



## *Making Dunn-Erwin Trail official*

With the report of a musket and snip of sissors, local officials and well wishers signal completion of first stage development on the 5.3-mile Dunn-Erwin Trail in downtown Erwin. Approximately 400 people took part in the June 15 festivities, many hiking and biking between the neighboring Harnett County towns.

## **Williamston set to develop storm-delayed rail-trail**

Williamston's Skewarkee Trail has been rebid and development is now set to be completed by Dec. 1, according to Town Manager Brant Knipe.

Development was delayed a full year when tropical storm Alica dumped torrential rains on Martin County last year and washed out a large area adjacent to the trail right-of-way. The town decided it would be better to coordinate trail development with drainage repairs.

The .93-mile Skewarkee Trail is on a former CSX right-of-way which connects downtown to the Roanoke River. The trail will have a 10-ft. wide paved surface financed by a \$300,000 Transportation Enhancement grant. A previous \$35,000 National Recreational Trails Program grant was used to purchase the rail corridor.

As a second stage, Williamston is planning a connecting Moratok Park walkway along the Roanoke River.

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## **Chatham approves ATT corridor lease**

The Triangle's American Tobacco Trail crossed a major threshold in July when the Chatham County Commission gave the green light to negotiating an interim trail use lease from the NC DOT Rail Division. Chatham County has four miles of the ATT in the middle of the 23-mile corridor.

"It's the keystone of the American Tobacco Trail. It's right in the middle," said Bill Bussey, Triangle Rail-to-Trails Conservancy president and Triangle Greenways Council vice-chairman.

Durham is now finishing development of the city's portion and Wake County is gearing up development on its rural section of the rail-trail.

In another welcomed action, Wake County and the City of Cary agreed in August to jointly purchase 143 acres that straddle the ATT. The purchase will preserve open space on the Jordon Lake watershed on White Oak Church Road. The purchase price is \$2 million.

Part of the land may be used for a future park and greenway. "This will be a super connection to the American Tobacco Trail," enthused Mary Barry, Cary's parks, recreation and cultural resources director.

Wake voters have approved bonding \$15 million to buy open spaces and Cary has established a \$12.5-million open space fund.

### **NCRT Annual Meeting**

10 a.m. Saturday, Oct 12. Woodcroft Community Room, Woodcroft Parkway, Durham. From Fayetteville Road, turn west on Woodcroft to intersection with American Tobacco Trail. Parking lot on right.

## Trails give town a new economic base

TRAIL TOWN, USA — Twenty years ago, Damascus, VA, was a declining little town, confined to one square mile by national forests on three sides. Its mining and lumbering haydays had long passed. The last train on the Virginia-Carolina Railroad rumbled through in 1977. Then Damascus missed the boost that neighboring Abingdon and other nearby towns got from Interstate 81.

Today, Damascus goes about its business with the quiet confidence that it has a permanent economic base. The turning point came in the early 1980s when Damascus teamed with Abingdon and the U.S. Forest Service to turn the former Virginia-Carolina rail bed into something perhaps better than an interstate highway: the Virginia Creeper National Recreation Trail. More commonly known as just the Creeper, the former railway is like a vein of silver running down the mountain from the North Carolina state line to deposit its blessings on little Damascus, many of them flowing from Tar Heel pockets.

Do trails really mean business? Yes, according to a decade-old National Park Service-sponsored study of three typical rail-trails: well over a million dollars a year in business activity per trail.

Perhaps the best measure is by eyeball. Hundreds of thousands who visit Damascus can clearly see that, yes, trails do mean business. There is not a vacant store front on the main street. Visitors have a choice of six restaurants and cafes. A dozen B&Bs and several campgrounds offer overnight accommodations. Other businesses are dedicated to equipping and



servicing trail users. The eyeball concludes this is a prospering town with a future. The trails are not going to downsize or move offshore.

Long a sleepy waypoint on the 2,200-mile Appalachian Trail, Damascus caters to hikers with a hostel, campground park and a post office that serves as a freight station for through hikers. The annual Trail Days, which began as an AT through hiker reunion, now draws upward of 20,000 people who fill every bed and available tent space. The week-long event culminates with a parade nearly longer than the town.

