

Opinion

MountainTrue: More greenways needed for Henderson County communities

By Katie Breckheimer

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Imagine a community where kids can ride safely to school, families can stroll through a forest without leaving town, and shoppers can go to the store without driving a car.

MountainTrue and the Friends of the Oklawaha Greenway are working to make that vision a reality by promoting greenways and supporting Henderson County's newly proposed Greenways Master Plan.

They believe that greenways can help transform our community by making it greener, healthier and happier.

"When the Friends of the Oklawaha led a visit to the Swamp Rabbit Trail for the League of Women Voters, I saw first-hand what an extended greenway could do for a community," said Jan Allen, a member of the Friends of the Oklawaha Greenway.

What exactly is a greenway? Greenways are linear parks or trails that can run through towns, countryside or woods, and welcome walkers, runners, cyclists and skaters, but not motorized vehicles.

The Friends of the Oklawaha Greenway started small about three years ago. They simply looked at where a trail might go to connect Jackson Park to Blue Ridge Community College.

"The first thing we did was go to the College's Board of Trustees to ask if they were interested," said Suzanne Hale, current president of the Friends group.

"When the trustees gave us a thumbs up and signed a resolution of support, we were off and running," Suzanne added. "Now we have almost 40 letters of support from groups and organizations. We never thought the community would come this far in three years, and we're

extremely happy with the possibilities in the draft master plan.”

Why are greenways a good idea? If you ask John Evers, also a member of the Friends group, he'll tell you that greenways create community. John leads a fitness walk three days a week on the Oklawaha. “I see people strike up conversations on the trail all the time,” said John. “I think it's important to have places like this that lend themselves to friendly interactions among neighbors.”

Greenways are also good for the environment. With its wetlands, meadows, stream and forests, just a few minutes from downtown Hendersonville, the Oklawaha Greenway is a great place for environmental education. Hands On! Children's Museum and the Boys and Girls Club of Henderson County have held nature walks on the trail. The Hendersonville Tree Board has sponsored native tree walks and a “pollinator safari” there.

The Audubon Society has named the Oklawaha Greenway a birding hotspot, but birds aren't the only animals you'll see on the trail. Jan often walks her dog Kodi on the Oklawaha. “My husband and I chose this area to retire in because we wanted to hike in the mountains nearby,” said Jan. “We use the convenient Oklawaha as a way to stay in shape for more strenuous hiking.”

Nearly half of the population of Henderson County is over 50 years of age. As folks get older, they're less interested in competitive sports, but they love walking the Oklawaha Greenway with its flat terrain. All ages can enjoy a walk on the greenway together, from grandmothers to babies in strollers.

Since the opening of the latest phase of the Oklawaha, over 20 groups and organizations have used it for events. Some were fundraisers and others were for exercise and recreation.

Greenways are good for our health. John Evers has type 2 diabetes and walks the greenway to help him keep his glucose levels manageable. An article printed in the 2012 NC Medical Journal stated that for every dollar we spend on accessible bike and pedestrian trails, we save \$3 in direct medical expenses.

Other evidence, from a 2008 Be Active NC study, cites that our unhealthy lifestyles are costing us billions. Excess weight and physical inactivity are the biggest culprits.

Just across the state line in South Carolina, another greenway — the Swamp Rabbit Trail — has transformed the sleepy little town of Travelers Rest — once blighted by empty storefronts — into a vibrant downtown with many new businesses and jobs.

When companies decide to locate new facilities, they are increasingly looking for places with the best quality of life, which includes things like parks and greenways.

Tourism is a pillar of Hendersonville's economy. The Institute for Transportation Research at N.C. State University found that trails encourage tourist visits, increase their length of stay and promote return visits. Once a community has 20 miles of connected greenway trails they become a tourist destination for bicycling.

"We're not doing this work simply to attract tourists," says Kathy Kyle of the Friends of the Oklawaha Greenway. "We're doing this for us too!"

Currently, Henderson County is ranked as the fastest growing county in western North Carolina. Finding places to create greenways at this time will be easier than waiting until available land becomes scarcer.

Let your county commissioners know that you support investing in our health and happiness — and thank them for supporting the Greenways Master Plan.

Stay informed as to when the public hearing and commission vote will take place by visiting the Friends of the Oklawaha website. Sign up for their e-newsletter at friendsofoklawaha.org.

To see a copy of the draft master plan and its priority trails, visit hendersoncountync.gov/greenway-network.



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Wes Burlingame of the Hendersonville Tree Board holds up native flowers on a recent pollinator walk on the Oklawaha Greenway. MountainTrue and Friends of the Oklawaha Greenway are working to promote area greenways. [PHOTO PROVIDED]



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John Evers, with Friends of the Oklawaha Greenway, leads three fitness walks a week on the greenway. [PHOTO PROVIDED]



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