

NORTH CAROLINA RAIL-TRAILS

Little Toot

Vol 5 No 1

Spring 1993

Trails Day Focuses On Extending The Creeper

Grab your horse, bike or hiking boots and head for the mountains of Ashe County on June 5 for the first National Trails Day.

NCRT is using the occasion to focus state attention on extending the magnificent Virginia Creeper Trail into North Carolina. Sign up any time that Saturday at the restored Virginia-Carolina Railroad depot in Todd. Then take the tour to Fleetwood at your own pace on Railroad Grade Road, a remnant of the old Virginia Creeper line. (See sidebar)

The program moves to the depot in downtown West Jefferson that evening where we will Rally Round the Creeper,



a statewide show of support for bringing the trail into North Carolina. A proposal for extending the trail will be presented to the Ashe County Commission on the following Monday, June 7.

Then comes the best part. We leave West Jefferson at 8 a.m. Sunday by car-or-van for White Top Station on the Virginia state line. From there it is 20 miles downhill to Damascus and another 13 flat miles to Abingdon. Again, do it at your own pace and enjoy the Creeper's spectacular scenery. Pack your own snack and drink as there are no burger bars before reaching Damascus.

The Creeper's surface is cinders and gravel. Mountain or cross bikes are recommended. A commercial shuttle service back to White Top will be available for hikers and bikers doing the Creeper one way.

Yes, Virginia, there really is a Carolina Creeper

People have been drawn to it for decades. To bicycle on a flat grade between the mountains along the scenic New River's South Fork. To enjoy family outings away from heavy car and truck traffic.



This rail-road-trail is aptly called Railroad Grade Road and winds along the South Fork between Todd and Fleetwood in Ashe County. There it is, a sleepy state road twisting along on the Virginia-Carolina Railroad bed, part of the Todd to West Jefferson section that was abandoned in 1933.

Even though a sign identifies the road's origin at Todd, many users are not aware that this bikers' haven was once an active railroad. Other broad hints are a beautifully restored depot, a locomotive and several rail cars in a grassy park.

Many visiting cyclists only know that it is special place: A flat grade in the mountains, relatively safe from motor traffic and served by an authentic general store.

Bicyclists repeatedly come from many distant places to enjoy Railroad Grade Road. Even with a few cars and passing pickups, what better demonstration of the need for and the appeal of rail-trails?

"To Preserve Rail Corridors and Promote Rail - Trails"

Controversial Corridor Deal Arouses Triad Trail Backers

Struggling to make lemonade out of political sour fruit, the Greensboro City Council voted April 29 to sell railbed footage and to use the proceeds to fund construction of a pedestrian and bicycling path along a critical section of abandoned rail corridor in the northwest section of the city.

A Triad rail-trail citizen steering committee has emerged from the controversy to monitor the project and to direct public attention to additional commuting path and trail opportunities in the Triad.

The corridor property in question can serve as a vital link in the Triad's parks and trails program. It connects downtown Greensboro and close-in greenway trails to outlying Battleground National Military Park and Bur Mill Park northwest of the city. The corridor also holds hope for linking Guilford County's Bicentennial Trail to these facilities and providing continuous trails to High Point City Lake Park. Ironically, the Greensboro council passed a resolution in 1981 to protect the corridor as a potential link for the state's struggling Mountain to Sea Trail.

The issue has certainly heightened the public's awareness of the area's corridors potential, according to Joe Best, the new trails steering committee chair. The committee will be working to focus the support of groups such as the Triad biking, hiking and running clubs. The intent is to develop a Triad initiative similar to the Triangle Rails-to-Trails Conservancy which was instrumental to developing the American Tobacco Trail project.

The steering committee was initiated at NCRT's quarterly public meeting in 'Greensboro' at which City Planning Director Chuck Mortimer reviewed the situation; Transportation Planner Ken Crawford showed its impact on the city's bicycle and pedestrian program, and Guilford County Planner John Morck discussed the Bicentennial Trail connection.

The problem started festering more than a year ago when the



Greensboro Planning Director Chuck Mortimer points out the problem: A half-width corridor under additional pressure from business development. The map depicts encroachments on the railbed by a previous purchase and by new tough-to-refuse offers.

City Council quietly voted to sell off 20 feet of city-owned railbed along Battleground Avenue. The problem was compounded by that fact that the purchaser was Mayor Vic Nussbaum Jr., whose business previously received half the corridor property up to the railbed centerline when Norfolk Southern abandoned the line. The city owns the opposite side of the corridor that borders a municipal cemetery.

That sparked offers from nine other business owners along the corridor to purchase additional 20-ft. wide railbed sections from the city. When public protests developed, the business owners proposed using the combined \$137,000 purchase price to design and construct a path on the remaining city corridor property next to the cemetery. Left unanswered was the question of whether or not the funds would cover construction of a new trailbed and if the remaining 30-ft. width would accommodate a future light rail option.

The 32-mile line from downtown Greensboro to Brook Cove is in the state's railbanking plan for 1997. However, the DOT's rail division kept its head down throughout the controversy and did not move to protect the corridor for future rail service.

Trail Advocates Told Cue On Agencies

The state DEHNR expects to have National Recreational Trails Fund application forms and manuals available by May, according to Darrell McBane, state trails coordinator.

He confirmed DEHNR's decision that only local, state and federal agencies can apply for funding. Trail organizations are being told to apply for project backing through local governments.

The federal allocation to North Carolina totals \$173,000 for 1993. After administrative and program costs, \$152,000 will be available with 30 percent allocated to federal agencies, 30 percent to state agencies and 40 percent to local agencies.

McBane warned that applications will require more supporting information than the state's Adopt-A-Trail program.

