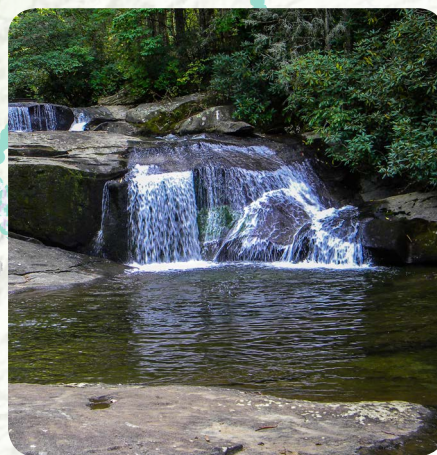




Wilderness Gateway State Trail Study

December 1, 2019



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INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the General Assembly authorized the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources to add the Wilderness Gateway State Trail to the State Parks System. During the same session the General Assembly directed the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation (Division) to conduct a feasibility study of connecting the trail with various natural areas, trails and communities in the four counties of the trail proposed corridor.

The vision for the Wilderness Gateway State Trail entails three primary purposes: conservation, recreation and tourism.

By protecting and conserving riparian corridors and other important habitats the trail corridors will serve as ecological connectors between larger tracts of natural lands enabling the migration of wildlife and ensuring the genetic viability of wildlife and plant populations. In this way, the trail is part of a statewide conservation strategy to ensure the future health and beauty of North Carolina's natural resources.

By creating pathways, enhancing walkable downtowns areas and building urban greenways in areas where North Carolina residents live and work, the trail will provide safe and pleasant recreation and exercise opportunities. This offers easy and enjoyable ways for people to improve their health with more physical activity.

Finally, by creating recreational opportunities with access to scenic wilderness areas and connections to multiple downtowns, all easily accessible from I-40, the trail will attract visitors from North Carolina as well as other states.

Division staff have visited the trail corridor and have met with potential stakeholders to explain the state trail concept. Staff have listened to input, begun recruiting segment managers and begun resolving issues. Finally, staff conducted a GIS analysis to determine a potential corridor for the Wilderness Gateway State Trail, within which segment managers will be able to construct and manage trail segments for inclusion in the State Trail.



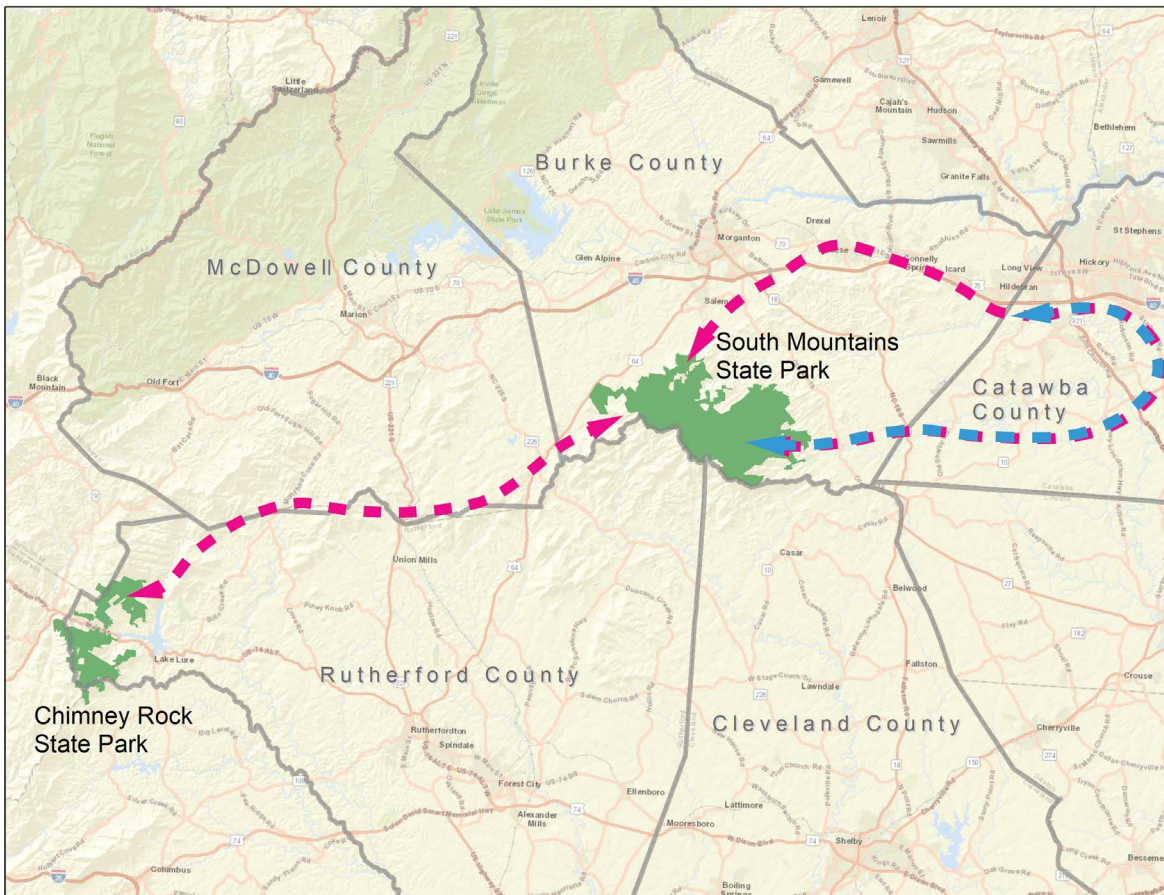
Stakeholder meetings were held.

PLANNING AREA

The legislation that created the Wilderness Gateway State Trail stated:

"The Division of Parks and Recreation of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources shall study the feasibility of connecting the Town of Valdese, the City of Hickory, the Overmountain Victory State Trail, natural areas located within Burke and Catawba counties, as well as other communities and places of interest to the Wilderness Gateway State Trail. In conducting this study, the Division shall specifically consider improving access across and from Interstate 40 to the northeastern and western portions of South Mountains State Park."

Using this direction, the planning area for the Wilderness Gateway State Trail encompasses Catawba, Burke, McDowell and Rutherford Counties. Meetings with officials from each of the counties and major towns within the planning area were held to help refine the planning corridor. Foothills Conservancy of NC and Conserving Carolinas Land Conservancy were also included in this planning effort.



Initial trail concept as outlined by the NC General Assembly.



The Wilderness Gateway State Trail will connect with the Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail (near Chimney Rock State Park) and will meander along the boundary of Rutherford and McDowell counties to connect to South Mountains State Park. From South Mountains State Park, the trail will travel through Burke and Catawba Counties, with connections to Valdese and Hickory. Much of the trail corridor in Catawba County will be developed in conjunction with the Carolina Thread Trail. Part of the initial development of the State Trail will be a blueway (paddle trail) on the Jacob Fork and Henry Fork Rivers. In the future, trails along the banks of these rivers and connecting to Bakers Mountain are envisioned.

LOCATION

This proposed corridor will intersect with locations of signature events in North Carolina history including Native American settlements, Spanish exploration, the Overmountain Victory men, textile and furniture industries, music and moonshine.

Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail, in Rutherford County, will be the western terminus of the Wilderness Gateway State Trail. Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail connects Chimney Rock State Park, Lake Lure, Bat Cave and Bearwallow Mountain. Some of North Carolina's most dramatic mountain scenery is found at Chimney Rock State Park, with the signature 315-foot spire overlooking Hickory Nut Gorge and Lake Lure.

Rutherford County was formed in 1779 and named after the Revolutionary War general and member of the North Carolina Provincial Congress, Griffith Rutherford. The county seat is Rutherfordton. The economy of Rutherford County includes tourism, Christmas trees, and textiles. The county is 564 square miles and is in the Broad River basin. In 2016 the population was estimated to be 66,421.



The southwestern segment of the Wilderness Gateway Trail will connect with Chimney Rock State Park



South Mountains State Park and the adjacent gamelands provide ample outdoor recreational opportunities.



McDowell County was formed from Rutherford and Burke Counties in 1842. It is named after Joseph McDowell, a general in the Revolutionary War. Originally Cherokee and Catawba Indian territory, today Marion is the county seat. The economy revolves around Christmas tree production, furniture and pharmaceuticals. It is 440 square miles, with approximately 75% of the land forested. Located in the Broad and Catawba River basins, McDowell County had an estimated population of 45,075 in 2016.

