



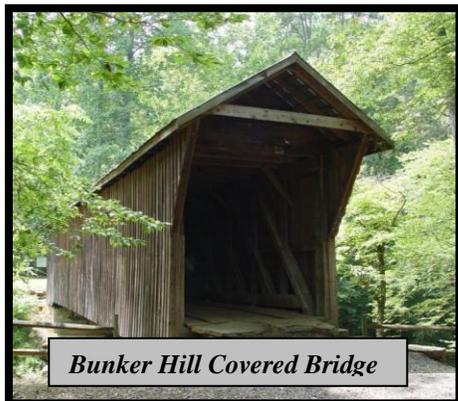
SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

It is the mission of Catawba County Parks to preserve Catawba County's unique and diverse natural heritage through education and conservation, while providing quality passive recreational opportunities, amenities, and services.

Catawba County is located in the western portion of North Carolina in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Established in 1842, the County adjoins 1) Iredell County to the east, 2) Lincoln County to the south, 3) Burke County to the west, 4) Caldwell County to the northwest, and 5) Alexander County to the north. The total land area is approximately 405 square miles and the topography varies from rugged terrain to gentle rolling areas. The County's main water feature is the Catawba River, which feeds Lake Hickory, Lookout Shoals Lake, and Lake Norman, along with several tributaries throughout the County. Lake Norman is the largest manmade lake located solely in North Carolina. The municipalities in Catawba County are located throughout the County and include Hickory, Long View, Newton, Conover, Maiden, Claremont, Brookford, and Catawba.

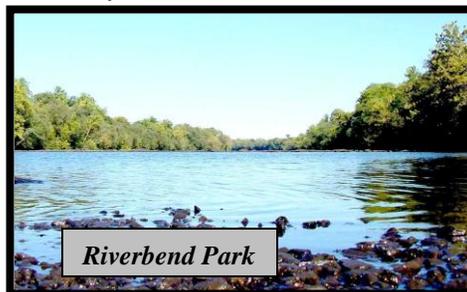


Bunker Hill Covered Bridge

Historically, agriculture and hydroelectricity, provided by the Catawba River, set Catawba County on a path to significant growth and development. Over the last century, transportation and vast natural resources helped maintain this progress. The natural environment has played a major role in the lives and heritage of the citizens and helped significantly enrich the visitor's experience to the area. With growth comes greater responsibility; and, like generations before, we

must protect Catawba County's valuable natural assets and meet the recreational needs of the area.

The Catawba County Parks Division was created in 1999 with the opening of Riverbend Park and the preservation of 450 acres for passive recreation. Bakers Mountain Park was opened in 2002, preserving 189 acres on Catawba County's most prominent point and the location of the County's largest mature forest. Both parks were created using matching fund grants from the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF). The grants essentially provide recreation development using a 50% grant



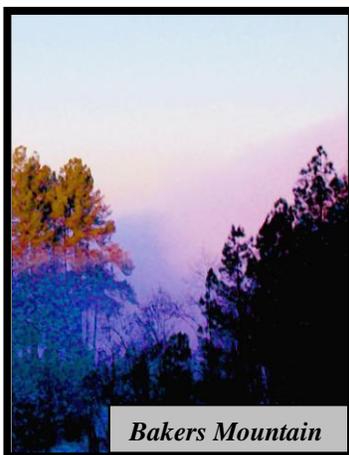
Riverbend Park



match; thus, reducing the financial burden to the local tax base. Currently, both parks are providing passive recreation opportunities to over 68,000 patrons a year with over 11,000 patrons participating in environmental, educational programs. With a visionary master plan, the next ten years should produce significant recreational development and enhanced programming that will reach an even greater segment of the County's growing population.

