

Dollars, jobs flow from paths

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Local efforts to build more greenways should get a boost from a N.C. Department of Transportation study detailing the economic benefits of shared-use paths.

The study looked at four paths across North Carolina: the Brevard Greenway in Brevard, the Little Sugar Creek Greenway in Charlotte, the American Tobacco Trail in Durham and the Duck Trail in the tiny seaside town of Duck in Dare County.

The study (available at go.ncsu.edu/sharedusepaths) is the first time North Carolina has looked at the economic benefits of bicycling and pedestrian paths, and bolsters the case that they are economic engines. “There’s been a lot of commentary on this idea, but we now have solid, North Carolina-specific data to back it up,” said Julie White, DOT’s deputy secretary for multi-modal transportation.

Statewide from 2015 to 2017, the four greenways generated \$19.4 million in estimated revenue for businesses along their routes, and \$684,000 in sales tax revenue for local governments.

The total cost to build the four trails was \$26.7 million. That generated 790 construction jobs and an estimated \$48.7 million in total business revenue. The study also found \$25.7 million in savings related to increased physical activity, less pollution and fewer traffic injuries as a result of the paths. For every \$1 spent one time to build the greenways, they returned \$1.72 in benefits — every year.

Consider the five-mile Brevard Greenway. It sees 76,000 trips or visits each year. Two-thirds of the folks who use the path live in Brevard and Pisgah Forest, and 90 percent of them use it for exercise and recreation. Trail users tend to be educated and affluent and include all ages: 52 percent are between the ages of 26 and 55; 44 percent are older than 55; and 3 percent are 18 to 25.

Not surprisingly, folks exercising outdoors get hungry, and the ones in Brevard spent most of their dollars at restaurants and groceries. Twenty percent of those surveyed made a restaurant-related purchase at the average cost of \$19, and 10 percent made a grocery-related purchase averaging \$32.

Overall, the study found the Brevard Greenway generates an annual sales revenue output of \$1.56 million, supports 21 jobs and generates \$614,000 in labor income. That’s pretty amazing for a modest path that runs from the Lumber Arts District through neighborhoods, along and across U.S. 64, behind the hospital and along Ecusta Road to connect with Davidson River Campground in Pisgah National Forest.

The study should bolster support for more local greenways. These include proposals to extend the Oklawaha Greenway from Hendersonville to Fletcher and Flat Rock, a path proposed along N.C. 280 in Mills River, and the holy grail of greenways, the proposed Ecusta Trail that would connect Brevard, Penrose, Etowah/Horse Shoe, Laurel Park and Hendersonville.

Should we support more greenways? Only if we want more jobs, strong economic growth, healthier residents and safe opportunities for outdoor recreation, all while improving our environment.

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