The **Overmountain Victory Trail** is a National Historic Trail that stretches for 330 miles through four states (Virginia, Tennessee, North and South Carolina). In 2019 the North Carolina portion was made a North Carolina State Trail by the state General Assembly. The Overmountain Victory Trail traces the route used by patriot militia during the pivotal Kings Mountain campaign of 1780. Thomas Jefferson called the victory of American patriots over British Major Patrick Ferguson's army at King's Mountain in October 1780, the battle that "turned the tide of success" in the Revolutionary War.

The trail follows the path that these citizen soldiers followed as they mustered to fight at Kings Mountain. Research done by the National Park Service has identified a narrow corridor for the trail. While there is a commemorative motor trail, users of the State Trail will be protected from vehicular traffic, following the alignment identified by the National Park Service. The Wilderness Gateway and Overmountain Victory State Trails will be co-located in portions of McDowell and Burke Counties.

South Mountains Game Lands offers over 22,000 acres for public hunting, fishing, trapping, wildlife viewing, and other wildlife-based recreational activities. The game land also provides other public outdoor recreational opportunities to the extent that these uses are compatible with the conservation and management of wildlife resources and do not displace primary users. The most popular activities



Both Valdese and Hickory have walkable downtown districts which will dovetail nicely with the Wilderness Gateway trail.



besides hunting/fishing are hiking, horseback riding, and photography. Additional activities such as mountain biking and geocaching occur at lower levels. Horseback riding on a 13.7-mile designated trail is currently allowed from May 15 to August 31.

South Mountains State Park, the largest North Carolina State Park at just over 22,000 acres, is an important part of the Wilderness Gateway State Trail corridor. Opportunities for camping, mountain biking and horseback riding, trout fishing, and spectacular scenery will enhance the trail experience. A visitor center offers museum-quality exhibits on the cultural and natural history of the South Mountains. The Catawba Valley and the gaps across the mountain ranges to the west were once major travel routes. The South Mountains served as a buffer zone between the Cherokee and the Catawba Indians, and the first European settlers in the area farmed the fertile land along the Catawba River.

Together, South Mountains State Park and South Mountains Game Lands serve as an important reservoir for endangered, threatened, or rare species including the white irisette, bog turtle, and small whorled pogonia. An additional 33 species are considered significantly rare, endemic, or species of special concern at the state level. Many common species of both flora and fauna occur through out both areas.

Burke County was formed in 1777 and named for Thomas Burke, NC governor and delegate to the Continental Congress. Morganton is the county seat. The county has the highest proportion of state government employees, outside of Raleigh, due to the North Carolina School for the Deaf, Broughton Hospital, Western Carolina Hospital and Western Correctional Center. The economy includes forest products, chemicals, and tourism. The county takes up 507 square miles and is in the Catawba River basin. In 2016 the population was estimated to be 88,851.

Valdese will provide an interesting cultural component for trail users. This town was founded by the Waldensians, Italian immigrants in the late 19th century. Their history is on display throughout Valdese including museums, Trail of Faith and the Waldensian Heritage Winery.

Catawba County was formed from Lincoln County in 1842 and is named for the Catawba Indians who once inhabited the land. Newton is the county seat, although Hickory is the largest city. Furniture, telecommunications equipment, and agriculture comprise a diversified economy. Located in the Catawba River basin, it occupies 398 square miles. The Carolina Thread Trail network runs throughout Catawba County. Some of the planned Carolina Thread Trails will be co-located with the Wilderness Gateway State Trail, thus boosting both trail efforts.

Hickory is best known for furniture production. At one time, it is estimated that 60% of all furniture made in the USA was made within a 200-mile radius of Hickory. In addition to furniture, Hickory hosts several colleges and universities and a minor league baseball team.



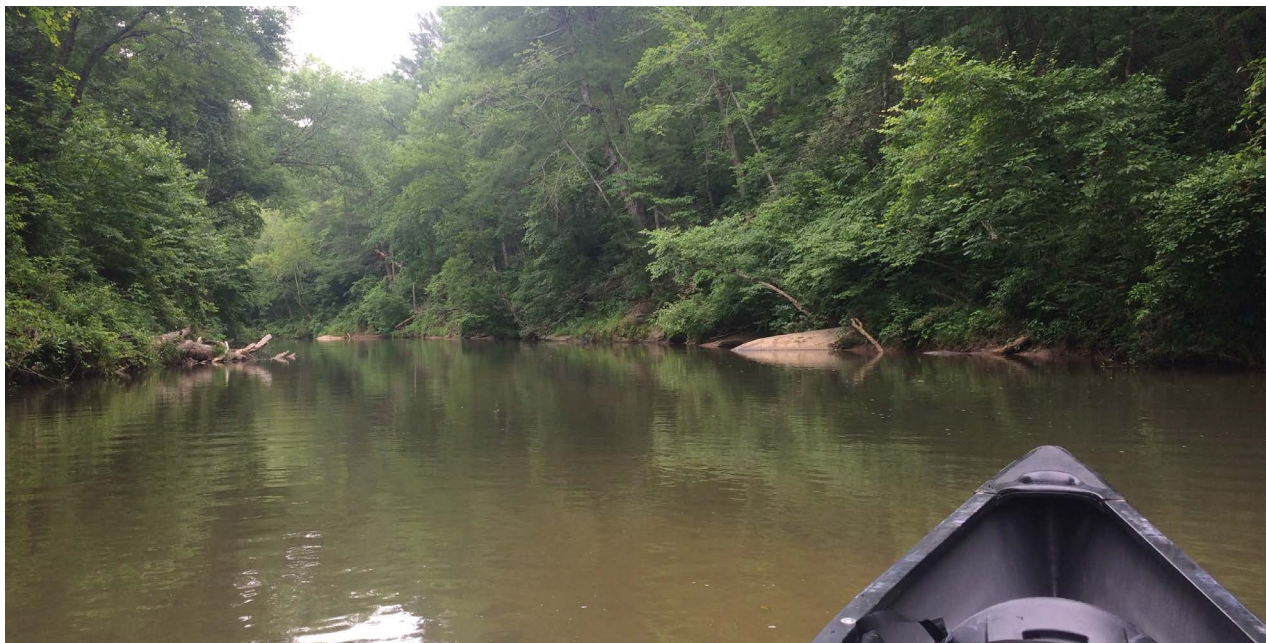


Results

To determine the feasibility for specific planned segments of the Wilderness Gateway State Trail, Division staff met with public officials, land conservancies, state agencies and private conservationists to evaluate local public support for the general concept of a public trail and the availability of trail volunteers; presence of viable section sponsors committed to the design, construction, maintenance and management of the trail; and a corridor that offers environmental and economic sustainability. The results of those meetings are summarized in the following tables.

