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Bridging the Gaps

Story and photos by Nancy Pierce

As a trail lover, you know the aggravation when a trail suddenly stops at a barricade but you can see so much potential on the other side. Here we'll check out the status of a few connectivity issues across the state, ranging from a reality in Durham to an incredibly frustrating but grand vision in Marion.

For the past year, commuters have watched a bike/ped bridge rise above I-40 near the Fayetteville Road exit in Durham. When the span opens to trail users in December of 2013, the American Tobacco Trail's (ATT) 22 miles from western Wake County through Chatham County to downtown Durham will finally be contiguous.

Incoming NC Rail-Trails board president Dave Connelly has navigated the gap on his ATT bicycle commute to work at Duke University for many years. Once, he emerged bruised but unbroken from an unfortunate collision with a vehicle on busy Fayetteville Road. "With the bridge, I'll be more likely to encounter a deer or a snapping turtle than a texting motorist," he says.

During the October ATT expansion celebration, a steady stream of trail users climbed the sloped trail behind Durham's The Streets at Southpoint mall to gaze across the barricade. It had the feeling of a pilgrimage: parents lifted drowsy babies high out of their strollers to see, and serious cyclists ignored the mud in their cleats, ambling into the

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Peavine Trestle in Marion

Bridging the Gaps *continued from page 1...*

woods to get a side view.

On a chilly October weekend, Cara and Gordon Bolt and their two children biked the trail to see the bridge after a play-and-picnic stop at Herndon Park. “We’re so excited that we’ll be able to bike safely with our kids from our home in Apex to their grandparent’s home in Durham,” said Gordon. Nearby, Sam Schwantes snoozed in his stroller while his parents gazed over the freeway. Said his father Tim, a project manager for the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health: “Sam will take for granted being able to walk or bike safely wherever he wants to go, because someone had the vision and tenacity to keep at it until this bridge could happen.”

Vision abounds but tenacity will be required 235 miles west of the ATT bridge in Marion. This mountain city has such a good rail-trail project in mind that its 2012 application was ranked fourth out of 200 proposals for funding under the State’s Transportation Improvement Program (STIP). The 2-mile Peavine Rail-Trail could give one-third of all Marion residents trail access to McDowell County’s Technical Community College and early college facility, a major education and employment center. The city already owns the corridor, but there are a few connectivity issues including an inaccessible trestle.

Construction of the million dollar project was slated for 2018-2019. Then, this past April, Marion city staff were ecstatic to hear that, if shovel-ready, the project could be

moved to 2014-2015.

But the joy was short-lived. It turns out that NCDOT staff had been scrambling to identify projects that could be completed quickly in the face of the “Strategic Transportation Investments” bill signed into law by the NC General Assembly in June. Under this law, projects not completed by July 1, 2015 would have to re-apply under new rules. It quickly became evident that Marion would not get the funds at all, much less early.

Marion Planning Director Heather Cotton’s frustration is clear: “We have all our ducks in a row to complete the project. But the State Legislature and Governor changed the rules in the last inning of the game and called for a rematch with this bill. We’re at least two years from having a Comprehensive Transportation Plan, required under the new rules. It has a huge negative impact on small communities.”

Planners and trail advocates believe that projects like the Peavine, already prioritized for funding, should have been grandfathered under the bill. Says Cotton: “Instead, the State threw out the baby with the bathwater. Now the Peavine project is on hold indefinitely.”

Meanwhile, on a secluded Yadkin River tributary near Elkin, volunteers bushwhack through the woods, making way for a crane. In the spring, they’ll watch an 80-foot prefabricated ped/bike bridge and two 30-foot extensions drop into place where, decades ago, a trestle of the abandoned Elkin & Alleghany (E&A) Railroad collapsed into Elkin Creek.

The bridge over Elkin Creek will connect

a .3 mile rail-trail from downtown Elkin to a .75 mile stretch on the other side of the bridge. A second trail bridge is planned to connect the trail to the city’s reservoir and a planned mountain bike course. Beyond that, additional trail easements are in progress with the goal of connecting to trail systems in Wilkes and Surry Counties.

Perhaps more than anywhere else in the state, Elkin’s E&A Rail-Trail advocates have demonstrated that building a rail-trail can build community as well. In the past year alone, the local trails group raised \$180,000 from donors, grants and fundraisers such as a wildly popular “Trail Boogie” musical event at a downtown watering hole. Trail easements, heavy equipment and operators’ time have been donated or heavily discounted, and every week around 30 people volunteer for trail-related work. The vision? A 20-mile contiguous trail, using sections of the E&A corridor, from downtown Elkin to Stone Mountain State Park.

100 miles southeast of Elkin the towns of Franklinville and Ramseur were connected for decades by rail along the Deep River. Two high trestles, both gone, spanned the Sandy Creek and Harlan Creek tributaries. Today, the Deep River Rail-Trail runs a mile and a half beside the rapid-flowing, canoe-and-kayak friendly river at Franklinville. But Ramseur and a boat landing between the towns won’t have trail access until the towns can span the two creeks with new bridges.

