



NORTH CAROLINA
RAIL-TRAILS

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“Connecting people & communities”

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ECUSTA TRAIL

Story and photo by Nancy Pierce

A 19-mile railroad corridor in North Carolina's southern mountains will eventually bring its communities together as only a trail can do, but right now the going is a bit bumpy.

The idea of an Ecusta Rail-Trail on the Hendersonville to Pisgah Forest (Brevard) short line has been floated ever since the Ecusta Paper Plant in Brevard, the line's only user, closed in 2002. The rail line has not been used since then.

But then-owner Norfolk Southern was reluctant to discuss giving it up, probably in deference to the Transylvania County Commissioners who have supported keeping the county's only railroad intact to help

recruit a new industry. The City of Brevard, the county seat, is staying mum on the issue. Henderson County officials have not formally weighed in but its communities of Hendersonville, Flat Rock and Laurel Park passed supportive resolutions and the Henderson Chamber of Commerce voted to support the trail. Newspaper editorials made local candidates' position on the trail an issue in the May primary elections.

Early this year Norfolk Southern sold the short line as part of a larger transaction. Trail backers hope the new owner, Kansas-based short line operator Watco, will be more amenable to federal rail banking. Recognizing that the United States' unused rail corridors

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Ecusta Trail
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are a unique national resource, Congress established provisions to protect them in perpetuity. Rail banking allows for public recreational trail use and does not preclude future rail use. Watco officials have not yet commented on their intention.

Through all this, the nonprofit Friends of the Ecusta Trail (FOET) members are building pro-trail momentum by educating community leaders and elected officials about the economic benefit of trails and how rail banking works. Early this year FOET's website activity increased 400% after they placed this billboard on heavily traveled US Hwy 64 near Brevard:



Photo © Paula Roberts/Hendersonville Lightning

In September, FOET released a video that opens with a no-nonsense statement by the corporate site selection consultant who landed Sierra Nevada Brewery in Mills River near Asheville. Don Schjeldahl faced the camera and told viewers that it's highly unlikely a quality employer will invest the several million dollars it will take to upgrade the Hendersonville to Pisgah Forest rail line in order to locate in Brevard. Furthermore, he said, good companies put a premium on quality of life, which includes trails for recreation and commuting.

Since Ecusta Paper closed 12 years ago, just one industry has proposed to locate in the Brevard area and use the short line. The company would have used the rail to ship biomass (read: garbage) from elsewhere to Brevard for "thermal gasification" (read: incineration). Wisely, Transylvania County citizens and elected officials turned back this unproven technology in favor of protecting clean air and water.

Clearly, Brevard doesn't have to sell its

soul to ensure economic growth. In fact some people say there's no place on earth quite like Transylvania County for outdoor recreation, especially bicycling and hiking. And the French Broad River - meandering alongside and under the Proposed Ecusta Trail - has 100 miles of dam-free paddling including designated put-ins and campsites every few miles along the entire route. All this appeals to young entrepreneurs and high tech companies who don't necessarily need to be in big cities as long as there's a reasonable airport nearby, like Asheville's. In the near future, broadband and quality of life will probably be more important than rail capacity.

On a recent warm October evening, Millennials filled Oskar Blues Brewery next to the proposed Ecusta Rail-Trail on the outskirts of Brevard. Bike shorts and jerseys were dress code as they sipped craft beer and ate post-ride food, bikes leaning against tables in the outdoor seating area. Colorado-based Oskar Blues owner Dale Katechis expanded his company - which includes a nearby bike resort REEB Ranch -- to Brevard in 2012 after he spent a decade taking mountain bike vacations there. With hundreds of forest roads and mountain bike trails in the DuPont State Forest and Pisgah National Forest, it's no wonder that Transylvania County has become known as "the cycling capital of the South". Road cycling professionals train on the area's uncluttered but challenging roads.

Earlier that same October weekday, affluent but casually-dressed older adults waited in line for seats at Hendersonville's many good downtown restaurants. Retirees are drawn to this part of the world too, and many Baby Boomers are hale and healthy well into their

80s. But the challenging mountain bike trails, steep roads and BMX tracks beloved by the spandex set are a bit much for older bones. Mike Domonkos, a retired administrative law judge, FOET board member and former NC Rail-Trails board member says: "There's a fourth leg to the bike culture that we're missing here. We need gentle, off-road long-distance bike paths."

Norman Maultbsy gets that. Fit and energetic at 75, the retired vice president of a large construction firm was managing a project in Texas early in his career when he told his then 6-year-old daughter he would open a Blue Bell Ice Cream shop when he retired. Thirty-seven years later she held him to that. Gop's Ice Cream Dream in downtown Hendersonville sits next to the Hendersonville-to-Pisgah Forest rail line on several acres of commercial property he owns. "Half the industrial plants I built in the 1980s all over the country are sitting empty," he said. "They're not coming here. But make this rail into a trail and property values will increase all up and down the line." He's so convinced of the trail's economic impact that he'll develop a vacant part of his land for trailhead parking. "Then I'll add a bicycle shop at the back of my ice cream shop," he said.

A 2012 Planning Study and Economic Impact Analysis estimated the yearly economic impact of the completed trail would be \$9.4 million from visitor spending, health care cost savings and property value increases. The Study says it will cost between \$11.5 and \$16.7 million to acquire and build, with most of the work going to local contractors.

The 19-mile Swamp Rabbit Rail-Trail from Travelers rest to Greenville in upstate



Photo © Nancy Piérre

South Carolina has been a poster child for rail-trail success since opening in 2010. The Greenville Hospital System, a primary trail funder, surveyed adjacent restaurants and shops and reported 400,000 visitors and 30% to 85% sales increases, and last spring Travelers Rest City Administrator Diana Turner told the Henderson Times-News that downtown business activity has quadrupled, all since the trail opened.

The Friends of the Ecusta Trail and the Hendersonville Chamber of Commerce took 36 people on a Swamp Rabbit tour this past summer. On that trip was Bill McKibbin who, as former chair of the Henderson County

Chamber and the County Partnership for Economic Development, has been reluctant to consider giving up a railroad, and he was afraid a trail would reduce property values and invite crime and trash. "But I kept an open mind," he said. He came away from the trip with three impressions: the trail was clean and neat, the police officers talked only about community pride and how safe the trail is, and he heard story after story of property value increases. "It's a big deal for me to advocate giving up a railroad. It's a huge mindset change," he said. "But it's evident that the future of our area is recreation. The Ecusta trail fits right in to that."

New NCRT Board Members

NCRT WELCOMED SIX NEW BOARD MEMBERS IN 2014.

Elected in January, **Britt Storck** (Chapel Hill) is a senior licensed landscape architect and project manager with Alta Planning + Design. She brings to the board her extensive knowledge of natural resource-based recreation projects and railbanking, rail-trail design and construction.

Elected in April, **Walter Turner** (High Point) is historian at the NC Transportation Museum in Spencer. He has written several books and contributed to documentaries on North Carolina transportation. He brings to the board his connections to the rail industry and historical context.

Elected in October:

Jennifer Dostert (Chapel Hill) recently moved back to her home state from Washington, DC. She is a finance and healthcare consulting professional with experience at major corporations. Jennifer brings to the board her finance expertise and will serve as Board treasurer.

Jamal Fox (Greensboro) is a member of the Greensboro City Council where he is liaison to the city's greenways committee as well as many other civic involvements. Jamal's experience working with city government will be valuable to the NCRT Board.

Mark Wasserman (Charlotte) moved to Charlotte from New York where he was a fan of that state's many rail-trails. He is a loan officer for Sun Trust Mortgage. He brings to the board his experience with finance and his community connections in the Charlotte area.

Kristi Wagner (Winston Salem) is experienced in marketing and PR and was director of development for a bicycling nonprofit in Tuscon before moving to North Carolina where she teaches fitness. Kristi brings to the board her experience building community partnerships.

NCRT thanks the following retiring board members for their service: Charles Farley, Ed Lewis, Clare Reece-Glore and Bob Segal.

Executive Director's Message

Ribbon cuttings! The past few months have been an exciting and satisfying time for rail-trail supporters. Most recently, the ribbon was cut on the new bridge crossing Elkin Creek on the Elkin and Alleghany Rail-Trail in Surry County. In August, the newly paved section of the Thermal Belt Rail-Trail, between Spindale and Ruth, was celebrated with a ribbon cutting and community celebration. There was also exciting news from Durham with the announcement that the City of Durham has been awarded a \$222,700 grant from the USDOT for the Duke Beltline Trail Master Plan. We expect big things from this project. Finally, work continues to progress on the 1.5 mile connector between the Dunn-Erwin Rail-Trail and the Cape Fear River Park Trail. Stay tuned for news on the next ribbon cutting!



Carrie Banks

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SPIKE AWARDS

Ms. Jequetta Jackson was awarded a Golden Spike in October. Jae has been a major force and an excellent example of board service. Jea’s leadership at the Ironman 70.3 event in Raleigh resulted in a \$1,250 award for NCRT.

The Elkin Valley Trails Association was awarded a Golden Spike recently as they cut the ribbon on their new bridge! There’s no stopping this talented group of volunteers and we can’t wait to see their next accomplishment on the Elkin & Alleghany Rail-Trail.



Two and four-legged racers are ready to go!

Photo © Shannon Johnstone



NCRT’s Ales for Rail-Trails 5K was a success again this year, with 259 racers and nearly \$5,000 raised for NCRT. We would like to thank Bull City Running Co. for their major sponsorship and for presenting the race. We also give a hearty thanks to **Fullsteam Brewery** and **501 Realty!**