

Alabama Trails Commission and Advisory Board Joint Meeting
Auburn, Alabama
December 2, 2015
11:00 am

ATC Attendees

Debbie Quinn, Chair
Joshua Jones
Amy Rauworth, Secretary/Treasurer
Phillip West, Vice Chair
Dr. Richard Guthrie
Rebecca Fulks
Wesley Helton
Dr. Wayde Morse
Rob Grant (proxy for Greg Lein)
Jeffery A. Pruitt

ATCAB Attendees

Jack Williams
Jim Felder
Francesca Gross
Jason Dockery
Dr. Mark E. Wilson
Richard Martin
Erika Davis (proxy for Cindy Ragland)
Ike Lyon
Dr. John Jenson
Steve Newton

Guests

Brian Rushing, University of Alabama
James C. Adams, TVA
Donna Sands, Alabama Cooperative Extension Systems
Themika L. Sims, Alabama Cooperative Extension Systems
Emily Nichols, Alabama Cooperative Extension Systems
Tom Cosby
Mitch Carter

ADECA Recreation and Conservation Programs Staff

Maureen Neighbors
Crystal Davis

Debbie Quinn called the meeting to order at 11:05 a.m., and Commission, Advisory Board members, and guests introduced themselves.

Alabama Gateway to Appalachian Trail

Mr. Tom Cosby was introduced and provided a presentation on the Alabama Gateway to Appalachian Trail. Benton MacKaye, the founding father of the Appalachian Trail, wrote an article in 1921 titled "An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning" in which he described his vision of the trail. MacKaye described the trailway as a functioning service embodying three main necessities: (1) shelter and food (a series of camps and stores); (2) conveyance to and from the neighboring cities, by rail and motor; (3) the footpath or trail itself connecting the camps. According to "Trail Years" by Brian B. King, plans were adopted at the first Appalachian Trail Conference where the trail's "main line" would run an estimated 1,700 miles from Mt. Washington in New Hampshire to Cohutta Mountain in Georgia. Extensions were proposed northward to Katahdin in Maine and southward to Lookout Mountain in Tennessee and then to Birmingham, Alabama. According to Mr. Cosby, we would like the trail to end at Flagg Mountain. Hikers could then hike from Flagg Mountain to Springer Mountain. There exists the opportunity to become part of other trails. There are CCC stone structures at Flagg Mountain. It is the last mountain in the Appalachian chain upon which the coastal plain to the south can be seen.

There is only one brand leader in trails and it is the Appalachian Trail. It is the most famous with brand recognition. The question is, "Would the Appalachian Trail Conservancy ever agree to officially move the southern gateway to Alabama?" They have moved the southern terminus five times already. Dr. E.O Wilson coined the term biodiversity. Alabama is a very biodiverse state with 25 endemic species and the convergence of five physiographic zones.

The Appalachian Trail today is 2,100 miles long and runs from Katahdin in Maine to Springer Mountain in Georgia. The Alabama extension would increase the length of the trail by 335 miles.

Why do we care?

- Image – paradigm shift in the images/minds of others
- Creative Class – recruiting young tech savvy people to the state
- Economic Development/Tourism – Sylacauga is the closest large city to Flagg Mountain

The Appalachian Trail is the number one tourist attraction in New England. The question has arisen of who will maintain the trail. However, maintenance is already ongoing. The Appalachian Trail Conference has 600 trail workers.

The question is, how do we make the extension of the Appalachian Trail into Alabama a reality? The strategy includes: (1) continuing to buy trail corridors eliminating road walks and focusing on ridge tops (eliminate as many road walks along the Pinhoti as possible); (2) bring the Pinhoti trail signs to a top national standard to enhance the entire hiking experience; (3) bring the Pinhoti trail shelters to a top national park standard; (4) bring the Pinhoti trail bridges to a national park standard; (5) create a proper beginning point for the most famous hiking trail in the world; and, (6) win the battle from the bottom up - distribute a hiker medallion by the kiosk at Flagg Mountain for all starting through hikers to put on their backpacks to carry all the way to Katahdin.

Requests of the Alabama Trails Commission (ATC): (1) make the Pinhoti a top priority trail; (2) adopt the goal of securing Appalachian Trail status; (3) support trail standards and designate the Pinhoti as a hiking trail only; (4) work to win support for the Appalachian Trail goal and trail standards from all appropriate state and federal agencies; and, (5) communicate this to our key elected leaders and ask for their support.

