

MEMORANDUM

TO: Board of Commissioners

FROM: Planning Board

DATE: February 15, 2010

IN RE: Lake Norman Regional Bicycle Plan - Consideration for Recommendation

REQUEST:

The Board of Commissioners adoption of the attached resolution of endorsement for the Lake Norman Regional Bicycle Plan to the North Carolina Board of Transportation.

BACKGROUND:

The concept for a bicycle route around Lake Norman began in 2003, recognizing that many bicyclists have been conducting rides around the Lake for years. In 2005, the Centralina Council of Governments in Charlotte began a planning process to develop a more detailed on-road route. Catawba County planning staff participated in the development of this Plan, which resulted in a map connecting all four counties around the Lake. This Plan was endorsed by the Unifour Rural Planning Organization (the County's rural transportation planning group) in late 2006. This Plan was then forwarded to the NCDOT - Division of Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation group to be used as a planning tool when new road widening and construction projects were designed. Unfortunately, this Plan was not approved by NCDOT because there were no State standards in place for a regional bicycle route.

In late 2007, the bicycling community lobbied the State to develop more and longer bicycle routes in North Carolina. Funds were appropriated to develop regional bicycle plans which would stimulate economic development and tourism opportunities. NCDOT approached Centralina COG in 2008 to discuss reexamining the earlier Lake Norman Bike Route (LNBR) Plan. Centralina COG began the planning process to conduct an expanded study in early 2009 for what will be the State's first regional bicycle plan.

The LNBR Plan was developed over a course of a year using input from a Steering Committee consisting of representatives from the four counties and six municipalities around the Lake. Catawba County was represented on the LNBR Plan committee by Mary George, Assistant Planning Director and John Marshall, Unifour RPO Transportation Planner from the Western Piedmont Council of Governments. One of the first tasks of the Committee was to establish a vision for the Plan:

“a continuous, multi-jurisdictional bicycle route that will encircle Lake Norman and connect with neighboring communities, destinations, and the various bicycle facilities, in order to provide a safer, useful, and attractive transportation

and recreation resource for a wide range of users within the surrounding four-county region.”

In determining the designated bicycle route, the Steering Committee looked at six factors, utilizing their own knowledge and input received from a series of public meetings. These factors were:

- 1) simplicity for user
- 2) safe routes
- 3) scenic viewsheds
- 4) off-road linkages
- 5) utility for transportation and/or recreation
- 6) coordination with existing plans and future projects

The route was then broken up into 52 segments which were evaluated to define an initial route and an ultimate route. The initial route includes the segments that can be completed in the short-term. The initial route is 89 miles long with 3-miles of off-road trail segments. The ultimate route is the ideal route that will eventually be possible. This route will be 117 miles long with 16 miles of off-road segments. After designating the route, the Plan identified the priority for the route’s 52 segments to be implemented based upon nine variables such as safety, linking residents to destinations, demand, scenic view and cost-effectiveness.

Relative to Catawba County, the LNBR Plan identifies 15.6 miles of initial route and 32.3 miles of ultimate route, which is broken up into 11 segments. The route is primarily planned for on-road facilities; however, the County has begun development of its Carolina Thread Trail (CTT) greenway master plan which may identify off-road opportunities. These could be incorporated in the future once the CTT plan is adopted. Of the 11 segments in the County, four ranked as a medium priority and seven as a low priority primarily due to safety and cost effectiveness of widening existing roads. Included in the Plan is a Catawba County signature route, referred to as the “Catawba Run.” The “Catawba Run” traverses the western shore of Catawba County from Hudson Chapel Road to Sherrills Ford Road and Slanting Bridge Road. This route connects to Iredell County and forms a north/northwest rural excursion around the Lake. This signature route will also be highlighted in the LNBR brochure (attached) and includes destinations and side excursions such as Bunker Hill Covered Bridge and Murray’s Mill.

With the location of the bike route charted in the County, the next step was to identify implementation strategies. The LNBR Plan can be realized through several ways:

1. Coordination with NCDOT road projects – as roads are widened by NCDOT, paved shoulders or bicycle lanes could be installed. Similarly, as new roads are designed by NCDOT, the LNBR will be reviewed and bicycle facilities will be provided.

2. NCDOT Transportation Plan – segments of the bike plan can be submitted by the local transportation agencies for inclusion in the State Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP).
3. Development approvals – as new developments, such as rezonings and subdivisions, are approved locally the approval process can include the provision of components of the LNBR Plan
4. Grants – Federal, State and private grants can be secured to construct segments of the LNBR.

In order to ensure the long-term integrity and implementation of the Plan, an enduring organization is being proposed to be created. This organization, the Lake Norman Regional Bicycle Route Task Force, will be charged with reviewing amendments to the route, coordinating improvements and approving requests for use of the route logo. Membership of the Task Force will include all affected governments (including Catawba County), transportation planning agencies and NCDOT. The Steering Committee recommended that the Task Force meet twice a year, as needed, to support the implementation of the Plan. The Centralina Council of Governments will be the support staff for the Task Force at no cost to local governments.

Attached is the executive summary of the LNBR Plan, the route map, a description of the segments in Catawba County and a reduced copy of the bicycle route brochure. Upon endorsement from the affected governments, the entire LNBR Plan will be submitted to the NCDOT Board of Transportation for consideration of approval in March or April.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

Planning staff recommended the Planning Board’s recommendation of the Lake Norman Bicycle Route Plan to the Board of Commissioners.

PLANNING BOARD PUBLIC HEARING/RECOMMENDATION:

The Planning Board conducted a public hearing on the LNBR Plan at its January 25, 2010 meeting. No one spoke at the hearing. The Board discussed various issues relative to private property rights and trails; however, since the LNBR is proposed to be located within public road rights-of-way the Planning Board unanimously recommended the Plan to the Board of Commissioners.

Attachments