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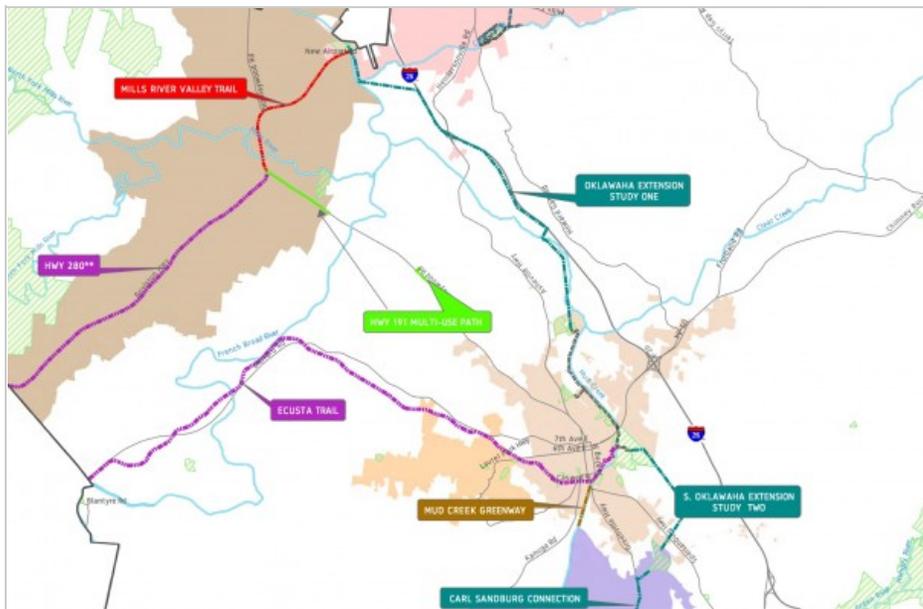
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Greenway plan envisions 71-mile network of trails



Map shows a concept of greenways developed by the Henderson County Greenway Master Plan Committee. Planning consultants are currently studying northern and southern extensions of the Oklawaha Greenway. The Mills River Valley Trail is currently under design.

Comments



By Lightning Reports, Published: November 13, 2018

Henderson County has been talking formally and informally about greenways since the early 1990s and even had a greenway commission that adopted a map depicting 200 miles of bike and walking trails.

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The county's Greenways Master Plan Committee is out with a new version of potential trails that cross the county, run along the French Broad River, Mud Creek or Cane Creek and connect destinations like the Carl Sandburg Home and Jump Off Rock.

"We actually have to some extent had a plan in place," Master Plan Committee Chair Chris Burns said. The initial plan was drawn by the old Apple Country Greenway Commission almost 20 years ago and fizzled out, in part because it seemed too big to swallow.

"I bet you it had well over 200 to 250 miles," Burns said. "We have condensed that to about 70 miles. It's a significant in that you have the three priority trails with smaller destination trails and connection greenways. The reason reason having this comprehensive plan is so is that any time you go to

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apply for funding the first question they're asking is, "Do you have an approved m plan in place."

After an initial presentation as early as January and possible revisions after that, the Board of Commissioners could formally adopt the Greenway Master Plan next spring as part of its overall four-year plan for investment in public services and capital projects. At the current armchair estimate of \$1 million a mile, the plan would cost \$71 million to implement. But under current state and federal policies requiring a 20 percent match, the investment by Henderson County and its municipalities — or even by private companies and nonprofit agencies — would top out at about \$14 million — less than half the current cost of a new school.

'Voluntary and conceptual'

"We're trying to put a voluntary conceptual plan together that's a broad vision," said John Mitchell, the county director of business and community development. He emphasizes that any lines on the map so far are conceptual only and that the county staff has carried out planning under a non-negotiable guideline from the Board of Commissioners cross private property when the landowner is a willing partner.

"All the lines go along public rights of way or down streams," he said.

The county Planning Board, Transportation Advisory Committee and Recreation Advisory Board are all in the process of reviewing the Greenway Master Plan and are expected endorse it. The plan would then go the Board of Commissioners.

On a separate but parallel track, Asheville-based Equinox, a land planning consultant, is nearing completion of a feasibility study on extending the Oklawaha Greenway south to Blue Ridge Community College and then the Park at Flat Rock and north from Berkeley Mills Park to Westfeldt Park on the French Broad River.

