

Catawba County planners seek input on parks

By Mary Katherine Creel
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Bakers Mountain and Riverbend Park in Catawba County collectively served 50,000 patrons in 2004. Both parks provide passive recreation opportunities like hiking and bird watching, but officials with the county's parks and planning departments want to know, is it enough?

Parks and planning representatives recently kicked-off the first in a series of focus group meetings with park patrons and members of small area planning districts to prepare a Parks Master Plan. That plan will be guided by community input and Catawba County's continuing goal to preserve its natural heritage and open space sites.

A survey has been posted on Catawba County's Web site to receive public input on current park facilities and need for

recreation in the county.

"With Bakers Mountain and Riverbend, there is a passive park presence in the northern and western portions of the county," said Blair Rayfield, Catawba County Parks Division Manager. "That presence is lacking in the southeastern part of the county, for instance, and we want to know, if there's a need for more recreational opportunities and specifically, in what areas."

Rayfield said the survey will serve as an important tool, giving people a chance to voice their opinion directly to parks and planning staff regarding current parks facilities and their individual recreational priorities, whether it is a need for more walking and hiking trails, or access on the Catawba River and Lake Norman. Data from the survey will also be used to structure future priorities and a

means for using funds. The data will also be helpful in the county's ability to acquire grants and other funding in the future.

The Catawba County Board of Commissioners began planning for parks in 1997 when it set aside funds to leverage grants for the development of future parks, Blair said. Those funds were matched with state grants to develop Riverbend Park in 1999 and Bakers Mountain Park in 2002. The Parks Master Plan will provide parks and planning staff with guidance for future expansion of those parks, as well as insight when considering potential sites in the future.

Catawba County reported spending \$2.46 per capita on recreation expenditures in 2004. According to a N.C. Recreation Resources Service report on expenditures from agencies statewide, Catawba

County ranked lowest on the list, in stark contrast to nearby parks and recreation agencies in Cornelius, Davidson and Huntersville, which collectively reported \$230 in per capita expenditures on parks and recreation.

After just one week, the parks and planning staff have already received nearly 50 completed surveys. One of the key issues expressed so far, Rayfield said, was expanding current hours of operation at Bakers Mountain and Riverbend from four days a week to six.

"Many people have said they were not even aware of these facilities," Rayfield said.

If Catawba County continues to grow as it has in the past 20 years, Rayfield worries that the opportunity to preserve large tracts of land for open space and passive recreation will

diminish, if not disappear.

"If you look at Catawba County now, and then look at things 20 years ago," Raufield said, "just based on that growth, the opportunity for preservation of large acreage and naturally significant sites simply won't be there. That's why this Parks Master Plan is so important. We need to evaluate the community's needs and look at what needs to be preserved now."

The deadline to submit a survey, either online, or by mail is Sept. 15. The survey can be accessed, downloaded and printed at www.catawbacountync.gov.

To gain further input from the public, two community meetings have been set for Aug. 25 and Aug. 30 at the Newton-Conover Middle School cafeteria from 7 to 8:30 p.m.