

**ORANGE COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS**

ACTION AGENDA ITEM ABSTRACT
Meeting Date: September 14, 2021

**Action Agenda
Item No.** 7-b

SUBJECT: Mountains to Sea Trail (MST) Update

DEPARTMENT: Environment, Agriculture, Parks
& Recreation (DEAPR)

ATTACHMENT(S):

Summary of Project Activities Memo
Adopted MST Map - January 2018
NC 54/Mebane-Oaks Road Adjustments

INFORMATION CONTACT:

David Stancil, 919-245-2522
Christian Hirni, 919-245-2516

PURPOSE: To receive an update on the activity of staff and other project partners on acquiring and constructing the segment route of the NC Mountains to Sea Trail (MST), a part of the NC State Parks system, within Orange County.

BACKGROUND: In January 2018, the County adopted a route map for the portion of the NC Mountains to Sea Trail in Orange County. This action was the culmination of several community meetings and planning exercises to identify, refine and address the planned route of this trail through Orange County. The NC Mountains to Sea Trail is a continuous off-road trail linking Clingman's Dome in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park to Jockey's Ridge State Park on the state's Outer Banks. The MST is part of the North Carolina State Parks system, with over 680 miles of the roughly 1,000-mile trail route open for use and road connecting sections identified by the Friends of the Mountains to Sea Trail (FMST) organization to allow hikers to complete the trail in areas where road routes are needed.

A statewide MST Master Plan was completed and approved in 2015 with an established corridor for the trail across the state, broken into defining segments. The plan included information about each segment, prioritization and plans for further work, centralized web-based content about trail progress, and a set of tools and guidelines to assist trail planning partners.

One of the regions in the state where the trail corridor was in need of further identification and refinement was the Eastern Piedmont section, from Greensboro to Durham. Segments of the adopted MST corridor traverse Orange County, entering from southwestern Orange County at the Alamance County line and running northeast through lands owned by the Orange Water and Sewer Authority (OWASA) around Cane Creek Reservoir. The MST corridor then continues northeast to the Orange County Seven Mile Creek Natural Area, before entering Occoneechee Mountain State Natural Area and into Hillsborough along the Town's Riverwalk. The trail then heads eastward into Eno River State Park and toward Durham.

Because almost all of the MST located east of Hillsborough will be within Eno River State Park and its master plan, the State and the Eno River Association have taken the lead to addressing the trail from Hillsborough Riverwalk east to the Durham County line.

Orange County's responsibility is to connect the trail from Alamance County to Occoneechee Mountain State Natural Area, and it is this area that has been the area of focus since 2018. As shown in the current and prior Capital Investment Plans (CIP), the first area of emphasis was to extend the trail west from the Hillsborough Riverwalk through Occoneechee Mountain and to the Seven Mile Creek Natural Area. This would extend an existing section of the trail, and significant progress has been made by the County, Town of Hillsborough, Eno River Association and State Parks. This is addressed in the attached Project Summary of Recent Activities in the section "Riverwalk to Seven Mile Creek Natural Area."

The second area of emphasis as per the adopted plan and the CIP was the subsection from NC 54 to Buckhorn Road, encompassing the Cane Creek Reservoir lands of OWASA. Working with several willing and interested landowners, staff has secured sections of trail corridor as well as a future trailhead on NC 54, and is finalizing trail easements with multiple property owners on lands that abut the OWASA Cane Creek lands where the trail would run. Updates on the progress in this area is provided in the attached summary document in the section titled "Cane Creek Reservoir Area." (Note: To protect landowner confidentiality, the summary document does not reference specific properties.)

The third and final area of activity for the Orange County section of the MST would connect Buckhorn Road near Cane Creek to the Seven Mile Creek Natural Area. It is expected that this subsection of the trail may take many years to complete, as was noted in the adopted 2018 map, and the Friends of the Mountains to Sea Trail have been working on road route connectors to serve hikers until the trail corridor is completed at some date in the future.

Staff continues to work with willing landowners, and is in regular contact with OWASA staff regarding the progress in that area, and the potential for construction of a segment of the trail in the Cane Creek area is being contemplated at this time.

As a long-term, multi-year project, staff plans to provide status reports to the Board on a regular basis to update on the activity and progress toward the trail route.

