

Trail will connect towns

Bike ride marks a greenway portion in Davidson

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By Lukas Johnson

Lauren Blackburn, Davidson's planning manager, said it will be about a decade before the Lake Norman towns of Cornelius, Davidson and Huntersville are connected via the Carolina Thread Trail.

"There is no funding dedicated in the five-year Transportation Improvement Program for our region that would provide for our inter-jurisdictional connections but I'm hopeful, especially with the commuter rail and other transportation improvements, we can expedite it. Maybe within 10 years, we'll all be well-connected with on-road and off-road segments."

Seven Carolina Thread Trail communities will host "Marking The Thread" celebrations in North and South Carolina as local leaders officially unveil the newly marked trails.

Davidson will promote the official marking of the South Prong Greenway as part of the Carolina Thread Trail at 10 a.m. Sept. 25 at the trailhead, on South Street next to Davidson Elementary. The event also will include a three-mile bicycle ride, which will begin at the Kincaid Trail at the end of South Street.

"We've made great progress towards enabling people to use their bikes as forms of transportation via greenways, and the thread trail is the vision of how people will be able to use their bikes to access all sorts of major destinations in the region via bicycle, and that's something to celebrate," said Blackburn. "And we're also concerned about the safety of cyclists due to recent accidents, so we want to take the opportunity to raise awareness."

The town and county, among other partners, built the South Prong segment in 2006 through a \$600,000 grant from the N.C. Department of Transportation. Blackburn said it takes roughly \$1 million to construct a mile of greenway, and the town is currently in the design stage, working on the connectivity between the other towns.

Greenway routes also are located throughout Cornelius and Huntersville, but the connector for the three towns, which parallels N.C. 115 and eventually will connect to Charlotte, won't be developed for years.

"There is some interest in going ahead and designing that part of the trail, and all the northern towns are interested in promoting that as best we can," said Blackburn. "Then we'll look for funding as soon as we can come up with some estimates in construction dollars. There's never enough money to do what we want in a timely manner, but the thread trail is getting great fiscal support from several contributors. We have not yet done anything significant on the 115 corridor. We have a long way to go. We're not over the hump yet. We still have significant mileage to construct."

The South Prong Greenway is about 2.5 miles long, with about a mile of overlaying connector routes that use neighborhood streets. Mecklenburg County also is in the process of building another half mile of trail east of the River Run neighborhood, said Blackburn. Currently Davidson has about 10-15 miles of trails, including bike lanes and sidewalks.

If the public wants to see this project come to fruition more quickly, Blackburn offered this advice.

"Continuing to promote bicycling and walking as forms of transportation is the most important significant thing people can do," she said. "Because until we have convinced the region that those are viable forms of transportation, and not just for recreation, then I'm not sure we're going to realize the ending potential that we could yield. If we can change peoples' mindset to where it can be an everyday commute or everyday errand, it will be great."

The trails will help create less traffic on roads, improve air quality, connecting communities and make for an overall healthier community.

The Carolina Thread Trail is a 15-county, two-state initiative designed to create a regional network of trails and conservation corridors. Local communities plan and implement their own portions of this green interstate system. Catawba Lands Conservancy is the lead agency for The Thread, working in partnership with Foundation For The Carolinas and others.

The Thread offers a growing network of trails and conservation corridors for walking, biking, commuting, fishing and paddling.

To date, counties with adopted plans have identified 874 miles of planned trails, and more than 63 miles of trails are open.

Throughout the region, communities like Davidson will celebrate the marking of the trail with activities ranging from live music to guided nature walks.

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