



TRANSYLVANIA
Natural Resources Council

Agenda for January 10, 2020 (2:00 PM)

Presentations: (Election Center Classroom, 2-4 PM) Collaborating on Campaigns to Reduce Consumption and Waste-Regional Initiatives as well as Local Activities. Speakers will be Joéle Emma, Director of Education, Asheville Greenworks, Jan Foster, Solid Waste Manager, Waste Reduction Partners, and Kenn Webb, Director, Solid Waste, Transylvania County

Business Meeting (Approximately 3:30 PM)

Minutes from December 2019 (to be forwarded separately)

Future Programs: Time and Location disruptions for January through April are due to office renovations in Community Services wing.

February 14, 2020 – (Commission Chamber, County Office, 101 South Broad Street, 28712. 9-11 AM)

River Keepers “What do they do?” (Jennifer Kafsky)

March 13, 2020 – (Tentative; Education Center Classroom, 9-11. Business meeting will be first, presentations starting about 9:30) Kudzu and Other Invasives (not all invasives!!!) (David W., Torry, and others)

April 10, 2020 – (Tentative; Education Center Classroom, 9-11) Forest Plan Revision (Dave Casey and David Whitmire)

May 8, 2020 – Maria Wise, Director Mills River Partnership: Monetizing Riparian Zones (Foster Creek Project at Living Web Farm). Meet at Cooperative Extension, 9:30 AM. Car pool or use our transport.)

September 11, 2020 – (Tentative) Cedar Mountain Small Area Plan: Treatment of Natural Resources (Bart & Kate)

October 9, 2020 – (Tentative) Mark Burrows, Tammy Hopkins: The Blue Zone Project and Natural Resources (Lee)

New Business: Election of TNRC Chair

Old Business: Endorsement of Ecusta Trail (BOC Agenda Memo and fact sheet attached)

Updates from subcommittees, public land managers, and others:

Subcommittee on Significant Natural Areas, management recommendations, GIS (Kent, David, Dan, Mark Tooley, Torry Nergart).

Landslide Committee (Davis W-C, Gray Jernigan, Aaron Bland)

Public Land Managers

Others

Announcements:

Next meeting: February 14th, 2020 9-11 AM, Commission Chambers, County Offices

Transylvania County Agenda Memo

Agenda Item:

Meeting Date:

From: Lee McMinn, Chair, TNRC

Date: January 10, 2019

Subject: Developing hiking/biking opportunities: Ecusta Trail

Department: Civilian Advisory Councils

Public Hearing: Yes

Contact Information: Lee McMinn 828-674-0318 or Leemcminn@comporium.net

Attachments: (1) An Abbreviated Fact Sheet: The Ecusta Trail

(2) Letters of Support/Endorsements from Friends of Ecusta Trail Website

Purpose: To express support for the expansion of recreational opportunities within the County and to **provide monetary commitment to assist in procurement of significant grant funds from NC DOT to support land acquisition along the planned route.**

Background: TNRC has taken up the issue of endorsing the concept of the Ecusta Trail as a linear park that lends itself to several environmental issues. The bridges and landscaping that will occur around stream and river crossings will have an impact on water quality. The trail itself will pass through several different ecosystems creating important educational opportunities through the use of kiosks and other forms of informational displays. It will provide easily accessible, natural experiences for families of young children and the physically impaired. And land along the trail will be conserved, creating opportunities for nature activities such as bird and wildlife watching. Other public health and economic benefits are discussed in enclosure 1.

The rail line running between Hendersonville and Brevard has been unused for more than 17-years and shows no signs of being reactivated due to its deteriorated condition and the unlikelihood of sufficient demand to cause the line's owner, WATCO Companies LLC, to consider the investment worthwhile. This line **may become** available for rail banking, a process to place out-of-service rail rights-of-way into public use by converting them into publicly accessible trails and was identified as a Priority Project on page 30 of the Transylvania County Bicycle Plan adopted by Commissioners on November 9 and in several other regional and county documents cited in Enclosure 1. WATCO Companies has approached Friends of the Ecusta Trail to begin a survey and appraisal of this unused rail line as a preamble to rail banking. Planning for the Ecusta Trail is currently underway in Henderson County and is already partially funded. Commissioners' endorsement would facilitate the completion of what was the most often cited improvement needed for bicycling in Transylvania County in several County planning documents.

Converting this unused rail line into such a trail has many public benefits as detailed in the attached Fact Sheet. Among the accrued benefits will be higher land values, increases in collected taxes, public health improvements as outdoor recreation becomes more accessible, a heightened awareness of our natural environment, and public health savings due to improvements in physical fitness. Communities along the trail (Blantyre, Penrose, Pisgah Forest, and

Brevard) will see economic benefits in the emergence of entrepreneurial opportunities to serve trail hikers and bicycle riders.