"I expect we'll have a full reports late December or early January on the feasibility of extending the Oklawaha," Mitchell said. "First we have a conceptual greenway master plan, which shows a vision of areas that would be good to connect and suggests a policy for greenways. The next phase is to then find sections that seem like a good next step and to do that you do a feasibility study to see whether or not you can actually connect them. You have to think about the conceptual plan as the bones that you're layering information onto."

The land planners at Equinox will produce a report on "what the cost is likely to be and it's going to be whether or not it's feasible." Even at that stage, voluntary participation remains a high priority.

"The two words I using when I describe this plan is voluntary and conceptual," he said. "We're looking for willing partners."

Connectivity is key

The master plan is 87 pages long with lots of maps, charts and photos of greenways, some here but mostly elsewhere. The county has only about 11 miles of greenways now — about 8 miles in Hendersonville and 4 miles in Fletcher. That would change over time if Henderson County, its towns and even non-profit groups and companies team to build paved paths from point A to point B and beyond.

Here are highlights of the plan:

- It's all about connectivity. Every mile of greenway — whether a straight point-to-point line, like the Ecusta Trail, or a squiggly spur — is part of an overall greenway network. Just as the Oklawaha Greenway in Hendersonville connects five different parks, the proposed greenways countywide would connect parks (such as Westfeldt Park and the planned Kunz Park on either side of the French Broad River), breweries (Sierra Nevada to New Belgium) and other destinations.
- Make it realistic. Conceptually, the planners think Priority Greenways would be built first for several reasons but if a shorter trail gets built quicker, it's OK. "The Priority Greenways are to be considered first to give the county focus and guidance but they are not meant to override other greenway connections and opportunities." The planners identified Priority Greenways "based on funding availability, regional goals, planning consistency, feasibility of the project, public demand (and) political will" or because those paths extend existing greenways.
- Three Priority Greenways would create a perimeter trail around the county. The Ecusta Trail, which is strongly supported by the Hendersonville City Council, the Laurel Park Town Council and the bicycling community, would run 20 miles from Hendersonville to Brevard (12 miles in Henderson County). The Ecusta Trail dependent upon railroad company Watco abandoning the tracks as a rail-to-trail. The Oklawaha Greenway is the only Priority Greenway that's partially built. The greenway now runs from Jackson Park to Berkeley Mills Park, all in Hendersonville except a few hundred years in unincorporated Henderson County (from Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard to Jackson Park). A northern leg would extend the trail from Berkeley Mills Park to Westfeldt Park and a southern leg would connect Jackson Park and the Carl Sandburg Home National Historic site. Think regionalism when it comes to French Broad River Greenway. The city of Asheville has built 3 miles of greenways in the River Arts District, has plans for another 7 miles, including the N.C. 151 greenway to the Henderson County line. It's desirable to connect with that greenway due to "the river's high usage, notable breweries ... along the river and the potential to create a greater tourist interest in the county."
- Destination Greenways connect to other trails, sites a few miles from a Priority Greenway or to a popular attraction like the Sandburg home. The master plan's destination trails are the Edneyville community trail (following an easement along Cane Creek), the Mills River Valley Trail (from N.C. 191 at the Triangle Stop to the French Broad River), Fletcher's Cane Creek, Hoopers Creek and Meritor greenways, the Green River Game Lands Greenway and the Carl Sandburg

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Home Greenway in the Village of Flat Rock.

- Connection Greenways are kind of the last twig on the branch, linking Priority or Destination trails to desired locations like Main Street and Jump Off Rock. The plan envisions a municipal inner loop connecting Hendersonville, Laurel Park and Flat Rock. The committee emphasizes the importance of linking important institutions and workplaces, like Pardee and Park Ridge hospitals, and schools and colleges. It's "possible to create a greenway connection across the interstate by way of Naples Road overpass" when that bridge is rebuilt for the I-26 widening.

Whether any of this comes to pass is anybody's guess. Given that the master plan is designed to guide greenway development for 30 years, bicyclists shouldn't expect to be cruising all the way from the Sandburg home to the New Belgium taproom anytime soon. But if it has no adopted master plan, the county can be assured that it will get no state and federal money for greenways.

