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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- 2 |** A Win-Win in Macon County
- 3 |** Big Plans: Peavine Trail, City of Marion
UPDATE: Rail-Trail Projects
Executive Director’s Message
- 4 |** Upcoming Events
Donor Spotlight

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A Win-Win in Macon County

By Nancy Pierce

The three little girls in matching hats had mixed feelings about their bike ride on this brisk fall day in the mountain town of Franklin, but they soon warmed to the outing. As the oldest raced ahead, her parents Elizabeth and Shawn Albers were happy to take turns chasing her down the trail. It turned out to be a win-win.

Win-win pretty much sums up the story of this trail project too. A unique partnership between a rural county and its power company created this 4.5-mile gem, the Little Tennessee River Greenway in Macon County.

Twenty years ago, the Little Tennessee was eroded from livestock grazing, polluted and

silted in by construction run-off. A sand-dredging operation kept the river flowing, but its edge was inaccessible and unpleasant. All the property, including the former Tallulah Falls Railway corridor, was in private hands (see sidebar).

Around 1990, members of the Franklin-based Nantahala Hiking Club imagined a flat trail along the Little Tennessee River in town for quick, easy hikes. Long story short, getting right-of-way for a trail is a daunting task. They gave up.

Meanwhile, Franklin-based Nantahala Power and Light (NP&L), a subsidiary of Duke Power

continued on page 2...



FROGS HEADQUARTERS
Photo/Nancy Pierce

FROGs operates a trail-side coffeehouse/ internet café/local arts and crafts gallery/library of nature and local history books.

An active, outdoor family, Elizabeth and Shawn Albers chose their house partly for its proximity to the trail. Running, their turn-around is a 300-foot marsh boardwalk, raucous with birdsong. Downstream, they pass a disc golf course, butterfly garden, wetland and exercise stations. Trail sections with names like “Tassee”, “Salai” “Walasi” and “Nonah” honor the area’s rich Cherokee heritage.

Says Kay Corriel, a charter member of FROGs: “There are different interest groups, but everyone has a strong sense of ownership.” Whether it’s construction, vandalism, Segue use or downed trees, complaints and suggestions to FROGs, Duke Energy, Macon County, and the Franklin Press are endless. Duke Energy’s Fred Alexander grins as he recalls this from a newcomer: “Why did Duke have to go and booger-up such a beautiful greenway with those darn power lines?”

A Win-Win in Macon County
continued from page 1...

and electricity provider to six area counties, realized that neither the old-timers nor the new-comers, and much less the young families like the Albers who had found a beautiful and safe place to raise their families, wanted to be losing power every time the wind blew hard.

NP&L had to build some serious new transmission lines. But while people love their heat and light, they don’t love transmission lines on their property. This wasn’t going to be easy.

One day in 1992, Tom Smitherman (VP of Transmission & Distribution for Duke Power) was talking about that very problem with some others in NP&L employee Barbara McCrae’s office. As a community activist, McCrae had

been involved with the failed trail effort. She dragged out the old trail files, and dumped them in Tom’s arms. “He ran out my door with those files and never looked back,” she recalls.

Tom’s team bundled the trail with the transmission line, telling the landowners: “NP&L will build both the transmission lines and the trail along the river and then give the trail to Macon County.” Some land-owners hated the transmission line idea but liked the trail, while others hated the trail idea but didn’t mind the lines. But bottom line, they felt like NP&L had always done what was right for the community. Eventually, they all came around.

Suddenly, the Little Tennessee River Greenway was everyone’s favorite project. The NC Clean Water Management Trust Fund made one of its’ largest grants ever, \$3.8 million for river bank restoration. A local businessman donated \$250,000 to match a NC Park and Recreation Trust Fund grant. And locals still laugh about how Tom Smitherman moved the historic Nickajack suspension bridge to its new home on the trail... driving very slowly in an NP&L truck, in the middle of the night, the wrong way on the four-lane bypass! That was the only way it would fit, and they suspect Tom told Duke Power about it after the fact.

Civic clubs and students installed gardens, trees, tables and shelters. Others photographed and catalogued wildflowers. In 2001, the nonprofit, Friends of the Greenway, Inc (FROGs) formed to support the trail. Today,

The Civil War-era Tallulah Falls Railway was supposed to connect northern Georgia to Tennessee, but it never got past Franklin in 1907. The 58-mile railway, stretching through the rugged Tallulah Gorge, was as famous for its 42 wooden trestles and dramatic 1950s train wreck movies as it was infamous for its real mishaps and financial woes. When the beleaguered railway shut down in 1961, the 2-mile corridor along the Little Tennessee River in Franklin reverted to adjacent property owners. It is now part of the Little Tennessee River Greenway and a beautiful example of a rail-trail.



Photo/Nancy Pierce

It’s puzzling why utility easement and trail easement partnerships don’t occur more often. Says Tom Smitherman: “You can’t keep people away from the transmission line clearing, but we certainly don’t want four-wheelers or people climbing the towers. So you might as well put responsible people there who will watch out for things, people who have a sense of ownership.”

