

**Minutes of the Alabama Trails Commission
and Advisory Board Joint Meeting**

August 26, 2020
11:00 AM

(via web conference)

Alabama Trails Commission Attendees

Dr. Graham Sisson, Chair
Amy Rauworth
Phillip West
Debbie Quinn
Sonya Baker
Grey Brennan
Greg Lein
Jonathan Hester
Jeff Pruitt, Vice-Chair
Johnny Smith, Secretary
Allen Armstrong

Advisory Board Attendees

Nisa Miranda, Chair
Jim Felder, Secretary
Francesca Gross
Steve Newton, Vice-Chair
Jason Dockery
Dr. Mark Wilson
Odell Sanders
Josh Burnett (Bucky Edmondson proxy)
Josh Yerby
Tim King
Larry “Chip” Dixon
Ken Thomas
Maeci Martin Walker
Elizabeth Lawlor (Maeci Martin Walker proxy, joined later in meeting)
Dr. Vini Nathan
Marie Bostick

Associates & Visitors

Brian Rushing – UACED
Condy Ragland – Alabama Trails Foundation
Jeanne Jackson – Alabama Trails Foundation

Lisa Booher – Birmingham Ultra Trail Society
Sundae Ragland – Alabama Department of Transportation
Angie Shugart – Little River Waterkeeper

Welcome and Introductions

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this meeting was conducted via web conference. Dr. Graham Sisson (Chair) called the meeting to order at 11:00AM and a role was called. A quorum was present for both the Alabama Trails Commission (ATC) and Advisory Board (AB).

Approval of Minutes

Dr. Sisson asked for the ATC to make a motion for the approval of the March 18, 2020 meeting minutes (EXHIBIT A). Debbie Quinn made a motion for approval. Jeff Pruitt seconded. Motion was approved unanimously.

ATC Chair's Report

- **AB Action Item: Officer Re-Election.** With a quorum of the AB present, Dr. Sisson asked for a motion from the AB to re-elect the AB officers, with Nisa Miranda as Chair, Steve Newton as Vice-Chair, and Jim Felder as Secretary (EXHIBIT B). Maeci Martin Walker made a motion for approval. Mark Wilson seconded. Motion was approved unanimously.
- **AB Action Item: Approval of AB Bylaws Changes.** Nisa Miranda asked for a motion from the AB to approve changes to the AB Bylaws, explaining that these changes were made to align this document with the 2016 legislation, extend the terms of appointment, and articulate the working relationship with the ATC and Alabama Trails Foundation (ATF). Dr. Wilson asked to change the word “chairman” to a gender neutral “chair” in the document. Pending this change, Tim King made a motion for approval. Jim Felder seconded. Motion was approved unanimously.
- **ATC Action Item.** Graham asked for a motion of the ATC to approve the formation of a Nominating Committee from both the ATC and AB to work to fill vacancies on both bodies. Phillip West made a motion for approval. Jason Dockery seconded. Motion was approved unanimously.
- **ATC, AB, and ATF Recap.** Graham reviewed the meeting of the groups, which took place on August 19 to discuss refocusing the efforts of the organizations on the legislative mandate of facilitating a statewide network of interconnected trails. The group discussed what such a network would look like, what 3-5 year goals should be established to advance that effort, and what near-term objectives and actions should be established to achieve goals. Goals were (1) Develop an inventory of existing trails, (2) Create a conceptual plan identifying feasible connections, and (2) Completion of a pilot project to demonstrate best practices for long-distance trail development, operation, and utilization by nearby communities to support trail tourism.
- **Great American Outdoors Act.** Graham reviewed the legislation recently signed into law by President Trump that will significantly enhance funding to address deferred

maintenance on federal lands and for the stateside competitive grants that fund recreational facility development.

- *Initiatives Status.* Graham asked Brian Rushing to briefly review highlights of developments on rail-trail projects that the ATC has been supporting through technical assistance (Exhibit C).

Alabama Trails Foundation

Jeanne Jackson, Vice-Chair of the ATF, shared recent activities of the organization. The ATF conducted webinars on August 4 and 11 that were intended for trail friends groups and nonprofits. The first webinar featured Shannon Preston, with the Alabama Association of Nonprofits, who presented on the benefits and considerations of forming a nonprofit corporation as well as best practices for nonprofit operation. The webinar also featured Kate Dixon, with North Carolina's Mountains to Sea Trail, who talked about how her organization is structured and how it works with state agencies, landowners, and volunteers to develop and sustainably manage 1,100 miles of trail that connects the Smokey Mountains to the Outer Banks. The second webinar was primarily focused on partnerships and featured Carolyn Buck, Red Rock Trail Coordinator with the Freshwater Land Trust, who talked about how her organization works with local governments to build and operate trails on land trust properties. This webinar also featured Walt Hutchinson, with Cherokee Alpine Trail Association, who presented on how his organizations trains and utilizes volunteers to maintain their extensive network of trails around Lake Martin. Mrs. Jackson also provided an update on the organization's Pinhoti Trail Initiative project, sharing that they are presently focused on work at Flag Mountain to restore the observation tower, which will make it accessible to the public. This work should be completed in 2021. The ATF will use the tower restoration as a tangible accomplishment that will help in fundraising communications to enable implementation of the first phases of the Pinhoti Trail enhancement. Jeanne also shared that the ATF continues to work on statewide diversification of the ATF board.