"The why is that there's a lot of state and federal money that can be drawn down but it requires a greenway master plan in order to apply for that money," Mitchell said. "That doesn't mean we have to apply for it. But if at some point it becomes pleas of board to invest in these facilities, if we have the plan then we'll have the ability to draw down state and federal grants."

The Greenway Planning Committee makes lots of recommendations — some high-minded and general but others more practical. Some are in the county's control and other's aren't. One idea is to ask the NCDOT to consider revising or eliminating its 20 percent match requirement for greenways because "many local governments cannot provide the required funding match."

In its key policy recommendations, the master plan committee said the Board of Commissioners could:

- Recognize greenways in its planning, economic development and health policies for their ability to "build communities, promote health benefits ... provide transportation connectivity and provide a safe place for future generations to walk, bike and explore out natural environment."
- Find ways to use utility easements for greenway paths.
- Adopt a policy similar to the Mountain to Sea Trail policy of finding other options to work around "uninterested property owners."
- Consider adopting a greenway overlay district primarily for the Priority Greenway routes.
- Encourage economic development along greenways.
- Work with the School Board and schools "when appropriate" to connect schools to the greenway network.
- Authorize county staff to "assess when an area is 'ready' for the greenway process."

Mountains to Sea model

Mitchell and the county staff are prepared to drop back and punt when landowners resist a greenway through their property.

"The vision in the plan that was put together is to work kind of like the Mountains to Sea Trail," which crosses the state. "It takes time but it's a way to route these things through willing landowners."

There are several reasons greenways typically run along creeks.

"The best place to ride and run is down by the creek because it's pleasant down there and there are birds and wildflowers and all that," Mitchell said. But that also means running a trail in a floodplain. That's bad when high water covers the path but it's good when an easement runs through land that's unbuildable. If commissioners OK the greenway plan and commit to a specific path, the county would next seek buy-in from landowners.

"The idea is to reach out to property owners generally in the area where one of the trails may or not be located and basically just say to them, 'Is this something that you would consider?' You could look and see if it's a utility easement. Is there a rail line? If the answer is no and the property owner is not interested, you take the roads, and that's how it works with Mountain to Sea. Hopefully a route can be found that goes through all willing property owners."

Encouraging meetings with Watco, Duke Energy

County staffers have already met with landowners along the proposed north and south Oklawaha Greenway extensions.

"We've held two public invitation meetings with landowners north and south. We've sent letters to every property owner which we could identify in the corridor. We've met individually with the railroad, we've met with Duke, Cane Creek sewage (district). ... We're not going to come back with a plan with a line drawn across private property without their consent."

So far, reaction has been positive.

"I've had really encouraging meetings with the railroad, really encouraging meetings with Duke," he said. "We've got a number of willing property owners who say, 'It sounds good to me.'"

Mitchell points out that the county has had — though it never adopted — the Apple Country Greenway Plan. And its current comprehensive plan calls for a greenway plan as an element of the whole. All the conceptual bike-ped paths are recommended in the comp plan's Small Area Plans, which were shaped at the community level. It's all part of a broader buy-in the county is seeking.

"We included the cities. The cities are moving forward on their own but we thought since it was a countywide vision it should include those conceptual plans," Mitchell said. "We went to each individual municipality and asked them what they would like shown in their map. We wanted to be very sure there was a level of comfort that what was included was what they desired to be shown."

"What the county is doing is taking a voluntary landowner approach," said Burns, the greenway plan committee chair.

"What will be happening at some point is the county will be meeting with all of the potential landowners along those paths to see what their interest is in having a right of way trail along their property or through their property. If the landowner says no, I really don't want that" the county will reroute. The landowner might say, "I'm fine with it but I would appreciate some screen."

Anyone who has observed the current climate of homeowner uprisings against road projects and disruptive land uses might dare predict that homeowners within sight of a new greenway will squawk.

"We can't see all concerns property owners may have," Mitchell said. "That's why it's got to be an open, public and deliberative process."

* * * * *

The Henderson County Greenway Master Plan Committee members were Chris Burns, Chair; Milton Butterworth, Sharon Carlyle, Mike Egan, Philip Ellis, Graham Fields, Linda Giltz, Suzanne Hale, Jennifer Hensley, Tricia King, Renee Kumor, Hunter Marks, Scott Rhodes, Rebekah Robinson, Joe Sanders and Ken Shelton. To read the Greenway Master Plan and participate in a survey click on Greenway Network at hendersoncountync.gov.