Jerry Stensland
Foothills Regional Commission – Safe Routes to Schools Coordinator, RPO Planner
Rutherford Outdoor Coalition – Co-founder and President

Karyl Fuller
Foothills Regional Commission - Economic and Community Development Director

Doug Barrick
Town of Rutherfordton - Manager
• 13.56 miles, 12-foot wide paved. Fully opened in Fall of 2019.

• Connects five communities (Gilkey, Ruth, Rutherfordton, Spindale, Forest City)

• Constructed on old rail line at cost of $5.5 million

• Averaging 130,000 trips per year

• Trail website: www.ThermalBeltRailTrail.com

• Including the Purple Martin Greenway, Rutherford County has 15.5 miles of paved trail at least 10-foot wide. One mile for every 4,387 people. Most per capita of any county in the Carolinas?!?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distribution by Site</th>
<th>Total-All Users</th>
<th>All Users</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Daily Average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>123,837</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyclists</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>70,821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedestrians</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>53,016</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Weekends - Cyclists**

- Daily Average: 309

**Weekdays - Cyclists**

- Daily Average: 148

**Weekends - Pedestrians**

- Daily Average: 167

**Weekdays - Pedestrians**

- Daily Average: 137

**Weekends - All Users**

- Daily Average: 476

**Weekdays - All Users**

- Daily Average: 284

1999 – Multiple local entities receive grants for construction and legal costs to put gravel down over the rails and crossties to create a trail.

2000 – Surface Transportation Board approves request to rail bank the corridor and allow ‘interim’ use as a trail.

2001 – Trail is opened after gravel applied to 7.87-mile section from Gilkey to Spindale. Rails and crossties remain under the gravel.

2001 – Lawsuit filed by some trail corridor neighbors primarily asking for compensation for their land that was used for the railroad. Trail remains open.

2003 – District Court judge rules largely in favor of the trail, leaving one issue to go to the NC Supreme Court.

2005 – NC Supreme Court rules in favor of the trail. Determines that the corridor is the equivalent of fee simple ownership and thus can be used as the owner sees fit.

2001-2014 – Trail remained in gravel. Limited parking, almost no signage. Conditions deteriorated over time. Was used by some, but underutilized and underappreciated.
Photos: Nancy Pierce
Between 2005-2019 there were 12 studies or plans that included trail elements and specifically mentioned the importance and potential of the rail trail.

2005 – Rutherford County Heritage Plan
- Idea of a countywide trail system is included with a mention of the Forest City section of the rail trail

2006 – Rutherford County publishes Arts, Parks & Recreation Comprehensive Plan.
- Leads to creation of new county staff position

2006 – Town of Rutherfordton Land Use Plan
- Includes a heritage trails network, connecting to the rail trail and creating the Purple Martin Greenway

2010 – Regional Trails Plan (Innovate: Trails) published by Isothermal Planning & Development

2015 – Rutherford County Comprehensive Transportation Plan

2015 – Forest City Pedestrian Plan. The number #1 priority project is to extend the rail trail into Forest City.

2017 – Thermal Belt Rail Trail Master Plan, funded by RHI Legacy Foundation

2017 – Rutherford County Tourism creates master plan called Rutherford Bound – Mountains to Main Streets
- Plan is heavily focused on outdoor recreation and trails.

2017 – Rutherfordton Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan

2018 – Rutherford County Parks & Recreation Master Plan

2018 – Isothermal Regional Bicycle Plan

2019 – Spindale Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan
Champions and small victories...

• A few persistent people can make all the difference...

• Keep at it, continue to plan and dream

• In 2014, the county paved a 1.8 mile section to six feet wide. Paved over the rails! Use on that short section skyrocketed. Funded by 2012 RTP grant with a private foundation providing the match.

• Later in 2014, ROC partnered with the newly formed RHI Legacy Foundation and raised $125,000 from a single golf event to extend the pavement and improve the rest of the TBRT.

• In 2015, the Town of Rutherfordton built the first one-third of a mile of the Purple Martin Greenway. Section had no formal parking and went to a dead end, but highlighted a beautiful and unknown part of Cleghorn Creek. Use was substantial and solidified Town Council support for more.

• In 2016, the big shift happened...
Rails-to-Trails could extend 13.5 miles

Forest City enters agreement with railway

BY JEAN GORDON
GORDON@THEDIGITALCOURIER.COM

FOREST CITY — The popular Rails-to-Trails corridor that begins in Spindale and continues to Gilkey could be extended after the Town of Forest City and the Thermal Belt Railway entered into a lease agreement on Thursday morning with the railway company.

The official transaction with Thermal Belt Railway releases its lease rights on the corridor between Alexander Mills and Gilkey for $250,000 and Rutherford Railroad Development Corporation (RRDC) enters into the lease for the portion of the corridor from Alexander Mills to Oakland Road.

The rent for the lease is a one-time payment by the Town of $250,000 to RRDC who utilized those funds to pay Thermal Belt Railway for its corridor rights. The lease terminates if rail use of the corridor is reactivated, said City Manager John Condrey.

“This is an exciting opportunity for the Town of Forest City and Rutherford County.”

— John Condrey
City Manager

This portion of the railway near the Florence Mill project and the Rutherford County Farmers Market could be developed as a part of the 13.5 mile Rails-to-Trails.

Jean Gordon/ Daily Courier

SEE TRAILS/PAGE A10
Rail trail gets $4.2 million boost from RHI Legacy Foundation

FROM STAFF REPORTS

FOREST CITY — The Thermal Belt Rail Trail is moving forward and should become a reality in late 2018 as a result of action taken by the RHI Legacy Foundation Board of Trustees at its meeting on Monday.

The RHI Legacy Foundation voted to fund construction of the 12-foot wide, 13-mile spur that will connect communities across the county from Forrest Hunt School to Gilkey. The grant also includes funding for up to six potential trailheads to provide parking and other amenities at access points for the trail. The grant request was approved for $4,250,000.

"David (Odom) and I have both worked in the county over 20 years. By far, this project reflects the highest level of intergovernmental cooperation and common purpose that we have ever seen."

-- Keith Webb, McGill

"The construction of this trail represents a transformational project for the county that combines health and wellness, economic development and neighborhood improvement. Due to this project's importance, we prioritized it outside of the Foundation's normal grant cycle."

-- Dr. Bobby England, Chairman of RHI Legacy Foundation
Trail Partners – Key Accomplishments

• Each entity signed a 99-year lease for their section of trail

• Developed and passed uniform ordinance for trail regulations

• Each entity agrees to maintain their section of trail. Partners communicate regularly and will share equipment and resources.

• Cultivated support with elected officials, support for trails across all elected bodies is broad

• Maintain trail website and social media presence through a contractor

• Reconstituted Rutherford Railroad Development Corporation (RRDC)
Lessons Learned

• Even a small amount of new trail can trigger significant change
• Bring your lawyer
• Foster intergovernmental cooperation
• Celebrate wins
• Elected officials buy-in
• Find champions
• Continue to plan and dream
• Number one question: Where’s the bathroom
Up next…

• $200,000 investment by Tourism in trail enhancements

• Crossing improvements at 9 DOT managed intersections

• $75,000 DOT grant to study connecting schools to the trail system. Ten (10) schools within a mile of a TBRT or PMG now.

• Feasibility study completed on connecting TBRT to Peavine Trail in Marion (18 miles). Rail corridor may have reverted to original property owners.

• Bostic Spur? (3 miles) – currently unused rail corridor, same ownership at TBRT. Currently leased to railroad operator.