Firefly Trail

Local Action Committee (LAC)

Mission Statement and Information Packet.

**Firefly Local Action Committees (LACs)**

**Mission Statement**

Approved by the FTI Board of Directors , Nov. 21, 2019

In order to mobilize and facilitate the efforts of local supporters of the Firefly Trail in the communities along the trail corridor, the Board of Directors of the Firefly Trail Inc. (FTI) seeks to organize Local Action Committees composed of local residents in each trail community. In addition, the FTI board has retained a Trail Development Coordinator (TDC) to support and facilitate the efforts of each local committee as well as to coordinate the work of the various LACs along the trail corridor.

The Varied Missions of LACs: The key focus of each LAC varies depending on whether funding to build the trail has yet been secured.

1. Before Funding: Before funding is assured, the main mission of the LACs is to encourage and facilitate the building of the trail, with the central objective of building enough popular support so that elected officials will feel comfortable voting to use public funds for construction.

2. After Funding: On the other hand, once funding to build the trail is secure, and still more after the trail is completed, the LAC in that area should turn its attention to encouraging local use of the trail as well as facilitating local involvement in its maintenance and development as a public resource.

LAC’s and Public Officials: The work of the LACs, both before and after completion of the trail, must be guided by a clear understanding that the support of local and state government officials is absolutely essential to building, developing, and maintaining the trail. The role of the LACs is to advocate for and enhance popular support for the trail so that officials at every stage of trail development can support the trail without undue political risk. There must be no confusion among LAC members that the relevant officials have final decision-making authority with respect to the trail.

Rail-trails and the Firefly Trail, an Introduction

By Mark Ralston, President

Firefly Trail, Inc. (FTI)

*We encourage Firefly Trail LAC members to read this briefing with care. It will not only answer many question you may have about the trail, it will also be great preparation so you can answer questions from neighbors and friends.*

 *--- The FTI Board of Directors*

**Background about rail-trails:**

The modern American trail movement has deep roots, extending back at least as far as 1921 when Benton MacKaye began rallying support for his vision of what is now the iconic Appalachian Trail – a footpath from Georgia to Maine along the spine of the Appalachian Mountains. He envisioned "the AT" and other trails as a place for people who live in increasingly urban, congested and stressful environments to connect with the outdoors, their friends, their faith, other people, and their inner selves. His concept spread in the 1950s and 60s when roads, trucks and personal cars siphoned passengers and cargo away from railroads. As railroad companies began closing less-profitable lines, a few communities saw the opportunity to repurpose abandoned corridors for walking, bicycling and other non-motorized uses. By the 1980s, enough communities were converting abandoned railroad corridors into trails that advocates saw the possibilities for a unified, international movement and founded Rails-to-Trails Conservancy on Feb. 1, 1986. More than 23,000 miles of rail-trails now serve millions of people each year in the United States alone, with trails in every state.

Rail-trails are very different from wilderness trails like the Appalachian Trail. Trains – which use steel wheels on steel rails – cannot climb steep grades or handle tight curves. That means trails built on abandoned railroad corridors have gentle grades – rarely more than 3 percent – and wide turns. These attributes make them perfect for people who are bicycling, walking, running, skating, pushing a stroller, or enjoying the outdoors in a wheelchair. Some trails also permit horses and skiers. Trails in urban and suburban areas often become highly valued as commuter corridors, allowing people to get to work, school, dining or shopping without a car.

Because they are built for a variety of uses, rail-trails tend to be wide (8-10 feet in most places) and many are paved. Many rail-trails take advantage of bridges, trestles, tunnels and other structures the railroads built, eliminating the need to climb over hills or drop down into valleys.

But the most valuable attribute of rail-trails is that they are separated from roads and do not allow motor vehicles. Trail users are able to enjoy the safety of being removed from car and truck traffic, and also enjoy other benefits of not being on the road, including cleaner air, less noise, more shade and more attractive scenery. As a result, rail-trails are heavily used, especially when they connect neighborhoods with each other and with destinations such as schools, workplaces, parks, churches, and retail centers. Longer rail trails may connect multiple towns, counties, and cities.

