

Ecusta Trail: Railroad files to abandon line; Timeline set for corridor purchase

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Hendersonville-Pisgah Forest unused rail line, as it crosses on a trestle over the Davidson River Road and the Davidson River northeast of Brevard, just upstream from the Davidson River-French Broad River confluence.

Conserving Carolina is one step closer to the construction of the 19-mile Ecusta Trail greenway in Henderson and Transylvania counties.

Blue Ridge Southern Railroad has submitted a proposal to the state to abandon the stretch of railroad for construction of the trail. The rail corridor purchase should be complete by the end of May, and then construction planning can begin, according to Conserving Carolina Executive Director Kieran Roe.

More than a decade of grassroots efforts led to the nonprofit organization purchasing the land in November 2020 with the help of a \$7 million bridge loan from Henderson County.

Abandonment of the rail corridor is part of the buying process governed by the federal railbanking statute, Roe said.

Several rails-to-trails projects have been completed around the country by converting inactive railroads to trails while conserving the infrastructure for possible future transportation use.

A couple examples are the Swamp Rabbit Trail in Greenville, South Carolina and the Virginia Creeper Trail in Southwest Virginia.

"People in the community are really excited about this for several reasons," Roe said. "Hendersonville, Brevard - the counties that they're located in, have a pretty strong tourist economy already. There's a lot of things that draw people to these counties as tourists, but this would be one more really big tourist attraction. ... They're spending money on hotel stays, restaurants and other shopping and retail support, which creates job and impacts revenues."

It will also be an amenity for residents, he added.

The trail will be constructed in segments at a cost of about \$1 million a mile.

Henderson County was awarded a federal grant of over \$5 million for construction of the first five miles beginning in Hendersonville at Main Street to Horse Shoe. The funds will be available for use in October, according to John Mitchell, Henderson County's director of business and community development.

Mitchell said he's happy to see federal tax dollars coming back to Western North Carolina.

"We believe it will be a useful economic development tool," he said. "We believe from studies that have been published that it will also be a wellness driver in the community and be a safe place for kids and adults to ride their bikes and exercise. ... It will be a catalyst for small business."