

Wake Trails Initiative – A Master Plan

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By Sig Hutchinson, Wake County Commissioner

As we enter 2020, the land between I-40 and Umstead State Park continues to be a source of contention for residents and individual interest groups. Each group has concerns and questions. What we can all agree on is that the need for more recreational trails and mountain biking resources in Wake County is significant -- recognizing that recreational opportunities as part of our quality of life represents one of our greatest assets.

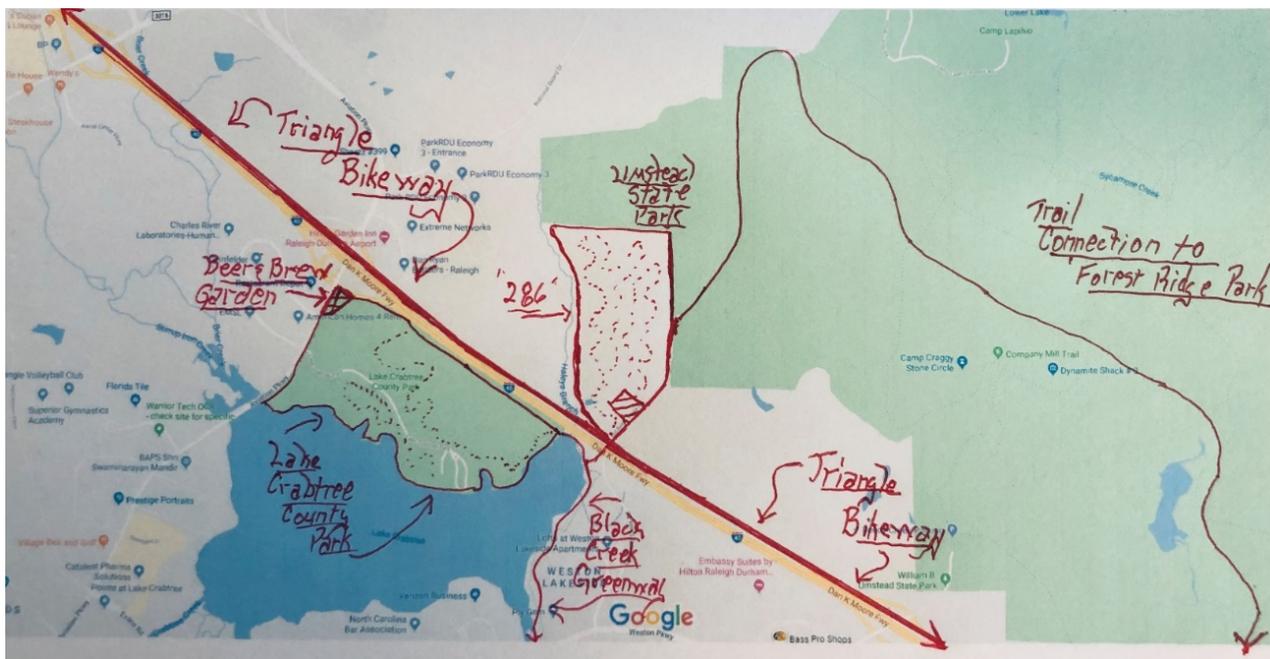
To accomplish this there is a unique opportunity to address all the concerns under a master plan. I have created a four-point plan that we can put into action today that promotes economic growth, expands an opportunity for private/public partnerships, protects the environment and our natural resources as well as creates more recreational opportunities.

The result would be a network of more than 50 miles of trails and biking experiences that cater to the biking community, yet available to all residents to enjoy as a multi-use recreation center. Moreover, it addresses land use and management concerns regarding the property around the RDU Airport.

Wake Trails Initiative – Four Point Plan

1. Expand Crabtree Lake County Park by including the 150 acres known as 286

Wake County to acquire the lease rights to the land located between I 40 and Umstead State Park known as “286.” The existing illegal trails at 286 could be evaluated to develop a comprehensive plan of incorporating these trails within the existing trail network of Lake Crabtree in collaboration with various stakeholders and groups of interest such as TORC. A plan could be developed to enhance the entire trail system which could add a variety of trail experiences with a sustainable trail network and in my view, if Wake County were to take over the area known as “286,” there would be no reason for a fence. These are the types of issues that would be answered if Wake County were to begin negotiations with the RDU Authority regarding a long-term lease of the property.

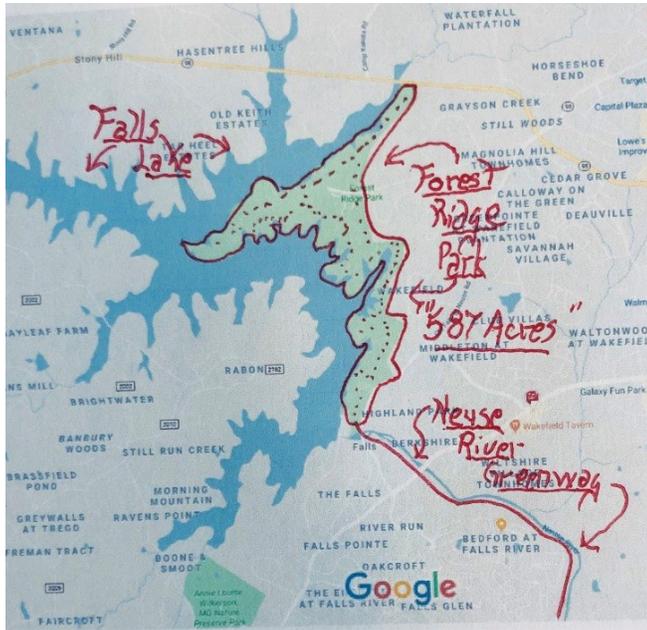


2. Create a multi-use destination center via public/private partnerships within the Lake Crabtree County Park at the corner of Aviation Blvd. and I-40