Prior to the formation of the Catawba County Parks Division, St. Stephens Recreational Corporation requested assistance from Catawba County to serve as a grant recipient for a Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) grant, which was awarded in 1979 in the amount of \$75,000. Upon approval of the grant, the 9.1 acre tract was deeded to Catawba County. A pool, bathhouse and picnic shelter were constructed and St. Stephens Recreational Corporation continued to operate and maintain the pool and park. At that time the County did not have a parks division nor did it operate active or passive parks. In 1985, St. Stephens Recreational Corporation was dissolved and the City of Hickory assumed responsibility for park operations until the summer of 2005. The swimming pool currently is in a state of disrepair, is functional obsolete and its replacement cost would be prohibitive. Since Catawba County Parks Division's goal is to provide passive recreation and natural preservation, the County is currently in the process of submitting conversion documents to the state - in order to declare the pool obsolete - and renovate and operate the park as a community passive park.

Also prior to the formation of the Catawba County Parks Division, the Mountain View Recreation Association requested assistance from Catawba County to serve as a grant recipient for a LWCF grant to obtain 5.05 acres of land, and to develop the site into an active recreation park. This 5.05 acre area is part of a larger complex which is owned and operated by the Mountain View Recreation Association, making a combined park area of approximately 15 acres. It is the intent of this plan that the County's portion of the park will continue to be operated by Mountain View Recreation Association, since Catawba County Parks Division's goal is to provide passive - as opposed to active - recreation.



However, to remain in compliance with the requirements of the LWCF grant, repairs are necessary to enable the County area of the park to meet the American Disabilities Act (ADA) standards.

Catawba County is a traditional foothills community, which holds strong to the traditions and values that have been developed over time. Significant cultural resources such as Murray's Mill and Bunker Hill Covered Bridge are recognized, not only within the state of North Carolina, but also attract visitors from across the United States. These resources - among others - have led Catawba County to become a



destination, not only for vacationers, but also as a place to reside. The County has acknowledged the increase of population and development within Catawba County by ensuring that growth is planned for in the future. The recent adoption of the Unified Development Ordinance (UDO), adopted in early 2007, promotes higher development standards, encouraging smart growth and protecting the environment and natural aesthetic qualities of the area.

Catawba County, the central county of North Carolina's seventh largest Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), has recognized the need to diversify and balance its traditional manufacturing base with other types of businesses and services. With the recent shift to a global economy, the County and region have made a concentrated effort directed at identifying and recruiting new non-manufacturing and non-traditional businesses. The high quality of life in Catawba County, which includes recreation, is important to the citizens who have lived here for many years and is viewed as an asset in attracting new businesses and planned residential growth that is essential to a healthy local economy. Catawba County's economic diversity, ideal climate, and natural scenic beauty naturally create a favorable destination for relocation

1.2 PURPOSES AND GOALS

The Catawba County Board of Commissioners, County Staff, and the Parks Division have recognized the need to prepare a Comprehensive Parks Master Plan. (See Appendix: Attachment 1 – Press Release) McGill Associates, P.A., was selected by Catawba County to evaluate its existing park and passive facilities and to develop a Master Plan as a guideline for implementation of recommendations designed to meet the needs of the population for a span of ten years. There have been dramatic changes in recreation amenities and the accepted method of facility and program operation since Catawba County Parks was created in 1999. Typically, a master plan is written for a 20-year period of time. Because the Catawba County Parks Division is still in its infancy and in a stage of rapid growth and change, a 10-year plan, with an update in five years will be more practical and realistic.

Catawba County Parks Comprehensive Master Plan 2007-2017 provides the framework for guiding the Board of Commissioners and staff in both its current evaluation of, and long-range planning for the Catawba County Parks System. The framework for this Master Plan is based upon conducting an inventory of the existing park system and recording



Kitty Barnes, Chairperson – Board of Commissioners



the observations. This assessment of these facilities, or lack of, will assist in identifying the immediate facility needs in the given communities, as well as predicting the future needs of residents.