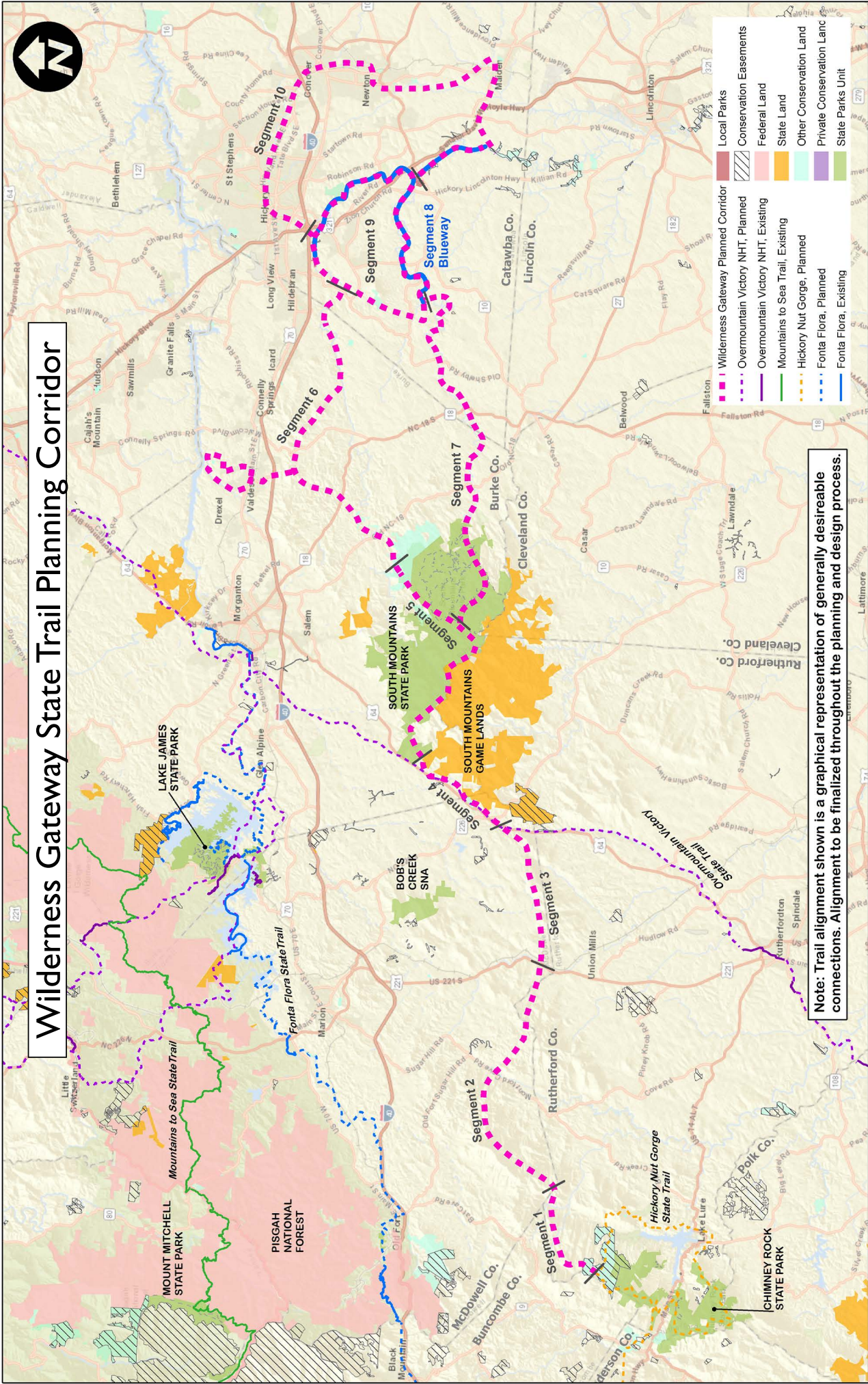
Meeting participants indicated universal public support for the trail. Segment managers were identified for many of the proposed segments and efforts are continuing to recruit managers for the remaining segments. Support was also vocalized for connecting the trail to downtown areas of nearby towns, as well as the potential to co-locate the Wilderness Gateway trail with other planned and existing trails in the region.

As segment managers begin to plan the trail's physical route and determine permitted trail users, care will need to be taken to identify a sustainable alignment for trail construction given the challenging topography of the region. However, this is entirely possible, especially with the services of professional trail builders and designers.

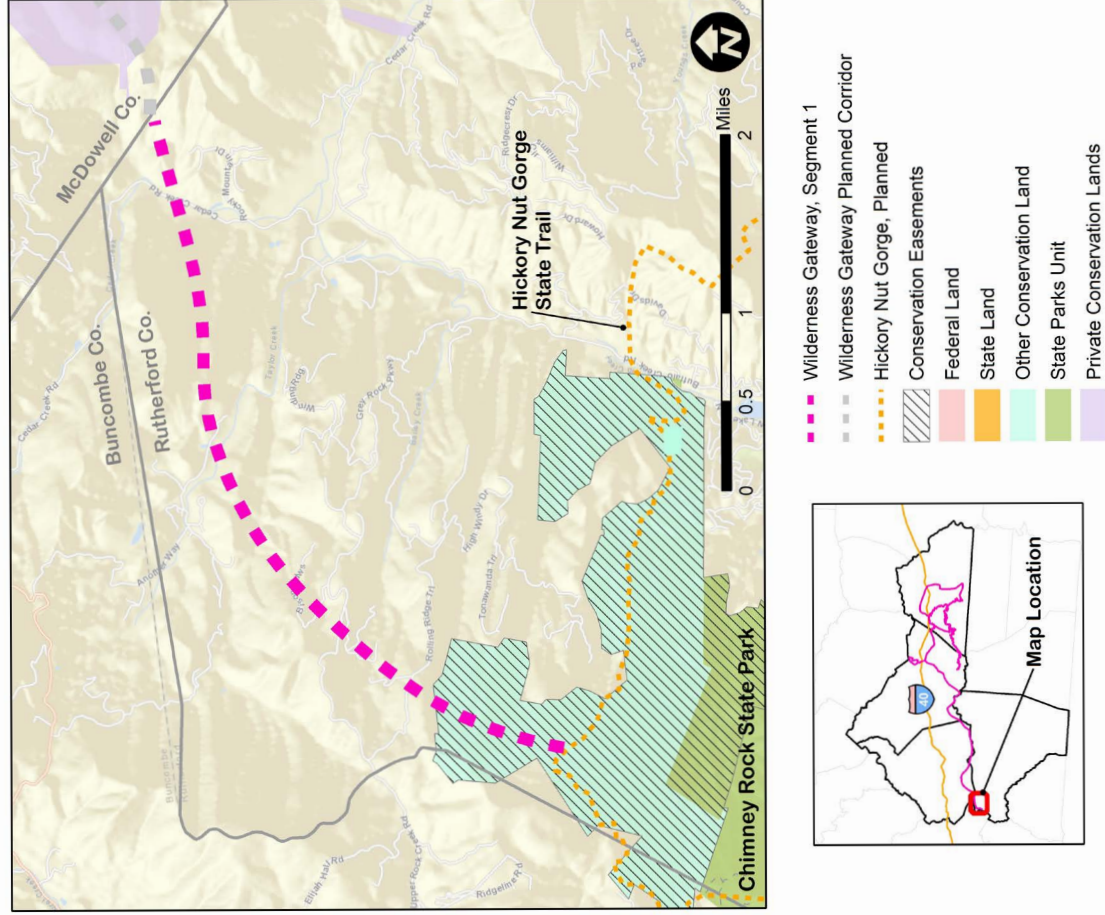


A paddle trail along parts of the Jacob and Henry Fork rivers will diversify the recreational opportunities along the Wilderness Gateway trail.

Wilderness Gateway State Trail Planning Corridor



SEGMENT 1: Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail to Rutherford County Line



Description:

This segment of the trail will connect Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail to trail built on private conservation land in McDowell County.

Planning Strategies:

The priority for this segment is to identify a segment manager. Once that is accomplished, then land will have to be acquired for the trail corridor.

Projected Timeframe:

long-term

Opportunities:

Public support	Local planning	Large landholdings
Funding	Stream/river corridors	Land conservancy support
Land acquisition	Floodplain/wetlands	Private support
Public land	Staff resources	Sidewalk/bicycle network

Challenges:

Funding	Major roadway crossing	Lack of local planning
Land acquisition	Coordinating easements	Floodplain/wetlands
Stream/river crossings	Urbanized corridor	Local opposition
Needs detailed alignment	Topography	Long-term management

Segment Details:

Constructed trail: 0 miles of constructed trail

Route alignment: The corridor will generally follow the Buncombe County line in order to take advantage of larger parcels of land. This alignment may change depending on the willingness of the area landowners to sell or grant permanent easements on their property for the trail.

