

Minutes of the Alabama Trails Commission
and Advisory Board Joint Meeting

Wednesday, December 8, 2021
10:00 AM

(via web conference)

Alabama Trails Commission Attendees

Dr. Graham Sisson, Chair
Amy Rauworth
Nisa Miranda
Dr. John Kvach
Chris Blankenship
Grey Brennan
Jeff Pruitt
Rep. Mike Jones
Phillip West
Sonya Baker

Advisory Board Attendees

Jason Dockery
Larry “Chip” Dixon
Marie Bostick
Dr. Mark Wilson
Nathan Wright
Odell Sanders
Steve Newton, Chair
Tim King
Will Collins
Will O’Connor

Associates & Visitors

Brian Rushing – UACED
Dr. John Jensen – Auburn University
Cindy Ragland – Alabama Trails Foundation
Tom Carruthers – Alabama Trails Foundation
Dr. Stephen Haber – Stanford University, Hoover Institution
Latoya Edwards – ADECA
Richard Martin – Former ATC Member
Jared Carter – Alabama
Wayne Breske - NOHVCC

Lisa Booher – Birmingham Ultra Trail Society

Kate Nielsen – Alabama Trails Foundation
Phillip Darden – SORBA
Dr. Mark Richman – Private Citizen

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 the Alabama Trails Commission (ATC) but not for the Advisory Board (AB). Dr. Sisson welcomed new appointees to the ATC: ADCNR Commissioner Chris Blankenship, Nisa Miranda (former Chair of the AB). New appointees to the AB are Will Collins, Rebecca Hayden, Bobby Whaley, Will O'Connor. Dr. Sisson thanked Greg Lien for his many years of the service to the ATC and Bucky Edmondson for his service to the AB. This was Representative Mike Jones' first meeting and Dr. Sisson welcomed him to the AB.

Approval of Minutes

Dr. Sisson asked for the ATC to make a motion for the approval of the August 25, 2021 meeting minutes (EXHIBIT A). Rep. Mike Jones made a motion for approval and Nisa Miranda seconded. Motion was approved unanimously.

ATC Chair's Report

- **Innovative Alabama Report.** The Hoover Institution's *Innovative Alabama* report to the Alabama Innovation Commission is likely to heighten awareness among our state's leadership of the importance of outdoor recreation and trails to our economy and to Alabama's economic future. The Alabama Innovation Commission is currently reviewing the *Innovative Alabama* report and it may be issuing its own set of recommendations to the legislature and Governor in the coming weeks. The Executive Committee is monitoring these developments and will be providing input to the Alabama Innovation Commission leadership at the appropriate time and their behest. The Executive Committee may be calling upon individual members of the ATC and AB to bring their perspective and expertise into these conversations. With the Alabama Innovation Commission in the midst of important decisions, ADECA's forthcoming release of the new Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, and with enhanced federal funding for trails likely coming down through the Transportation Alternatives Program, there are a number of important opportunities that are developing. Today's meeting is customarily when we would be electing new officers for a two-year term. However, with these changes in process, the Executive Committee recommends that the ATC and AB postpone their election of new officers until our first meeting in 2022. Dr. Sisson asked for questions or comments regarding this recommendation. Debbie Quinn commented that continuity in the ATC is important until the body is able to figure out where it fits in the new the bigger picture. There were no questions.

- **Federal Funding Update.**
 - **Transportation Alternatives Program.**
 - There will be enhanced federal funding that will be coming down through the Transportation Alternatives Program, and this will be through the Infrastructure, Investment, and Jobs Act, which President Biden signed into law on November 15.
 - The Infrastructure, Investment, and Jobs Act is a \$1.2 trillion spending bill and increases funding for the Transportation Alternatives Program by 70% to an average of \$1.44 billion per year starting in FY 2023.
 - It creates the Active Transportation Infrastructure Investment Program, which is a new program designed to advance the connectivity of the nation's trail and active transportation system. The program is to receive \$200 million each year. However, the funding is not dedicated and requires annual appropriation. Advocacy for this appropriation could be an option for the ATC independently, through organizations like the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, or both.
 - As noted by Steve Newton in our last meeting, the Recreational Trails Program remains at \$84 million per year, where it has been since 2009. A long-anticipated Federal Highway Administration study of recreational fuel taxes used to fund the program shows that there is sufficient revenue to increase the program by nearly \$200 million per year, but the study came out slightly too late to influence the Senate debate on the infrastructure bill.
 - **Build Back Better Act**
 - Congress is continuing to finalize this bill, which includes \$43 billion in additional infrastructure spending. It passed out of the House and currently making its way through the Senate.
 - The Bill currently contains a number of grant programs where active transportation will be eligible. Two of the primary ones are:
 - *Community Climate Incentive Grants* – \$3 billion for carbon reduction projects at MPO and local government levels.
 - *Neighborhood Access and Equity Grants* – \$3.95 billion for enhancing access to safe and affordable transportation, complete streets, multi-use trails, regional greenways, and active transportation networks. (\$1.58 billion of these funds must be used in communities that are economically disadvantaged.)
 - Several grant programs like the Neighborhood Access and Equity Grants are set to take effect immediately in FY 2022, so trail groups should be prepared to put forward trail and active transportation plans as soon as the programs take effect.