An area of the greenway system that I have wanted to strengthen for many years would be more destinations where users could stop, enjoy a beverage and something to eat or simply create a place to gather, rest and socialize. For this reason, the second component of the plan would be to create public/private partnerships for a “Bike & Brew Garden” at the corner of Aviation Blvd. and I-40 within the Lake Crabtree County Park. Tables, fire pit, bike racks and wash stations could all be provided to allow cyclists and runners, hikers and families the opportunity to hang out with friends and enjoy the beautiful park within the trail network.



3. Build More Trails at Raleigh's Forest Ridge Park and then Connect the Network to the Neuse River Greenway and the Greater Greenway System



This little-known jewel in the Raleigh Park system represents 587 acres of parkland nestled alongside the Falls Lake Recreation Area and adjacent to Falls Lake and the Neuse River Greenway system. Recently opened with three miles of mountain biking trails, this area could easily handle much more of a trail network. Just as important, the trails network could also connect to the Neuse River Greenway at the southern edge of the park and allow cyclists and runners to access a continuous greenway connection and experiences to other locations such as Dix Park, Pullen Park, Anderson Point Park, Horseshoe Farms Park and Umstead State Park creating the “Triangle Emerald Necklace.”

Connecting these trail networks and parks would begin to create the necessary components for an IMBA designated “Ride Center” for the region.

What is an IMBA Ride Center? A “Ride Center” defined by IMBA is a designated large-scale recreational area representing every type of trail experience for every type of trail user from young to seniors, from beginners to experts. Rider Centers need at least 50 miles of trails to be considered for such a designation. We could not currently provide 50 miles of trails at the RDU Forest facility, however by linking trail systems through our series of greenways, we could create a riding experience that could draw visitors as well as serve the residences of the Triangle. The Wake Trails Initiative could create, with time and partners, one of the best riding experiences on the East Coast.

The Wake Trails Initiative would qualify as an [International Mountain Biking Association \(IMBA\) Ride Centertm](#) with more than 50 miles of connected trails that includes every type of trail experience for users of all ages and skills.

4. Develop the regional “Triangle Bikeway” along I-40 and connect Raleigh, Morrisville, RTP, Durham and Chapel Hill

The fourth piece of the Wake Trails Initiative would be connecting this recreation area to Raleigh, Morrisville, Cary, RTP and then on to Durham and Chapel Hill. To accomplish this, plans are currently underway and in design for the “Triangle Bikeway.” This biking superhighway would start at Trenton Rd. and would travel west beside the I-40 corridor into Morrisville, RTP, Durham with connections to Chapel Hill. The Triangle Bikeway is currently in the early stages of design as a joint project of the Capital Area MPO and the Durham/Chapel Hill Carrboro MPO. The initial study scheduled for completion in late 2020 or early 2021. With these connections to the region and to this recreational area, all the elements of transportation, recreation and destinations will come together to enhance trail development and the user experience.



The Odd Fellows Tract

There has been a great deal of discussion regarding the Odd Fellow site as a possible quarry. This decision was made by the board of the RDU Authority and is currently being litigated to determine whether the RDU Board had the authority to make such a decision. The original judge in the case ruled that the RDU Authority Board had the authority to make such a decision and that ruling is currently being appealed. If that ruling stands, then the property still must go through licensed and permitting, which is a lengthy process and will take time. While these issues play themselves out, there is no reason why we shouldn't move forward on the elements of the plan that we can control. If during any part of the process, the Odd Fellows property becomes available, then this land could be evaluated as a possible addition to the plan. Until then, let's begin this regional recreational transformation where we have control and begin making the Wake Trails Initiative a reality.

What do we need to make this happen?

1. Community support for the plan
2. Support from elected leaders and the RDU Authority Board
3. Collaborative partnerships within planning, design and implementation of the plan from the private, public and government sectors

Why is this the right thing to do now for Wake County and the Triangle Area?

- Creates a healthier Wake County and improves the quality of life and environment by providing:
 - Additional fitness and recreation opportunities that are safe and properly maintained
 - An alternative transportation option to car travel
 - Protection for natural areas in a safe, legal and environmentally friendly manner
- Encourages economic development and creates:
 - New tourism draws (A trail system in Bentonville, AK now draws more than 60,000 visitors a year)
 - New jobs in parks and recreation, construction and service areas
- Honors the desire expressed by residents to develop the land adjacent to Old Reedy Creek Road for public use and eliminate the need to secure that land with fencing or other barriers
- As stated in the recent report, *Market Analysis of Mountain Biking in the Southern Appalachian National Forests*: “Within North Carolina, there is significant mountain bike demand emanating from the Raleigh/Durham area which also appears to be undersupplied with mountain bike trails.” This helps meet the gap in supply and demand for mountain biking recreation resources in the Southern Appalachian National Forest region as outlined in a study by CHM Government Services (CHMGS) at the request of the USDA Forest Service (USFS).
https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd632448.pdf

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