

**ORANGE COUNTY
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENT, AGRICULTURE,
PARKS AND RECREATION**

MEMORANDUM

To: Board of County Commissioners
Bonnie Hammersley, County Manager

From: David Stancil, DEAPR Director
Christian Hirni, Land Conservation Manager

Date: May 3, 2022

Subject: NC Mountains to Sea Trail Progress Report

As an update on activity along the Mountains to Sea Trail (MST) corridor, Land Conservation Manager Christian Hirni - working with our trail partner organizations – reports the following activity to further the MST project. To protect landowner confidentiality, properties are not referred to by name:

Occoneechee Mountain to Seven Mile Creek Natural Area (Phase I)

- County staff continues to work with the Eno River Association to negotiate final connections from Dimmocks Mill Road to Occoneechee Mountain State Natural Area, through either fee simple or trail easement options. Recent landowner interest in a combined conservation/trail easement has the real potential to make this connection. Staff continues discussions with State and private nonprofit partners to confirm this route and connection.
- After preliminary review by the State, the Board approved in January final easement language for the acquisition of a conservation and trail easement from the Draper-Savage Foundation (Moorefields), adjacent to Seven Mile Creek Natural Area. Survey work was delayed but is now scheduled that will include a trail easement to connect from Seven Mile Creek Natural Area to the east, which will require final State approval before closing. Pending State approval, the closing is estimated for the late spring/early summer this year.
- Contact has been made with another landowner that could be the final piece needed to connect Seven Mile Creek Natural Area to the east.

Cane Creek Reservoir Area (Phase II)

- Staff continues to work with OWASA staff and the Friends of the MST (FMST) to determine the optimal trail route through OWASA Cane Creek Reservoir lands. Staff has begun the process of working with Emergency Services, the Sheriff's Office, and other first response agencies to draft an Emergency Access and Management Plan for this proposed section of trails. Once these plans are in draft stage, work will begin to finalize the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with OWASA for the trail.
- Staff is also in discussion with a new landowner on Cane Creek Reservoir. This owner is interested in granting a trail easement on land recently acquired adjacent to the reservoir and along the trail route. Discussions will continue after landowner has completed other needed actions for management of the land.

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- The Board has approved, in November and December, easement language for two landowner donated trail easements (Carl Shy and Ed Johnson). Surveys have been delayed due to high demand and backlogs among surveyors, but are now contracted for both and should be completed in the late spring, allowing for title work and closing dates to be scheduled for late spring/early summer of this year.
- Staff have identified landowners for possible additional connections into and within the trail route on OWASA lands, and will be contacting these owners in the coming months about interest.

Buckhorn Road to Seven Mile Natural Area (Phase III)

- *NOTE: This segment of the trail is slated in the CIP for FY 2027-28 and beyond. No activity other than conversations with FMST and occasional landowners.*
- Discussion with FMST staff about potential interim connections along roads route (or future alternate spur route). Conversation in early stages with one landowner and FMST along an interim road route.

Eno River State Park (ERSP) to Durham County (Other Lead Entities)

Note: State Parks, the Eno River Association and the FMST are coordinating in this segment from Hillsborough Riverwalk eastward to Durham County.

- The FMST and State Parks worked to secure a pedestrian walkway on the proposed new NCDOT bridge over the Eno River at Pleasant Green Road. The new bridge is expected to be completed around 2025 (before recent DOT budget issues) with a sidewalk. This will allow nearly 4 additional miles of trail through Eno River State Park.
- FMST, State and County staff continue working to ensure the trail path be included underneath the newly rebuilt Hwy 70 bridge north of Hillsborough.
- FMST and ERA is following up with landowners to connect two portions of ERSP.
- FMST is working to repair the support structure and replace a bridge across Cates Creek, just south of the Eno River in Hillsborough, with a much sturdier, long-term bridge.

Next Steps:

- Follow-up with interested landowners in Cane Creek and Occoneechee Mountain / Seven Mile Creek Natural Area locations.
- Discuss specific trail location and construction details with OWASA staff. Work with Emergency Services and Sheriff's Office to draft an Emergency Access and Management Plan for the Cane Creek Reservoir sections.
- The FMST is posting road routes to allow hiking connections between existing and proposed trail segments on their website.

In closing, it is important to note that negotiations of all trail easements involve a series of discussions with landowners, their attorneys, and the County's environmental and legal staff and management. The County must perform due diligence in any negotiation for acquisitions using public funds. As such, there are occasions where conversations and information gathering is underway and necessary but not always visible to all interested parties, until the time for official action (as per State statutes).

Please let us know if we may provide additional information.