

Oklawaha Greenway feedback, plans presented to commissioners

By Rebecca Walter

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Oklawaha Greenway stakeholders want any expansions of the trail to connect schools, affordable housing and commercial areas, and prefer that the greenway run alongside waterways.

Community feedback on the Oklawaha Greenway expansion and crucial next steps for the project were presented Wednesday to the Henderson County Board of Commissioners.

David Tuch, president of local planning firm Equinox, gave the presentation, which included stakeholder feedback, the history of the project and steps for the future.

The county received \$96,000 in October 2017 in Surface Transportation Block Grant-Directly Attributable funds for the creation of two studies to determine the feasibility of extending the Oklawaha Greenway south to Blue Ridge Community College, with an option to expand further to Flat Rock Park, and north to Westfeldt Park and Kuntz Park.

The board voted and accepted a proposal from Equinox in February 2018.

Since then, the firm has conducted the studies by evaluating the land's topography and environmental features, conducting extensive property owner outreach and stakeholder meetings and identifying opportunities and constraints.

Feedback from stakeholders included locating the greenway along streams and creeks, even if the alignment could more easily be located along a road, and to connect schools, affordable housing and commercial areas along the greenway.

Stakeholders pointed out that much of the study area routinely floods, so design for the greenway should ensure it drains quickly and isn't an impediment to connectivity.

Feedback also pointed out the many nonprofit and other organizations in the area that are willing to help reach out to landowners, provide advocacy and help secure funding.

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The Oklawaha Greenway in February 2017.



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Listed stakeholders include the Henderson County Greenway Master Plan Advisory Committee, Recreation Advisory Board and Transportation Advisory Board; Blue Ridge Community College; Friends of the Oklawaha Greenway; Henderson County planning, engineering and parks and recreation departments; Healthy-People-Healthy Carolinas; the city of Hendersonville; Conserving Carolina; Henderson County Cooperative Extension; the town of Mills River; Blue Ridge Bicycle Club; Henderson County Public Schools; the Village of Flat Rock; and the Hendersonville Airport.

Future opportunities for the greenway include existing sewer easements, new development to accommodate greenways and partnerships with agencies like Conserving Carolina, Tuch said.

He shared a summary of the upcoming goals for the project. Potential alignments have been studied to test feasibility from a physical constraints perspective, but specific greenway alignments would be determined based on conversations with property owners, Tuch explained.

Working with organizations such as Conserving Carolina to secure greenway easements is a crucial next step, Tuch added. He encouraged the county to look into the greenway easements as soon as possible.

The next steps conclude with the final designs, engineering and construction of the expansion.

The feasibility study through Equinox included sections for visions and goals; summary of past plans; existing conditions assessment; property owner outreach; steering/stakeholder engagement; opportunities and constraints; potential routes and alternatives; action and maintenance plan; along with phasing, cost summary and funding sources.

The vision for the project states that “The Oklawaha Greenway extensions will create connectivity between park, municipalities and destinations through an accessible, continuous greenway that serves as a walking and biking spine for future greenway growth and connections with Henderson County. The greenway will build community through shared recreation and ease of transportation.”

The main goals of the greenway are broken up into five parts: accessibility, community engagement, constructability, stimulating to economic development, and adding to Henderson County’s sense of place and residents’ quality of life.

Destinations in the greenway system include the municipalities of Fletcher, Mills River, Hendersonville and Flat Rock, along with the French Broad River, Mud Creek and Bat, parks, other greenways, Blue Ridge Community College and various natural areas.

The total proposed greenway is around 14.65 miles.