Benefits of Greenways

A multi-objective greenway system for Mecklenburg County can address and resolve many community issues that affect the future environmental and economic health of the County. Greenways have been implemented by other communities to control flooding, improve water quality, protect wetlands, conserve habitat for wildlife, and buffer adjacent land uses. Greenways typically incorporate varying types and intensity of human use, including trails for recreation and alternative transportation, and passive and active park facilities, including open play fields. Greenways have also been shown to increase the value of adjacent private properties as an amenity to residential and commercial developments.

Flood Control Benefits
Greenways preserve wooded open spaces along creeks and streams which absorb flood waters and filter pollutants from storm water. Flooding has historically been a significant problem in many parts of Mecklenburg County. In some areas, buildings and land uses have encroached into flood prone areas. By designating floodplains as greenways, the encroachments can be better managed, and in some cases, replaced with linear open spaces that serve as an amenity to local residents and businesses as well as providing important flood water storage capacity.

As a flood control measure, greenway corridors serve as a primary storage zone during periods of heavy rainfall. The protected floodplain can also be used during non-flood periods for other activities, including recreation and alternative transportation. In conjunction with existing Charlotte-Mecklenburg floodplain management policies, recommendations, and programs, greenway lands can be established as development occurs.

The expense associated with the establishment of the greenway system can be offset by the savings realized in reduced flood damage claims. Additionally, for those residents who are required to purchase flood insurance, implementation of a community-wide greenway system in Mecklenburg County is likely to result in reduced flood insurance rates.

Water Quality Benefits
Greenway corridors also serve to improve the surface water quality of local rivers and creeks. The floodplain forests and wetlands contained within greenway corridors filter pollutants from storm water. These pollutants are not removed if storm water is collected.
in pipes and discharged directly into local streams. Improving surface water quality in streams and creeks not only benefits local residents, but also numerous forms of wildlife that depend on creeks for their habitat.

The Surface Water Improvement and Management (SWIM) initiative was established by the Mecklenburg County Department of Environmental Protection in November 1996. The program’s objective is to improve the surface waters in Mecklenburg County and to restore the usability of the creeks. Growth is occurring at a high rate in the southern watersheds of the County, which has led to the degradation of water quality in local creeks. Similar growth is also occurring in the north and west watersheds of Mecklenburg County, which discharge into the County’s primary drinking water supply, Mountain Island Lake. Greenways and the SWIM initiative will help to improve water quality within these watersheds of Mecklenburg County by protecting and promoting stream side buffers that will filter pollutants from overland runoff.

**Transportation Benefits**

In past years, most American communities have grown in a sprawling, suburban form as a result of dependence on the automobile as the sole means of transportation. Americans have abandoned some traditional forms of transportation (such as passenger train service) and have been slow to improve other forms of transportation (bicycle and pedestrian networks, bus systems, and local train service). In order to provide relief from congested streets and highways in Mecklenburg County, future transportation planning and development should be concentrated on providing a choice in mode of travel to local residents. These mode choices should offer the same benefits and appeal currently offered by the automobile: efficiency, safety, comfort, reliability and flexibility.

Greenway corridors throughout Mecklenburg County can serve as extensions of the roadway network, offering realistic and viable connections between origins and destinations such as work, schools, libraries, parks, shopping areas, and tourist attractions. Greenway-based bikeways and walkways are most effective for short travel distances. National surveys by the Federal Highway Administration have shown that Americans are willing to walk as far as two miles to a destination and bike as far as five miles. It is conceivable that destinations can be linked to multiple origins throughout the County with a combination of off-road trails and on-road bicycle and pedestrian facilities. As stated in the 2015 Plan for Mecklenburg County, “the overall transportation goal for Charlotte-Mecklenburg is to develop an efficient, effective, safe, and interrelated transportation system that includes roads, mass transit, aviation, rail, bicycle, and pedestrian ways and related facilities needed for mobility in a rapidly growing urban...
region." The greenway system will be linked to improvements that will be made to bicycling, sidewalk and transit systems.

