

## OUR VIEW

# Trail idea is alive and well

Last week brought a flicker of hope for residents who have advocated for years to convert the unused rail line between Brevard and Hendersonville into a multi-use path.

Kansas-based Watco Companies, owner of the line, announced it would reopen one mile of the spur for switching trains and storing empty rail cars. But that mile, from where the track splits off the main line near Fourth Avenue East to the Kanuga Road crossing, would not be required to complete the proposed Ecusta Trail between Hendersonville and Brevard.

In discussing plans for the one-mile section, Watco spokesperson Tracie Van-Becelaere said there are still opportunities for the Ecusta Trail on the rest of the line. That is good news coming from an official source, considering the deafening silence trail advocates got for many years from Norfolk Southern, which previously owned the 19-mile rail line.

The track has not seen a train since the 2002 closure of the Ecusta paper mill in Pisgah Forest. And for more than a decade, advocates have been laying the groundwork to create

what would become one of Western North Carolina's signature attractions.

The Ecusta Trail would provide visitors and residents with a healthy and beautiful place to ride bicycles, jog, walk, push strollers and skate with their kids and grandkids. Running through quaint communities such as Laurel Park, Horse Shoe, Etowah, Blantyre, Penrose and Pisgah Forest, it would give people a safe, off-highway route between Brevard and Hendersonville and spur millions of dollars in economic development.

A 2012 study by Alta/Greenways, a Triad-area consultant that specializes in trail planning and design, determined the Ecusta Trail would "transform the community" by sparking economic development, tourism and increasing property values along its route.

The study estimated the trail would generate \$20 million and 180 jobs in Henderson and Transylvania counties during construction, a \$42 million one-time return and an additional \$9.4 million in annual returns in tax revenues, tourism spending, health care cost savings, property value increases and direct use values. That

includes \$2 million in visitor spending and the creation of 27 tourism-related jobs.

Estimates to acquire the right-of-way and build the trail ranged from \$9.9 million and \$13.4 million. Advocates hope to tap state and federal grants for much of the funding.

The Ecusta Trail is listed as a priority greenway in the recently adopted Henderson County Greenway Master Plan. Henderson County, Hendersonville, Laurel Park and Brevard have all endorsed the idea of the Ecusta Trail, leaving Transylvania County as the lone holdout. We continue to hope that government leaders there will see the benefits the trail would bring to both counties, understanding that the right-of-way can be "rail-banked" to preserve its future use for trains should a compelling need ever arise.

The Friends of the Ecusta Trail has brought together leaders from business, tourism, the Chamber of Commerce, and environmental, conservation and recreation organizations, all with a single visionary goal. Should the railroad allow it to be built, the Ecusta Trail will compliment and even rival the popularity of our area's biggest attractions.