

LGFCU Excellence in Innovation Award Project Evaluation

Project Number	PIP-2
Title of Program	Fonta Flora Loop Trail
Program Category	Public Information/Participation
Submission Date	5/29/2015 9:52:00 AM
County	Burke
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County Manager	Bryan Steen
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Implementation Date	11/18/2014
FLSA Designation	Exempt
Project Team Members	Scott Carpenter, Sara Chester, Scott Black, Ed Phillips, Christy Magas, Crawford Craig, Polly Leadbetter, Johnnie Carswell, Lee Kiser, Mike Long, Dr. Bryant Lindsey, Tim Johnson, Paul Braun, David Wright, Travis Ruff, Nick Shaver, TOm Kinney and Kristina Solberg.

Description of Productivity Improvement

R. Scott Carpenter, Deputy County Manager/Planning Director for Burke County, NC has worked tirelessly over the last eighteen months putting together a vision and bringing into reality a concept that was once believed to only have a remote possibility of becoming a reality for a loop trail around Lake James, NC. Scott's dream is that the Fonta Flora Loop Trail will provide pedestrians and bicyclists of all abilities a safe and legal route to circumnavigate Lake James within Burke County. The trail will allow users to experience the natural diversity of the area, incorporate multiple access points and support facilities, and create a community and regional asset that will provide a variety of opportunities for local residents and visitors; and promote tourism and low infrastructure economic development within Burke County and the surrounding region via a ribbon of trail.

Description of why this project was initiated

Many times planners and others rarely realize their full potential as "planners" and instead spend their entire careers administering ordinances and trying to implement the plans of others. Very few planners are actual "visionaries" who set out to create innovative plans that can indeed have a great impact on their community or region. There are several factors that make the Fonta Flora Loop Trail effort stand out as an excellent example of what a community can do to bring about positive change in an area that has been hit hard from the housing market collapse that occurred in 2007-08. Scott believes that the nature of his contribution and his continued drive to implement the Lake James Loop Trail may best be described through highlighting exactly what he believes the trail will bring to the Lake James area.

The Lake James Loop Trail project, plan and efforts will. . .

- provide a multitude of economic, recreational, health, environmental, community, and transportation benefits;
- provide a "center piece" for Burke County's recreational, eco and nature-based tourism development efforts;
- enhance the appreciation of the region's beauty and natural resources by residents and visitors by making it more accessible;
- boost regional economic development opportunities and growth through business and event development, increased property values, increased sales and property tax revenue;
- connect a multitude of recreational assets that offer a variety of opportunities to residents and visitors alike;
- provide access to a much larger comprehensive trail network in western North Carolina;
- serve as a health wise amenity for residents and visitors;
- preserve valuable habitat and a "green" corridor for wildlife;
- assist with protection of water quality;
- promote a deeper understanding of the area's history and culture by residents and visitors;
- provide an outdoor classroom for experiential education experiences;
- provide a safe transportation alternative around the lake for pedestrians and mountain bikers; and
- help strengthen the feeling and sense of community among Burke County citizens by focusing attention on a unique project that brings together a diverse group of stakeholders and the general public.

It is important to recognize that all of the above elements are currently being worked on and implemented to varying degrees, even in advance of the FFLT being on the ground. Another very important contribution is the realization that the Master Plan was developed entirely in-house and with the assistance of volunteers. It is also important to recognize that Scott Carpenter and the Work Group had no formal experience in developing plans for trails or recreational areas. There are no fancy graphics or over the top GIS mapping techniques utilized in the document. What the document shows is that anyone with a desire and a vision can create a realistic plan and begin implementing it, without the need to spend thousands of dollars on professional consultants. Granted, those documents may look better, but they will not necessarily contain information or plans that are any better than “our homemade document!” The real proof to a successful plan comes during the actual implementation stage.

Quantifiable results (sustainability, cost savings, cost avoidance and/or a higher level of service).

Indication of what resources were used and what was done with any accrued time savings

Fonta Flora loop Trail Project has significant implications for the field of planning. First of all, it is an excellent example of what can be done with little or no money, when even a single individual has a vision and focuses their energy on making it a reality. Most initiatives wait until funding is secured before embarking on a project of this magnitude. The entire 75 page Fonta Flora Loop Trail Master Plan was done for only \$2,100.00, most of which was used to pay for meals during the Work Group’s working lunches. Nearly twenty miles of easements were obtained from public and private sources with only \$3,000.00 spent to pay for surveyors to create plats. Lobbying of ND-DOT resulted in a 2.25 million dollar bridge to be expanded, moved up on the priority list and built to accommodate the trail; and Crescent Communities donated a 140 acre tract of land on Lake James, valued at 1.75 million dollars for Burke County to establish a park and loop trail headquarters. All of these things were done without waiting for the FERC approval to release 1.1 million dollars for the construction of the loop trail. Burke County has positioned itself way ahead of the game to develop a regional eco-tourism destination by using transferability, quality planning and negotiating skills, and a comprehensive approach to utilizing our natural resources in a positive way.