**Air Quality Benefits**
Greenways as alternative transportation corridors can serve to reduce traffic congestion, helping to improve local air quality. Offering viable alternative transportation choices through greenways will encourage people to bicycle and walk more often, especially on short trips, thereby reducing traffic congestion and automobile emissions.

The 1970 Clean Air Act calls for federal, state and local governments to reduce ozone levels to what is believed to be a safe level. The level has been lowered to 0.08 parts-per-million (ppm) averaged over an eight hour period. Currently, Mecklenburg County is not a non-attainment area and meets the requirements of the Clean Air Act. However, air quality monitoring shows that levels of air pollutants, such as ozone, are increasing.

Cars and trucks are the key contributors of ozone pollution in Mecklenburg County, producing 68% of the ozone. Factories and power plants only contribute approximately 4% of the ozone pollution. The number of ozone “alert” days in 1998 exceeded the number of ozone “alert” days in 1997 by 800 percent.

**Plant and Animal Habitat Benefits**
Greenway corridors serve as habitat for many species of plants and wildlife. These corridors provide essential food sources and access to water. Greenway corridors in Mecklenburg County function as primary migratory corridors for aquatic, avian and terrestrial wildlife, serving to help maintain the integrity of plant and animal gene pools. Some wildlife biologists have extolled greenways as future “gene-ways” and determined that migration routes are essential to maintaining healthy wildlife populations. Greenways can also serve as “gene-ways” for plant species which migrate with changes in climate and habitat. These “gene-ways” often follow river and stream corridors that have long served as transportation routes for animals and humans. Greenways in Mecklenburg County can be targeted as a primary habitat and breeding ground for many species of plants and animals. Programs can be established to not only protect the valuable existing forested and wetland areas of the County, but also to reclaim and restore streams to support higher quality habitat.
Economic Benefits

Greenways offer numerous economic benefits to Mecklenburg County, including higher real property values, increased tourism and recreation related revenues, and cost savings for public services. Greenways have been shown to increase the value of adjacent properties by as much as 5 to 20 percent. For example, within a new development in Apex, North Carolina, new lots situated on greenways were priced $5,000 higher than comparable lots off the greenway.

In Charlotte, national builders typically charge premiums ranging from $1000 to $5000 for $120,000-$200,000 homes bordering open space and greenways.

Many home buyers and corporations are looking for real estate that provides direct access to public and private greenway systems. Greenways are viewed as amenities by residential, commercial and office park developers who, in turn, are realizing higher rental values and profits. American LIVES, a Real Estate Research Firm, completed a national study of the top reasons that people choose their new home. Walking and biking paths are viewed as extremely important to 74% of buyers nationally. The Crosland Land Company, Charlotte, NC, surveyed 800 new and older Charlotte area homebuyers in 1993 and found that walking/biking paths that meander was the second most important amenity to buyers across all price points and buyer types. Additionally, greenways in Mecklenburg County can also save local tax dollars by utilizing strategies for managing community storm water and placing into productive use landscapes that would not normally be developed for community uses.

The 2015 Plan for Mecklenburg County states that Mecklenburg County has a strong record of economic vitality and new jobs. Greenways will enhance the quality of life in Mecklenburg County and ensure long term economic viability. Tourism is currently ranked as the number one economic force in the world. In several states, regional areas, and localities throughout the nation, greenways have been specifically created to capture the tourism potential of a regional landscape or cultural destination. The State of Missouri, for example, spent $6 million to create the 200-mile KATY Trail, which, in its first full year of operation, generated travel and tourism expenditures of more than $6 million. Orange County, Florida spent $2 million to create the 16-mile West Orange Greenway and expects to realize a complete return on its investment in the first year of operation through the economic revitalization of the small towns that lie along the trail's route.
Health and Recreation Benefits

Greenways encourage more people to walk or bike to nearby destinations. Studies have shown that as little as 30 minutes a day of moderate-intensity exercise (such as bicycling, walking, or in-line skating) can significantly improve a person’s mental and physical health and prevent certain diseases. Providing opportunities for participation in these outdoor activities close to where people live and work is an important component of promoting healthy lifestyles for Mecklenburg County residents.

