

THE GAFFNEY LEDGER

Happy trails to thee...

By JOE L. HUGHES II Ledger Staff Writer joe@gaffneyledger.com
8/10/2011 – Local News

A beaten path and select landmarks are all local resident Larry Mullinax needs to navigate the Cherokee County wilderness.

"Few trails in these parts have names, we just know them by frequenting these areas over time," he said. "We have our own that we've traveled, ones I've been taking my daughter on since she was knee-high."



Local resident Larry Mullinax provides input on a network of trails in Cherokee County last week, pinpointing their location to Carolina Thread Trail representatives who were in town hoping to develop a plan for greenways and waterways here. The 15-county initiative in North and South Carolina is designed to inspire and facilitate the creation of a regional network of trails, blueways and conservation corridors that will eventually link more than 2.3 million people.

Some of the trails might be family secrets, but Mullinax shared some of his collection with members of the Carolina Thread Trail group during a recent open house at the Gaffney Visitors Center. A network of trails, greenways, blueways, and conservation corridors in a 15-county area around Charlotte, the organization hoped to pick the brains of local residents, finding out where they liked to hike, bike, or walk their canine companions.

"Our goal is to find out what people know, find out a little bit about the greenways and trails in this area," said Jonathan Wood of Haden Stanziale, a planning, urban design, landscape architecture and civil engineering firm based in Charlotte. "In addition, we want to find places where we can connect trails already existing in other areas to those we hope to create in Cherokee County."

Of the counties making up what is to become the Carolina Thread Trail, 10 have adopted master plans identifying desired routes. Approximately 70 miles are open for public use.

Funded through a private capital campaign that will eventually be leveraged with local, state and federal money, the Carolina Thread Trail has set a goal of \$150 million, approximately \$40 million of which will be brought in by private donations. Thus far, cash and land gifts have helped the organization surpass the halfway mark in terms of private donations, raking in more than \$20.5 million.

While it hopes to collect quite a lump of money in an effort to accomplish its goal, "The Thread" also contributes immensely to the areas through which it meanders, helping communities acquire nearly \$1.7 million in grant awards. Using the River Walk in York County as an example, Carolina Thread Trail Community Coordinator Randi Gates believes a well developed plan of action can reap quite the reward for counties and municipalities involved.

"More than 4,000 visitors come to the River Walk every week; every location doesn't keep count, but that is one example of the success we have had with this program," she said. "Every community has a popular segment it has to offer and the best part of it is that it is free. In these lean times, these trails offer low-cost solutions, free recreation we like to call it."

Though much of the planning is done in the present, much of it will not come to fruition in the short term.

"This is undoubtedly a long-term project; maybe 40 years or so," Gates said. "We have 10 adopted plans, calling for approximately 1,100 miles of trails; only 70 of those are on the ground. So we'll continue to work at it."

"I don't know why it took so long, but I'll be extremely happy when they get it going," Mullinax said. "It'll be a place you can take your family, something all of you can be proud of."

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