Coloring Across The Lines

Still going! Tom Neenan, executive director of the Iowa Trails Council, now holds an ICC Notice of Interim Trail Use Permit for 122 miles of a Norfolk Southern abandonment . . . including 85 miles in Missouri. ITC has 180 days after April 6 to finalize the Section 8(d) National Trails System Act railbanking requirements.

Neenan and the ITC were largely responsible for the nation's first Section 8(d) railbanking 10 years ago and helped Iowans completed the process for eight of the first 11 in the country.

Neenan is accustomed to acting on corridor preservations outside his jurisdiction. At one time he sat on a county board that accepted responsibility for a rail-trail that stretched through three additional counties.

Ah, Tom, we, ah have some Norfolk Southern abandonments in Carolina and we're, ah, kinda wondering if . . .



Whistle Stops: Bargains Go Begging

Note: This was written and going to print when Gov. Hunt was called in by the telephone companies to announce the "North Carolina Information Highway." Left unanswered was how soon and at what cost will every school, library, business and neighborhood have access? What's the most efficient way to distribute fiber optic arteries? A 1948 rail system map might well be the best blueprint.

Last winter we proposed expanding the Governor's Rail Task Force to look beyond presently perceived notions of rail system needs. We urged looking outside that square toward other public uses for "nonstrategic" rail corridors.

There is more to look at than recreational trails and commuting paths. There is more at stake than urban greenways and rural conservation corridors. A lot more.

Growth and development are certain to require power, gas, and water lines. Those needs also are "strategic." A bit of forethought could alleviate the costs of ripping across established neighborhoods and tearing through existing infrastructure. An available corridor is a great bargain. If those corridor options don't stir up thought, this next one should. The future of this country's communication utilities is being hammered out in Congress, right now.

The nation's telephone companies have pledged to invest well over \$100 billion this decade if they are given the regulatory green light to build the nation's new "electronic highways." They are talking about the next century's interstates and primary routes for integrated telephone, data, TV, interactive video and other developing media. Corridor forethought could have a powerful impact on the economic future of any state with the good sense to protect existing corridors for fiber optic cables and future technologies.

Rail corridors were established to bring this and other states out of the mud and into the Industrial Age. Those same corridors could again bring social and economic advantage in the Information Age. A quick and economically attractive way to put down fiber optics and to tap into the mainline could do a lot for local education and commerce. - DA

State Program Makes Newsletter Award

NCRT has been awarded its third Adopt-A-Trail grant from the state program. This year's grant is \$928 to be applied to publishing this newsletter.

The two previous grants were used to initiate the Durham-Bonsal American Tobacco Trail master plan and to evaluate extending the Virginia Creeper Trail into Ashe County.

This year 30 groups received a total of \$35,000 in grants. The largest award was \$5,000 and smallest \$70.



Lincolnton Railroad Greenway Coalition leaders Chafin Rhyne, on bike, and Gary Cornwell, on foot, test the existing surface after track removal. The coalition has placed signs at several street crossings to bring public attention to the 1.8-mile corridor through Lincolnton.

State, CSX Deal On Pender Corridor

The NCDOT is negotiating with the CSX Railroad to acquire 27 miles of Pender County rail line between Wallace and Castle Hayne north of Wilmington. The line continues in service north of Wallace to Goldsboro and Wilson.

The abandoned section is in the DOT's 1993 railbanking plan with a \$950,000 allocation. The tracks have been removed from the Pender County section. Negotiations have centered on CSX donating the 27-mile section to the state in exchange for streamlining DOT procedures covering rail crossing and track maintenance.

ENLIST TODAY IN THE NORTH CAROLINA RAIL-TRAILS MOVEMENT!

Name _____ Address _____

City _____ State _____ ZIP _____

Telephone: Home _____ Work _____ Best Time _____

Reason for interest in rail-trails _____

Member of other conservation/recreation/historical organization? _____

NCRT annual memberships: Individual - \$15, Family - \$20, Corporate - \$100

Mail to North Carolina Rail Trails, Suite 124, 703 9th St., Durham, NC 27705

THANK YOU FOR JOINING NCRT

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"To Preserve Rail Corridors and Promote Rail - Trails"

MEET JUNE 5 AT TODD STATION

NCRT's quarterly meeting will be held at 10 a.m. Saturday, June 5, at the Virginia-Carolina Railroad Station in Todd. The public is invited to all NCRT meetings.

Take Highway 194 out of Boone to Todd. Turn right on Railroad Grade Road. Todd Station also will serve as the information center for National Trails Day activities.



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Sherron Recycles Railbank Aid

Sen. J.K. Sherron's legislation to make it easier for the state and railroads to railbank corridors has been reintroduced as Senate Bill 758 and has been referred to the Senate Transportation Committee. The bill would allow the state DOT and operating railroads to file affidavits to preclude presumption of railroad easement abandonments under G.S. 1-44.1.

While Sen. Sherron's bill is a major step in the right direction, it does not place the same railbanking tool in the hands of local governments and other state agencies.

Historically, local governments and state park departments throughout the country have taken the lead in preserving rail corridors for broader purposes such as recreation trails, commuting paths, greenbelts, utility lanes and local light rail transit. NCDOT only recognizes lines that it deems at the moment "strategic" for rail service and does not consider other or interim uses in its long-range plan.

The bill was first proposed by Sen. Sherron in the 1991 session as Senate Bill 131. That version passed the Senate, received a favorable report from the House Transportation Committee and was recommended for passage by the Legislative Research Commission's Committee on Railroads and Other Public Transportation. However, inexplicably, it failed to make it out of the House Transportation Committee during the 1992 short session.

Final dates for newsletter materials are: Winter - Feb. 10, Spring - May 10, Summer - Aug. 10, Fall - Nov. 10.

NORTH CAROLINA

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