Mr. Cosby will attempt to raise \$250,000 to accomplish these steps to build upgraded shelters and install signage and bridges along the Pinhoti. Part of what can be done now is plan, implement, and launch the medallion strategy.

The discussion of impact studies ensued and Jack Williams recommended that the Commission find a way to demonstrate and document the Economic Development impact of the Appalachian Trail extension to Alabama. It was proposed that the Commission approve a resolution in support of the extension and seek a resolution from the legislature for the same.

Debbie Quinn asked about the Alabama Appalachian Mountain Trail Commission (AAMTC) established by the state legislature in early 2010. Rob Grant indicated that the Commission was created but he was unaware of its status.

Ike Lyon mentioned that he worked for the Forest Service for two summers in college as the quasi leader over the youth conservation corps working on the Pinhoti trail. He mentioned his disbelief that the extension hasn't already occurred and recommended the Commission get behind the effort. Richard Martin agreed.

The smart play is to improve the Pinhoti trail, get it off road, implement the medallion idea and with time see what happens. Maybe in five or ten years under the best of circumstances, true negotiations can begin.

Phillip West posed the question that if the trail is maintained like the Appalachian Trail, wouldn't the Conservancy let Georgia and Alabama duke out which point was the southern terminus.

Steve Newton asked how many miles were road side which was answered with approximately 100 miles.

Debbie Quinn recommended the creation of a task force to work with Tom Cosby to bring something back to the board to vote on at the meeting in March. The task force should also research the status of the AAMTC. Jack Williams made the recommendation that if the AAMTC isn't functioning that the ATC prepare a resolution to dissolve the AAMTC and recommend the responsibilities be transferred to the ATC.

4H Graham Farm in Jackson County

Debbie Quinn introduced Themika L. Sims, Donna Sands, and Emily Nichols from the Alabama Cooperative Extension Systems (ACES). Handouts were provided to the meeting attendees. A presentation on the Graham Farm and Nature Center was conducted by Mr. Sims.

The Jackson County Extension Office is seeking assistance for the construction of a trail at Graham Farm and Nature Center. The 491 acre site was donated to Auburn University by the Graham family. The University agreed to accept the property only if ACES would maintain it. The goal for the property is to establish a model site using and demonstrating sound ecological and agricultural management practices for educational purposes. The Paint Rock River runs through the property and houses several endangered species.

A six inch main was installed on the property for running water. Future plans for the site include the construction of a pavilion, meeting space, kitchen, and classroom. Significant investments have already been made in the project. The Stewardship Committee is tasked with developing business plans for site development while the Program Committee determines which programs need to be in place.

The entire property is protected. Approximately 300 of the 491 acres is in a conservation easement. ACES hopes to enroll approximately 35 acres in the Wetlands Reserve Program offered by the United States Department of Agriculture. The program offers landowners the opportunity to protect, restore, and enhance wetlands on their property and establish long-term conservation and wildlife practices and protection.

The mission and vision of the Nature Conservancy was discussed. The Student Conservation Association, which deploys young people to work in parks and public lands and urban green spaces to make improvements and learn conservation and sustainability practices, will be utilized. There will be a dedication to Veterans' programs and intensive youth internships where participants will stay six months at a time.

Contributing agencies and partners were mentioned. Future plans include the construction of cabins, trails, and an ATV training site and activities to include canoeing and birding. Adult programs include animal science, water quality education, forest education, community

gardening, birding, and ATV safety. Youth programs include classroom in the forest, water quality education, community gardening, etc.

Jim Felder commented that Emily Nichols worked with him to develop the River Kids Program.

Debbie Quinn and Brian Rushing will meet with the ACES representatives to see if the Commission can assist with the project in any way and bring the information back to the ATC in the spring.

August 6 Meeting Minutes

Debbie Quinn asked if there were any changes that needed to be made to the minutes of the August 6 meeting. Corrections were noted and Ms. Quinn approved the minutes as read. She stated that if any other errors were detected they could be addressed at a later date.

