

The Green Way

The Newsletter of the Yadkin River Greenway Council, Inc.
Spring 1997

Successful Meeting March 20th Launches Greenway Plan With Local Landowners

Plans for a greenway along the Yadkin River valley were launched March 20th at a Wilkesboro meeting with landowners on or near the greenway route.

Members of the Yadkin River Greenway Council, a non-profit, non-governmental group, hosted the meeting. Greenway planners, parks officials, attorneys and accountants were on hand to answer questions.

"This has the potential to be a premier greenway project," Dr. Phil Carlson, a spokesman for the group, said. **"This is a very exciting moment...a very innovative beginning,"** R.G. Absher of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers agreed.

What Is a Greenway, Anyway? How Would One Enhance Wilkes?

Greenway council spokesman Dr. Phil Carlson introduced the greenway concept and explained a number of ways a greenway would be a community asset during a slide presentation March 20th.

Greenways, he explained, are linear parks, usually running along a stream. Cities across the United States have built greenways for recreation and transportation. Nearby towns such as Boone and Morganton already have greenways, Carlson noted.

The Yadkin River Greenway would enhance life in Wilkes County in many ways:

□ The greenway will be an important recreation spot. Walkers, runners, cyclists and roller bladers will all enjoy the greenway. The greenway will promote the health of the community. The greenway is expected to eventually link fitness-oriented facilities such as River's Edge Park (soccer fields), the Wilkes Regional Medical Center Wellness Center at West Park and the Wilkes YMCA. "It will appeal to young and old, children and senior citizens," Carlson said. Similar greenways in other towns have become magnets for everyone from serious athletes to casual amblers.

The greenway will be used for transportation. Users can get to work, school or shopping using the greenway system. Several schools, major employers and both downtowns will be accessible from the main greenway and its spurs.

The greenway will showcase the hidden beauty of the Yadkin valley. The river bottom is home to a variety of birds and other wildlife. Forests and beautiful pastoral vistas will be abundant along the Yadkin River Greenway.

The Yadkin River Greenway will provide an additional outlook on the area's history. The greenway is anticipated to be part of the Overmountain Victory Trail, a nationally-recognized route which commemorates the assembly of patriots from the uplands of North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee to fight the British at the Battle of Kings Mountain in 1780. "This is a very, very important piece of American history," remarked Rich Sussman, a regional executive with the National Park Service. The Yadkin valley was also an ancient home to native Americans. Interpretive displays and kiosks could showcase the rich history of the area, and spur trails off the greenway would link existing historic sites like the Old Wilkes Jail and Benjamin Cleveland home in old Wilkesboro to the greenway.

How Would a Greenway Boost the Local Economy?

The "bottom line" on greenways is **highly positive**, concludes Chuck Flink, a greenway expert who's helped get greenways going in communities large and small across the U.S.

Among the economic benefits Flink cited:

"Residential property values go up when associated with greenways," Flink said. A high percentage of potential homeowners want to be near a greenway, he said. Several residential areas are near the potential route for the Yadkin River Greenway.

Greenways are an amenity for the attraction of incoming business and industry. Companies of all types are concerned about health care costs and many evaluate community 'quality of life' as a factor in siting decisions. A seemingly small factor like a greenway can tip the balance as companies consider otherwise similar communities. Town of Morganton official Lee Anderson said the greenway is part of the standard tour given to representatives of firms looking to relocate there. Raleigh's greenway system was a pivotal factor in landing one recent industry. "We heard the jogging trails were great...we wanted the jogging trails," an official of Reichold Chemical told the the *News and Observer* newspaper in 1993.

Greenways stimulate existing and new business. Dunedin, Florida's downtown was struggling before implementation of a greenway there, Flink said. Now occupancy is 100%. Restaurants, bike shops and concessions all can flourish near popular greenway projects. Other retail businesses can also benefit from impulse, walk-in traffic.

Greenways can provide a publicity boost to help give the community a positive image. Morganton, for example, has just been named one of the nation's top ten "most liveable" areas. "It (the greenway project) has really helped us a lot," Anderson said.

What's In It for the Landowners? Why Donate Land or Easements?

Landowners along the greenway corridor who donate land or easements will make a permanent contribution toward the betterment of the community.

Donations of easements or land also carry "**very, very significant tax benefits,**" explained Tom Worth, an Ashe County native who is a land trust attorney in Greensboro.

Benefits include:

An **income tax deduction** for the donation of a conservation easement or outright donation of land.

Reduction of vulnerability to Federal estate taxation. Estate amounts above and beyond \$600,000 are taxed at a 37% rate, Worth noted.

In many cases, a donation or easement may be the best use of the land, since flooding concerns often limit the developability of greenway corridor properties.

"**We have great statutory tools to help facilitate contributions,**" Worth said.