FINANCIAL IMPACT: Funding for both land acquisition/trail easements and trail construction (including appurtenances like road crossings, fences, bridges and other needs) is included in the adopted Capital Investment Plan from prior years, including \$220,000 for trail easements and land acquisitions. MST funding is and has been staggered over several years, based on the three focus areas of the trail mentioned above. Funding for trail easements and land acquisition is also provided by NC State Parks, and other costs are offset by the work of the trail partners such as Eno River Association and FMST.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IMPACT: The following Orange County Social Justice Goal is applicable to this item:

- **GOAL: ESTABLISH SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE LAND-USE AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES**

The fair treatment and meaningful involvement of people of all races, cultures, incomes and educational levels with respect to the development and enforcement of environmental

laws, regulations, policies, and decisions. Fair treatment means that no group of people should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, governmental and commercial operations or policies.

The Mountains to Sea Trail is consistent with the Social Justice Goal by facilitating an area of public recreation that is available and accessible to “people of all races, cultures, incomes and educational levels.”

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT: The following Orange County Environmental Responsibility Goal impact is applicable to this item:

- **RESULTANT IMPACT ON NATURAL RESOURCES AND AIR QUALITY**

Assess and where possible mitigate adverse impacts created to the natural resources of the site and adjoining area. Minimize production of greenhouse gases.

The Mountains to Sea Trail is in keeping with this impact by helping to conserve open space and promote alternative transportation methods that help protect natural resources and work to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions.

RECOMMENDATION(S): The Manager recommends that the Board receive the report and presentation, and provide feedback to staff as desired.

**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: September 14th, 2021

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 protect landowner confidentiality, properties are not referenced by name:

Occoneechee Mountain to Seven Mile Creek (Phase I)

- County staff continues to work with Eno River Association to negotiate additional 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. A recent site meeting has confirmed this landowner's interest in pursuing a trail easement. Staff is in discussion with State and private nonprofit partners to confirm this route and connection.
- The County received grant funding for acquisition of an addition to the Seven Mile Creek Natural Area that the MST may cross through. Final discussions with the landowner are underway and should be completed this fall.
- The County has also been awarded a grant for a conservation easement adjacent to Seven Mile Creek Natural Area. Final easement language is under review by the State, and will include a trail easement to connect from Seven Mile Creek Natural Area to the east.
- The State Property Office purchased a trail corridor with aid of Eno River Association and NC Connect Bond funds. State Parks will manage the land as part of Occoneechee Mountain State Natural Area and allow MST connection to the west and the Hillsborough Riverwalk.
- Letters of interest have been sent to 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)

- Secured a trail corridor and trailhead along NC 54 that will allow a safer trail route by eliminating the need for the trail to run within the NC 54 right-of-way.
- Acquired an adjacent trail easement (donation) to connect the trailhead to the Mebane-Oaks/NC 54 Intersection.
- Staff is working with OWASA staff and the Friends of the MST (FMST) to discuss specific trail location possibilities, and whether changes will be needed to OWASA provisions and adopted conditions.

- Staff began 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. Discussions will continue after landowner has completed other needed actions for the land and its management.
- After a lengthy review, conservation easement amendments have been finalized and recorded for OWASA and the Clean Water Management Trust Fund (now the NC Land and Water Fund) on pre-existing easements that exist on an interested landowner's property. This landowner has stated an intention to grant a trail easement to connect OWASA lands at Cane Creek to a public road along the adopted route. Final trail easement is under review by County legal staff.
- Final easement language is under County legal review for an additional landowner donation trail easement.
- OWASA has secured complete ownership of a tract of vital connection along the Reservoir route. County staff has been in conversation with OWASA staff regarding the route and particular easement language. Site (scouting) visits and potential routing are being suggested in the near future.

Eno River State Park (ERSP) to Durham County

- *Note: State Parks, the Eno River Association and the FMST are coordinating in this segment from Hillsborough Riverwalk eastward.*
- 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 and OC staff worked to ensure the trail path be included underneath the newly rebuilt Hwy 70 bridge north of Hillsborough
- FMST is following up with landowners to connect two portions of ERSP.