Other descriptive information

R. Scott Carpenter was hired as Burke County’s Planning Director in November 2012. After several months of evaluating the county and the surrounding region he decided to choose a “capstone” project that would wrap up 25 years of dedicated governmental employment. One day, after reviewing the Catawba-Wateree Relicensing Agreement and the recreational commitments that were outlined in the document, he decided that the best possible project to engage in would be to develop a plan and begin the process of establishing a trail around Lake James, NC. The FFLT represents a cooperative venture between Burke County, Duke Energy, Crescent Communities, North Carolina State Parks, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, private landowners, businesses, area residents, elected officials and volunteers.

March 2013 --Scott Carpenter begins putting together a plan to achieve a project of regional significance with the possibilities of having a big local impact. At this early stage, most activities were focused on finding out if there was still an interest in building a trail around Lake James. Finding out what had been done historically and why the efforts had not produced any results and eventually ceased. A lot was

learned about the volatile history and dynamics around Lake James and how there had been lawsuits filed to fight a moratorium that Burke County had put in place on development at Lake James.

July 2013--Scott approached the Burke County Board of Commissioners and got them to agree to cease developing "small area plans" for two years, while a new effort to write a master plan for a trail that would loop around Lake James, create economic, environmental, cultural and recreational opportunities was developed.

August 2013--Scott put together the Lake James Loop Trail Advisory Group. The trail advisory group was made up of twenty individuals, from a wide variety of backgrounds, interests and representing both public and private interests in the Lake James Region. In fact, the diverse make-up of the group was inclusive of all the parties, which had previously argued, fought court battles and generally didn't see eye to eye on development issues involving Lake James. However, all parties were able to put these differences aside and under the leadership of Scott, agree that a trail around Lake James was a great idea, in the interest of all, and they wanted to play a role in making it a reality.

In addition to beginning the formal planning process, Scott was able to negotiate a 140 acre "gift" of land from Crescent Communities to establish a lakefront park at Lake James. This gift will be utilized for several miles of lakefront hiking trail and may eventually serve as the headquarters for the trail.

September 2013-- Lake James work group began meeting to discuss the reality of building a trail around Lake James. This same month, Scott discovered that the bridge crossing the Linville River was dilapidated and was put under contract by NCDOT, with an estimated time of construction within 3-4 years. After inquiring with NC DOT, it was learned that the bridge would be built with no consideration given for the inclusion of bike lanes or a trail section. After intense lobbying of NCDOT, Scott was able to have the bridge moved up on NCDOT's construction timeline by three years, secure the necessary design changes to accommodate the FFLT and add a bike lane. In addition, engineering was changed and rustic design elements added to the bridge at no additional cost to Burke County. Last, the bridge was moved up to a priority status and was completed in February 2015 (three years ahead of schedule).

October 2013 to August 2014--Lake James Work Group continued to meet and discuss the design and location of the FFLT. Scott Carpenter, had a vision that the trail needed to be more substantial than just a 2-3 ft wide foot path around the lake, and after much debate and persistence was able to get the NC State Parks and NC Wildlife Commission to agree to a more substantial 5-6 ft. trail tread across their lands. Important in order to give the trail a design to allow people or bikes to walk or ride side by side. During this early stage of the FFLT Master Plan development process, Scott also decided that it was time to begin trail implementation work and set out to start acquiring easements, land dedications and MOU's for the trail to cross public and private properties. Agreements for trail easements were secured with Crescent Communities, Duke Energy, NC Wildlife Commission, NC State Parks, three private landowners and NCDOT for right-of-way encroachments. Letters in support of the trail were also received from Senator Warren Daniels, Representative Hugh Blackwell, Governor Pat McCrory, and U.S. Congressman Mark Meadows.

August 2014--Work Group Approval: After a lot of hard work, agonizing discussions and overcoming differences of opinion, our diverse Work Group voted unanimously to approve the Lake James Loop Trail Master Plan.

November 2014--Board of County Commissioners Approval; Discussions with NC State Parks results in name change from "Lake James Loop Trail" to "Fonta Flora Loop Trail." Fonta Flora means "fountains of flowers", in a loose translation from Latin, and is meant to be a cultural reminder of the African-American sharecroppers that once lived where Lake James is today. Scott secures funding from the National Park Service and receives an additional \$10,000 from the Burke County BOC to develop a master plan to connect the FFLT to the City of Morganton, NC via the Catawba River. Destination by

Design was contracted to work with Burke County and the City of Morganton to create the Master Plan, which is expected to be completed by July 2015.

December 2014 to Current-Fonta Flora Loop Trail is submitted by Senator Warren Daniels (SB 211) and Representative Hugh Blackwell (HB 339) for consideration to be added to the State Park System. On the ground trail work begins on a 3.15 mile FFLT extension to connect the Lake James County Park to the Mountains to the Sea Trail. Work is being done by hand, utilizing Burke County Community Development staff and the BRIDGE crews under the direction of NC Forestry. Corridors are beginning to be cleared and GPS work continues around Lake James. Wayfinding designs and prototypes are being developed, based on rustic, one of a kind, artistic principles. Please do keep in mind nearly all of this has been done without any appropriated funding or grants. All work has been coordinated via Scott Carpenter.