



TRANSYLVANIA
Natural Resources Council

Meeting Minutes for Transylvania County Natural Resource Council

Regular Meeting

December 13, 2019

Welcome

The meeting was called to order at approximately 10:40 A.M. by Lee McMinn.

Roll Call:

Members present:

R.K. Young
Lee McMinn
Stephanie Adams
Dave Casey
Jason Guidry
Jeff Parker
David Whitmire
Kent Wilcox
Elizabeth Reshower
Mitch Woodward (Presenter)
Neal Wilcox
Wesley Sketo
Dan Hodges

Staff:

Addison Bradley
Samantha Trueman
Kenn Webb
JoAnn McCall
Kate Hayes
Jason Stewart

In addition, approximately 5 members of the public were present.

Speaker Series:

Program consisted of a presentation by Mitch Woodward, N.C. Cooperative Extension, "Protecting Water Resources: Options for Stormwater Management."

Approval of agenda: Unanimously approved.

Approval of minutes from November 2019: Unanimously approved.

Future Programs:

January 10, 2020- Asheville Greenworks, Plastic Reduction Task Force, will be in Elections Center at 2:00 P.M.

February 14, 2020- River Keepers, "What do they do?" (Jennifer Kafsky)

March 13, 2020- (Tentative) Kudzu and Other Invasives (David Whitmire, Torry Nergart, and others)

April 10, 2020- (Tentative) Forest Plan Revision (Dave Casey and David Whitmire)

May 8, 2020- Maria Wise, Director at Mills River Partnership: Monetizing Riparian Zones (Foster Creek Project at Living Web Farm). Meet at Cooperative Extension at 9:30 A.M. to carpool or use provided transport.

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

New Business:

Endorsement and Support for Ecusta Trail (see attached): Lee McMinn drafted endorsement with the intent to submit to B.O.C. Motion was made by Kent Wilcox to remove recommendation number 4 regarding public comment and Lee McMinn moved to remove number 3. Amended draft will only include points 1 and 2. Topic was tabled until following Rosman Aldermen meeting.

Old Business:

Updates from subcommittees:

None

Updates from public land managers:

David Casey- Pisgah N.F.

- Opened Pilot Mountain Road this week.
- Will harvest white pine in Davidson River Campground.
- Will continue with prescribed burns.

Wesley Sketo- DuPont S.R.F.

- Timber harvest has been delayed.
- Certified burner course was a success with 30 attendees.
- Possible prescribed burns along Cascade Lake Road.
- Hemlock treatment continues.
- Remediation plan for plant site is on the website.

Neal Wilcox- Gorges S.P.

- Discussions regarding bike trails continue.

David Whitmire- Town of Rosman, Wildlife Commission

- Forest plan is due to be released February 1, 2020.

Motion was made to adjourn and Kent Wilcox seconded, approved unanimously

Meeting was adjourned at 11:17

Respectfully submitted by Addison Bradley

Transylvania County Agenda Memo

Agenda Item:

Meeting Date:

From: Lee McMinn, Chair, TNRC

Date: December 13, 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: A rail line running between Hendersonville and Brevard has been unused for more than 17-years and shows no signs of being reactivated as a rail line due to its deteriorated condition and the unlikelihood of sufficient demand to cause the lines 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. Development of the Ecusta Trail is currently underway in Henderson County and is already partially funded. Commissioners' endorsement and public support 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, 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: **As you decide but** \$100,000 is suggested as a meaningful gesture of support

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

Recommendations:

1. Discuss these recommendations in open forum to allow public comment.
2. Join the Land of Sky Regional Council, the NC Department of Transportation, the City of Brevard, and our neighbors in endorsing the concept of the Ecusta Trail.
3. Assure affected land owners that their property rights will be respected as plans are made and land is purchased to complete the trail.
4. Join Conserving Carolina in providing a sum (\$100,000 from available fund balance is recommended **as being a meaningful contribution**) toward matching funds for the NC DOT grant.

- 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.

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.

The Transylvania Natural Resources Council recommends that County Commissioners

1. Discuss these recommendations in open forum to allow public comment.
2. Join the Land of Sky Regional Council, the NC Department of Transportation, the City of Brevard, and our neighbors in endorsing the concept of the Ecusta Trail.
3. Assure affected land owners that their property rights will be respected as plans are made and land is purchased to complete the trail.
4. Join Conserving Carolina in providing a sum (\$100,000 from available fund balance is recommended **as being a meaningful contribution**) toward matching funds for the NC DOT grant.

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>