Commission Chair Report

New Appointments/Legislation

Brian Rushing introduced Dr. Mark Wilson from the Jefferson County Health Department as a leader in Birmingham in advocating for preventative health. Dr. Wilson was appointed to the advisory board under the State Health Officer position. Dr. Wilson is connected to healthcare, community providers, and insurers. The position had been vacant for some time as the last individual appointed to this position retired.

Currently, members are eligible to serve for two years and then an additional two years. The new legislation would change that to four year appointments. Advisory board positions would be added to include a seat for Blue Cross Blue Shield, TVA, and PowerSouth.

Alabama Trails Foundation 501(c)3 Status

Brian Rushing, Francesca Gross, Tom Cosby, Merrill Stewart, Paul Kennedy, and Katheryn Corey have been working to determine how to sell the foundation to corporate sponsors. Debbie Quinn stated that this topic would be brought up again at a later time but that 501(c)3 status had been filed with the Feds.

Rebecca Fulks recommended utilizing a website where all private non-profits are located.

Recreational Trails Leadership Workshop Recap

Brian Rushing discussed the leadership workshop which was held in Anniston on October 15, 2015. Approximately 50 people attended and included operators, planners, funders, and user

groups. It was an opportunity to network and to see what the city of Anniston has done with respect to trails. The workshop included a demonstration of the Alabama Recreation Trails website, a presentation by the city of Anniston, and field trips at the end of the day. The workshop was well attended mostly by public employees. The next workshop will likely be held on a Saturday to accommodate user groups comprised of mostly volunteers. A survey was distributed and indicating a great need for information on funding sources, assistance with grant writing, and technical assistance on actual trail building. The event was a success and will likely be hosting another in the near future.

Debbie Quinn mentioned that in the past a conference was held every two years which required a tremendous amount of manpower. We are now considering hosting an intense one day workshop every six months instead.

State DOT Bike-Ped Plan

Rebecca Fulks discussed the five year transportation bill out of the house. She indicated that the plan was moving along and that they are attempting to get three good email addresses in each county. Unfortunately, some counties do not have a website. They are seeking input from individuals interested in bike-ped transportation. Most of the input to date has come from bike enthusiasts, the elderly population, real estate developers, the American Diabetes Association, and individuals interested in economic development. They are trying to reach out to the groups who serve the homeless and underserved population such as caseworkers at non-profits. An advisory committee was formed to try and reach people outside the Department of Transportation (DOT).

The goal is to determine effective places to have bike routes, sidewalks, or crosswalks on state highways. Traffic on these roadways is a huge consideration. There is a survey on the Alabama DOT website. To date over 1,500 responses have been received. One workshop will be held in each of the five Alabama DOT regions. The goal is to have the final plan completed and available to view by the summer. Anyone wishing to be on the mailing list can should contact Ms. Fulks.

Jim Felder stated that a plan had already been developed by individuals outside of Alabama. The Alabama DOT recognized that the plan was no good. Mr. Felder indicated that he was impressed by the interaction between the public and the Alabama DOT at the meetings. Bikers were upset about the repaving of roads with rumble strips, however, they are required by federal law. Communication is the key and that is what is occurring at these meetings.

Rebecca Fulks stated that engineers have to decide where the money will be spent. Safety is the number one concern followed by connectivity. The choices are difficult with the limited resources available for improvements.

Erika Davis asked about the result of the survey. Ms. Fulks indicated that will be the basis for the five meetings. The location of the survey was provided to attendees. Debbie Quinn stated

that she sent the survey to everyone when it first came out but would resend. Francesca Gross asked if this was the basis for the State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). Debbie explained that the SCORP fell under the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA). Ms. Gross mentioned that it sounded like data that would be beneficial in the development of the SCORP.

TAP Projects for 2016

Rebecca Fulks handed out the TAP application and provided an overview of the program. The deadline to apply is January 25, 2016, at 5:00 pm. TAP is an 80/20 competitive grant with a maximum grant amount of \$400,000. The application packet is very detailed and includes a list of ineligible items.

RTP Projects for 2016

Crystal Davis indicated that FY 2015 RTP grant announcements would be released in the near future. Amy Rauworth discussed the RTP application submitted by the Lakeshore Foundation.

