



newsletter winter 2017

"Connecting people & communities"

VOLUME 26 | NUMBER 1

Notice to North Carolina Rail-Trails (NCRT) members:

**A meeting to consider dissolving NCRT will be held March 2, 2017 7:00 PM
Durham County South Regional Library, 4505 South Alston Avenue in Durham**

Dissolution requires that 2/3 of the members and board members in attendance at the meeting vote "yes". Members who want to discuss the matter or review the Plan of Dissolution ahead of the meeting may contact NCRT Board Chair Dave Connelly at drpconnelly@gmail.com or 919 357 6409.

A letter to the members of North Carolina Rail-Trails from the Board of Directors:

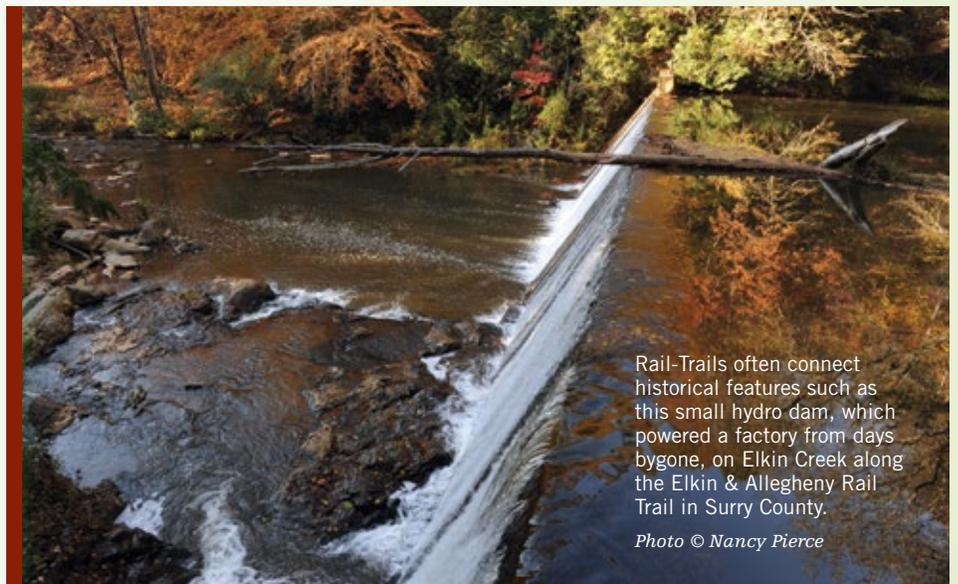
With mixed emotions, we recommend the dissolution of NCRT. We're grateful beyond words for your support over the years, so we want to be very clear about why we took this step.

As a state-wide organization focused solely on rail-trails, NCRT had become unsustainable. We discussed expanding our mission to include all trails or merging with other trail groups. But we always came back to this: There are now so many local and regional trail groups in our state that one can hardly keep track of the ribbon cuttings.

We think that's a good problem to have, and we celebrate it even though it means NCRT is no longer needed.

To be sure, challenges remain. Under North Carolina statute, abandoned railroad easements are presumed to revert to adjacent property owners. State rail banking is typically allowed only when the entire corridor under consideration is owned outright. Most corridors are a complex web of easements and ownerships going back to the 1800s when rail was rapidly expanding in the South.

Federal rail banking – which has no full-ownership condition – is a better path for rail-trails. But railroads and communities



Rail-Trails often connect historical features such as this small hydro dam, which powered a factory from days bygone, on Elkin Creek along the Elkin & Allegheny Rail Trail in Surry County.

Photo © Nancy Pierce

hesitate to give up unused corridors, hoping they'll carry freight or passengers again. They can have it both ways. Rails-with-trails are popular elsewhere in the US and, under federal rail banking, corridors are protected for "interim" recreational use until rail use is viable again. In the meantime, rail-trails offer tremendous economic, recreational and health benefits to communities.

During NCRT's early years, the all-volunteer board worked tirelessly to convince policy

makers and public officials to protect unused rail corridors for recreational use. NCRT had great successes such as the Dunn-Erwin Rail-Trail (donated to NCRT by a small, regional railroad company) but at other times it was hard, frustrating work. Obstacles included "not-in-my-backyard" property owners, skeptics who said no one would use trails, and public budgets that placed no priority on pedestrian/bike connectivity.