See www.littletennessee.org or www.visitsmokies.org



Photo/Nancy Pierce

Executive Director's Message

Autumn and early winter seems to be the time for community togetherness. As the heat of summer gives way to fall's crispy chill, the outdoors become inviting once again. County fairs, Halloween carnivals, and holiday parades bring community members out for one last visit before the cold of winter keeps us all inside. Rail-trails often become the heart of their communities, hosting event such as farmers markets, 5K fundraisers, picnics, music festivals and more. In this issue of the newsletter, we are discussing how the community of Franklin came together around the creation of the Little Tennessee Greenway in Macon County. Active community support is the key ingredient in all projects where rail-trails go from idea to reality. Want to get involved in rail-trail project in your community? Check out the "find a trail" section of our website to see where you can help. As always, thank you for your support.



Carrie Banks

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BIG PLANS: Peavine Trail, City of Marion

After six years of negotiations, in October of 2010 the City of Marion in McDowell County purchased 3.5 miles of the inactive Peavine short line from Norfolk Southern. When complete, it will connect downtown Marion to a regional trail system along the Catawba River, the north shore of Lake James, the Over Mountain National Historic Victory Trail and Burke County Trails. It will accessible via a short walk to more than half the town's residents. 1.5 miles of the corridor is open now with a grassy surface, and the City has applied for grant money to apply a fine crush and gravel surface. A trestle at midpoint of the purchased section is presumed unsafe, and the corridor south of the trestle is not maintained for public use. Original plans called for the trestle to be dismantled but recent public opinion has swayed officials to consider inspecting its potential for renovation.

UPDATE: Rail-Trail Projects

Thermal Belt Rail-Trail, Rutherford County: Rutherford County has been awarded a Recreational Trail Program grant totaling \$75,000 to pave a section of the Thermal Belt Rail-Trail near Spindale.

West Pender Rail-Trail, Pender County: Pender County has been awarded \$72,404 from the State of North Carolina Recreational Trails Program to develop the first segment of the West Pender Rail-Trail. The grant will fund the development of 1.11 miles of a crushed stone surfaced trail, near the Pender–New Hanover County boundary.

Elkin & Alleghany Rail-Trail, Surry County: The Elkin Valley Trails Association has been hard at work, fundraising and gathering community support for their rail-trail. Construction is about to begin on the first section of the rail-trail, starting at the Elkin Recreation Center. Both Vulcan Materials and Greenhills Environmental LLC are donating materials, labor and equipment to get this project started.

Deep River Rail-Trail, Randolph County: On October 4th, 2011 the Town of Ramseur voted to acquire a 20' wide corridor along the river which will allow the Deep River Rail-Trail to be extended by 1165 feet. Funding to support this acquisition came from the Clean Water Management Trust Fund. Ramseur and Franklinton have been pursuing grant monies and conducting workdays for several years to make the trail a reality. The first phase of the trail extends from Brooklyn Avenue to U.S. 64 East, a distance of ~1.25 miles.

A & Y Greenway: A draft plan has been developed for the Atlantic and Yadkin Greenway through a feasibility study of the corridor. The draft plan is a joint effort between the Town of Summerfield, the Town of Stokesdale, Guilford County and the Greensboro urban area Metropolitan Planning Organization. The proposed trail follows the historic A & Y railroad route from southern Summerfield to Stokesdale.



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more than 130 racers participated and we raised \$4,000! Save the date for Oct. 14, 2012

DONOR SPOTLIGHT:

NCRT members since 1995, Edith and Jim Johnson have made additional end-of-year donations for the past seven years.



The two 79-year-olds have bicycle toured all around the US and Canada, including the San Juan Island, Nova Scotia, Washington, Oregon

and California. They describe their yearly treks on the 10-mile Todd-to-Fleetwood Railroad Grade in North Carolina as “idyllic”, and they love stopping at the historic Todd General Store. Their Charlotte home is a brief walk from the Stewart Creek Greenway, a short rail-trail. Says Edith: “We read about long rail-trails elsewhere and we salivate”.

A retired early childhood educator, Edith says “Children need wild places. Rail-trails can get them there.” Jim is a retired executive of a nonprofit agency serving families. Why do they donate to help preserve North Carolina’s rail corridors for trails? “We won’t see it,” she says. “But we donate for the kids.”

Upcoming Events

Every Tuesday at noon: Lunchtime 5K on the American Tobacco Trail
Register for this FREE program and you will be eligible for prizes and giveaways. Runners of all levels are welcome. Rochelle. Mys@YMCATriangle.org

November 4th: NC Transportation Museum’s Rail Camp
Participating Boy Scout Troops will camp out, explore the museum and take train and turntable rides while earning their railroading merit badge. www.nctrans.org

November 5th: Touchstone Energy North Carolina Cotton Festival
Enjoy more than 100 food and craft booths and be sure to visit the Dunn-Erwin Rail-Trail while you’re there! www.nccottonfestival.com

November 11th: Onslow County Veteran’s Day Parade
After enjoying the patriotic music of the 2nd Marine Division Marching Band, head over to the 5.5 mile Jacksonville-Camp Lejeune Rail-Trail. A wonderful way to celebrate Veteran’s Day!

November 19 & 20th: First Annual Festival of Trees in Williamston
Begin the holiday season with a trip to Williamston, home of the Skewarkee Trail. The Farmer’s Market will be a winter wonderland of decorated trees and holiday vendors with goodies for sale. unitedway@martincountyncgov.com