-85 and a proposed pedestrian crossway over Wilkinson Boulevard would be one of the most visible in the region.

I think of it as a billboard advertising healthy living choices to people passing by in vehicles.

Even if things go exactly right, the trail is still years in the future.

There's a lot of work to do. But Stowe is positive about its chances. The Thread Trail grant is a step in the right direction, she said.

I agree. And this time, I hope the project stays on track. By the way, donations are still being accepted.

<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2011/01/16/1975500/a-rail-trail-might-run-through.html#ixzz1C4TrYTSN>