Approximate planned length: 6 miles

Section sponsors: TBD

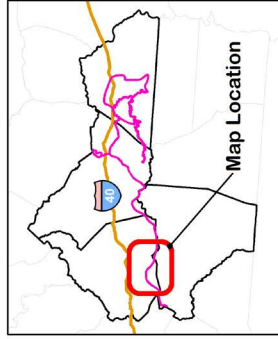
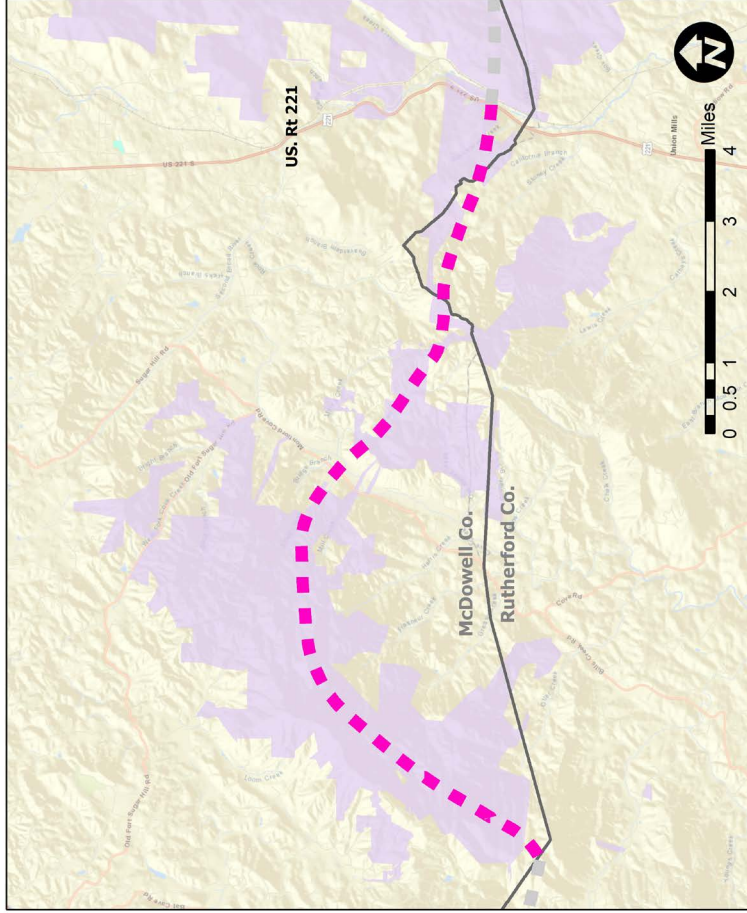
Planning stakeholders: Rutherford Outdoor Coalition, Conserving Carolinas Land Conservancy, Foothills Conservancy of NC, Rutherford County, NC State Parks

Next Steps:

- Identify segment manager
- Acquire land from willing sellers



SEGMENT 2: Rutherford County Line to US 221



- Wilderness Gateway, Segment 2
- Wilderness Gateway Planned Corridor
- Private Conservation Lands

Note: Trail alignment shown is a graphical representation of generally desirable connections. Alignment to be finalized throughout the planning and design process.



Description:

The trail will be contained on private conservation land that will be managed by Foothills Land Conservancy.

Planning Strategies:

Land is still being acquired in this section. At the request of Foothills Conservancy of NC and the private conservator, planning and construction of the trail in this section will occur after all the land is acquired.

Projected Timeframe: mid-term

Opportunities:

• Public support	Local planning	• Large landholdings
Funding	Stream/river corridors	• Land conservancy support
• Land acquisition	Floodplain/wetlands	• Private support
Public land	Staff resources	Sidewalk/bicycle network

Challenges:

• Funding		Major roadway crossing	Lack of local planning
• Land acquisition		Coordinating easements	Floodplain/wetlands
• Stream/river crossings		Urbanized corridor	Local opposition
• Needs detailed alignment	• Topography		Long-term management

Segment Details:

Constructed trails: 0 miles of constructed trails

Route alignment: Rutherford/McDowell County line

Approximate planned length: 13 miles

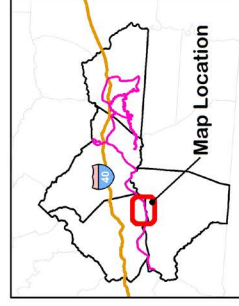
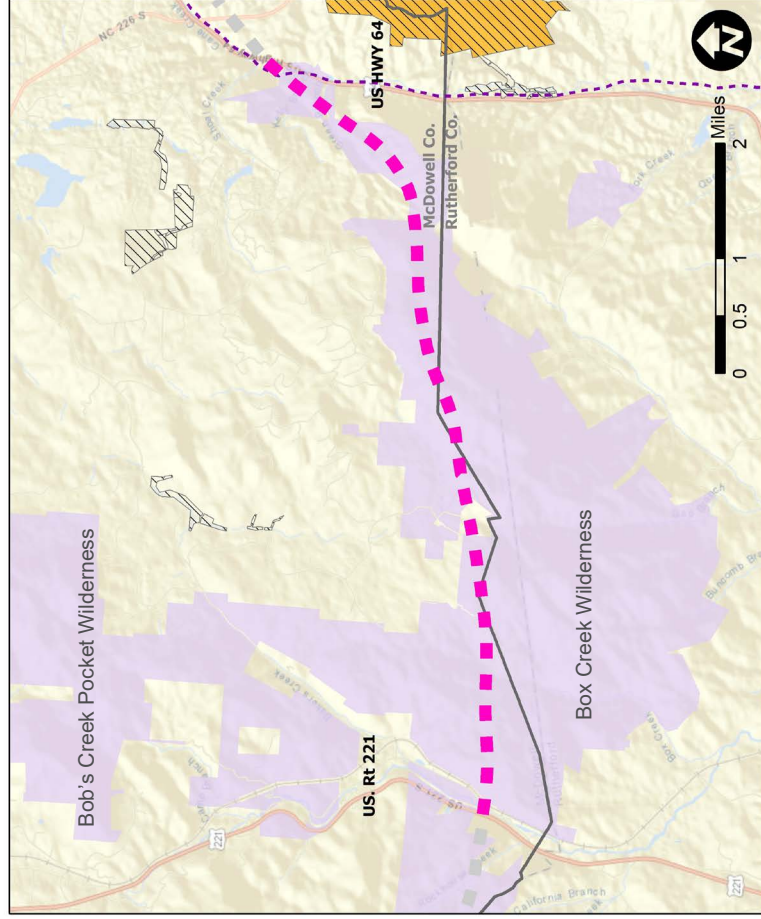
Section sponsor: Foothills Conservancy of NC

Planning stakeholders: Rutherford County, McDowell County, NC State Parks

Next Steps:

- o Acquire land from willing sellers
- o Design sustainable trail alignment
- o Acquire permanent trail easement

SEGMENT 3: US 221 to US 64



- Wilderness Gateway, Segment 3
- Wilderness Gateway Planned Corridor
- Overmountain Victory NHT, Planned
- Conservation Easements
- State Land
- Private Conservation Lands

Note: Trail alignment shown is a graphical representation of generally desirable connections. Alignment to be finalized throughout the planning and design process.

Description:

The trail will be located on private conservation land that is managed by Foothills Conservancy of NC. There is a complete, protected corridor between US 221 and US 64. A trailhead can be located where the trail intersects with US64.

Planning Strategies:

Trail construction can start once a detailed, sustainable trail design is completed. There is potential and support for a connection to the Fonta Flora State Trail through the Box Creek Wilderness. This connection might also serve to connect the Thermalbelt Rail Trail (Rutherford County) with the Peavine Rail Trail (McDowell County), a local priority.

Projected Timeframe: near-term

Opportunities:

• Public support	Local planning	• Large landholdings
Funding	Stream/river corridors	• Land conservancy support
• Land acquisition	Floodplain/wetlands	• Private support
Public land	Staff resources	Sidewalk/bicycle network

Challenges:

Funding	• Major roadway crossing	Lack of local planning
Land acquisition	Coordinating easements	Floodplain/wetlands
• Stream/river crossings	Urbanized corridor	Local opposition
• Needs detailed alignment	• Topography	Long-term management

Segment Details:

