

**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: June 15, 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 further the MST project:

Occoneechee Mountain to Seven Mile Creek (Phase I)

- County staff is working with Eno River Association to negotiate additional possible 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.
- The County received grant funding (with an extension through 2022) for acquisition of a significant property for the Seven Mile Creek Natural Area. The MST may cross through a section(s) of this property once purchased.
- The County has also received a grant award for a conservation easement adjacent to Seven Mile Creek Natural Area. Final easement language is underway and will include a trail easement to further connection 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. The State Parks division will manage the land as part of Occoneechee Mountain State Natural Area and allow MST connection to the west (Hillsborough Riverwalk).
- An additional letter of interest has been sent to 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 acquisition 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 a trail easement (donation) to connect the trailhead to the Mebane-Oaks/NC 54 Intersection. Provided extensive additional property boundary marking to mitigate any confusion of County/private boundary lines, including boundary tree/shrub plantings to allow for added privacy of adjacent landowner, and conducted first plantings.

- 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 memoranda and adopted conditions.
- Staff began discussion with a potential new landowner on Cane Creek Reservoir. Owner is interested in granting a trail easement along the reservoir.
- Finalized and recorded easement amendments for OWASA and Clean Water Management Trust Fund (CWMTF) easements on an interested landowner's property. Landowner has announced intent on granting trail easement to connect OWASA lands at Cane Creek to a public road along the adopted route. A draft trail easement is under review by the attorneys for the parties.
- Final easement language is under review for a landowner donation trail easement. Staff has followed up on multiple occasions to ensure continued landowner interest.
- Continue to meet with OWASA to discuss a potential partnership land acquisition.

Eno River State Park (ERSP)

- *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 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 for modifications to OWASA's conditions for 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 other interested parties, until the time for official action as per State statutes.

Please let us know if we may provide additional information.