



The Gilboa United Methodist congregation gathers on the rail-trail in front of the historic church.

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Upfitting the Thermal Belt Rail-Trail

Story and photos by Nancy Pierce

The second longest rail-trail in North Carolina bypasses rolling Carolina foothills and connects historic towns, but it's known by few and used by even fewer outside Rutherford County. The 8-mile-long Thermal Belt Rail-Trail has no navigational signage, and it's so rough in sections that it discourages the users one would expect in an area starved for long multi-use trails.

But that's about to change. Rutherford Outdoor Coalition President Jerry Stensland has been juggling all the entities involved, and he says the trail should finally see significant improvements during 2013.

This railroad corridor was chartered before the Civil War as the Wilmington, Charlotte and Rutherford (completed to Rutherfordton in 1887) and the Charleston, Cincinnati &

Chicago (Rutherfordton to Marion in 1892), and then consolidated into Southern Railway in 1898. It was the transportation backbone of the area for decades, providing twice-daily passenger services and freight for the textile and wood product manufacturing.

Following the exit of many manufacturing operations in the 1980s, Southern Railway abandoned the Thermal Belt corridor in 1988. It was operated briefly by a local short line, then a Rutherfordton-based community development nonprofit, Bechtler Development Corporation, obtained federal rail banking status for the corridor and has managed it as a rail-trail for the past decade.

Under federal rail banking, the corridor has "interim" trail use, meaning that it could be resurrected for freight again if new manufac-

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People using the trail near Gilkey

Upfitting the Thermal Belt Rail-Trail continued from page 1...

turing operations needed it. So, the rails were left in place and covered with rough gravel.

But it's been frustrating for trail lovers. Runner Willie Lowe lives in rural Rutherford County and uses trails in Spartanburg, Greenville, Asheville and Marion. A few years ago he organized the local running club to meet at the Thermal-Belt's southernmost point in Spindale for out-and-back long weekly runs. "But everyone lost interest pretty fast," he says. "It's so scenic, but with the exposed rails and gravel, it just wasn't very user-friendly."

So Stensland, who was Rutherford County's Cultural and Heritage Planner until the job was eliminated in December of 2012, has led an effort to upfit the trail. NC Rail-Trails helped out with pro bono legal services.

By early summer 2013, rails and ties will be pulled up and sold, with proceeds going to prepare the trail for resurfacing. This does not preclude ever using the corridor for freight again, since updated rails and ties would have to be installed for freight use anyway. So, it makes sense to pull up the old ones and improve the surface for trail users.

A grant from the NC Recreational Trails Program will pay for paving a 2-mile urban section down the middle of Spindale's Main Street, where park-like green space and rows of trees buffer the trail from the split road. North of Spindale to Ruth, fine gravel will replace the rocky surface. North of Ruth to

the trail's terminus at Gilkey, the trail is already quite smooth. Signage and historical markers will follow.

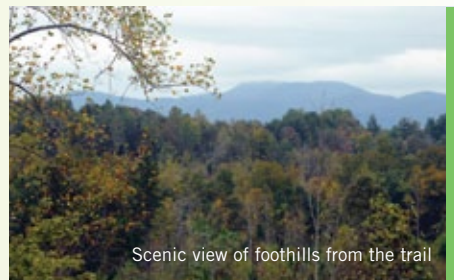
Historical and cultural aspects of the area are varied. Spindale, home of the American Dairy Goat association, hosts a dairy goat festival and parade each spring. Grazing goats can be seen from parts of the trail.

Rutherfordton is home to 82-year-old clothing manufacturer Tanner Companies, maker of the Doncaster line of fine women's clothing. The Tanner Outlet store and its restaurant, The Lavender, are at the trail's midpoint near Rutherfordton. "Trail users should feel very welcome using our parking lot," says Chairman of the Board Mike Tanner, who is also a member of the Rutherford Outdoor Coalition. "Then they can stop by and shop." The restaurant is a bit upscale but not so much so that they'll mind athletic clothes. Mike notes that his employees use the trail regularly for noon exercise walks.

The Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail, which traces the route Patriot troops from East Tennessee took across the mountains to the decisive Revolutionary War Battle of Kings Mountain, crosses the Thermal Belt Rail-Trail near the Tanner Outlet.

Downtown Spindale's Barley's Taproom & Pizzeria co-owner Linette Gosnell says, "Lots of outdoor-type people come in here. We have craft beers, vegetarian options and carbs, healthy and hearty food. It's a great place to finish or end a run or bike. We do see people coming off the trail on nice days, but there could be so many more!"

Another trail landmark is Gilboa United



Scenic view of foothills from the trail

Methodist Church and its historic cemetery, both so close to the rail-trail that parishioners walk across the trail to get from the parking lot to the church. The congregation itself is 200 years old, but the current building rose in 1887 just as the railroads arrived. Lifetime church members 87-year old Donald Spratt and his sister, 85-year old Charlotte Spratt McMahon grew up on the family farm behind the church. As children, they walked to the

passenger rail station for trips to town or to visit relatives in Marion.

Ms McMahon recalls being scolded for giggling when the train whistle drowned out the sermon or, even worse, for putting her pennies on the rails to get flattened rather than in the collection box.

Prior to the California Gold Rush, from 1820 through the 1840s millions of dollars in gold were panned or dug from the creeks and valleys of western North Carolina. In 1830 the Bechtler family, German metalworkers, opened a jewelry store in Rutherfordton and within a year they were minting coins from local gold. During the Civil War "Bechtler Gold" was well-accepted for commerce when Union or Confederate currency lost value. One mile south of the Gilboa church beside the trail, a small county park and historical site is being developed around a subsurface mine operated by the Bechtlers during that time.

The architecture enthusiast will love Rutherfordton's historic and lively downtown, just one mile from the rail-trail. Rutherfordton has the best cluster of intact antebellum architecture in the southern foothills, including the original Bechtler family home place and many public structures. This town of only 4200 residents has numerous examples of Gothic-Revival and Classic-Revival architecture and a 20-acre historic cemetery, all within an easy walk or bike ride from the trail.

If Rutherford County leaders want to encourage healthy recreation for its residents and draw tourism dollars, they can stay atop potential for expansion south and north. It's still technically active to the south, but if service ceases it could connect to the existing Forrest Hunt Greenway rail-trail in Forest City, creating a nearly 13-mile one-way trip. In fact, the Thermal Belt has potential to become the longest rail trail in the state through 30 miles of rolling foothills, connecting Forest City to Marion. At that length, rail-trails elsewhere in the United States attract tourists for multi-days visits, boosting economic gains for all the towns in their path.

And finally, the answer to the question you have been asking yourself: "Just what is a thermal belt anyway?" It's an area with a unique combination of altitude and proximity to flatlands and to mountains, resulting in a temperate climate generally favorable for growing fruit. Cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter, it's also ideal for year-round outdoor recreation. Go Thermal Belt!

Michael Domonkos awarded the CR Townsend Volunteer Spike Award

Former NCRT board member Michael Domonkos was honored with the 2012 CR Townsend Volunteer Spike Award. Mike served on the board of directors from 1997 to 2012, where he used his legal expertise to bring federal railbanking projects to fruition in North Carolina. In 2006, Domonkos successfully

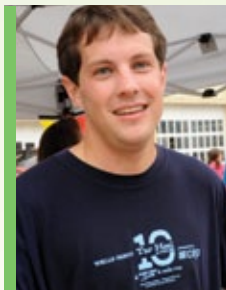


argued a case for the Thermal Belt Rail-Trails that helped ensure the success of rail-banking throughout the state of North Carolina.