In 1987, the President’s Commission on Americans Outdoors released a report that profiled the modern pursuit of leisure and defined the current quality of life for many Americans. Limited access to outdoor resources was cited as a growing problem throughout the nation. The Commission recommended that a national system of greenways would provide all Americans with access to linear open space resources.

The proposed greenway system for Mecklenburg County can be developed to complement the community’s existing parks and open space system. Trail systems will be developed not only for alternative transportation, but also to serve as primary recreation and fitness resources.

Cultural Benefits

Greenways can enhance local culture and protect many of the historic resources in Mecklenburg County. Successful greenway projects across the United States have served as new “main streets” where neighbors meet, children play, and community groups gather to celebrate. For cities and towns large and small, greenways have become a cultural asset and focal point for community activities. Some communities sponsor “greenway days” to celebrate the outdoors and local traditions. Various walking and running events are also held on greenways to support charity or to extend traditional sporting events. Many civic groups adopt segments of greenways for clean-up, litter removal and environmental awareness programs. Some greenways, like San Antonio’s Riverwalk, are the focal point not only for community activities but also for economic development.

The richness and diversity of Mecklenburg County’s historic resources are represented by numerous National Register of Historic Places and locally significant sites and historic districts. The interpretation of historic and archeological sites along greenways can serve to increase the awareness and appreciation of Mecklenburg County’s rich history. Greenways can also be a vehicle to provide controlled public access to important cultural sites in a manner that promotes preservation and enhances interpretive opportunities.
Safety Benefits

Many Americans are concerned with crime. Some of the most successful deterrents to criminal activity have involved increased neighborhood awareness by citizens and participation in community watch programs. Greenways have proven to be an effective tool to encourage local residents to participate in neighborhood watch programs. Some greenways have even been developed as part of efforts to deter criminal activity in a neighborhood.

As a recreation resource, alternative transportation corridor, or area where fitness activities can take place, most greenways provide a much safer and more user-friendly resource than other linear corridors, such as local roads. Greenways typically attract local residents who use the facility frequently and create an environment that is virtually self-policing. Crime statistics and reports from law enforcement officials have shown that parks and greenways are typically land uses with the lowest incident of reported criminal activity. According to national crime statistics, on average, a person is more likely to be raped, robbed or assaulted on a street, in a parking lot, or inside their home than in a park (Statistical Abstract of the United States 1988-1992). Additionally, out of 372 trails included in a recent study by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, only 3 percent of the trails reported experiencing any type of major crime (in 1995 and 1996).

A December 1997 Crime Risk study was completed by a UNC-Charlotte graduate student, Shane Nixon, that researched crime risks along the Mallard Creek Greenway and adjacent properties. Using information supplied by the district police department, the study showed that Mallard Creek Greenway and adjacent properties had a total of eight crimes in three years. When compared on a square mile basis per year, the Mallard Creek Greenway and adjacent properties had a crime rate of 13.0 offenses per square mile whereas the local police district area had approximately 24.7 offenses per square mile. Compared to Mecklenburg County, which had a crime rate of 95.7 offenses per square mile, the Mallard Creek Greenway and adjacent properties have a very low crime rate. This study concluded that people that lived along the greenway were at less risk for crime.
Greenways also improve the safety of their users by providing off-road facilities for bicyclists and pedestrians that are much safer than the roadways. Nationally, over 5,000 pedestrians are killed every year on streets. Sixteen percent of those fatalities are children. A 1998 study by the Surface Transportation Policy Project identified Charlotte, NC as the 10th most dangerous place in America for pedestrians. Recently, a South Mecklenburg High School cross country runner was hit and killed by an automobile while training and a jogger was critically injured in Dilworth by a hit and run driver. These tragic events can be avoided in the future by supporting greenway development to provide connections between existing greenways and schools, parks, businesses, and neighborhoods.