Another purpose of the Master Plan is to recommend the addition/renovation of parks and/or recreational facilities as needed. Not only does the Master Plan include recommendations, but it also prioritizes specific projects, such as recommended park upgrades, expansion and/or land acquisition, taking into consideration the identification of user population and the development of recreation standards. The Master Plan is intended to be action-oriented and designed to provide Catawba County with a practical guide for its enhancement of the Parks Division for the next ten years.

In preparing the Master Plan, McGill Associates, P.A., worked closely with Catawba County's Parks Division, Planning Staff, and the Focus Group (which was comprised of citizens from Catawba County representing each of the seven Small Area Plan vicinities).

A key objective in the development of the Master Plan was the solicitation of community input – thereby, identifying additional needs for Catawba County, such as renovation, construction, land purchase, development and/or operational policies. – both now and in the future. Community input, along with the comparison to state and national standards, served as a foundation providing a framework for the Master Plan process.

State and National Parks and Recreation Standards were used as a guide to support the recommendations made for the parks and recreational facilities for Catawba County. Also the Master Plan reflects the recommendations of the *Greater Hickory Recreation/Tourism Plan* (2006). Using these standard guidelines and regional recommendations, McGill Associates, P.A., developed a plan, which applied specifically to the County's residents and non-resident users of the parks.



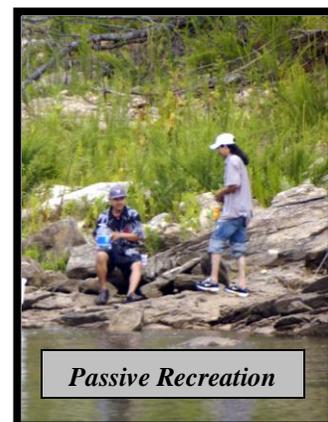


The Master Plan encourages “connectivity” of proposed projects to existing sites, such as other parks, schools, and government-owned properties. It is not designed to be exclusive, but rather to enhance recreational opportunities in the communities, the County, the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA), and the entire region.

The Master Plan reflects the mission of Catawba County Parks, which includes these key elements:

- *To provide quality passive recreation;*
- *To preserve Catawba County’s unique and diverse natural and historical heritage;*
- *To provide educational environmental programming;*
- *To preserve the natural character and aesthetics of the County while realizing its importance as a tool for economic development and its ability to continue to uphold Catawba County’s high quality of life;*
- *To promote wellness by providing recreation options that encourage good physical and mental health; and*
- *To preserve/enhance air and water quality by protecting native vegetation and habitats while providing passive recreational opportunities that are conveniently accessible.*

Passive recreation is defined as the type of recreation that occurs in a natural setting, with minimal facilities and impacts on the natural integrity of the area. Examples of such facilities include greenways, bike trails, fishing areas, non-motorized canoe/kayak access, hiking, dog parks, environmental education and quality open space. The quality of the environment plays a tremendous role in passive recreation – providing refreshment of the mind and body. Most importantly, passive recreation can be enjoyed by all ages and promotes positive social interaction among communities, family and friends.



Passive Recreation

Of utmost intent, the Master Plan’s purpose is to maintain the type of venue in Catawba County that fosters community spirit, activism, and bonding between local citizens, while preserving the rural and natural character of the landscape that is synonymous with the high quality environmental reputation of the region.



The study of the demographic profile of County residents – population and ages, as related to areas of larger/smaller population – is a key factor in making specific recommendations and projecting levels of service.

Not only does the Catawba County Parks Master Plan make recommendations for a ten-year period of time (2007 - 2017), but it also suggests the means by which the identified objectives might be achieved. Opportunities for grants, partnerships, and outside funding are recommended as aids in the establishment of a Capital Improvement Plan and an operating budget. The need for and location of land acquisition(s) are explained in detail.