More info on the case is here:

www.ncrailtrails.org/littletoot/FALL06.PDF

ADAM OLLS INTRODUCTION



We are happy to announce that Adam Olls has joined our board of directors. Adam is an attorney at Baily and Dixon and has helped NCRT with

several rail-trail projects including legal council for the Thermal Belt Rail-Trail. Adam is pictured at the finish line after running our 2nd annual Ales for Rail-Trails 5K in Durham. The 5K was a great success and we look forward to having it again next fall. Welcome aboard Adam!

Executive Director's Message

Many exciting changes are taking place here at North Carolina Rail-Trails in 2013. I am happy to announce that we have made the leap from a staff of one to a staff of two!



Alison Valentine Smith has joined the team as a part-time project assistant. Alison brings a love of the environment and recreation to NCRT and is helping with a wide range of duties from administration and fundraising to grant management and community outreach. I am so pleased to have her on the team. We'll soon be welcoming another (very small) new member of NCRT as I am preparing to go out on maternity leave. Alison will hold down the fort while I am away. Many trails seem to be on the verge of major construction development. The E & A Rail-Trail in Surry County is poised to place two new bridges while the Dunn-Erwin Rail-Trail will hopefully connect to the Cape Fear River Park Trail. Perhaps the most exciting development is the completion of the American Tobacco Trail with the installation of a long-awaited bridge over I-40 in Durham. NC Rail-Trails founder AL Capehart was instrumental in the development of the American Tobacco Trail and we are so proud to see this trail reach its full potential. Congratulations AL.

Carrie Banks

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2012 Honor Roll of Donors

North Carolina Rail-Trails would not exist without you...our supporters. As a special way of saying thank you we are including your name in our yearly honor roll. Thank you so much for your gift. Because of you...the rail-trail movement is gaining traction in North Carolina.

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RE-LIVE SOME RAIL HISTORY WITH TONY REEVY'S NEW BOOK *O. Winston Link: Life Along the Line*

O. Winston Link photographed the Norfolk and Western, the last major steam railroad in the United States, when it was converting its operations from steam to diesel in the 1950s. Link's N&W project captured the industry at a moment of transition, before the triumph of the automobile and the airplane that ended an era of passenger rail service. His work

also revealed a small-town way of life that was about to experience seismic shifts and, in many cases, vanish completely. Including a collection of more than 180 of Link's most famous works and rare images that have never before been published, *O. Winston Link: Life Along the Line* offers a moving account of the people and communities surrounding the last steam railroad.



UPDATE: Rail-Trail Projects

Elkin & Allegheny Rail-Trail: The Elkin Valley Trails Association continues to make great strides! The rail-trail has been designated as the primary route for the Mountains-to-Sea Trail and the Association has completed extensive research on the Elkin & Allegheny Railroad's history and will be publishing a book in the future.

West Pender Rail-Trail: NCRT is awaiting a decision from the Pender County Board of Commissioners. Grant money is currently available to begin construction on the first mile of this rail-trail, but the project is stalled because of concerns that the trail will negatively impact a county-owned business development park. NCRT presented to the Board of Commissioners in November 2012, expounding the positive economic development benefits of trails. We'll keep you updated.

Dunn-Erwin Rail-Trail: Our fingers are crossed for two grant proposals that NCRT has submitted with the Town of Erwin to connect the Dunn-Erwin Rail-Trail and the Cape Fear River Park Trail. Winning these grants would allow us to build a 1.5 mile connector between the two existing trails, creating 7.5 miles of continuous trail! We hope to have good news to share in the coming months.

American Tobacco Trail: Construction is currently underway to close the gap in the American Tobacco Trail! Approximately 4.2 miles of new trail, including a pedestrian bridge over Interstate-40, will complete the trail from its current end point at NC-54 and Fayetteville Street in Durham to the Chatham County line. Closing this gap will create over 20 miles of continuous trail! The bridge will be placed in mid-March...keep an eye out on I-40 near exit 276!