

N.C. COALITION FOR TRAILS

December 22, 2020

The Honorable Roy Cooper
Governor of North Carolina
1 East Edenton Street
Raleigh, NC 27601

RE: Funding for Trails: PATH (Parks and Trails for Health), Great Trails State, and Visit N.C.

Dear Governor Cooper:

Thank you for recommending that the N.C. General Assembly allocate \$20 million of CARES Act funds for your PATH (Parks and Trails for Health) initiative. We appreciate your recognition of how important places to be outside are for North Carolinians and look forward to working with your administration on recommendations for the 2021 General Assembly.

As leaders of nonprofits that plan, build and manage trail systems, we have been delighted to see how much trails have meant to people during the pandemic, and we have worked hard to keep them safe and open and to help first-time users find trailheads and learn trail etiquette.

Now that the first vaccine has been approved, we are eager to help your administration move forward to expand trail systems all over North Carolina that can provide:

- Places for people to safely enjoy nature and healthy exercise.
- Improved quality of life and increased property values.
- Jobs in outdoor and eco-tourism, manufacturing and retail, and in trail construction and maintenance, including jobs for young people.
- Carbon-free transportation systems.
- Corridors of natural land for wildlife habitat and water quality protection.

Even before the pandemic, interest in trails has grown rapidly. The vision of a state-wide system, first laid out in the N.C. Trail System Act of 1973, has gained momentum because of strong support from citizens and local governments. They have built miles of local trails and greenways and undertaken exciting efforts to complete new segments of the Mountains-to-Sea State Trail. Within the last five years, with unanimous support from the N.C. General Assembly, five new long-distance State Trails have been authorized (Fonta Flora, Hickory Nut Gorge, Northern Peaks, Overmountain Victory and Wilderness Gateway), bringing the total number of State Trails in the State Park system to nine.

This year, your N.C. Department of Transportation launched the “Great Trails State Plan” initiative to develop a comprehensive plan for paved greenways connecting every county.

Visit NC has recognized the value of trails and parks and is developing a Leave No Trace trails campaign to launch in early 2021. Our coalition has been brainstorming with all these agency partners about ways to raise the visibility of trails by designating 2023 as Year of the Trail.

Investing in trails will help rebuild our economy, provide quality of life and health benefits, and create a stronger, more resilient North Carolina – all with a high return on investment.

To help achieve those goals, we respectfully submit the following funding proposal:

1. PATH (N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation)
 - a. Provide \$2 million of recurring funding to State Parks to support the nine State Trails that were added to the State Park system by the General Assembly. These trails do not receive any dedicated funding or staffing now. We recommend that the \$2 million be allocated as follows:
 - i. \$150,000 for each of the nine State Trails for a total of \$1.35 million
 - ii. \$650,000 for an expanded N.C. Trails Program headed by an Assistant Director of State Trails.
 - iii. A more detailed definition of how such a program might operate is attached to this letter and has been discussed in detail with State Park leadership.
 - b. \$18 million (\$3 million recurring and \$15 million non-recurring) for a grant program for natural surface trails that would be administered by the N.C. Trails Program in State Parks. Projects on officially-designated State Trails would be given priority ranking within this grant program.
2. Great Trails State (N.C. Department of Transportation)
 - a. \$45 million (\$15 million recurring and \$30 million non-recurring) for shared use paths to be administered by the Integrated Mobility Division of the N.C. Department of Transportation. These funds would help leverage federal greenway dollars that are being lost now.
 - b. \$2 million non-recurring for RPO planning and feasibility studies for shared-use trails in rural areas
3. Trail Communities Program (Visit NC)
 - a. \$250,000 to establish a program to help communities market their trails for quality of life and economic impact
4. Conservation Trust Funds (Land and Water Fund, Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, Agricultural Development and Farmland Preservation Trust Fund)
 - a. Support continued funding of the three conservation trust funds at the level recommended by Land for Tomorrow.

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Thank you for your calm, decisive leadership during this crisis. We look forward to doing our part to rebuild a strong and vibrant North Carolina. For further discussion, please contact Bill Holman at bholman@conservationfund.org or 919-224-9312.

Sincerely,

Bret Baronak, Carolina Thread Trail
Charlie Brady, Blue Ridge Conservancy
Jack Brown, Northwest N.C. Mountain Bike Alliance
Scott Carpenter, Burke County
Kate Dixon, Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail
Allison Glackin, Connect Buncombe
Doug Hattaway, Connect Enka
Beth Heile, Friends of the Valdese Rec
Bill Holman, The Conservation Fund
Judge Bob Hunter, Friends of Fonta Flora State Trail
Sarwat Khattak, Triangle Off-Road Cyclists
Andrew Kota, Foothills Conservancy of N.C.

Bart Landess, Catawba Lands Conservancy
Jason McDougald, Camp Grier-Tanawha Adventures-G5 Trail Collective
Palmer McIntyre, Piedmont Legacy Trails & Piedmont Land Conservancy
Fritz Neal, Piedmont Fat Tire Society
Kieran Roe, Conserving Carolina
Craig Ruhland, Pisgah Area SORBA.
Sarah Sanford, East Coast Greenway Alliance
Noel Turner, Southern Appalachian Biking Assn.
Rusty Tysor, Elkin Valley Trails Association
Brayton Willis, Brunswick County Branch, NAACP

Cc: Susi H. Hamilton, Secretary, N.C. Department of Natural & Cultural Resources
Eric Boyette, Secretary, N.C. Department of Transportation
Anthony M. Copeland, Secretary, N.C. Department of Commerce
Reid Wilson, Chief Deputy Secretary, N.C. Department of Natural & Cultural Resources
Julie White, Deputy Secretary, Intermodal Transportation, N.C. Department of Transportation
Christopher Chung, CEO, Economic Development Partnership of N.C.
John Fullwood, Interim Director, N.C. Division of Parks & Recreation
Heather Hildebrandt, Interim Director, Integrated Mobility Division, N.C. Department of Transportation
Wit Tuttell, Vice President, Visit North Carolina
Amy Allison, Director, N.C. Outdoor Recreation Industry Office
Scott Crocker, Manager, N.C. Trails Program
Tom Weaver, Chairman, N.C. Trails Committee
Neal Lewis, Chairman, N.C. Parks and Recreation Trust Fund Authority

ATTACHMENT #1: Proposal to Enhance the N.C. Trails Program to Complete North Carolina's State Trail System

The N.C. Trails Program (NCTP) is an existing program within the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation that provides technical support for trail planning and design and administers a federal grant program known as the Recreational Trails Program.

We recommend that NCTP be enhanced so that it can provide support for North Carolina trails similar to which the federal government has effectively provided on a national level through its National Trail System Program:

1. For National Trails,¹ which are similar in concept to our State Trails, the federal strategy depends on a partnership between a federal agency and a nonprofit for all 30 trails in the system. Creating a successful, long-distance trail is not primarily a land management task. Instead, the primary tasks are to build partnerships, inspire others, and promote a shared community vision. The federal agency and nonprofits bring their unique strengths and work together under a memorandum of agreement (MOA), and enter into cost-share agreements to help fund the nonprofits' work on projects of mutual interest.
2. The federal government provides funding to help build and maintain National, regional and local trails.² In North Carolina, these federal funds are distributed through a grant program run by NCTP.

The following enhancements would allow NCTP to provide needed resources and leadership to complete the North Carolina Trail System (**structure and programs of the existing NCTP are bolded**):

- 1) The NCTP would be led by an Assistant Director of State Trails.
- 2) **As it is today, the NCTP would be advised by a seven-member citizen N.C. Trails Committee, appointed by the Secretary of N.C. Department of Natural and Cultural Resources.**
- 3) The NCTP would administer the following programs:
 - a) **Oversee State Trails**
 - i) Each official State Trail would receive \$150,000 in funding annually for planning, design, volunteer management, promotion, administration and other similar activities.
 - ii) Enter into Memorandums of Agreement with a nonprofit partner for each of the State Trails,
 - iii) Work with the nonprofit partner to develop a 3- to 5-year plan for development of each State Trail,
 - iv) Enter into Cost Share Agreements with each nonprofit so that it can undertake needed tasks for development of the trail,
 - v) Assess progress and adjust plans and funding as needed.
 - b) **Designate completed sections of State Trails**

¹ National Trails include 11 Scenic Trails like the Appalachian and Pacific Crest and 19 Historic Trails like the Lewis and Clark and Selma to Montgomery. Like N.C. State Trails, National Trails are legislatively designated and funded.

² The federal funding source is called the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) within the Federal Highway Administration. The source of money is gas taxes paid by riders of off-road vehicles, and it is distributed among all 50 states, each of which runs a program to grant the funds for local and state projects.

- c) Administer Grant Programs
 - i) State grant program for natural surface trail design, environmental assessment, construction and repair with priority for official State Trails:
 - ii) **Federal RTP grant program (approximately \$1.6 million per year) that can fund State, regional and local trail projects.**
- d) **Design and oversee construction of trails in State Parks.**
- e) Support trail development in North Carolina
 - i) **Provide technical trail advice to local and other state government agencies,**
 - ii) **Serve as clearing house for information about trails (e.g., through a website, conferences and meetings)**