A million dollar sewer project - the biggest public works project in Franklinville’s history - has diverted attention from the bridge, says Franklinville Mayor and chief trail advocate Perry Conner. But they have secured the easements and are now ready to use a \$36,000 Randolph Hospital Community Health Foundation grant to explore options for the 100-foot span over Sandy Creek. Downstream in Ramseur, town commissioner Ray Isley says: “We’re confident that once we get the land secured and the trail started from our end, we’ll be able to raise money for our bridge from corporate donors. They want to encourage healthy lifestyles for their employees. Students already use the trail for cross-country running and the schools would love to see another half mile to downtown

Ramseur. Once we connect the towns, it's going to be a big thing."

75 miles southeast of Ramseur, NCRTs first trail building project connects the towns of Dunn and Erwin. The 5.3 mile rail-trail (with a Black River wetland boardwalk) and the nearby Cape Fear River Park are both heavily used. But they're separated by 1.5 miles of thick, soggy woods. Soon they'll be connected by trail using an \$85,000 NC Recreational Trails matching grant, written by NCRT.

Erwin Recreation Director Doug Stevens

hopes they get final notification of the grant by early winter so they can clear the route while the forest and critters are dormant. If so, competitors in the popular Erwin Wilderness Challenge, a bike-kayak-run triathlon, in June will run the final leg entirely on the new trail instead of on a highway. Total trail length with the connection: 7.5 miles.

Barriers to connectivity are so incredibly frustrating, whether they're highways, waterways or bureaucracies. With members like you, we will continue working to bridge these gaps all over the state. Thank you.

Executive Director's Message

The recent American Tobacco Trail celebration was an emotional day for me. It was supposed to be a ribbon cutting for the new bridge and I've really been looking forward to a ribbon cutting.

Trail building takes a lot of time and planning and time and grant writing and time and delays and...well, you get the idea. This is a job for someone with lots of patience. Working for NCRT for the last three years, I thought I had a lot of patience...but that day we celebrated trail advocates who have worked for over twenty years to see the American Tobacco Trail completed. The trail advocate nearest and dearest to our hearts is AL Capehart, one of NC Rail-Trail's co-founders. Watching him on that chilly morning was like watching a beloved teacher visit with students at a reunion. Everyone new AL and he received the loudest and longest applause during the celebration. It brought a tear to my eye and made me so proud to represent NCRT. Thank you for your membership and support that makes our work possible. We will cut the ribbon on the bridge soon enough.



Carrie Banks



Trail Signs

The Kings Mountain Gateway Trail recently installed their new rail-trail sign. Pictured are trail committee members Bill McCarter, Shirley Brutko, Mal Brutko and Bill McMurrey, Ronnie Franks and Larry Hyde.

The sign, created with a grant to NCRT from NC State Parks, is being placed on all rail-trails statewide. It includes a digital barcode that trails users can scan with their smart phones and be connected to our website's trail maps and descriptions.

Z. Smith Reynolds Grant

North Carolina Rail-Trails has been awarded a \$15,000 grant from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation to conduct a study on the American Tobacco Trail. The purpose of the study is to document community perceptions, issues, concerns and partnership opportunities with the American Tobacco Trail, focusing on recent crime along some portions of the trail. This study is a partnership between North Carolina Rail-Trails, Dr. Kofi Boone of North Carolina State University and Dr. Deborah Bailey of North Carolina Central University. Stay tuned for updates on this exciting project!

NCRT wins \$10,000 William J. Bennington Healthy Community Institute for Nonprofit Excellence Award

Nancy Pierce, John Morck and Carrie Banks attended the Blue Cross Blue Shield NC Foundations's Healthy Community Institute in October 2011. During this free two-day seminar they attended classes on many aspects of nonprofit management. The institute gives attending organizations the tools to improve their nonprofit and then check in with the nonprofits at the one year mark to see how much progress has been made. The organization showing the most positive change from the pre-assessment to the post-assessment receives a one-time award. North Carolina Rail-Trails was selected from the 54 participating organizations for the \$10,000 Bill Bennington Award! We are honored to win this award and are very grateful to the Blue Cross Blue Shield NC Foundation and Mr. Bennington.

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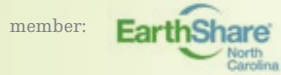
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ALES FOR RAIL-TRAILS FUND RAISER

The third annual Ales for Rail-Trails 5K on October 13th in downtown Durham raised \$5,645 for NCRT's general operating fund, up 30% from last year's race. This year, 265 runners competed under cool, drizzly skies. After the race, they joined families and friends, NCRT board members and volunteers inside Fullsteam Brewery to claim their Ales for Rail-Trails 5K pint with beer, and for the awards ceremony. The race results are on www.ncrailtrails.org.



Dave Connelly

Jequetta Jackson

NCRT Board Changes

John Morck, NCRT board president since 2008, has stepped down due to new job responsibilities. Under John's leadership, the board hired its first executive director, embarked on strategic planning, expanded the board's skill set and diversity, and engaged in new efforts to keep NCRT moving forward. He will continue to serve on the board. At the October board meeting, Dave Connelly of Durham was elected NCRT board president, Adam Olls of Raleigh was elected vice president, and new board member Jequetta Jackson of Raleigh was elected treasurer, replacing Bob Segal who has moved off the board. Jequetta is using her knowledge of social media and online platforms to update NCRT's outreach and marketing efforts. She is a recent graduate of NC Central University and Hult International Business School in London, England where she received a master's degree in International Business. She currently works as an administrative support specialist at UNC Chapel Hill.