Constructed trail: 0 miles constructed trail

Route alignment: Roughly parallels the Rutherford/McDowell County line

Approximate planned length: 8 miles

Section sponsor: Foothills Conservancy of NC

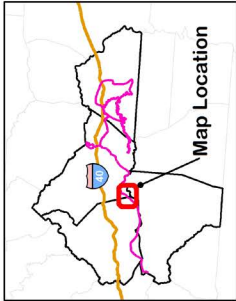
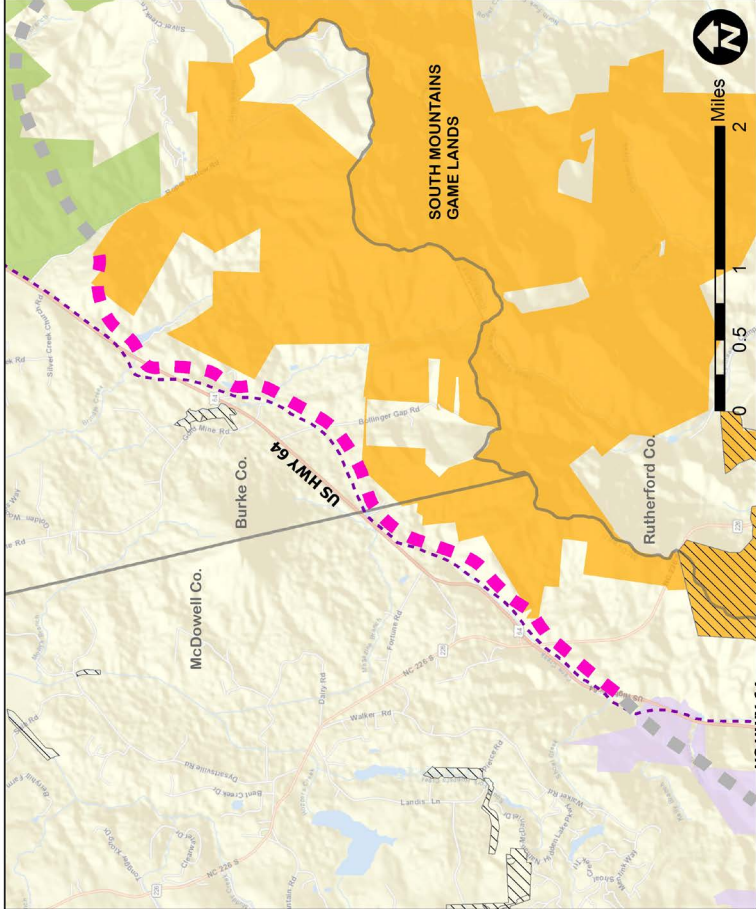
Planning stakeholders: McDowell County, Rutherford County, National Park Service, NC State Parks

Next Steps:

- o Develop a design-build proposal for sustainable trail construction
- o Acquire permanent trail easement



SEGMENT 4: US 64 to South Mountains State Park



Note: Trail alignment shown is a graphical representation of generally desirable connections. Alignment to be finalized throughout the planning and design process.



Description:

This segment will connect trail constructed on private conservation land with South Mountains State Park. It will be co-located with the Overmountain Victory State Trail.

Planning Strategies:

This segment of trail will be co-located with the Overmountain Victory State Trail until it enters the state park. The trail alignment must be coordinated with the National Park Service to ensure that it occurs within their planned corridor for the Overmountain Victory Trail footpath.

Projected Timeframe: midterm

Opportunities:

● Public support	● Local planning	Large landholdings
Funding	● Stream/river corridors	Land conservancy support
Land acquisition	Floodplain/wetlands	● Private support
● Public land	● Staff resources	Sidewalk/bicycle network

Challenges:

● Funding	● Major roadway crossing	Lack of local planning
● Land acquisition	Coordinating easements	Floodplain/wetlands
● Stream/river crossings	Urbanized corridor	Local opposition
● Needs detailed alignment	● Topography	Long-term management

Segment Details:

Constructed trail: 0 miles of constructed trail

Route alignment: Co-locate with Overmountain Victory State Trail

Approximate planned length: 4 miles

Section sponsor: Burke County

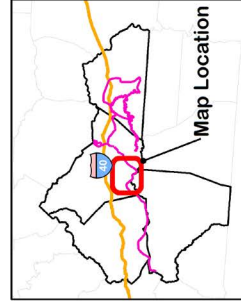
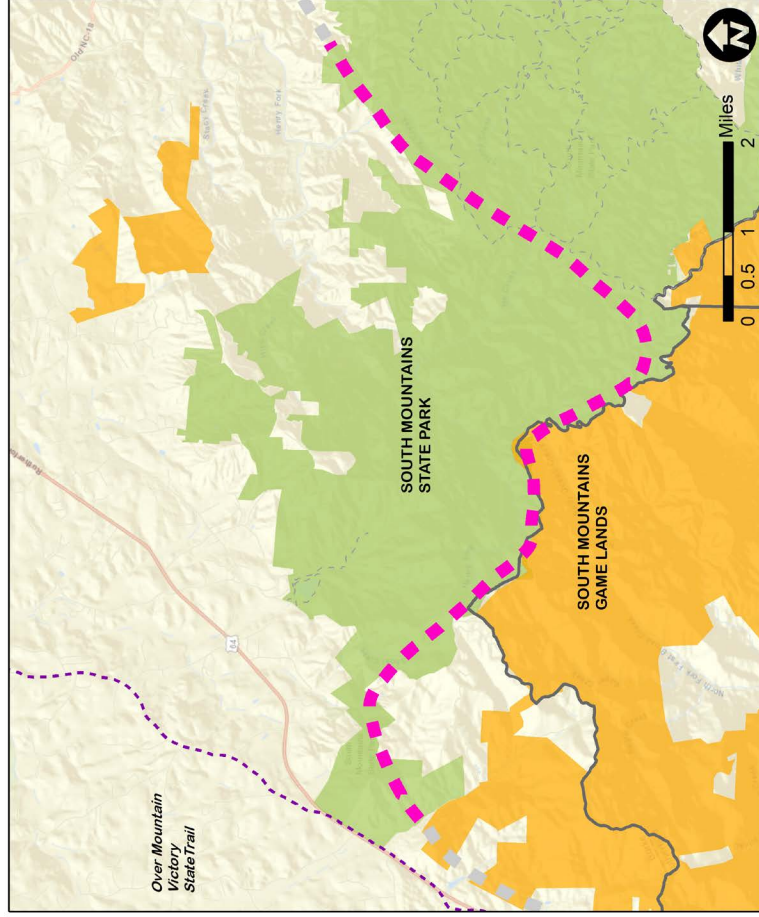
Planning stakeholders: National Park Service, Overmountain Victory Trail Association, South Mountains State Park, NC Wildlife Resources (South Mountains Gamelands), NC State Parks

Next Steps:

- o Acquire land from willing sellers
- o Coordinate with National Park Service to co-locate with Overmountain Victory State Trail
- o Coordinate planning and development with Burke and McDowell Counties
- o Coordinate with Wildlife Resources Commission (Gamelands)
- o Coordinate with South Mountains State Park



SEGMENT 5: South Mountains State Park



- Wilderness Gateway, Segment 5
- Wilderness Gateway Planned Corridor
- Overmountain Victory NHT, Planned
- State Land
- State Parks Unit

Note: Trail alignment shown is a graphical representation of generally desirable connections. Alignment to be finalized throughout the planning and design process.

Description:

This trail segment will connect to the existing trail network in the eastern part of the park.

Planning Strategies:

North Carolina State Parks should hire a trail designer to design and build this segment, since the topography in the western part of the park is especially challenging. There is an opportunity to route the trail onto the game lands that are managed by the Wildlife Resources Commission.

Opportunities:

Public support	Local planning	Large landholdings
Funding	Stream/river corridors	Land conservancy support
Land acquisition	Floodplain/wetlands	Private support
Public land	Staff resources	Sidewalk/bicycle network

Challenges:

Funding	Major roadway crossing	Lack of local planning
Land acquisition	Coordinating easements	Floodplain/wetlands
Stream/river crossings	Urbanized corridor	Local opposition
Needs detailed alignment	Topography	Long-term management

Segment Details:

Constructed trail: South Mountains State Park has over 40 miles of constructed trails in the eastern part of the park. The alignment of the new trail in the western part of the park will determine which trails will be co-located with the Wilderness Gateway State Trail.

Route alignment: The interim route will be located on WRC's gravel access road. The permanent route will connect the western boundary of the park with the existing, sustainable trails in the eastern part.

