

Trail planners hope backers, critics turn out to public meeting

by: Olin Ericksen
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Planners of proposed nature trails that could someday connect Lincoln County with its neighbors are pushing for a big crowd at their next public meeting Thursday in Lincolnton — and they hope that critics of the plan will voice their opinions as well.

Less than 50 residents attended a three-hour interactive presentation at North Lincoln Middle School in Pumpkin Center on April 1.

The meeting's aim was to gather comments in on the local leg of a proposed Carolina Thread Trail — a project uniting nearly 500 miles of trails envisioned through 15 counties and several cities in the Charlotte region.

However, county planners and Thread Trail organizers said they need a wider cross section of local residents to know whether there is community buy-in on the plan when it comes up for approval later this year.

"We weren't too thrilled with the turnout we had," said Randi Gates, community coordinator for the Carolina Thread Trail in Lincoln County. "The whole process is driven by community input."

There is a chance, organizers said, that opposition may crop up at the last second if not enough residents weigh in or understand what the project involves.

"We could come to adoption and find that no one has heard of the Thread Trail," Gates said

From pushing for more coverage by local news media to passing out leaflets at community events, Gates and others have worked for the past two weeks to try and get the word out about the next meeting.

"It's OK if people don't support. We're not expecting everyone to support it," Gates said. "We just want to hear from them."

Through the meetings, the public will not only decide where the trails may someday meander, but what type of trails they become and how they are built.

Gates and others stressed, however, the trails would go only where they are wanted. "This is entirely based on cooperation," she said.

While there are several strategies that can be used to gain the trust and support of local property owners, eminent domain — a legal process that allows governments to take property by compensating the owner — would not be used, organizers said.

Backers of the plan said they are taking extra step to reach critics of the Thread Trail, including property owners and some farmers who spoke out against the concept to commissioners in April 2008.

The regional Thread Trail, totaling between \$100 million and \$150 million, would be funded with a combination of private, state and federal funds and local contributions.

Counties and cities would likely pitch in approximately \$40 million during a 10-year period.

A \$60,000 planning grant is being used now to finance the public forums, a newsletter, a Web site, flyers and other resources used for outreach

There is no set amount Lincoln County or Lincolnton would be expected to commit to for now beyond the \$3,000 each has already spent as matching grant money used to jump-start the mapping process.

The next meeting will be 5-8 p.m. Thursday at Lincolnton City Hall Council Chambers, 114 West Sycamore Street.

For more information and to weigh in on the local plan, visit www.greenways.com/lincoln or call Randy Williams, principal planner for Lincoln County, 704-736-8472.