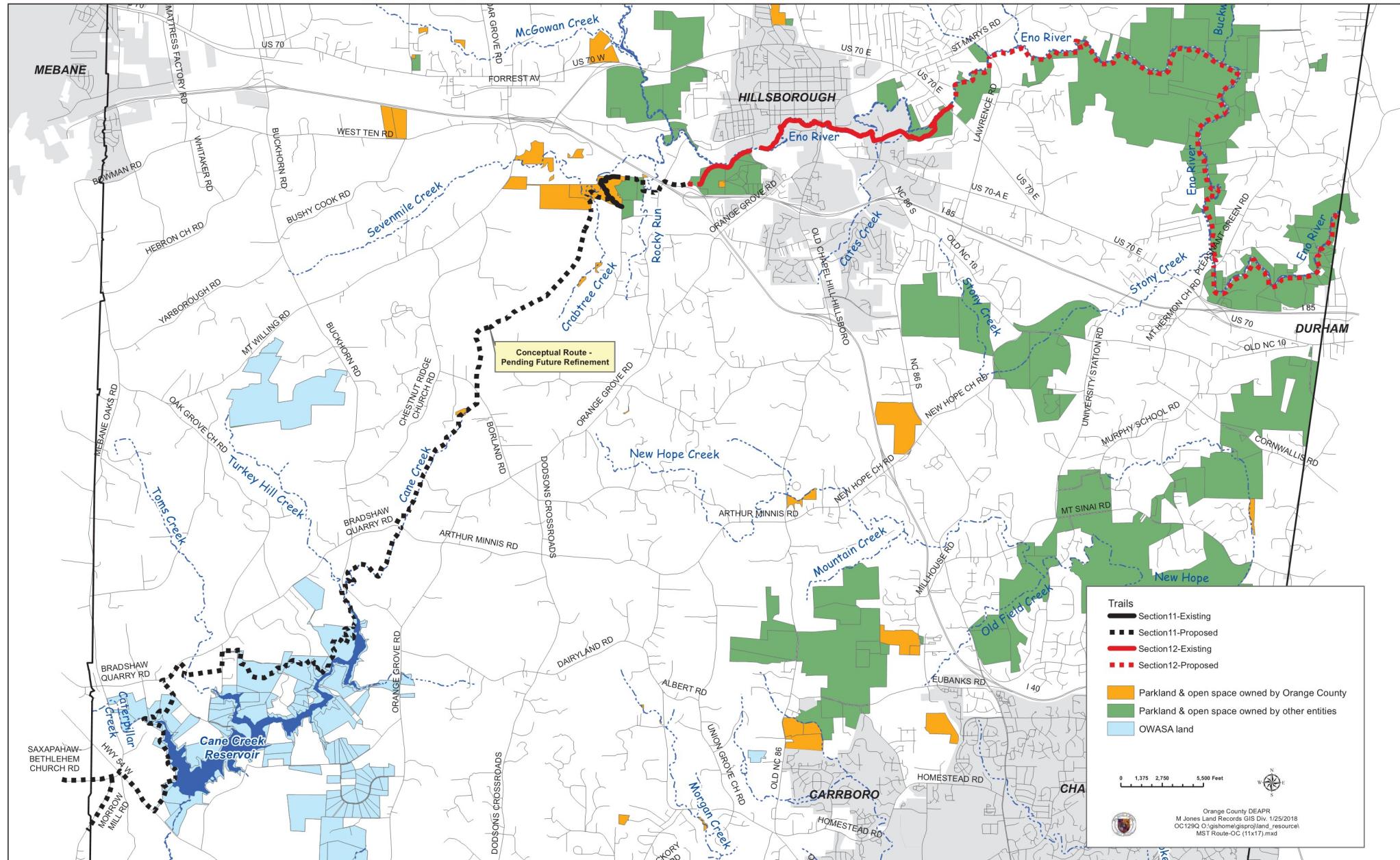
Next Steps:

- Follow-up with interested landowners in Cane Creek and Occoneechee / Seven Mile Creek areas.
- Review of potential requests to OWASA regarding conditions for the MST on OWASA-owned land. Discuss specific trail location and construction details with OWASA staff.
- 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).