The Master Plan focuses on providing Catawba County with an accurate, usable guide for decision-making as the County begins to implement items, such as the following:

- *Park renovations, acquisitions, and developments;*
- *Facility renovations, acquisitions, and developments;*
- *Passive recreation programming strategies; and*
- *Implementation of improvements.*

The Master Plan is divided into seven major component sections, plus an appendix, which are listed below:

Section 1 – Introduction

Section 2 – Population Trends and Projections;

Section 3 – Existing Plans and Documents

Section 4 – Existing Park Facilities;

Section 5 – Recreation Needs Assessment;

Section 6 – Goals and Recommendations;

Section 7 – Action Implementation Plan: and

Appendix



1.3 SOCIETAL BENEFITS

Catawba County has traditionally relied upon an agricultural and manufacturing based economy. Within the past few years, the County has recognized the need to expand and diversify this economic base. Like many communities in America, Catawba County is at a crossroads, balancing the need of economic growth with the need to provide a good quality of life for its residents. Fortunately, the two do not have to be mutually exclusive. The same amenities that attract residents can benefit a wide variety of concerns, including economic growth.

Benefits of Parks, Greenways and Trails

Economic

- **Tourism.** Hiking is one of the fastest growing recreation activities in America. Several studies have shown that trails attract a variety of retail businesses to their location, including restaurants, sporting equipment shops, lodging and guide services. It has been estimated that a visitor to a trail will spend from \$10 to \$75 per day at local businesses. TIA Travelscope and Global Insight, Inc. found that when visitors came to North Carolina, 35% of their expenditures were spent on food, 22% on accommodations, 17% on entertainment, 12% on retail, and 14% on transportation.

According to the 2006 Economic Impact of Travel on North Carolina Counties prepared for the North Carolina Division of Tourism, Film and Sports Development by the Travel Industry Association of America, tourists spent \$207,790,000 in Catawba County last year. This was an 8.8% increase in spending over the previous year. Tourism accounted for \$40,800,000 in payroll and directly employed 2,370 people. Local tax receipts from tourism were \$4,710,000.

The Charlotte Regional Economic Development Partnership, of which Catawba County is a member, saw tourists spend over 4 billion dollars in 2006. A good system of parks, trails and greenways would be instrumental in attracting more of these visitors to Catawba County.

According to the National Center for Bicycling and Walking:

“Trails and greenways are very popular among vacationing bicyclists and pedestrians. Visitors appreciate and often return to communities that provide places for bicycling and walking, safely removed from busy roads and streets. Trails offer scenic recreation opportunities suitable for a wide range of ages and abilities. Where popular trails exist,



lodging providers can encourage extended stays among their guests, thereby increasing occupancy. For residents, investments in trails and greenways can increase property values and improve the overall livability of a community.”
(National Center for Bicycling & Walking, 2003)

- **Increased property values.** Houses located near greenways and trails have been shown to sell for higher prices than houses further away. A developer in Apex, North Carolina, was able to sell houses adjacent to a regional greenway for \$5,000 more than for houses not adjacent to the greenway. The more expensive houses on the greenway also sold more quickly than the others. The National Park Service has noted that homes adjacent to trails and greenways sell from 5% to 32% higher than comparable homes located further away.

According to the Trust for Public Land:

“Quality of life is a determining factor in real estate values and economic vitality. A real estate industry report calls livability “a litmus test” for determining the strength of the real estate investment market...If people want to live in a place, companies and jobs will follow.” (The Trust for Public Land, 2003)

- **New residents and businesses.** Greenways, with their natural beauty and recreation opportunities make a community more attractive to those looking to relocate their families or their companies.

According to the National Parks Service:

“Businesses which move to an area because of tax incentives tend to leave as soon as the incentives expired. However, businesses that move to the area because of its quality of life remain to become long term residents and tax payers.” (Economic Impacts of Trails, 2005)

- **Job growth.** Trails and open spaces provide an immediate source of jobs through their construction and maintenance.