When the Appalachian Trail was



realigned in 1972, Damascus remained a waypoint on the new route. Today, the old AT route is a single-track known as the Iron Mountain Trail, which runs north 24 miles to Iron Mountain Gap and south 23 miles to HWY 91 in Tennessee.

Another single track, the 67-mile Virginia Highlands Horse Trail, can be taken from the Creeper at White Top, and links to the 55-mile New River State Rail-Trail near Ivanhoe.

Plus, there are 400 miles of equestrian and mountain bike trails to explore in the surrounding Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area.

All-in-all, it's an inventory that keeps Damascus in business. In numbers, the Creeper carries the largest load. The Blue Blaze Shuttle and bike rental, which was started a dozen years ago, encouraged three more van and bike trailer shuttles. On weekends, it is not unusual to see shuttle vans lined up to unload at the recently rebuilt White Top depot near the North Carolina state line.



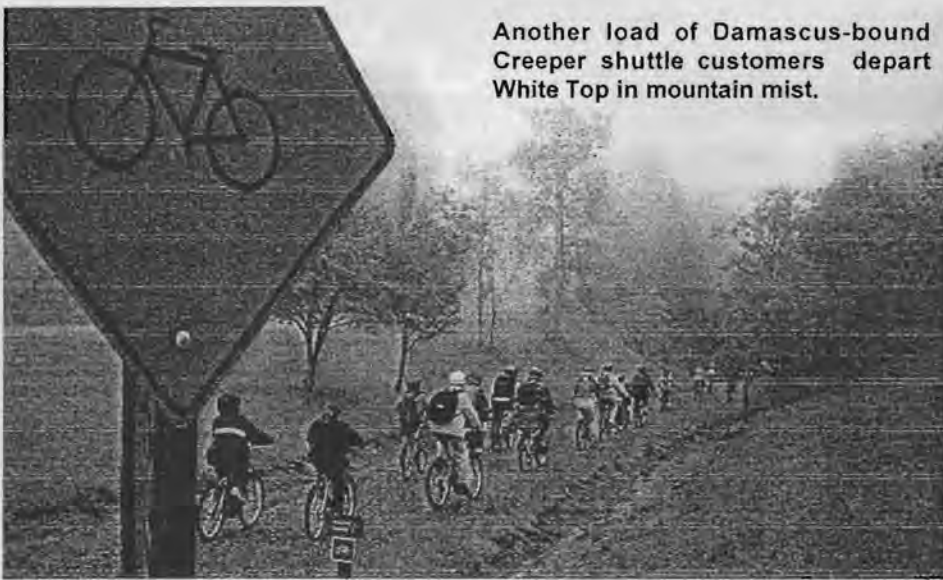
Trail Days attendees assemble in Damascus Park for awards and prizes.





While no composite figures are divulged, the eyeball registers van load after van load of smiling bicyclists, at \$10 to \$35 a head, launch at White Top for the 17-mile downhill to Damascus.

It is Blue Blaze founder, Phoebe Cartwright, who best expresses the Damascus business philosophy: "People from all over are perfectly happy to come here, spend their money, and leave." That, in few words, is a sustainable business plan that many a town can envy.



Another load of Damascus-bound Creeper shuttle customers depart White Top in mountain mist.

## Whistle Stops

The Virginia Creeper is but half the story. More than half of the Virginia-Carolina Railroad was in Ashe County, NC. Train service to West Jefferson ended when the local made its last run in 1977. Service on to Baldwin, Fleetwood and Todd ended in the 1930s.

In North Carolina, fee simple determinative deeds allowed the Creeper right-of-way to revert to adjoining property owners. With landowners' consent, the 10 miles between Fleetwood and Todd were turned into a local road which, over the decades, became a popular bike ride along the South Fork of the New River. Residential development on the mountain ridges increased both bicycle and motor traffic during the last decade. New easements are needed to widen Railroad Grade Road so that it can safely accom-

modate all users.

Over the past 25 years, several attempts have been made to restore the Creeper right-of-way from the Virginia state line to Husk, Lansing and West Jefferson. The most recent, in 2000, was part of an effort to protect Big Horse Creek water quality. The creek and rail bed share a narrow valley. That drew the interest of the state's Clean Water Management Trust Fund, which backed a feasibility study for the 14 miles from White Top to Lansing. Before the study could be completed, property owners, fired up in opposition by part-time, second-home residents, made it impossible to complete a meaningful evaluation.

That leaves West Jefferson wondering what it could be as the Carolina gateway for an extended Creeper. And for Lansing, almost a mirror image of Damascus two decades ago, to look over the ridge to dream of becoming a Carolina Creeper trailhead.

The shame is that misguided North Carolina right-of-way owners have a stranglehold on towns serving their daily needs. The irony is that two counties, separated by a state line and attitude, counties that at one time shared a railroad and a common economy, can't today share a brighter future on an expanded common trail, the Creeper.



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Reason for interest in rail-trails \_\_\_\_\_

NCRT annual memberships: Individual - \$20, Corporate - \$100

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(Summer02)

THANK YOU FOR JOINING NCRT

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### Going the last mile

Contractor Brad Wickham uses a slipform paver to apply a top course of fine rock to the Thermal Belt Rail-Trail in Rutherford County. The present work will complete the last mile to Gilkey. The first seven miles were developed last year. Other improvements completed during the past year include a mid-trail parking lot and a \$20,000, multi-station, exercise course which was donated by local physicians. The eight-mile section of the Thermal Belt Railroad was put in the federal railbank two years ago. The trail passes through Spindale, Rutherfordton and Ruth, then through rural areas before reaching Gilkey.

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## Existing Rail-Trails

**A.** Strollway, 1.2 miles, City of Winston-Salem. Central business district south to historic Old Salem.

**B.** Lake Brandt Greenways Trail, 5 miles, City of Greensboro and Guilford County. Rail corridor trail connects 25-mile High Point-to-Greensboro Bicentennial Trail to parks and 27-mile trail system around Lake Brandt reservoir.

**C.** Libba Cotton Bikeway, 1 mile, City of Carrboro. On active rail spur right-of-way. Connects Carrboro central business district to UNC campus.

**D.** American Tobacco Trail, 23 miles, Durham, Chatham and Wake Counties. Durham-to-New Hill corridor railbanked by NC DOT. Being leased to local governments. First sections open in Durham. Triangle region cities and counties plan 100-mile connecting greenways network.

**E.** Eagles Spur, 2.2 miles, Corps of Engineers. Stagecoach Road-to-Jordon Lake. Provides Jordon Lake access and is a Durham County spur of the American Tobacco Trail.