Grant funds of \$6.4-million are available from NC DOT to construct the trail if the nonprofit rail banking entity, Conserving Carolina, and Friends of the Ecusta Trail can raise matching funds of \$1.6-million, making the total funds available of \$8-million which will be used to acquire lands along the right of way to secure the trail, thus conserving and protecting extensive swaths of land along this “linear park”.

Financial Impact: None unless you decide otherwise

Strategic Plan Goal & Strategy: Goal 1: All strategies. Goal 4: Strategy 4A. Goal 5: Strategies 5A & C.

Recommendations:

1. Join the Land of Sky Regional Council, the NC Department of Transportation, the City of Brevard, several county economic development agencies, and our neighbors in endorsing the concept of the Ecusta Trail.

Enclosure: (1) An Abbreviated Fact Sheet: The Ecusta Trail
(2) List of organizations supporting the Ecusta Trail

Enclosure 1: An Abbreviated Fact Sheet: The Ecusta Trail



An unused rail line, last used more than 17 years ago, lies between Hendersonville and Brevard and has become overgrown and deteriorated so as to be unusable.

The likelihood of a demand high enough for resumption of rail service along this line is remote due to the nature of our economic make-up (i.e. small businesses, outdoor recreation, education and health services, and tourism), **the versatility and price-competitiveness of the trucking industry**, and the costs of renovating the line.

The National Trail Systems Act, adopted by Congress in 1983, provides a statute for converting rail corridors to trails through a process known as railbanking. Railbanking is a voluntary agreement between a railroad company and a rail banking entity, in this case Conserving Carolina and the Friends of the Ecusta Trail, to convert out-of-service rail corridors **to publicly accessible** trails until the railroad operator chooses to reactivate rail service. The rail operator does not give up the right to reactivate the line.

WATCO Companies has approached Friends of the Ecusta Trail to begin appraisal and survey of this line as a preamble to negotiations for the rail banking entity, Conserving Carolina, to begin purchasing land along the line for the purposes of converting it into a hike/bike trail connecting Hendersonville and Brevard.

According to a USDA 2015 report, Transylvania County is identified as having a “recreation economy” based on earnings from entertainment, recreation and accommodations, employment trends and the amount of seasonal housing. (2025 Comprehensive Plan, USDA report cited on pg. 11)

North Carolina Department of Transportation Walk Bike Program, referenced in an action step under Objective 2, page 14 of the 2025 Comprehensive Plan, incorporates **walking** and **bicycling** into daily life, promoting safe access to destinations, physical activity opportunities for improved health, increased mobility for better transportation efficiency, retention and attraction of economic development, and resource conservation for better stewardship of our environment.

Transylvania County’s recent induction into the Blue Zone Project will encourage improvements in community health by optimizing such things as public parks and safe walking paths.

There is a grassroots effort to convert this unused rail line to a multiuse path, the Ecusta Trail mentioned on page 13 of the 2025 Comprehensive Plan, that will connect Brevard with Hendersonville, thereby providing safe, easily accessible, greenspace for exercise, family outings, and stress relief meeting several goals of the Blue Zone Project.

The regional bike plan created by the Land of Sky Regional Council identifies a connection such as the Ecusta Trail as one of its top five projects (Blue Ridge Bike Plan 2013).

NC House Representative Chuck McGrady identified a grant opportunity for the Ecusta Trail offered by NC DOT and notified the citizen group, Friends of the Ecusta Trail who asked Conserving Carolina, a non-profit

environmental group whose purpose is to protect and steward land and water resources vital to our natural heritage and quality of life and to foster appreciation and understanding of the natural world, to take the lead in acquiring these funds as the rail banking entity and managing potential land acquisitions necessary for trail development.

Conserving Carolina was successful in winning the \$6.4-million grant but must raise matching funds of \$1.6-million to complete the grant for a total of \$8-million toward land acquisition.

Development of the Ecusta Trail has been endorsed by Hendersonville, where the trail would start, Henderson County, Mills River, and Brevard. All the local government sectors the trail will affect except Transylvania County have endorsed the project.

The Ecusta Rail Trail Planning Study and Economic Impact Analysis, prepared by the City of Hendersonville and published in 2012, projects the following:

By investing the direct costs of construction for this amenity, residents and local government can expect to see an estimated \$42-million one-time return.

Annually, a \$9.4 million return can be estimated on tax revenues, visitor spending, health care cost savings, property value increases, and direct use value.

An estimated \$20-million to construct the trail will create 180 temporary jobs.