Approximate planned length: 12 miles

Section sponsors: NC State Parks, NC Wildlife Resources Commission

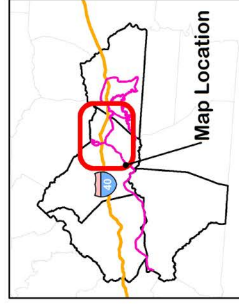
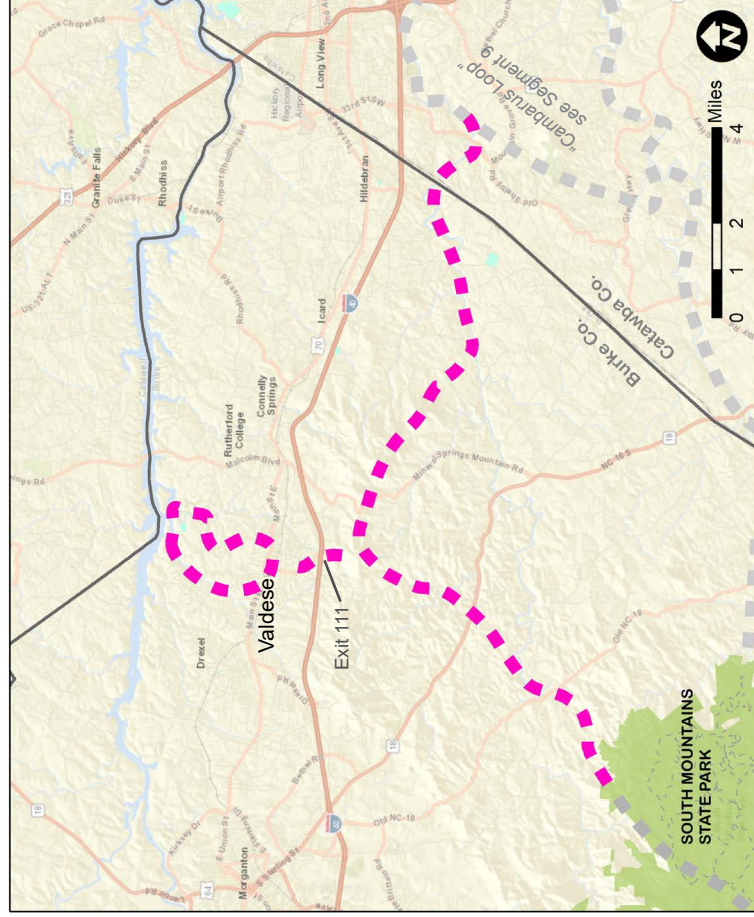
Planning stakeholders: National Park Service, Friends of South Mtns State Park, Foothills Land Conservancy of NC, South Mountains State Park, NC Wildlife Resource Commission

Next Steps:

- Acquire land from willing sellers if needed



SEGMENT 6: South Mountains State Park to Cambarus Loop, North



Note: Trail alignment shown is a graphical representation of generally desirable connections. Alignment to be finalized throughout the planning and design process.

Description:

This segment will connect South Mountains State Park to Valdese and the north end of the Cambarus Loop.

Planning Strategies:

Much of this segment will be dependent on land acquisition. One of the major obstacles of this segment—crossing I-40 near Valdese—has been resolved with the NCDOT's willingness to include bike/pedestrian access at Exit 111 when the overpass is replaced. Locating the segment south of I-40, with a connection to Valdese, takes advantage of larger tracts of undeveloped land.

Projected Timeframe: Long term

Opportunities:

Public support	Local planning	Large landholdings
Funding	Stream/river corridors	Land conservancy support
Land acquisition	Floodplain/wetlands	Private support
Public land	Staff resources	Sidewalk/bicycle network

Challenges:

Funding	Major roadway crossing	Lack of local planning
Land acquisition	Coordinating easements	Floodplain/wetlands
Stream/river crossings	Urbanized corridor	Local opposition
Needs detailed alignment	Topography	Long-term management

Segment Details:

Constructed trail: 0 miles of constructed trail

Route alignment: The route will be primarily south of I-40, other than the connections with Valdese, to take advantage of the less urbanized landscape and the partnership with Foothills Conservancy of NC.

Approximate planned length: 21 miles

Potential segment sponsors: TBD

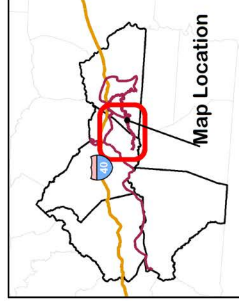
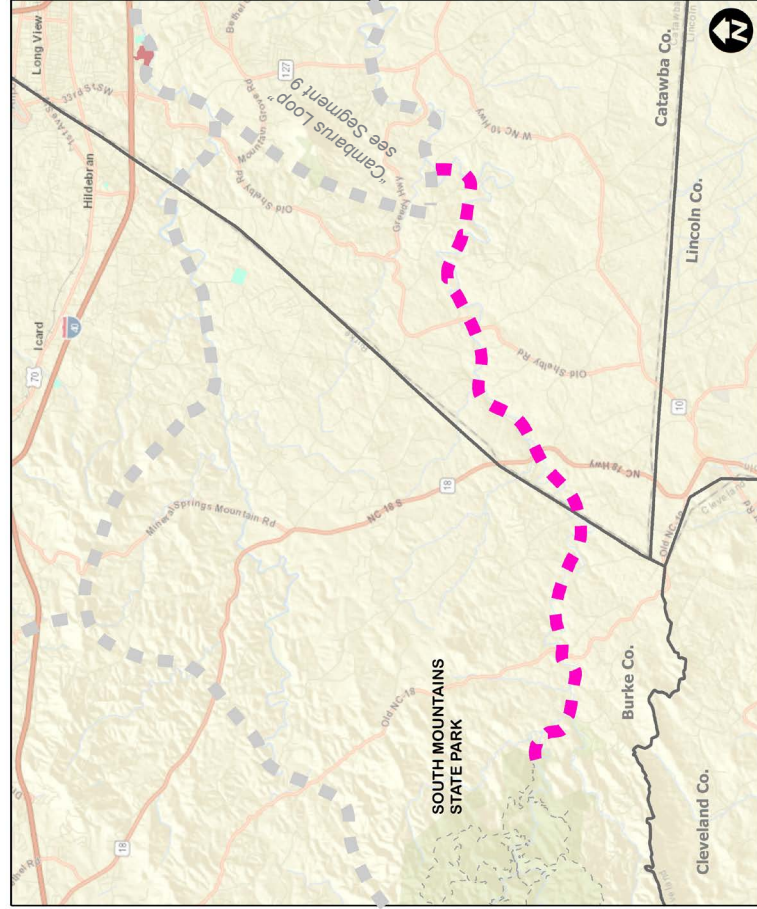
Planning stakeholders: Friends of Valdese Parks, Foothills Conservancy of NC, Town of Valdese, Burke County, Catawba County, NC State Parks

Next Steps:

- Identify segment sponsor
- Acquire land from willing sellers



SEGMENT 7: South Mountains State Park to Cambarus Loop, South



- Wilderness Gateway, Segment 7
- Wilderness Gateway Planned Corridor
- Local Parks
- Other Conservation Lands

Note: Trail alignment shown is a graphical representation of generally desirable connections. Alignment to be finalized throughout the planning and design process.

Description:

This segment will connect South Mountains State Park to the south end of Cambarus Loop via the Jacob Fork.

Planning Strategies:

Much of this segment will be dependent on land acquisition.

Projected Timeframe: Long term

Opportunities:

Public support	Local planning	Large landholdings
Funding	Stream/river corridors	Land conservancy support
Land acquisition	Floodplain/wetlands	Private support
Public land	Staff resources	Sidewalk/bicycle network

Challenges:

Funding	Major roadway crossing	Lack of local planning
Land acquisition	Coordinating easements	Floodplain/wetlands
Stream/river crossings	Urbanized corridor	Local opposition
Needs detailed alignment	Topography	Long-term management

Segment Details:

Constructed trail: 0 miles of constructed trail

Route alignment: This route will follow the Jacob Fork river east from South Mountains State park, following the riparian buffer.