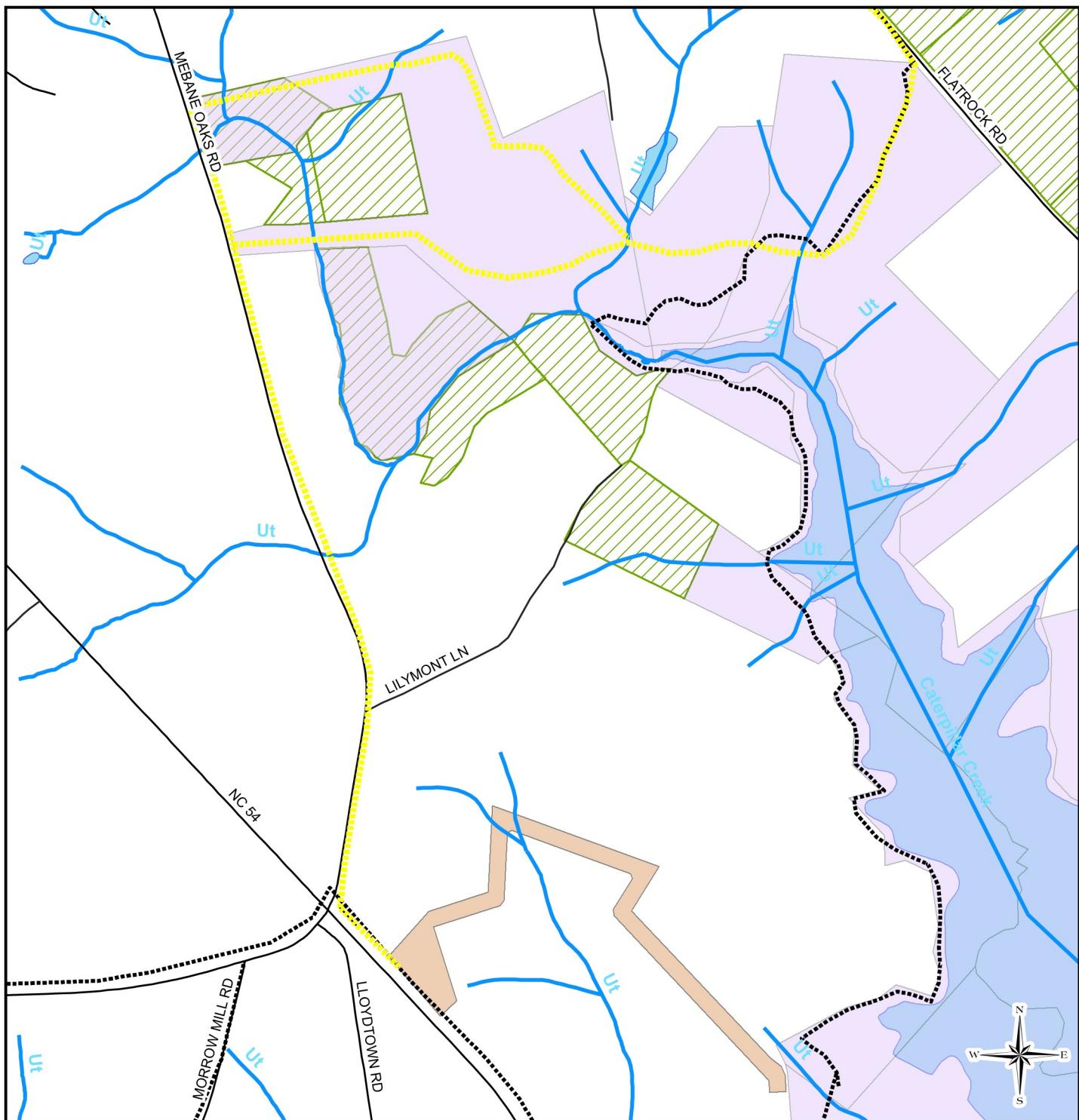
Please let us know if we may provide additional information.

Orange County Mountains-to-Sea Trail (MST) Route - Adopted 1/23/2018



Adjusted Mountains to Sea Trail

7



Tract Information:

Landowner: Various
Lat: 35° 57.63"
Long: 79° 15.11"
Date: 09/01/2021
Image: 2017 Aerial Photo
Created By: Christian Hirni
Acres: N/A

0 295 590 1,180 1,770 2,360 Feet



Department of Environment,
Agriculture, Parks & Recreation

Legend

- Adjusted Trail Route (Yellow Dotted Line)
- BOCC Adopted Route (Black Dashed Line)
- Roads (Black Solid Line)
- Streams (Blue Line)
- OWASA Lands (Light Purple Shaded Area)
- County Trailhead (Tan Shaded Area)
- Conservation Easements (Green Diagonal Hatching)