**F.** Sabina Gould Walkway, 1.2 miles, Town of Littleton.

**G.** River to the Sea Trail, 11.5 miles, City of Wilmington. Partly on old Wrightsville Beach Trolleyway.

**H.** Dunn-Erwin Rail-Trail, 5.3 miles, Harnett County. Federal railbanking by NCRT.

**I.** Gold Hill Rail-Trail, 2 miles, Gold Hill Community and the LandTrust for Central NC.

**J.** Lincolnton Rail-Trail, 0.7 mile, City of Lincolnton.

**K.** Forrest Hunt Greenway, 0.8 mile, Bechtler Development Corp. Town of Forest City, Alexander Mills community.

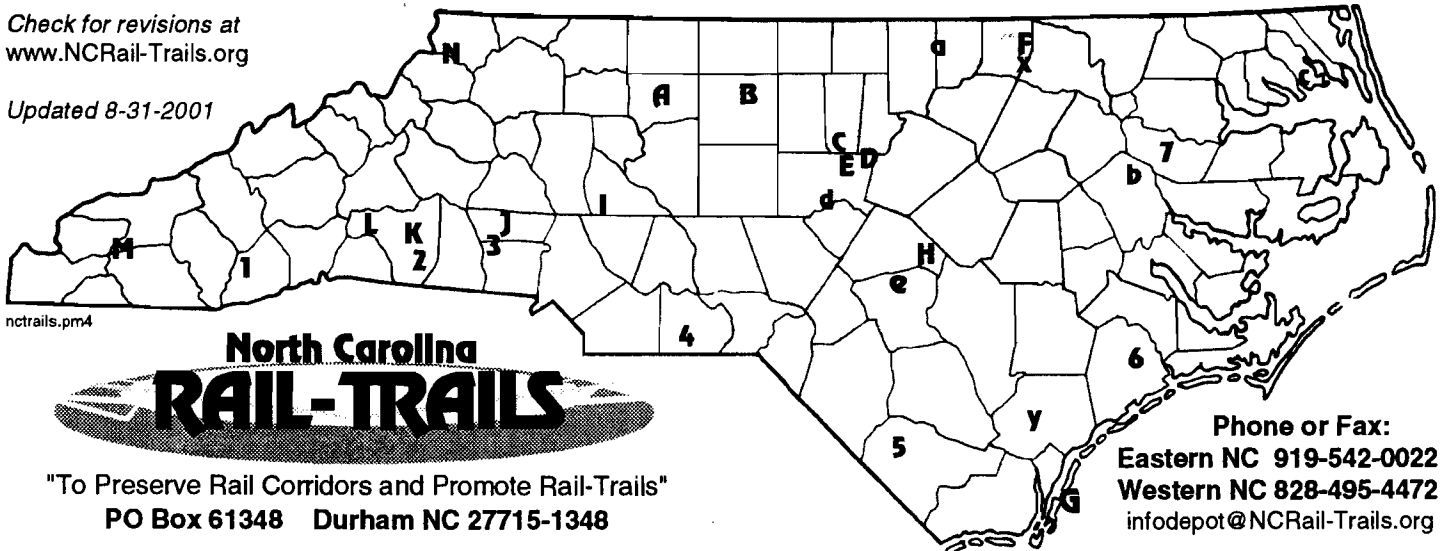
**L.** Thermal Belt Rail-Trail, 8 miles, Bechtler Development Corp, Spindale to Gilkey.

**M.** Nantahala Bikeway, 0.5 mile, U.S. Forest Service. Nantahala Gorge, Swain County.

**N.** Railroad Grade Road, 10 miles, Ashe County. Todd-to-Fleetwood. Local road built on section of abandoned Virginia-Carolina Railroad along South Fork of New River.

Check for revisions at  
[www.NCRail-Trails.org](http://www.NCRail-Trails.org)

Updated 8-31-2001



## Development Projects

**1.** Brevard-to-Pisgah Forest, 2 miles, Transylvania County. Bike/ped trail. Contact: Michael Domanokos, 828-884-7648.

**2.** Cliffside Heritage Trail, 2.4 miles, Rutherford County, Cliffside to Caroleen. Contact: NCRT, 828-495-4472.

**3.** Rhyne Preserve Rail-Trail, 2 miles, Lincoln County, Catawba Lands Conservancy river protection project area. Contact: Chafin Rhyne, 704-735-1746.

**4.** Carolina Heartlands Rail-Trail, 12.5 miles, Anson County. Wadesboro-to-McFarlan. Corridor retrieval and development. Contact: Myla Warfel, 704-851-3891.

**5.** Waccamaw Cypress Trail, 32 miles, Columbus County, Fair Bluff-to-Whiteville Depot-to-Lake Waccamaw. Contact: Sally or Terry Mann, 910-642-5029.

**6.** Jacksonville Greenway Project, 11 miles, City of Jacksonville, Onslow County. Contact Rhonda Rogers, 910-938-5236.

**7.** Skewarkee Trail, 0.8 mile, Williamston, Martin County. Contact: Brant Knipe, Town of Williamston, 252-792-5142.

## Initiatives & Studies

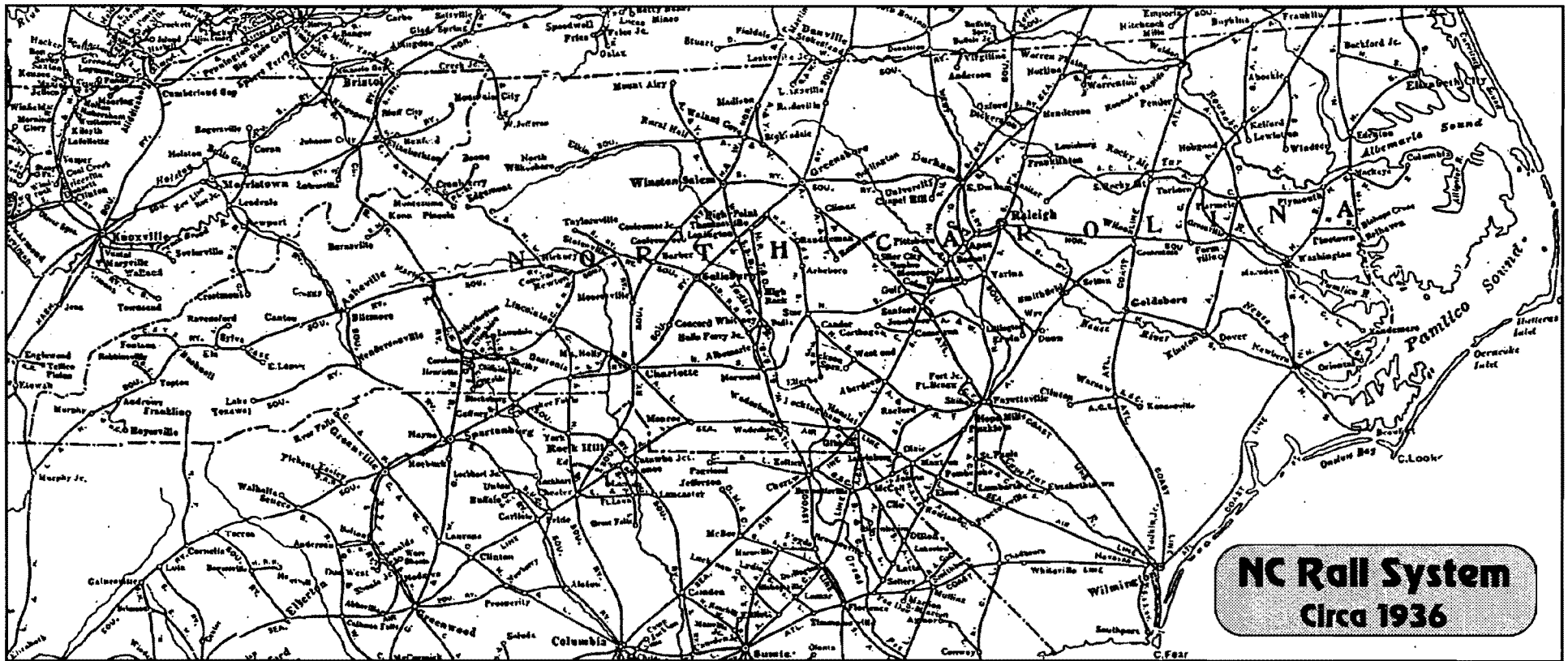
**a.** Henderson, 2 miles, Vance County. Study and negotiations with N-S and CSX. Contact: Kathy Powell, 919-431-6035.

**b.** Coastal Carolina Trail, 30 miles, Beaufort, Martin and Pitt counties. Study complete. Washington-to-Oak City with Stokes-to-Pactolus first stage. Contact: James Rhodes, 252-830-6319.

**c.** Elizabeth City Coast Guard Trail, 7 miles, Pasquotank County, Elizabeth City-to-Weeksville. Possible NC DOT railbanking. Contact: Dave Copley, 252-330-4514.

**d.** Deep River Nature Trail, 4 miles, Chatham and Lee counties. Trail loop study completed. Contact: Margaret Jordan-Ellis, Deep River Park Association, 919-898-4814.

**e.** Overhills Rail-Trail. 4 miles, Fort Bragg, Onslow County. On former Rockefeller estate. Contact: Paul Wilson, 910-323-4986.



### NC Rail Corridors

Peak NC rail system miles	5,200
Present NC rail system miles	3,377
Major railroad miles (N-S, CSX)	2,597
Shortline rail miles (23 operators)	780
NC DOT railbanked miles	93
Reactivated railbanked miles	56
Non-railbanked trail miles	31

### NC DOT Holdings

x. Roanoke Valley Trail, 32 miles, Warren and Halifax Counties. Norlina-to-Roanoke Rapids. Trail study complete. NC DOT purchasing for high-speed passenger rail to Norfolk.

y. Pender County Trail, 28 miles, Pender County. Wallace-to-Castle Hayne. Trail study complete. Railbanked by NC DOT.