Approximate planned length: 22 miles

Potential segment sponsors: TBD

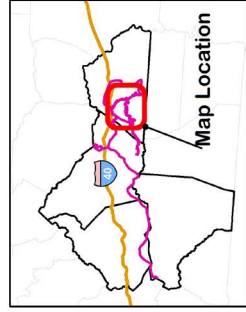
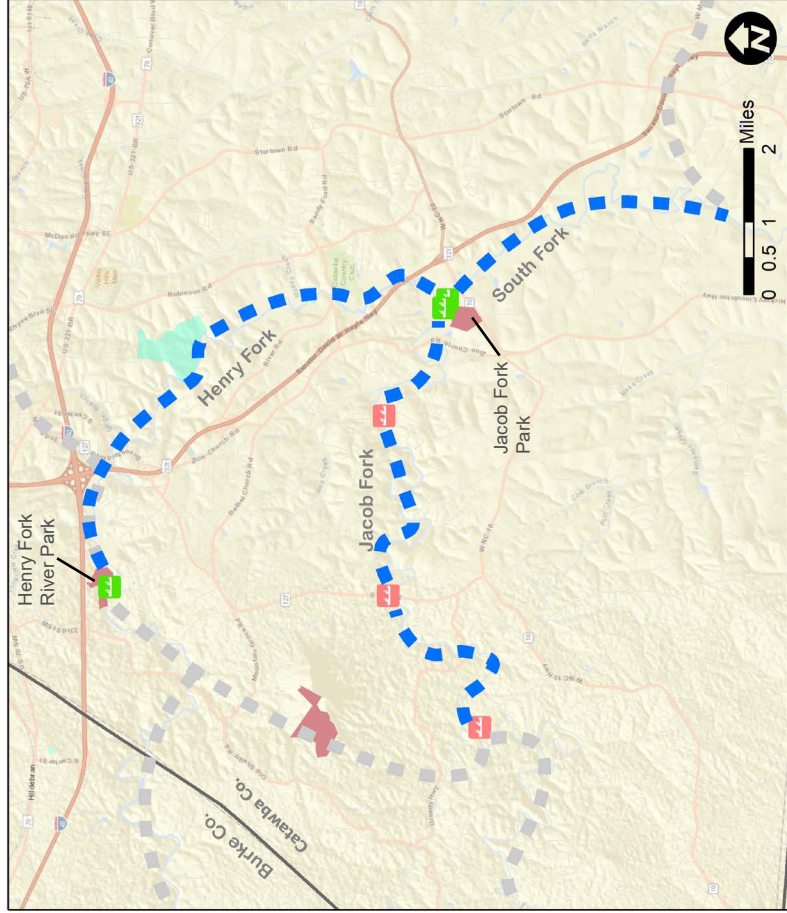
Planning stakeholders: Friends of Valdeese Parks, Foothills Conservancy of NC, Burke County, Catawba County, NC State Parks

Next Steps:

- Identify segment sponsor
- Acquire land from willing sellers



SEGMENT 8: Cambarus Loop Blueway



- Wilderness Gateway, Segment 8
- Wilderness Gateway Planned Corridor
- Local Parks
- Other Conservation Lands
- Official Access point
- Unofficial Access Point

Note: Trail alignment shown is a graphical representation of generally desirable connections. Alignment to be finalized throughout the planning and design process.



Description:

This segment of the trail will be a blueway, which is a paddle trail, along the Jacob Fork, Henry Fork and South Fork Catawba Rivers. It is named for an endemic crayfish species recently discovered in the area. Access points are currently available at Jacob Fork Park and Henry Fork River Park.

Planning Strategies:

Developing a blueway encompasses acquiring and developing paddle access sites along the waterways. Parking, restrooms, access to the river and signage are all required.

Projected Timeframe:

near-term

Opportunities:

Public support	Local planning	Large landholdings
Funding	Stream/river corridors	Land conservancy support
Land acquisition	Floodplain/wetlands	Private support
Public land	Staff resources	Sidewalk/bicycle network

Challenges:

Funding	Major roadway crossing	Lack of local planning
Land acquisition	Coordinating easements	Floodplain/wetlands
Stream/river crossings	Urbanized corridor	Local opposition
Needs detailed alignment	Topography	Long-term management

Segment Details:

Constructed trail: 0 miles of constructed trail

Route alignment: The Cambarus Loop Blueway will follow the Henry Fork and Jacob Fork and continue past the confluence on South Fork Catawba River.

Approximate planned length: 34 miles in total (Jacob Fork-13, Henry Fork-14, South Fork-7)

Segment sponsors: NC State Parks, Town of Newton

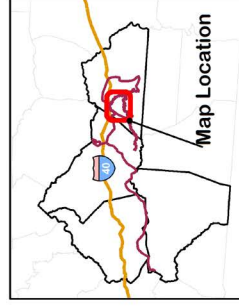
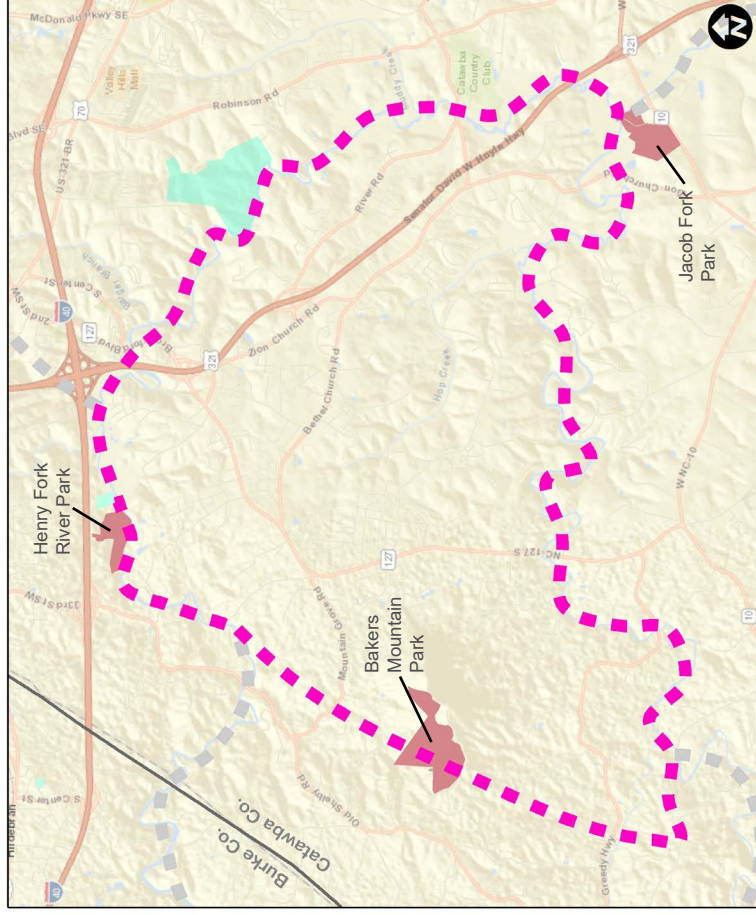
Planning stakeholders: Foothills Conservancy of NC, Hickory, Catawba County, Town of Newton, NC State Parks

Next Steps:

- Acquire land from willing sellers
- Paddle access development—river access, parking and restrooms



SEGMENT 9: Cambarus Loop



- Wilderness Gateway, Segment 9
- Wilderness Gateway Planned Corridor
- Local Parks
- Other Conservation Lands

Note: Trail alignment shown is a graphical representation of generally desirable connections. Alignment to be finalized throughout the planning and design process.



Description:

This segment of the trail will incorporate Bakers Mountain Park, a destination of interest for Catawba County, and creates a loop along the banks of Henry's Fork and Jacob's Fork. The Cambarus loop is named for an endemic crayfish species recently discovered in the area.

Planning Strategies:

As land is acquired, the trail will be developed.

Projected Timeframe: Long term

Opportunities:

• Public support		Local planning		Large landholdings
• Funding	•	Stream/river corridors	•	Land conservancy support
• Land acquisition		Floodplain/wetlands		Private support
• Public land		Staff resources		Sidewalk/bicycle network

Challenges:

• Funding		Major roadway crossing		Lack of local planning
• Land acquisition		Coordinating easements	•	Floodplain/wetlands
• Stream/river crossings		Urbanized corridor		Local opposition
• Needs detailed alignment	•	Topography	•	Long-term management

Segment Details:

Constructed trails: 0 miles of constructed trails

Route alignment: Follows the eastern segments of the Jacob and Henry Forks to their confluence at Jacob Fork Park. It will connect these segments via Bakers Mountain Park.