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NCRT laid some essential groundwork though, and things look a whole lot different in 2017.

Trails are the most sought-after amenities in new subdivisions. Multi-county efforts such as the Charlotte-based Carolina Thread Trail have inspired others such as the Greensboro-based Piedmont Land Conservancy toward similar efforts. The Mountains-to Sea Trail and East Coast Greenway, plus local gems like the Jacksonville-Camp Lejeune Rail-Trail and Greensboro's A&Y Rail-Trail promise more miles. Cities now have pedestrian/bike planners, and NCDOT pays attention to multiple modes of transportation.

Rail-trails are part of a larger picture, and we

like the way that picture looks.

Check out the timeline on this and the next page to learn about NCRT's 26-years of advocacy. Then, honor its legacy by finding a local, regional or statewide trail organization and lending it your support. Join the national Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), a natural fit to continue our work in North Carolina. NCRT's Plan of Dissolution (under consideration) will send its remaining funds to RTC to start a grant program for North Carolina projects. Check out RTC's trailandrails.com to locate trails anywhere in the USA.

It's been a wild train ride. Thank you for staying with us over the years, and we wish you happy trails!

NCRT Board

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Behind the scenes and upfront: a timeline of NCRT's legacy

1989 Trails and railroad fan Al Capehart and Vonda Frantz, Durham City-County Planning, form steering committee for statewide rail-trails organization.

1991 NC Rail-Trails (NCRT) established as a nonprofit with Carolyn Townsend as board chair.

NCRT wins grant money to master-plan American Tobacco Trail (ATT), an effort of the Triangle Rails-to-Trails Conservancy in Durham.

NCRT wins grant money to evaluate extending the Virginia Creeper Trail across the state line into Ashe County.

Association and others to propose legislation that protects unused rail corridors for public recreational use.

1999 NCRT gains land trust status

2000 NCRT first land-trust action federally rail banks a 5.34-mile corridor of the Aberdeen & Rockfish Railroad in Harnett County which was donated to NCRT.

NCRT board member Dan Arrasmith and NCRT volunteers recognized by the Charlotte Observer as "environmental heroes" for working to preserve rail corridors.

First section of ATT dedicated at Durham Bulls Ball Park, Durham.

Organized opposition from Ashe County property owners halts NCRT's efforts to expand Virginia Creeper Trail into North Carolina

2001 8-mile Thermal Belt Rail-Trail dedicated, Spindale-to-Gilkey in Rutherford County.

2002 NCRT and the towns dedicate 5.3 mile Dunn-Erwin Rail-Trail in Harnett County

Ecusta Paper Mill in Brevard closes and its rail line goes unused. Ecusta Trail (Hendersonville-to-Brevard) committee forms in Transylvania County.

2004 Dedication of .9 mile Skewarkee Rail-Trail connecting downtown Williamston to the Roanoke River, in Martin County.

2005 NCRT board member Harry Clapp monitors Greensboro's plans for four-mile greenway loop downtown including the Atlantic & Yadkin rail corridor.

2006 In a significant ruling for rail trails, N.C. Court of Appeals affirms that adjacent landowners have no claim to the Thermal Belt Rail-Trail corridor in Rutherford County. NCRT board members and attorneys Mike Domonkos and David S. Coats of the Raleigh firm Bailey & Dixon handled the case pro bono.



NCRT Board at Deep River Rail-Trail

1993 NC Bicycle Federation merges with NCRT

Raleigh law firm Bailey & Dixon commits to ongoing pro bono counsel for NCRT, a relationship which persists today through board member Adam Olls, a lawyer with the firm.

1995 (and 1998) NCDOT Rail Division purchases ATT corridor from Norfolk Southern, enabling eventual recreational trail use.

1997 NCRT director Al Capehart lobbies NC Public Transit

2007 Depending on how one counts, NC has between 51 and 78.6 total rail-trail miles, in the bottom third nationwide. Wisconsin has 1,533 miles.

2008 Plans for 32-mile Coastal Carolina Trail linking Beaufort, Pitt and Martin counties are halted by the counties. NCRT had been actively pushing the project forward since 1994.

A pedestrian bridge over NC 24 completes Jacksonville's 5.2-mile Rails to Trails Greenway, which NCRT advocated for since 1990.