According to the Triangle Greenways Council:

“Business leaders are selecting sites for the relocation and expansion of industries and corporations where the quality of life is high and recreation opportunities are abundant. Increasingly, corporations are recognizing the benefits to their employees of convenient fitness and recreation facilities



and are seeking greenway amenities in potential business sites.” (Triangle Greenways Council, 2005)

According to the National Center for Bicycling and Walking:
“Studies show that where bicycle and pedestrian tourism is fostered and promoted, and where investments are made in bicycle and pedestrian facilities, the economic impact may be even greater than only impacting the tourism industry. A thriving tourist industry, in turn, can attract and revitalize businesses, create jobs and increase public revenue.”
(The National Center for Bicycling & Walking, 9/28/07)

Parks, trails, and greenways provide many more benefits to a community. Though listed under different headings, many of the benefits below also provide economic advantages to a community.

Environmental

- **Protection of waterways.** Open spaces provide natural buffers that protect rivers, streams and lakes by filtering pollutants and eroded soil from run-off before it reaches the waterways. Clean waterways increase the quality of life for residents, attract new residents and businesses and provide increased opportunities for tourism. Paddle trails are a growing source of recreation and economic opportunity for the communities of North Carolina.
- **Wildlife habitat.** Increased open space provides habitats for a wide variety of species. Birding trails are a fast growing segment of eco-tourism and there is a statewide effort in North Carolina to develop and promote them. Increased wildlife habitats also allow for educational opportunities and are perceived as increasing the quality of life for residents.
- **Reduced pollution.** The majority of trips taken by Americans in their cars are of less than 5 miles. Trails provide alternate avenues for walking, skating and biking to neighborhood destinations, reducing both air pollution and water pollution (run-off from roads and parking lots). Less automobile traffic also results in smaller parking lots, reducing the heat island effect and increasing opportunities for ground water penetration.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service:
“Green space in urban areas provides substantial environmental benefits. The U.S. Forest service has calculated that over a 50-year lifetime, one tree generates \$31,250 worth of oxygen, provides \$62,000 worth of air



pollution control, recycles \$37,500 worth of water and controls \$31,250 worth of soil erosion.” (Economic Impacts of Trails, 2005)

Education

- **Preservation of historic, natural, and cultural sites.** Trails and greenways have been shown to draw people to adjacent historic and cultural sites, providing additional funds for preservation.
- **Educational opportunities.** Open spaces have been used successfully as outdoor classrooms through the use of interpretive signage and instructor led classes. Educational programming attracts both residents and tourists.
- **Increased accessibility.** Greenways and trails cannot only provide access to individual sites, but can serve to link several sites together. This linkage cannot only increase attendance but provide for the integration of educational programming between several linked sites.

Health

- **Improved health.** Open spaces provide opportunities for exercise. Exercise has been shown to reduce stress, improve cardiovascular health, and promote weight loss - all of which help to prevent or reduce a variety of related health problems. Improved health of a community's residents helps to decrease health care costs.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC):

“57% of all North Carolinians are either overweight or obese, up 82% from 1990 to 2002. Further, 26% of youth 12 – 18 and 20% of children 5 – 11 are overweight or obese. Interestingly, each of these NC statistics is significantly above the national average.

The numbers serve as a warning to all North Carolinians, because regardless of ones individual health status, ultimately we all suffer through increased healthcare costs and lost productivity in the workplace. In fact, based on research from a January 2004 study from the Research Triangle Institute, North Carolina taxpayers pay an estimated \$2.1 billion annually for obesity related medical expenses.”
(Fit Together, Retrieved 11/8/07)



Society

- **Community.** Open spaces offer many opportunities for people to meet and interact, strengthening the sense of community. This is very attractive to many corporations as they seek new locations.
- **Family activities.** Open spaces provide for a variety of passive recreation activities that can be shared by all members of a family.
- **Community identity.** A well planned and executed system of open spaces can provide a community with an ‘identity’ that can be used to promote business growth and tourism.

A strong economy, a heightened sense of community, educational opportunities, better health and a healthy environment are all attributes of a well planned and executed system of parks, trails and greenways. These attributes contribute to the overall satisfaction of residents and the prosperity of Catawba County.

-End of Section-