Approximate planned length: 21 miles

Potential section sponsors: TBD

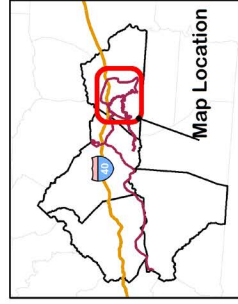
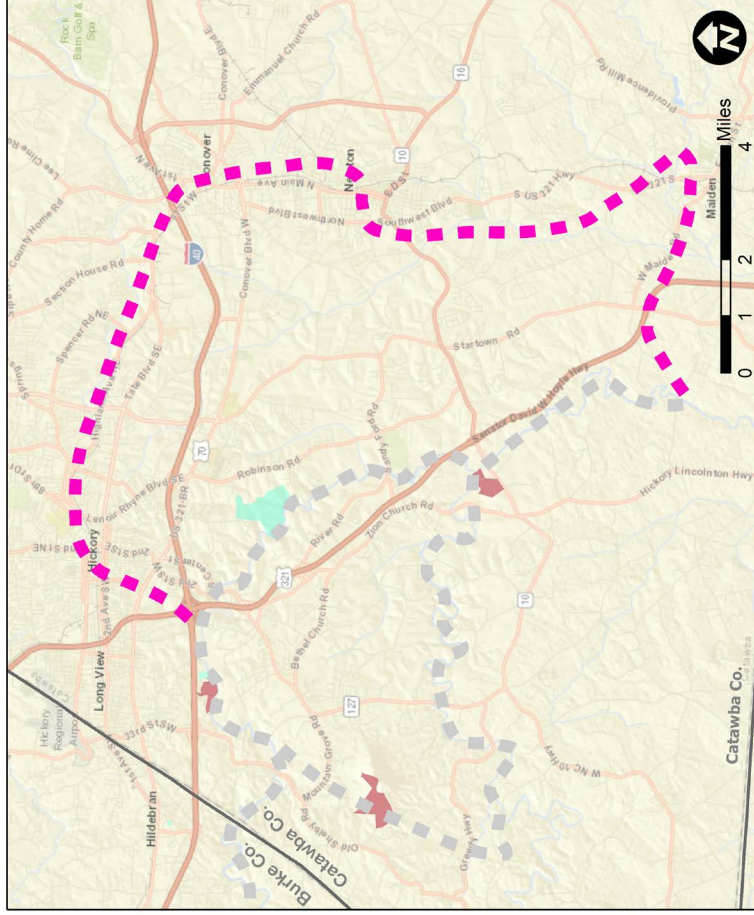
Planning stakeholders: Foothills Conservancy of NC, Catawba County, NC State Parks, Hickory, Newton

Next Steps:

- o Identify segment sponsor
- o Acquire land from willing sellers



SEGMENT 10: Catawba County Loop



- Wilderness Gateway, Segment 10
- Wilderness Gateway Planned Corridor
- Local Parks
- Other Conservation Lands

Note: Trail alignment shown is a graphical representation of generally desirable connections. Alignment to be finalized throughout the planning and design process.



Description:

The loop through Catawba County will be co-located with part of their Carolina Thread Trail network.

Planning Strategies:

Incorporate the planned Carolina Thread Trail route and greenway plans of Hickory and Newton.

Projected Timeframe:

Long term

Opportunities:

Public support	Local planning	Large landholdings
Funding	Stream/river corridors	Land conservancy support
Land acquisition	Floodplain/wetlands	Private support
Public land	Staff resources	Sidewalk/bicycle network

Challenges:

Funding	Major roadway crossing	Lack of local planning
Land acquisition	Coordinating easements	Floodplain/wetlands
Stream/river crossings	Urbanized corridor	Local opposition
Needs detailed alignment	Topography	Long-term management

Segment Details:

Constructed trail: 10.02 miles

Route alignment: The route will be co-located with the Carolina Thread Trail system that is planned in Hickory and Conover.

Approximate planned length: 29 miles

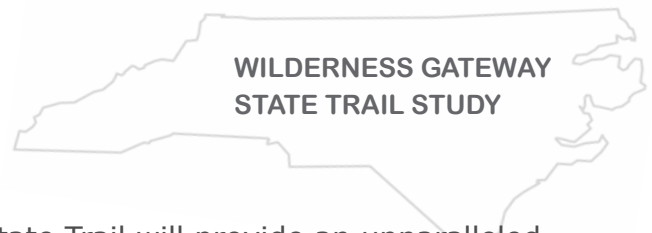
Potential section sponsors: TBD

Planning stakeholders: Carolina Thread Trail, Catawba County, Hickory, Newton, NC State Parks, Foothills Conservancy of NC

Next Steps:

- o Identify segment sponsor
- o Acquire land/easements from willing sellers
- o Coordinate activities with Catawba County, Hickory, and Carolina Thread Trail





CONCLUSIONS

The development of the Wilderness Gateway State Trail will provide an unparalleled regional recreational resource. Evaluation of the proposed corridor shows that:

1. Provides significant natural, cultural, scenic and recreational value.

- Numerous plant and animal species, including those of special concern, will benefit from the preserved trail corridor.
- The corridor intersects with locations that are integral to North Carolina history including Native American settlements, Spanish exploration, Revolutionary War battles, music, moonshine, textiles and furniture.
- Breath-taking vistas and opportunities to walk through a variety of North Carolina ecosystems.
- Multi-day hiking and camping trips.

2. Enough length and beauty to attract varied and significant use from regions outside the local area.

- The planning corridor for the Wilderness Gateway State Trail is approximately 150 miles long. As the trail is constructed, that distance will increase as a result of accommodating topography and other factors.
- As the Wilderness Gateway State Trail is developed with options for camping, it will attract users from far outside the region.

3. Minimal and surmountable incompatible features such as roads, intrusive development or large water bodies.

- The primary barrier for the Wilderness Gateway State Trail proved to be I-40, which could prevent connecting the trail to Valdese and Hickory. However, Hickory already has a pedestrian connection across the interstate and NCDOT is partnering to provide a pedestrian connection when the overpass at Valdese (Exit 111) is replaced.

4. Local public support for the general concept of a public trail and the availability of trail volunteers.

- Without exception, every stakeholder that we met with was enthusiastic about the potential of the Wilderness Gateway State Trail.





5. There are viable section sponsors committed to the design, construction, maintenance and management of the trail.

- Most of the segments already have segment sponsors who have committed to the design, construction and maintenance of that portion of the trail.
- State Parks is continuing to identify segment sponsors for the remaining portions.

6. The trail alignment can be sustainable.

- There are sustainable design parameters which must be observed in order to prevent erosion, trail and environmental degradation or unsafe conditions.
- Each segment sponsor should seek the services of a professional trail builder, who has been trained in sustainable trail design. There are a number of trail builders in the planning area for the Wilderness Gateway State Trail.
- Trail design will be dependent on the proposed usergroup as determined by the segment sponsor.
- NC State Parks has a trails program which can provide technical assistance to the segment sponsors as they finalize their trail alignments to ensure that the planned alignment and construction techniques will be sustainable.

NEXT STEPS

Although this study has established that it is feasible for the Wilderness Gateway State Trail to connect natural areas, trails and communities within Catawba, Burke, McDowell and Rutherford Counties, there are further actions that must be taken in order to make this trail a reality.

Planning:

- **Public review of trail corridor:** A general trail corridor was planned through the process of developing this feasibility study. The corridor should be presented to the public. Comments will be collected and given to the appropriate segment sponsors to inform their planning efforts.
 - ◇ The Division will hold public meetings in McDowell/Rutherford County, Burke County and Catawba County. These meetings will present the concept of the Wilderness Gateway State Trail, answer questions posed by the public, and collect comments and suggestions about the trail. We will also collect comments on our website for people unable to attend any of the scheduled meetings.





- **Sustainable design and construction toolbox:** The Division will assemble a “toolbox” of sustainable trail design techniques to be included in the Wilderness Gateway State Trail Plan to be shared with all potential segment sponsors.
- **Branding:** The Division will develop a branding package for the Wilderness Gateway State Trail. This will include logos, blaze design and placement, and best practices for trail signage. This information will also be included in the Wilderness Gateway State Trail Plan.

Funding:

- **Additional funding** to supplement federal funding would facilitate and expedite completion of the Wilderness Gateway State Trail. The NC Trails Program received more than twice as many applications for trail and greenway funding as Recreational Trails Program grants were able to fund.
- **Land Acquisition:** Ongoing funding will be needed to acquire land, from willing sellers, throughout the trail corridor.
- **Trail Construction:** Once the land is acquired, the segment sponsors will need funding to design and construct the trail to sustainable criteria for their trail users.
- **Ongoing maintenance and management** of the trail is critical to its success.
- **Funding for blueway infrastructure** is needed to design and construct river access, parking lots and restroom facilities.

Designation of Completed Segments:

A State Trail as authorized by the NC General Assembly is very broad in definition and scope. To officially be recognized as a part of the State Trail, constructed trail within the planned corridor must be designated by the Secretary of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. Section sponsors may apply for designation once a trail segment is completed. Criteria for designation include public access, developing an emergency management plan, outlining facilities provided to the public and inspection by a regional trails specialist. Once a trail has been designated it can then display a state trails sign and blazing.



Finally, numerous national studies have shown the positive economic impact regional trails have on the communities with which they connect. North Carolina State Parks should partner with local universities and the Department of Commerce to measure the economic impact of the Wilderness Gateway State Trail to the region and state.



Typical signage of a North Carolina state trail.