An estimated gain of 4% in property values along the trail will result in increased tax revenues of \$160,000 per year from properties located within one-quarter mile of the trail.

A direct use impact (savings to users who choose the free trail over other forms of recreation that have associated costs) of \$2.2-million will accrue to users of the trail.

Health care savings due to increased opportunities for exercise will result in improved health care outcomes, reduced costs, increases in worker productivity, reductions in chronic illnesses and other, short-term health care needs of approximately \$5-million per year.

Economic benefits would accrue to all land owners and businesses along the proposed trail, affecting the communities of Blantyre, Penrose, Pisgah Forest, and Brevard.

Completing the Ecusta Trail as proposed would fulfill the following goals of the County's 2025 Comprehensive Plan, the Strategic Plan, adopted in 2016, and the [County Bicycle Plan, adopted in November 2019](#):

Comprehensive Plan: [\(In the survey conducted as a basis for the 2025 Comprehensive Plan, other than jobs, completion of the Ecusta Trail was the most mentioned item in response to the question "Thinking about the next 10 years, what would you like to see in the County that is not here now?"\)](#)

Diverse and vibrant economic base supported by exceptional infrastructure (pg. 13), action items l and k.

Maintain and enhance infrastructure (pg. 19): items b and c.

Preserve, conserve, protect, enhance and utilize ...environmental resources to provide access for outdoor experiences while increasing recreational and economic development opportunities (page 24): items a, e, and g.

Healthy communities that have access to recreational resources (page 39): all of objective 1.

Promote health and wellbeing of citizens (page 40): items a, b, c, e, and f.

Strategic Plan 2016-2021:

Goal 1. Quality of life and environment: All strategies

Goal 4, Natural Resources: Strategy 4A

Goal 5, Promote health, transportation connectivity, and sense of place: Strategies 5A & C

Transylvania County Bicycle Plan, 2019

Completion of Ecusta Trail was identified as the most often cited improvement needed for bicycling in Transylvania County during this planning process.

TNRC has taken up the issue of endorsing the concept of the Ecusta Trail as a linear park that lends itself to several environmental issues. The bridges and landscaping that will occur around stream and river crossings will have an impact on water quality. The trail itself will pass through several different ecosystems creating important educational opportunities through the use of kiosks and other forms of informational displays. It will provide easily accessible, natural experiences for families of young children and the physically impaired. And land along the trail will be conserved, creating opportunities for nature activities such as bird and wildlife watching. Other public health and economic benefits were discussed in this paper and in the below listed references.

The Transylvania Natural Resources Council recommends that County Commissioners

1. Join the Land of Sky Regional Council, the NC Department of Transportation, the City of Brevard, several county economic development agencies, and our neighbors in endorsing the concept of the Ecusta Trail.

References:

<https://www.hendersonvillenc.gov/ecusta-rail-trail-planning-study-economic-impact-analysis>

http://transylvaniacounty.org/sites/default/files/departments/planning/docs/170328_Final-2025-Plan.pdf (2025 Comprehensive Plan)

<https://conservingcarolina.org/who-we-are/>

<https://www.bluezones.com/services/blue-zones-project/#section-5>

<http://transylvaniacounty.org/county-strategic-plan>

http://transylvaniacounty.org/sites/default/files/departments/planning/docs/TransylvaniaCountyBicyclePlan_2019-March%20Modified%20reduced%20size.pdf (Draft bicycle plan)

<http://www.landofsky.org/brbp.html> (Blue Ridge Bike Plan 2013)

Enclosure 2. Letters of Support/ Endorsements From:

The Friends of The Ecusta Trail are very appreciative for the resolutions, endorsements and statements of support from the following (please click each to view the official documents). Transylvania organizations are in **boldface**.

[Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy \(now Conserving Carolina\)](#)

[Brevard/Transylvania County Chamber of Commerce](#)

[Cradle of Forestry in America Interpretive Association](#)

[City of Brevard](#)

[City of Hendersonville](#)

[City of Fletcher](#)

[Village of Flat Rock](#)

[Town of Laurel Park](#)

[Henderson County Commissioners](#)

[Henderson County \(Greenways Master Plan\)](#)

[Henderson County Chamber of Commerce](#)

[Henderson County Tourism Development Authority](#)

[Hendersonville Family YMCA](#)

[League of Women Voters of Henderson County](#)

[Oskar Blues Brewery](#)

[NC-Rail Trails](#)

[Transylvania County Tourism Development Authority](#)

[Resolution by City of Hendersonville to Add the Ecusta Trail to the Metropolitan Transportation Plan](#)

[The above letters of endorsement and support may be found at:](#)

<https://www.ecustatrail.org/statement-of-support/resolutions-statements-of-support.html>