

Minutes of the Alabama Trails Commission
and Advisory Board Joint Meeting

Wednesday, December 7, 2022
10:00 AM

(via web conference)

Alabama Trails Commission Attendees

Amy Rauworth
Dr. Graham Sisson, Chair
Grey Brennan
Johnny Smith
Nisa Miranda
Phillip West
Robby Cantrell
Sonya Baker

Advisory Board Attendees

Bobby Whaley
Dr. Mark Wilson
Dr. Vini Nathan
Francesca Gross
Jared Carter
Jason Dockery
Josh Burnett
Josh Yerby
Marie Bostick
Natalie Norman
Nathan Wright
Tim King
Will O'Connor

Associates & Visitors

Brian Rushing – UACED
Tom Carruthers – Alabama Trails Foundation
John Jenson – Auburn University
Phillip Darden – IMBA / SORBA
Ryan Degraffenreid – Interested Citizen
Andrew Szymanski – Alabama Scenic River Trail

Welcome and Introductions

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, this meeting was conducted via web conference. Dr. Graham Sisson called the meeting to order at 10:00AM and called roll. A quorum was present for both the Alabama Trails Commission (ATC) and Advisory Board (AB). Dr. Sisson welcomed Robby Cantrell, who was appointed by the Governor as the representative of the Alabama Association of Regional Councils. Dr. Sisson thanked Jeff Pruitt (Robby's predecessor in this seat) for his many years of service.

Approval of Minutes

Dr. Sisson asked if there were any corrections or discussion regarding the February 16, 2022 (EXHIBIT A) and August 10, 2022 meeting minutes (EXHIBIT B). With no questions or discussion, he asked for a member to make a motion for the approval. Nisa Miranda made a motion for approval for the February 16, 2022 minutes and Sonya Baker seconded. With no discussion, a motion to adopt the minutes as written was approved unanimously. Mayor Johnny Smith made a motion for approval for the August 10, 2022 minutes and Amy Rauworth seconded. With no discussion, a motion to adopt the minutes as written was approved unanimously.

Executive Committee Report

Dr. Sisson reviewed that the ad hoc committees approved by the Alabama Trails Commission (ATC) at the February 16 meeting have worked over the course of 2022 to develop a set of recommendations to state leadership for how best to enhance trails as part of outdoor recreation development. This work involved research into best practices from other states and analysis of information presented in the 2021 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan. As part of this effort, the ATC and Advisory Board (AB) Executive Committee also secured input from the Alabama Trails Foundation (ATF). The executive leadership of the ATC, AB, and ATF gathered in October for a working meeting to review and discuss the draft document. The outcome of this effort is the current draft *Recommendations to the State for Enhancing Outdoor Recreation and Recreational Trails in Alabama* and presented in EXHIBIT C.

Dr. Sisson went on to make the following points:

- The Hoover Institution's 2021 report provides valuable context for understanding Alabama's historical underinvestment in outdoor recreation. The report asserts that building, sustaining, and administering new funding sources beyond the traditional "patchwork, project by project" approach can yield benefits for urban and rural areas as Alabama seeks to grow its innovation economy.
- We make the point in the draft recommendations document that recreational trails are an integral part of outdoor recreation. They help provide the quality-of-life amenities that people are seeking in our major metro areas and they create tourism access to Alabama's outstanding natural endowments in rural areas. Trails facilitate most nature-based outdoor recreational activities in some way.
- While the Hoover Institution's report focuses on the need for more physical infrastructure, we make the assertion that what outdoor recreation tourists are looking for are *experiences* that are dependent upon more than building new infrastructure. Positive experiences are created when we have well-maintained facilities, well-designed marketing, communications, and public information products, as well as public engagement programming that effectively inspires participation. Also, in order to support the development of these experiences and to enhance the local economic impact of outdoor recreation, it is important to have in place outreach and support services to assist communities in creating and sustaining high-impact initiatives and to expand small business development around outdoor recreation.
- The 2021 Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) is an important source of information about outdoor recreation and trail facility needs. These needs, along with Alabama's updated outdoor recreation strategy provide key insights for how best to focus attention and resources to affect impactful projects and programs. Additional "second-tier" analysis of SCORP data, which we demonstrate using trails in the draft document's "ATTACHMENT A," can be used to help identify priority opportunities for filling regional needs across the state.
- We present case study summaries of North Carolina and Arkansas, which are two states excelling at outdoor recreation economic development. They provide good examples of state-level funding

administrative structures that support outdoor recreation and trail development as well as programming, marketing, and business support programs.