NCRT board chair Carolyn Townsend steps down after 17 years.

2009 After NCRT brings its expertise to the stalled Deep River Rail-Trail effort, the first .75-mile section opens in Franklinville, Randolph County.

Ncrailtrails.org debuts with robust and interactive information, news and resources for rail-trail advocates

Gastonia, just west of Charlotte, becomes the first city in North Carolina to federally rail bank a main line railroad, now the 1.7-mile Highland Rail-Trail.

2010 NCRT Founder Al Capehart retires from board after 21 years. NCRT hires first paid executive director Carrie Banks and engages its first interns, who create detailed rail-trail trip reports for the NCRT website.

2011 NCRT launches new newsletter design with trail features and project updates in each issue.

NCRT launches annual Ales for Rail-Trails 5K to benefit NCRT

2012 NCRT assumes financial sponsorship for the Elkin Valley Trails Association (EVTA) in Surry County, allowing EVTA to fund-raise under NCRT supervision.

2013 NCRT uses NC State Parks grant to install signs on all rail-trails in the state, with a digital barcode connecting smartphones to trail maps and descriptions.



Atlantic & Yadkin Rail-Trail, Greensboro (left)
American Tobacco Trail volunteers, Durham (above)

NCRT uses Z Smith Reynolds Foundation grant to investigate community perceptions and concerns around recent crime on portions of the ATT, in partnership with NC State and NC Central universities.

NCRT wins \$10,000 Blue Cross Blue Shield/NC award for organizational growth.

2014 Long awaited bridge over I-40 connects the ATT's two sections, for 22 contiguous miles from downtown Durham to Chatham county.

EVTA dedicates a critical connector on the Elkin & Allegheny Rail-Trail in Surry County, the Elkin Creek bridge.

NCRT launches annual Toast to Trails vineyard bike ride, a fundraiser.

2015 NCRT hires executive director Emily Herbert

2016 NCRT and town of Erwin dedicate Dunn-Erwin Rail Trail extension to join the Cape Fear River Trail.

Work proceeds on 5-mile extension to the current 8-mile Thermal Belt Rail Trail in Rutherford County

2017 NCRT asks its members to approve dissolution as a nonprofit, sending NCRT funds to the national Rails-to-Trails Conservancy for North Carolina projects.



END OF THE LINE

It's been my privilege to serve on the board of NC Rail-Trails (NCRT) for the past 12 years. I've seen the gradual shift from the founders, steeped in railroad knowledge and fired up with passion to preserve rail corridors, toward a new generation of advocates who work to make the world a better, more walkable place.

Our projects began with the American Tobacco Trail, at 22+ miles now the longest and most popular rail-trail in NC. NCRT also created the Dunn-Erwin Trail, becoming a land trust in the process. And we helped launch the Elkin & Allegheny Trail in Surry County.

Now, we gratefully look to the national Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) to continue our legacy. They have helped with queries from communities for years. RTC will manage our remaining funds by making grants for rails-to-trails projects within NC. I will serve on this grants committee, and I will continue to advocate for bike-ped improvements across NC. I hope you will too.

Paths to the future.

– Dave Connelly, NCRT Board Chair



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**From Al Capehart, NCRT
Founder and longtime
president of the board:**

“For me NCRT’s greatest moment, in addition to existing at all as the only statewide rail-trail organization in the country, was when it became a land trust. This enabled NCRT to guide the state’s first federal rail bank of the Aberdeen & Rockfish Railroad in Harnett County and to convert it into the public Dunn-Erwin Rail-Trail in 26 months. NCRT’s legacy is on the ground and in the hearts and minds of us who nurtured it. Thanks to all.”

MOVING FORWARD



Friends of the Ecusta Trail in Henderson and Transylvania County continue to build momentum for the 19-mile Ecusta Rail-Trail.

Photo © Hendersonville Lightning



Elkin Valley Trails Association excels at fund- and volunteer-raising, to

connect Elkin with Stone Mountain, on the former Elkin & Allegheny Railroad corridor in Surry and Wilkes County.

Photo © Nancy Pierce



Rutherford (County) Outdoor Coalition members advocate for active outdoor recreation amenities including the Thermal Belt Rail-Trail, at 8 miles and soon to be 13, the second longest rail-trail in North Carolina behind the American Tobacco Trail in the Triangle area.

Photo © Nancy Pierce