Statewide Outdoor Recreation Plan

Brian Rushing gave a brief review of the status of the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) that the UA Center for Economic Development and UA Center for Business and Economic Research are conducting on behalf of ADECA (Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs). Brian reviewed the purpose of the SCORP, highlighting how it informs the funding decisions under the Land and Water Conservation Fund grant program and aligns the efforts of multiple agencies and organizations to address outdoor recreation issues of statewide importance. The SCORP will also include a State Trails Plan component, which will help inform funding decisions under the Recreational Trails Program. Brian reviewed the formation of the SCORP Workgroup, which is steering project development. He shared that UACED has developed survey instruments to capture an inventory of outdoor recreation facilities, ascertain challenges providers face in delivering outdoor recreation services, and determine resident demand for outdoor recreation. The SCORP Team will be utilizing a research panel to obtain resident demand data, which represents a first for Alabama and among the first times in the country such a method has been used to update a SCORP. The provider surveys are also a first for the state. The SCORP team will engage key stakeholders this fall to begin informing the update of Alabama's Outdoor Recreation Strategy to identify issues of statewide importance and

strategies to address those issues. Later, the team will invite the public to participate in a survey to provide their input into the process and then will revisit the conversation with key stakeholders to define goals and objectives. The hope is to have all data obtained and analyzed in the spring of 2021 and to deliver the final document to ADECA in the fall of 2021. The final document will be intended for use by both funders as well as planners and facility operators to guide decision-making.

Presentations on Trail-Related Work

- **Chip Dixon** (U. S. Army Corps of Engineers) gave a review of his organization and their prominent role in delivering water-based and land-based outdoor recreation in the United States and here in Alabama. Chip reviewed the USACE recreation and mitigation land holdings in the state and specifically the public lands, waters, and facilities available in the Alabama-Tombigee project areas. Most trails within recreation areas are four miles or less. Many USACE sites are on the Alabama Birding Trail. Free hunting is available by permit. All information on recreation facilities and permitted activities are available at USACE's website. In Chip's project area, they have seen between a 14% and 19% uptick in visitation during the Covid pandemic.
- **Amy Rauworth** (Lakeshore Foundation & NCHPAD) gave an overview of her organization and their role in making outdoor recreation and trails accessible. The Lakeshore Foundation has taken part in providing a grant to establish an Advisory Committee with Land Trust Alliance on inclusive health and disability to amplify knowledge about these subjects among conservation, recreation providers, and users. Currently, they are conducting a needs assessment survey about how they can design community centered conservation models that include accessibility. Lakeshore has partnered with the Blue Star Families organization to work with active military families to build community support and connectedness with communities. Specifically, Lakeshore is providing training to Blue Star Families leadership and providing technical assistance around accessibility for veterans with disabilities. Through a partnership with the Wounded Warrior Foundation and the VA, Lakeshore is providing outdoor recreation kits that will be distributed to wounded warriors in four major cities. These kits provide equipment to assist service members with disabilities in engaging in outdoor recreation. Locally, Lakeshore is providing fall programs to the families Lakeshore serves. Two Thursdays each month they are leading field trips to discover new accessible trails in the Birmingham area and are offering recumbent bikes and hand bikes, to explore these trails. Lakeshore continues to support the 100 AL Miles challenge through video production and website management. They are also partnering with the Alabama Department of Public Health on the "Move Your Way" statewide campaign to promote physical activity and nutrition and use of public lands for those with disabilities.

Round Table Discussion About Current Events & Opportunities

- Jeff Pruitt observed an uptick in the attendance at Montesano State Park and Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge since Covid and an increase in trash in these areas.

- Debbie said Gulf State Park was overrun with people during the spring. Phillip said that March to April they had 30,000-40,000 unique trips along the Bald Eagle Trail in Gulf State Park.
- Greg Lien said that this will be a record year for visitation. Numbers in March and April were down due to stay at home order. In May through rest of the summer, every week was like the Fourth of July in attendance. Trails have been heavily used. The new OHV trail at Buck's Pocket is now open and has been well received. More OHV trail development will happen over the next year at Lakepoint State Park. State Parks has had no particular issues with respect to trail management during this time. There have been more rescues than normal due to new visitors that are unfamiliar with the terrain. This has been a particular issue at Oak Mountain.
- Grey Brennan confirmed that outdoor attractions are doing better than normal, but that indoor tourism sites are suffering tremendously. Overall, tourism is down, though. The Tourism Department is moving toward a marketing approach of "plan your trip to Alabama," emphasizing planning for when you feel comfortable to travel. Some visitors to Alabama are discovering outdoor places that they may not have known about otherwise. The Tourism Department will likely continue to be the tourism theme in 2021 if the Covid situation doesn't improve.
- Odell Sanders shared that the National Forests has seen a huge increase in visitors. They had to shut down campgrounds for a short time due to the increased visitor pressure and challenges in keeping up with routine maintenance. They've seen more trash and vandalism particularly in dispersed recreation areas. Developed recreation areas managed by concessioners have doubled their revenue over last year.
- Josh Yerby announced Alabama Power's new website at <https://apcpreserves.com/>, which features the new trails available at The Preserves.
- Elizabeth Lawlor reviewed the need for communities to do more than just "estimate" the value of a corridor and then apply for federal funds because they may not be able to acquire the corridor with available funds. She encourages communities to coordinate with the railroad early on so that they have a realistic idea of the value. Nisa suggested offering a rails-to-trails webinar for communities interested in creating rail-trails and that Elizabeth could help with that learning opportunity. Elizabeth agreed that this would be a great idea and that we could combine a "How to Work with Rail Companies" with a rail-trail legal webinar that Brian is currently working to organize with the Rails-to-Trials Conservancy.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be on Wednesday December 2, 2020 at 10:00AM, and the location will be determined and confirmed via email.

The meeting adjourned at 1:08 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Brian Rushing