Safety, connectivity, and easy grades make rail-trails attractive not only for local residents but for tourists. Whether users live a few yards away or are from another state, trails bring foot- and bicycle-traffic to retailers and employers, enhancing economic opportunities, and boost the appeal of areas close to the trail for residential and business uses. These features make rail-trails into powerful tools for economic development and, even more importantly, building a sense of community. Traveler's Rest, S.C., is a good example. According to city officials, before the Swamp Rabbit Trail and its connection to downtown Greenville was completed in 2008, there were 60 empty storefronts in Traveler's Rest and nine open businesses. As of late 2019, the town has enjoyed a complete turn-around, with 60 open businesses and just nine empty storefronts.

**The Firefly Trail**

The Firefly Trail will be Northeast Georgia's first long trail, stretching some 39 miles from Union Point to Athens. Following the historic corridor of the Georgia Railroad Athens Branch – partially abandoned in 1984 and fully abandoned in 2001 – it will connect Athens-Clarke, Greene and Oglethorpe counties and the cities of Union Point, Woodville, Maxeys, Crawford, Arnoldsville, Winterville and Athens. Two elementary schools are within easy walking distance and one middle school lies close to the route. Numerous churches, businesses and residential areas line the trail route, along with several major manufacturing interests. The west end lies close to downtown Athens and the University of Georgia.

According to an economic impact assessment conducted in 2016 by the Georgia Tech Institute of Technology for the Georgia Department of Transportation, when finished, the Firefly Trail will attract an estimated 1.1 million users per year and will have an annual economic impact of some $14.7 million.

The Firefly Trail will consist of a hardened, multi-use surface that will be 8-10 feet wide in most places, but 12-14 feet wide in places that are likely to get especially heavy usage, such as the Dudley Park area in Athens. Because the Georgia Railroad placed the corridor on a divide between river systems, the trail crosses only the North Oconee River and Trail Creek, both within half a mile of downtown Athens. Additional bridges carry the trail over Poplar and Peter streets in Athens and also will cross North Rhodes Street in Union Point. Our hope is to include unpaved parallel side trails in many areas for mountain biking, horseback riding and runners who prefer natural surfaces to pavement.

Here is the status of the trail as of December 2019:

* Athens: 0.8 miles of 14-foot-wide concrete trail is open from East Broad Street to Old Winterville Road. This stretch of trail connects two components of the Athens-Clarke County Greenway Network to provide nearly 7 miles of paved multipurpose trail from Sandy Creek Nature Center to College Station Road.
* Maxeys: about 0.7 mile of asphalt trail has been laid and work is underway to complete installation, build an additional 0.4-mile of trail, and add amenities such as an off-road parking area, signage and a rest area.
* Winterville: construction has started on a 1.1-mile segment from Five Points to near the Athens-Clarke/Oglethorpe County line.
* Union Point: final planning and right-of-way acquisition is in progress for a 0.6-mile concrete "Model Mile" from downtown to Union Point Elementary School. Discussions to extend the trail north and connect to Maxeys have begun.
* Local Action Committees, which help governments build support and funding for local portions of the trail, are in place in Greene County and southern Oglethorpe County, and are in development in Athens-Clarke and northern Oglethorpe counties.
* Athens-Clarke County voters in 2017 approved $16.7 million in Transportation Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax funds to complete all 8 miles of trail that will traverse ACC. In addition to the active construction in Winterville, ACC is working on bridging Trail Creek and connecting the existing segment to the Winterville segment. The Mayor and Commission have publicly committed to completing the connection in the shortest timeframe possible, even if the unified government must use asphalt or aggregate for part of the distance as a lower-cost alternative to concrete.

The ultimate goal is to pave the entire trail – preferably concrete for its durability and limited maintenance costs – for the entire length. In addition, the Firefly Trail is a catalyst in a broader, statewide trail movement that is raising interest in trails that someday could connect the Firefly with destinations such as Lexington, Greensboro, Madison, Watkinsville, Sandersville and even Savannah. This activity aligns perfectly with the Mission of Firefly Trail, Inc.:

*To develop the Firefly Trail along the historic Athens Branch railroad corridor of the Georgia Railroad as the first segment of a multi-purpose regional trail system that complements local community initiatives.*