

Residents show support for trails

by: Olin Ericksen
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More voices were heard last week on a plan to build nature trails that could someday connect Lincoln County with its surrounding neighbors.

Nearly two dozen local residents attended a three-hour interactive presentation at Lincolnton City Hall last Thursday.

The meeting was the second in a series of gatherings to be held in coming months to capture comments on the local leg of a proposed Carolina Thread Trail — a project uniting nearly 500 miles of trails envisioned through 15 counties and several cities in the Charlotte region.

The response from most residents, many of whom live in and around Lincolnton, was overwhelmingly positive.

"I like the idea," said Deane Griffin, who lives just south of Lincolnton. "We need to be able to get out and walk and I'd like to have something closer to where I live."

However, at least one person, a local farmer and property owner near Lincolnton, voiced concern that his land may be taken to build the trails using a legal process known as eminent domain.

Organizers of the Thread Trails stressed that the trails would not go anywhere they were not welcome, and eminent domain, would not be an option.

"We are going to work with property owners to find voluntary options," said Randi Gates, community coordinator for the Carolina Thread Trail in Lincoln County.

Gates said all comments on the plan are important and welcome.

"His opinion counts as much as anyone else," she said.

Backers of the Thread Trail said they are committed to working proactively to educate the community about what the Thread Trail would mean, and not mean, to the area.

One misconception she said some communities often voice is about crime being increased as a result of the trails.

"We understand that crime has been mentioned as a concern, but we have found through various studies that trails do not encourage crime," Gates said, citing a study of 1991 study conducted by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy.

"If anything, trails deter crime as there are more eyes on the trail — almost like a community watch," she said. "With many citizens on the trail, they tend to look out for their neighbors."

The regional Thread Trail, totaling between \$100 million and \$150 million, would be funded with a combination of private, state and federal funds and local contributions.

Counties and cities would likely pitch in approximately \$40 million during a 10-year period.

A \$60,000 planning grant is being used now to finance the public forums, a newsletter, a Web site, flyers and other resources used for outreach.

There is no set amount Lincoln County or Lincolnnton would be expected to commit to for now beyond the \$3,000 each has already spent as matching grant money used to jump-start the mapping process.

The next public meeting is expected sometime this July, according to county planners.

For more information and to weigh in on the local plan, visit www.greenways.com/lincoln or call Randy Williams, principal planner for Lincoln County at (704) 736-8472.

<http://www.lincolntimesnews.com/Default.asp?Section=20&VA=19162>