- There will likely be needs/opportunities for the ATC to advocate for funding trails-eligible programs under the Build Back Better Act. The Executive Committee will monitor the progress of the bill and send out alerts as needed.
- **International Trails Symposium.** The American Trails' International Trails Symposium was scheduled for April 2022, but due to the ongoing pandemic, has been rescheduled for April 17 – 21, 2023 in Reno, Nevada.
- **Initiatives Status.** An updated status report on ATC initiatives is presented in Exhibit B. Brian Rushing highlighted the two online webinars/web conferences held in November. The first was in collaboration with the Rails to Trails Conservancy and dealt with legal considerations of rail-banking in Alabama. The second was in collaboration with Matt Hayes at Alta Planning and dealt with taking trail projects from vision to implementation.

Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) Update

Brian Rushing highlighted the fact that ADECA has been conducting a public comment period for the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan, which ends tomorrow. He invited everyone on the call to review the document and to make any comments they feel necessary via email to ADECA.

Alabama Trails Foundation (ATF) Report

- Tom Carruthers highlighted the ATF's three new board members, Katherine Avants, Wendy Jackson, and Terry Smiley and thanked the ATC for their approval of those members.
- The Flagg Mountain improvements are nearing completion and the ATF will be holding a ribbon cutting in the near future. Next phases include bringing water to the mountain and adding bathrooms.
- Scott Lake (Jugloma Lake), further north on the Pinhoti, is a next priority. MackNally Land Design is helping to assess what improvements are needed at that anchor site along the Pinhoti.
- Kate Nielsen and the fundraising committee have hosted several prospective funders at two events at Flagg Mountain. These events have initiated a major fundraising effort to secure private funds to support the next planned enhancements along the Pinhoti.
- The ATF is working with Jacksonville State University to build trail design and maintenance in their curriculum. JSU is developing a certification program in this area.

Debbie Quinn reiterated the genesis of the ATF as an offshoot of the ATC and thanked them for their work on the Pinhoti.

Tom Carruthers noted that Sunny Eberhart (Flagg Mountain Caretaker) recently set the record for the oldest person to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail and the fact that he started that hike at Flagg Mountain. He added that a little over \$900,000 have been applied thus far on the work at Flagg

Mountain. Sources of this funding are the ATF, Alabama Forestry Commission, The Conservation Fund, and The University of Alabama Center for Economic Development.

Hoover Institution's Innovative Alabama Report Summary

Dr. Stephen Haber reviewed the work the Hoover Institution has undertaken to assist the Alabama Innovation Commission in assessing how to attract and retain highly innovative technology talent in our state, in particular the need to enhance our outdoor recreation ecosystem. Dr. Haber noted that the younger generation today are very concerned with working in locations where there are numerous outdoor recreation opportunities. The report highlights Alabama's significant natural endowments and the underdevelopment of those assets for outdoor recreation due to lack of financial and other resources. Alabama has tremendous opportunity to use its assets to attract talent to the state. The report recommends the formation of a Joint Commission for Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure with representation by diverse organizations. They recommend that this commission create a vision for outdoor recreation in Alabama and significantly enhance public and private funding to enhance existing programs that support outdoor recreation planning and development. The report is available online at www.hoover.org.

Nisa Miranda stated that she hopes the state takes the Hoover Institution's report seriously and wanted Dr. Haber to thank Dr. Condoleezza Rice on behalf of the ATC for bringing the Hoover Institution to Alabama to help.

Dr. Mark Richman shared that there are "low hanging fruit" opportunities for achieving IMBA ride status designation for mountain bike trails at Oak Mountain and Monte Sano State Parks. Commissioner Chris Blankenship thanked Dr. Richman for his comments.

Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) Update

Commissioner Chris Blankenship gave a brief presentation on the trail-related activities of ADCNR. He noted that Will Collins is the State Parks state trails coordinator and is glad Will can serve on the AB. Commissioner Blankenship noted the plethora of trails of all kinds that are in State Parks, on Forever Wild lands, and state lands, and is looking to develop other opportunities. He noted that there has not been much state-level dedicated funding for trail and trail-related amenity planning and development but hopes that the Hoover Institution's report can help facilitate that. He discussed trail projects recently completed at Lakepoint and Buck's Pocket State Parks and ADCNR is looking at extending a trail to Fort Morgan from Gulf State Park.

Alabama Mountains, Rivers, and Valleys RC & D (AMRV RC & D) Presentation

Jared Carter is the program manager for the AMRV RC & D. He discussed the formation of the North Alabama Trails and Recreation Program, which is intended to improve North Alabama's recreational opportunities through providing expertise, awareness, funding, and workforce

development. The area includes 18 North Alabama counties. They are working with a number of partners to are establishing a network of organizations to share resources and expertise to help local providers with delivering outdoor recreation services at quarterly meetings. They will hold an outdoor recreation expo in the fall of 2022 for the general public to provide general information on destinations, connect them with volunteer opportunities, and to showcase equipment vendors and service providers. They want to create a special fund for North Alabama trail and recreation projects and build a volunteer program to consistently meet development and maintenance needs throughout the region. Their website is at www.natrails.org.

The next ATC/AB meeting is scheduled for February 16, 2022 at 10:00AM via zoom.

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned.