

N.C. COALITION FOR TRAILS

May 20, 2020

The Honorable Roy Cooper
Governor of North Carolina
1 East Edenton Street
Raleigh, NC 27601

RE: Trails: A source of jobs and respite for North Carolinians

Dear Governor Cooper:

COVID-19 has thrown so many North Carolinians out of work and also demonstrated how much we need safe places to be in nature in these hard times. As you develop your 20-21 budget recommendations and look for ways to stimulate the economy and create jobs, we write to suggest construction of new trails and restoration of degraded ones as projects that can provide meaningful work for many people – including young people who are starting careers at this time of massive unemployment – while providing infrastructure that will greatly enhance quality of life for our citizens as well as the tourism economy.

Our coalition is developing a list of executable trail projects throughout North Carolina that can be quickly completed if funding is available. The projects would employ young people through the Conservation Corps N.C., professional trail builders, and contractors who specialize in design and construction of bridges and boardwalk. We are also working with our partners in State Parks, N.C. Department of Transportation and the Economic Partnership of N.C. to develop job creation estimates.

Our proposal, outlined below, recommends \$15 million in non-recurring funds to complete these projects and \$2 million in recurring funds to provide the structure and oversight needed for these and future projects to expand North Carolina's trail system as the economy improves.

Even before the pandemic, interest in trails has been growing rapidly. The vision of a state-wide system, first laid out in the N.C. Trail System Act of 1973, was gaining momentum because of strong support from citizens and local governments. They built miles of local trails and greenways and also undertook exciting efforts to complete new segments of the Mountains-to-Sea State Trail. Within the last five years, and with unanimous support from the N.C. General Assembly, five new long-distance State Trails were authorized (Fonta Flora, Hickory Nut Gorge, Northern Peaks, Overmountain Victory and Wilderness Gateway).

More recently, your N.C. Department of Transportation launched “The Great Trail State” initiative to develop a comprehensive plan for greenways and trails that will link every county in the state. And Visit NC is now developing travel itineraries that highlight trails as an activity that can be safely enjoyed in this time of social distancing.

Investment in trails is a great way to rebuild our economy and create an even stronger, more resilient North Carolina. We respectfully submit the following proposal as a way to achieve that vision:

1. Establish a non-recurring fund of \$15 million to fund executable trail construction and maintenance projects now. \$10 million of these funds would be used for projects on the nine authorized State Trails and \$5 million for projects on other trails in North Carolina.

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2. Establish a recurring \$2 million fund that would be administered by an enhanced N.C. State Trail Program. The funding would allow State Parks to lead and partner with nonprofits to complete the authorized State Trails and support other trail systems across the state. A detailed proposal for how this program could be structured is attached (see Attachment #1). This proposal has been shared with Reid Wilson and Dwayne Patterson of the N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources.
3. Support continued funding of the three conservation trust funds as recommended by Land for Tomorrow (\$19.6 million for the Clean Water Management Trust Fund; \$19.7 million for the Parks & Recreation Trust Fund; \$7.8 for the Farmland Preservation Trust Fund).
4. Amend the NC Trails Act (Statute 143B-135.92) to incorporate language supporting the involvement of volunteers and nonprofits (see Attachment #2). This amendment, which is based on language found in the National Trails Act, recognizes the critical role that nonprofits and volunteers play in building community and landowner support for complex trail projects and lowering construction and maintenance costs.

Thank you for your calm, decisive leadership during this crisis. We look forward to doing our part to rebuild a strong and vibrant North Carolina. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Bill Holman at bholman@conservationfund.org or 919-224-9312.

Sincerely,

Bret Baronak, Carolina Thread Trail
Charlie Brady, Blue Ridge Conservancy
Jack Brown, Northwest N.C. Mountain Bike Alliance
Scott Carpenter, Burke County
Kate Dixon, Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail
Dave Ellegood, Cape Fear SORBA
Chuck Flink, Greenways Incorporated
Beth Heile, Friends of the Valdese Rec
Bill Holman, The Conservation Fund
Judge Bob Hunter, Friends of Fonta Flora State Trail
Sarwat Khattak, Triangle Off-Road Cyclists
Andrew Kota, Foothills Conservancy of N.C.

Matthew Leach, Pisgah Area SORBA
Bryant Lindsey, Overmountain Victory Trail Assn.
Jeannine Mazza, Southern Appalachian Biking Assn.
Jason McDougald, Camp Grier-Tanawha Adventures-G5 Trail Collective
Palmer McIntyre, Piedmont Legacy Trails & Piedmont Land Conservancy
Fritz Neal, Piedmont Fat Tire Society
Jan Pender, Conservation Corps North Carolina
Kieran Roe, Conserving Carolina
Sarah Sanford, East Coast Greenway Alliance
Paul Stalschmidt, Southern Off-Road Bicycle Assn.
Peter Tay, Nantahala Area SORBA
Melissa Weddell, Boone Area Cyclists

Cc: Susi H. Hamilton, Secretary, N.C. Department of Natural & Cultural Resources
Eric Boyette, Secretary, N.C. Department of Transportation
Anthony M. Copeland, Secretary, N.C. Department of Commerce
Reid Wilson, Chief Deputy Secretary, N.C. Department of Natural & Cultural Resources
Christopher Chung, CEO, Economic Development Partnership of N.C.
Dwayne Patterson, Director, N.C. Division of Parks & Recreation
Heather Hildebrandt, Interim Director, Bike and Ped Division, N.C. Department of Transportation
Wit Tuttell, Vice President, VisitNC
Scott Crocker, Manager, N.C. Trails Program
Tom Weaver, Chairman, N.C. Trails Committee
Neal Lewis, Chairman, N.C. Parks and Recreation Trust Fund Authority

ATTACHMENT #1: Proposal to Enhance the N.C. Trails Program to Complete North Carolina's State Trail System

The N.C. Trails Program (NCTP) is an existing program within the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation that provides technical support for trail planning and design and administers a federal grant program known as the Recreational Trails Program.

We recommend that NCTP be enhanced so that it can provide support for North Carolina trails similar to which the federal government has effectively provided on a national level through its National Trail System Program:

1. For National Trails,¹ which are similar in concept to our State Trails, the federal strategy depends on a partnership between a federal agency and a nonprofit for all 30 trails in the system. Creating a successful, long-distance trail is not primarily a land management task. Instead, the primary tasks are to build partnerships, inspire others, and promote a shared community vision. The federal agency and nonprofits bring their unique strengths and work together under a memorandum of agreement (MOA), and enter into cost-share agreements to help fund the nonprofits' work on projects of mutual interest.
2. National Recreational Trails,² which are like our local and park trails, are designated through an application process which ensures that they are built with local support using sustainable trail building standards. The federal government provides funding to help build and maintain such trails.³ In North Carolina, these federal funds are distributed through a grant program run by NCTP.

The following enhancements would allow NCTP to provide needed resources and leadership to complete the North Carolina Trail System (**structure and programs of the existing NCTP are bolded**):

1. The NCTP would be led by a Superintendent of State Trails.
2. **As it is today, the NCTP would be advised by a seven-member citizen NC Trails Committee, appointed by the Secretary of N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources.**

¹ National Trails include 11 Scenic Trails like the Appalachian and Pacific Crest and 19 Historic Trails like the Lewis and Clark and Selma to Montgomery. Like N.C. State Trails, National Trails are legislatively designated and funded.

² There are more than 1200 National Recreational Trails and they are found in all 50 states. The program recognizes locally-managed trails for their contribution to the nation's system of public trail access and outdoor enjoyment. Agencies, communities, and States pursue NRT designation to highlight the trail for tourism marketing, promote public access, and recognize trails as a recreation amenity for communities.

³ The federal funding source is called the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) within the Federal Highway Administration. The source of money is gas taxes paid by riders of off-road vehicles, and it is distributed among all 50 states, each of which runs a program to grant the funds for local and state projects.

ATTACHMENT #1 (continued)

3. The NCTP would administer the following programs:
 - a. Oversight of State Trails
 - i. Enter into Memorandums of Agreement with a nonprofit partner for each of the State Trails,
 - ii. Work with the nonprofit partner to develop a 3- to 5-year plan for development of each State Trail,
 - iii. Enter into Cost Share Agreements with each nonprofit,
 - iv. Assess progress and adjust plans and funding as needed.
 - b. Designation and Support of N.C. Recreational Trails and State Trails
 - i. Establish standards and process for N.C. Recreational Trail designation,
 - ii. Designate NC Recreational Trails and **State Trails**.
 - c. Administration of Trail Grant Programs
 - i. \$2 million recurring state funding for cost-share agreements with nonprofit partners for State Trails, allocated as follows:
 1. \$1.35 million to fund cost-share agreements with nonprofits that support the nine State Trails,
 2. \$650,000 to fund the superintendent position and related administrative and staff costs.
 - ii. \$15 million non-recurring state funding to be distributed as follows:
 1. \$10 million for shovel-ready projects on State Trails including for land and easement acquisition and trail construction and maintenance,
 2. \$5 million for Recreational Trail projects for:
 - a. Development of plans for a trail that could qualify as an NC Recreational Trail,
 - b. Shovel-ready trail projects including construction and maintenance and land and easement acquisition on designated NC Recreational Trails.
 - iii. **The federal RTP grant program (approximately \$2 million per year) that can fund State Trail and NC Recreational Trail projects.**
 - d. **Trail design support for trails on State Parks.**
 - e. Support for trail development in North Carolina by:
 - i. **Providing technical trail advice to local and other state government agencies,**
 - ii. **Serving as clearing house for information about trails (e.g., through a website, conferences and meetings),**
 - iii. Helping communities market their trails for economic impact (e.g., establishing a program to recognize trail towns).
4. The Superintendent of State Trails would have a rank similar to other superintendents of state parks and would participate with them in meetings related to state park management.

ATTACHMENT #2: Proposal for amending the N.C. Trails Act to incorporate language supporting the involvement of volunteers and nonprofit in state trails.

The amendment language below comes directly from the National Trails Act, which was the original model for the N.C. Trails Act. Somehow this language was not included in our state version, but it is reasonable, visionary and has served the national trail system very well.

I) The most important language to add is in the Declaration of Policy and Purpose in Statute 143B-135.92. Our amendment would add a third paragraph to this section that says:

“(c) The General Assembly recognizes the valuable contributions that volunteers and private, nonprofit trail groups have made to the development and maintenance of North Carolina's trails. In recognition of these contributions, it is further the purpose of this Act to encourage and assist volunteer citizen involvement in the planning, development, maintenance, and management, where appropriate, of trails.”

II) The other language shows up at the very end of the National Trails Act as a separate section (1250) entitled “Volunteer trails assistance.” It should be added as a separate paragraph.

§1250. Volunteer trails assistance

(a) Volunteer planning, development, maintenance, and management of trails. The Secretary of Natural and Cultural Resources is authorized to encourage volunteers and volunteer organizations to plan, develop, maintain, and manage, where appropriate, trails throughout the State.

(b) Scope of volunteer work. The Secretary or the head of any state agency may assist volunteers and volunteer organizations in planning, developing, maintaining, and managing trails. Volunteer work may include, but need not be limited to—

(1) planning, developing, maintaining, or managing (A) trails which are components of the state trails system, or (B) trails which, if so developed and maintained, could qualify for designation as components of the state trails system; or

(2) operating programs to organize and supervise volunteer trail building efforts with respect to the trails referred to in paragraph (1), conducting trail related research projects, or providing education and training to volunteers on methods of trails planning, construction, and maintenance.

(c) Use of State facilities, equipment, tools, and technical assistance. The appropriate Secretary or the head of any state agency may utilize and make available state facilities, equipment, tools, and technical assistance to volunteers and volunteer organizations, subject to such limitations and restrictions as the appropriate Secretary or the head of any state land managing agency deems necessary or desirable.