Debbie Quinn asked Rob Grant to provide an update on State Parks. Mr. Grant explained that after several months of riding the budget roller coaster it was revealed that State Parks would be required to transfer \$3 million to the general fund. The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources planned to close five parks and reduce operations in three others to seasonal. Fortunately, local communities have voiced an interest in taking over the parks in Florala and Dallas County. At this time they are uncertain of what the budget will look like for 2017. At this time there are no plans for major renovations. The public has shown a lot of support for the parks.

Wesley Helton explained that last year the Governor tried to take a \$50 million bond issue at Gulf State Park which would result in \$8 million a year in profits. Once the bond was paid off, there would be a profit. They would take \$50 million off the BP settlement and move forward with the project having it complete by the time the Governor leaves office in 2019. This is a short term solution. What is needed for long term sustainability is for Gulf State Park to make money.

Debbie Quinn mentioned that one survey indicated that 94% were in favor of not letting the legislature take money from State Parks. Dr. Mark Wilson stated that they are advocating for an increase in the tobacco tax of at least \$1. It was raised by \$.25 and may be raised further.

Committee Organization & Planning

Brian Rushing stood in for Cheryl Morgan and explained that each committee put together its mission, goals, etc. The ad hoc Technical Assistance Committee is looking at ways to provide resources to anyone wanting to support a trail project. The platform is the website. They are working on a list of experts as well as a list of best practices and good examples.

Amy Rauworth explained that the Policy and Advocacy Committee goal is to support trails priorities, public lands, user groups, and leverage partnerships. The committee is in listening mode and welcomes any ideas.

Wayde Morse gave an update on the Research and Education Committee. The goals of the committee are dependent upon other projects. There is a state project on obesity focusing on access to healthy foods, nutrition education, and outdoor recreation. They are developing focus groups/needs assessments for each of the 14 counties included in the project. The next step is a survey which will be sent out in January or February 2016. The initial data will be presented at the March meeting. A web page will also be developed sometime this spring. Debbie Quinn indicated that she would send out an email requesting the biggest and most used trails to be listed in the survey. The response can be emailed to Wayde Morse or Mitch Carter. Brian Rushing indicated that they did poll for top trails from the commission.

Other Business

Brian Rushing discussed rail trail opportunities. The Gadsden rail trail is almost three miles long. Two segments of the line connect Black Creek to downtown. The property has been banked. The city hasn't acted upon it up to this point. Brian met with the mayor and his staff and persuaded them to make a low ball offer to Norfolk Southern for the lines. They are moving forward with making an offer.

The Wiregrass Trail project is a 43 ½ mile trail running through Andalusia in Covington County to Geneva in Geneva County. It will be the longest rail trail in Alabama. The project has received grant funds from the Alabama DOT in the amount of \$400,000 and \$400,000 from ADECA in Recreational Trails Program funds. They are looking to Forever Wild to bring the match and any additional funds needed to purchase the corridor. At this time they are researching how Forever Wild will be paid if the acquisition does take place. At the September 17, 2015, meeting, Forever Wild voted to move forward with the first appraisal. Sponsors are government entities that don't have the funds to pay for the acquisition so we are looking for a way to pay Forever Wild directly.

Alabama Recreation Trails Website

Updates are being made to the website to make it more responsive to users. Unless the URL is known you cannot find the website because there are very few links to it. Please talk to Brian Rushing if you are interested in having a link to the website from your organization's website.

Upcoming Events

Brian Rushing discussed the possibility of a gathering of conservation and recreation leaders to see if there is interest in developing a more comprehensive plan to help be a decision support tool. He tried to schedule the meeting a couple of times in the past without success and is going to try again in early spring.

There will be a leadership workshop scheduled in late spring possibly April or May in Tuscaloosa. It will likely be on a Saturday and more information will be provided as it develops.

Tourism on Events

Jim Felder mentioned that he attended the Toronto Outdoor Expo and almost everyone he spoke to knows about Alabama. He is going to put together a book on trails to try and get people on byways. If you would like your trail to be included please provide Mr. Felder with the trail information. They will go to print by the time that the next meeting takes place in the spring.

Next Meeting & Adjourn

The next meeting of the Trails Commission is scheduled for March 2, 2016, at 11:00 am in Montgomery. After the meeting we will walk over to the legislature and say hello.

The meeting adjourned at 1:29 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Crystal Davis