How Do We Get It Done? Where Do We Begin?

Greenways aren't built in one fell swoop, and they aren't built overnight, experts caution.

"You are where Morganton was ten years ago," Lee Anderson said. The town has built about 25% of a planned six-mile greenway. It will take about 20 years to complete the project.

The Yadkin River Greenway Council has already conducted two important first steps:

A **feasibility study** has been conducted by Greenways, Inc. to see whether the Yadkin valley is a suitable site for a greenway. "The answer to that question is a definite yes," Phil Carlson noted emphatically. And the council has **contacted landowners** along the general corridor of the route to introduce the project, and the meeting March 20 was conducted to address their concerns.

The next step is the development of a **master plan** that will specify the specific route the greenway will take, taking into account a number of factors. The council will ask the county and the towns of North Wilkesboro and Wilkesboro to contribute to the cost of the master plan.

Once the master plan is in place, the council will work with landowners to **obtain easements** or land donations. The council will also **raise funds** from governmental and private sources.

The vision for the project is a partnership, with major players including the towns of North Wilkesboro and Wilkesboro, the county of Wilkes, the state Department of Transportation, the state National Guard, landowners, private industry and citizens at large.

How Will We Pay for a Greenway?

Successful greenway projects have been **public-private partnerships**, Chuck Flink, a greenway expert who's helped design greenway projects in 17 states, noted. Government grants, private donations and landowner easement and land contributions are all part of the mix.

"More and more money is becoming available (for greenway development) every year," Rich Sussman, a regional executive with the federal National Park Service, said.

Sussman described several ways the NPS can help get the Yadkin River Greenway going. NPS' challenge cost-share program can match local contributions dollar for dollar to defray costs for construction and signage. NPS landscape architects can be loaned to provide technical assistance for the development of greenway projects, too, he added.

"We'd like to tie in to your project wherever applicable," Sussman said.

An important source of money for greenway development in the 1990s is **ISTEA**, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, Flink said. This federal act, enacted in 1991, sets aside a portion of federal highway funding to create bike and pedestrian paths. "Ice tea" (as the act is pronounced) has been a refreshing change for greenway development, funneling some \$1 billion into alternative transportation projects nationwide. In the 20 years before ISTEA, only \$40 million had been spent on such projects.

The new interest in development of non-motorized transportation corridors is a pleasant situation for greenway developers. **"We have granting agencies calling us up trying to give us money,"** Lee Anderson, a city planner instrumental in the construction of Morganton's greenway system, noted. About half the money expended for Morganton's greenway has been "outside money", Anderson said.

Q&A About Greenway Concerns

Experts on the panel addressed the concerns landowners and municipal officials may have about greenways.

Q: *Is **crime** a problem along greenways?*

A: "We're not finding (liability and crime issues) are negatives," Chuck Flink said, reflecting on his familiarity with greenway projects across the country. Morganton's greenway hosts some 8,000 users a month, yet crime is not a problem, Lee Anderson reports. In Austin, Texas, only seven of 40,000 reported crimes were associated with the community's 40-mile greenway system.

Q: *What about **damage to private property**?*

A: "The number of such incidents is so incredibly low in rural projects such as yours," Flink said. Greenways are a focal point of community pride. Volunteers help maintain them. Litter and vandalism have not been problems. If anything, greenways can serve to protect property and waterways by opening them to community use and appreciation.

Q: *Some of our greenway corridor is rural. What about **livestock**? **Hunting**?*

A: Greenways and livestock can coexist peacefully. Cross access agreements can be used to legally preserve the rights of landowners with livestock. As for hunting, trail sections passing through hunting areas could be shut down during hunting season. (Greenways, by the way, are generally a boon to anglers.)

Q: *What about private **landowner liability**?*

A: "Great North Carolina recreational use statutes reduce landowner liability," Flink noted. The duty owed to a greenway user by a landowner is no greater than the duty owed a trespasser, Flink said. This doesn't relieve the landowner of all liability, but it exposes the landowner to no greater burden of protection than already exists. Proper design can do much to minimize liability concerns. Fencing and routing that avoids certain areas can do much to keep greenway users where they belong.

Landowner Pledges Support for Greenway

A major landowner along the general corridor of the greenway pledged support verbally during the March 20th meeting.

Heather Murphy, executive director of The Health Foundation, Inc., endorsed the Yadkin Valley Greenway Council's plan to build a greenway along the Yadkin River through the Wilkesboros. The Health Foundation and Wilkes Regional Medical Center are currently renovating West Park Shopping Center for use as a medical mall. WRMC's Wellness Center will soon relocate at West Park.

"The board of directors of The Health Foundation, Inc. is pleased to be among the first landowners along the proposed corridor to pledge support for a healthful community asset that can be enjoyed by all ages," Mrs. Murphy said.



Yadkin River Greenway