- These case studies, along with the Hoover Institution's report, our own examination of Alabama's 2021 SCORP, and other research, inform our draft recommendations.

Francesca Gross made the following points:

- Our recommendations are for the state leadership to:
 - **Establish an outdoor recreation authority or utilize an existing nonprofit corporate entity** to undertake developing Alabama's outdoor recreation economy. This entity should also effectively develop private funding streams to leverage public dollars in support of outdoor recreation development;
 - **Create a governing board** to manage this entity with broad representation of organizations that have long-standing interests in outdoor recreation, conservation, and/or economic development; and that
 - **This Governing board should:**
 - Identify funding levels necessary to effectively advance outdoor recreation and trail development across the state;
 - Identify, recommend, and implement (as appropriate) new and sustained funding mechanisms for outdoor recreation and trail planning, development, and operation; and
 - Apportion funding across the following programmatic areas:
 - Competitive grant program for planning, development, and operation of large-scale infrastructure and programs (including trails) with significant regional quality of life and tourism impact;
 - Competitive grant program for up-front zero cost-share assistance to communities of need for the planning, development, and operation of large-scale infrastructure and programs (including trails) with significant quality of life impact and tourism potential;
 - Creation and operation of an Outdoor Recreation Service Center to proactively lead priority local and regional projects, provide technical assistance to communities of need, and conduct research and training in support of outdoor recreation and trail practitioners;
 - Creation and operation of a statewide outdoor recreation small business incubation/support program with a focus on trail and trail tourism;
 - Development of enhanced certification and degree programs at colleges and universities with a focus on trails;
 - Enhancement of marketing and public information tools for outdoor recreation and recreational trails; and
 - Supplement federal dollars for the statewide outdoor recreation planning process.
- We also list additional research and analysis that we believe are necessary to implement our recommendations. These are:
 - Estimation of the sustained funding necessary to effectively advance outdoor recreation and trail planning, development, and operation in Alabama;
 - Identification of specific feasible mechanisms that may be employed in Alabama to generate the needed funding;

- o Market and trend analysis to identify and define the outdoor recreation experiences demanded by high-skilled workers;
- o Second-tier analysis of 2021 SCORP data to inform strategic statewide investment priorities in facilities and programs; and
- o Evaluation of public policies that state government should address in order to support the development and expansion of outdoor recreation and Alabama's outdoor recreation economy.

Dr. Sisson added that the draft document states that the ATC, AB, and ATF are already playing a major role in helping to shape outdoor recreation in Alabama and we have significant expertise that we can bring to the table as part of the state leadership team.

Following this presentation, Dr. Sisson invited Tom Carruthers to provide comment on behalf of the ATF. Tom said that the ATF is "thrilled" to be a part of this process but that he and Cindy Ragland had not yet had a chance to completely digest the recommendations and take them to the full board. He and Cindy hope to do so in the near future. Dr. Sisson thanked Tom for his partnership and the ATF's consideration.

Nisa Miranda stressed the fact that the document is a draft and asked everyone on the ATC and AB to read it in detail and come back to the next meeting with comments. Nisa suggested that the ATC and AB hold off on approving the recommendations until the February meeting. The purpose for this suggestion is the fact that the ATF still needs to review the document and the recent appointment of Dr. Sisson, Amy Rauworth, Phillip West, and Dr. John Kvach to the Alabama Innovation Corporation's Outdoor Recreation Roundtable may reveal additional insights that could be useful in crafting the final recommendations.

Alabama Trails Foundation (ATF) Report

Tom Carruthers provided an update on behalf of the ATF...

- The ATF is transitioning to a new set of officers and David Perry will be stepping in as the new president, Pau DeMarco will be first vice president, Wendy Jackson will be second vice president, Ann Haas will remain as treasurer, and Maggie Cunningham will remain as secretary. Tom will continue to be engaged with the ATF's Executive Committee as the immediate past president.
- The ATF recently appointed Taylor Purcell as a new board member. Mr. Purcell operates Purcell Farms, which is an outdoor recreation destination near Sylacauga. The ATF has sent a letter to the ATC requesting ratification of this appointment.
- The Alabama Forestry Commission Funding has been able to secure funding to bring water to Flag Mountain. Once this happens, the ATF will work to raise funds for bathrooms and additional infrastructure there.
- The ATF is focusing on the Lake Jogloma/Scott Lake enhancement project along the Pinhoti Trail in Talladega Co. It is currently working with planners and designers on the needed improvements there and will be raising funds soon. Terry Smiley facilitated \$150,000 for this project from Alabama Power. The Alabama tourism Department has also provided \$50,000 for this project.
- The ATF recently participated with UACED and Jacksonville State University in an informational session for the state senators and representatives from the Pinhoti Trail region. Cindy Crutchfield, the new director of the AIC, was also present. She was very engaged in this meeting.
- Tom provided a brief financial report, relaying that the ATF has assets of \$347,000 (mostly cash) allocated between different projects.

