

OUR VIEW

County leads on greenways

Greenways are linear parks that encourage healthy outdoor lifestyles for residents and visitors. Just check out Hendersonville's Oklawaha Greenway between Berkeley and Jackson parks, and you will see kids and adults of all ages walking, jogging, skating, pushing strollers and bicycling.

The first section of what is now a paved path was built decades ago in a partnership between the city and volunteers who saw the recreational value of flood-prone land along Mud Creek. Today the 3.5-mile Oklawaha Greenway connects four parks as it winds through wetlands, meadows and forests. Meanwhile, the town of Fletcher has built almost four miles of greenways along Cane Creek.

These are the first miles of paths planned over the next 30 years as part of Henderson County's draft Greenway Master Plan. An advisory committee held two public meetings this week and continues to gather input in online surveys at www.hcgreenways.org.

The plan identifies three greenways as priorities: Oklawaha Greenway extensions,

the Ecusta Trail and a 21-mile path following the French Broad River through the county. These would connect to form a regional trail network with Buncombe and Transylvania counties.

"The county should work in cooperation with Transylvania County, the city of Brevard, the city of Hendersonville and the town of Laurel Park to develop the proposed Ecusta Trail, if it is reasonably determined that the rail line from Hendersonville to Brevard has no viable future rail use," the plan states.

It also recommends that local governments encourage the state to acquire the line for a greenway, and review federal rail banking law as a way to secure and preserve the line.

The rail line between Hendersonville and Brevard has sat unused for about 15 years.

An advocacy group, Friends of the Ecusta Trail (Ecusta-trail.org) has laid the groundwork for the path in the event the company that owns the line determines it is no longer needed for rail service.

While towns such as Brevard, Hendersonville and Laurel Park have endorsed plans for a 19-mile Ecusta Trail, Transylvania County

leaders have balked in hopes of one day re-establishing rail service. Should the line become available, both counties should cooperate to build the Ecusta Trail.

Meanwhile, Henderson County is not waiting to plan more paved paths. It is studying the feasibility of extending a path from the southern end of the Oklawaha Trail in Jackson Park to Blue Ridge Community College and possibly to the Park at Flat Rock. The county also plans to study extending a path from the north end of the Oklawaha Trail at Berkeley Park to Westfeldt Park on the French Broad River between Fletcher and Mills River.

The plan also identifies "destination" greenways in Edneyville, Mills River and Green River Game Lands, and a "Carl Sandburg Home Greenway" in Flat Rock.

As more paths are built and linked, they will present greater recreational opportunities for residents and visitors and encourage economic development around healthy outdoor lifestyles. Building greenways is a long-term project that will take decades, so it's great Henderson County is planning now.