Alabama Innovation Corporation Council on Outdoor Recreation Update

Commissioner Chris Blankenship gave an update on the AIC's Council on Outdoor Recreation (COR)...

- Commissioner Blankenship, along with Bill Poole (finance director), Peter Inge (Birmingham), and Darrell Ezell (Huntsville), serves on the COR.
- The COR is focused on how to use outdoor recreation as a tool to support technology and innovation.
- The COR has established the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (ORR) and wanted to include all segments of outdoor recreation and geographic areas of the state. Currently there are 19 members on the ORR, including Dr. Graham Sisson, Amy Rauworth, Phillip West, and Dr. John Kvach.
- The ORR's initial meeting was on November 30, 2022 and their next meeting will be after the first of the year.
- Commissioner Blankenship looks forward to conveying the ATC/AB's recommendations to the ORR.

Initiatives Status

Brian Rushing gave a brief update on ATC initiatives (EXHIBIT D)...

- The Wiregrass Trail corridor has been rail-banked by CSX and remains available. However, CSX is not currently interested in divesting of it so this project is on "pause."
- The ATC is grateful to the ATF and Tim King and Blue Cross Blue Shield's ongoing support of the 100 Alabama Miles Challenge program. The program steering committee hopes to hold public engagement events in the spring to kick off the 2023 season. The steering committee is currently receiving proposals for updating the program's marketing and communications plan.

Alabama Forestry Commission Update

Jason Dockery gave a review of the Alabama State Forests available for trail recreation throughout the state. State forests are managed both for timber production as well as outdoor recreation.

- Little River State Forest – 200 acres with many miles of trails (facilities are under repair from storm damage).
- Geneva State Forest – All roads and fire brakes are open for horseback and ATV trail use outside of hunting season.
- Weogufka State Forest (includes Flag Mountain) – 240 acres including loop trails and the Pinhoti Trail as well as the new universally accessible approach trail and parking lot. Ancient mountain longleaf pines are a feature of this site and the AFC has started reintroducing fire in this forest to help restore the longleaf pine ecosystem there. Easement work for the new water line to Flag Mountain has been completed and the AFC plans to let out bids for installation in the next 4-6 months.
- Choccolocco State Forest – Features mountain biking and hiking trails, but many trails have been closed due to discovery of unexploded munitions associated with the former military use at nearby Fort McClellan. IT is hoped that future trails will expand what is offered there and create linkages with the Pinhoti Trail and Chief Ladiga Trail as well as the Mountain Longleaf Pine NWR and Talladega National Forest.
- The AFC has \$6.8 million in bond money to implement a number of improvements at state forests within 36 months. These include above-mentioned improvements along with creating a new

operations office at Weogufka State Forest and acquiring the access road to that forest from Coosa County.

- Jason invited the ATC & AB membership to propose ideas for improvements at Choccolocco State Forest.

Action Item: Approval of Taylor Purcell's Appointment to the ATF Board

Dr. Sisson called for a motion of the ATC to approve Taylor Purcell's appointment to the Alabama Trails Foundation board. Phillip West made a motion and Amy Rauworth seconded. Without no discussion, the motion passed unanimously.

General Announcements

- Dr. Sisson announced an American Trails webinar taking place today that will focus on how to approach state legislatures for support for trails.
- Will O'Connor announced that River Region Trails will soon be launching their master planning process for a trail network in the region and for Cypress Nature Preserve. Will highlighted the important regional connections of this planned network with the Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail to the west and trail planning happening in Lee and Russell Counties to the east.
- Nathan Wright gave a brief update on the Alabama Hiking Trail Society's and The Conservation Fund's efforts to move six miles of the Pinhoti Trail off-road, which will bring the total road walk remaining in Alabama to just 10 miles.
- Jared Carter shared that the AMRVRCD recently completed their first round of grant awards for trail infrastructure in their 16-county region under the North Alabama Trails and Recreation (NATR) Program. NATR also makes a trail tool trailer available for local groups wishing to build and maintain trails. The NATR Expo was held in October in Decatur and this event that attracted 600members of the general public.

Schedule for 2023 ATC/AB Meeting

The 2023 ATC/AB meetings will be February 15, August 16, and December 6. These meetings will be in person with locations TBD.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned.