THE NEW DOODLE TRAIL



From left, Fox Simons, Easley city administrator, Katherine Hendricks, Pickens city administrator, and David Owens, mayor of Pickens, envision economic and recreational opportunities with the construction of the Doodle Trail. MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

Cities ready to go full steam ahead on trail

First step to making $4.5 million Doodle plan a reality is funding

By Nathaniel Cary and Amy Burns
Staff writers

How'd the Doodle Trail get its name? Find out in a video on GreenvilleOnline.com.

Right now, the abandoned former Pickens Doodle Line railroad that links the cities of Easley and Pickens is a weed-lined path filled with weathered wooden railroad ties and limitless potential.

Within two years it could transform into a bicycle and pedestrian pathway patterned after the Greenville Health System Swamp Rabbit Trail.

City leaders from Easley and Pickens hope the trail will have the same recreation and economic effects as the Swamp Rabbit Trail has had on the cities of Greenville and Travelers Rest.

"It could be the saving grace for our downtown," said Katherine Hendricks, Pickens city administrator.

Thursday, the two cities unveiled long-awaited plans to spend up to $4.5 million to turn the 8.5-mile stretch into the Doodle Rail Trail, a pedestrian and bicycle path that Easley and Pickens will jointly own and build.

The public got its first peek at plans that show welcoming entrances at trailheads in each city with a 10- to 12-foot-wide trail that could be built as a natural surface first and later paved with asphalt.

The trail was discussed for years, well before the cities of Pickens and Easley agreed to purchase the former length of railroad for $500,000 in August 2013.

Leaders see the potential and say their residents and businesses have clamored for a trail after they saw the revitalization the Swamp Rabbit brought to the city of Travelers Rest.



Pickens and Easley have already accepted bids to remove railroad ties along the planned trail. MYKAL MCELDOWNEY/STAFF

"The most challenging part for us, and for most small towns ... is getting people back to your downtown."

KATHERINE HENDRICKS, Pickens city administrator

"This is a huge project for our community," said Fox Simons, Pickens city administrator. "It is a quality of life issue. It is an economic development issue. It brings people into Pickens County. It is a tourism development piece."

Challenges remain, chief among them how to fund the trail's construction.

The two cities plan to evenly split the $3 million cost to build and pave the trail, but each city will pay for its trailhead con-

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struction separately, Simons said.

Easley has its money in place. Pickens is still trying to secure its share.

Easley plans to issue a $1.5 million bond in the upcoming budget, which it will repay with hospitality tax income, Simons said.

Pickens hopes to secure a grant next year through the Appalachian Regional Commission, which it would pair with hospitality tax income to pay its share, Hendricks said.

When and when?

The question Simons hears most often from residents about the trail is, "When and when?"

The cities understand it's a high-priority project and will work quickly to fund and construct the trail, but it will take time, he said.

"The Swamp Rabbit Trail took 12 years," he said. "We just bought this in August."

Blake Sanders, senior designer with Alta Planning + Design, the company hired to develop the Doodle Trail master plan, said it could feasibly be opened in the next two to three years because of the planning each city has done.

In an unfinished state, the trail could open much sooner, but to do that, the cities must find a way to fix or replace two wooden railroad trestle bridges that span streams along the railbed, he said.

"If those are repaired, with minor improvements and signage and fixing the crossings ... this trail could be opened as a natural surface trail," Sanders said.

The master plan calls for the trail to be built in six phases.

» Phase one: Structural improvements to remove railroad ties and fix bridges at a cost of $344,000.

» Phase two: Pave 2.7 miles of trail from downtown Pickens to Wolf Creek for $873,000.

» Phase three: Pave 2.7 miles of trail from Wolf Creek to Rices Creek for $804,000.

» Phase four: Pave 2.1 miles of trail from Rices Creek to downtown Easley for $1.03 million.

» Phase five: Build Pickens trailhead for $1.01 million.

» Phase six: Build Easley trailhead for $401,000.

While it's obviously ideal to have all funding in place to build the trail at once, a phased pattern would also be similar to the Swamp Rabbit's construction, Sanders said.

It gets people on the trail, excited to use it, and then the users develop a vision for its future, Sanders said.

"You kind of give the communities something to start with and then they start building upon it themselves," he said. "They kind of start raising their hand and saying 'Hey, we'd like to have it connect to us as well.' "

The cities have already accepted bids to remove the railroad ties, which could take four months, Simons said.

"We understand the public's desire to get this done as quick as possible, and we're trying," he said.

Main Street connection

At the end of the rail line, four rusty railroad cars sit near Main Street in Pickens. Easley owns two of the cars, Pickens the other two. The cars will be turned into décor along the trail, plans show.

The two cities want to draw the connection between their railroad past and what they hope will become their retail future.

Pickens is well-positioned. The trail will dead-end in the center of town with existing businesses on Main Street, a vibrant new amphitheater that regularly hosts events and a new bicycle park at Town Creek Park.

A trailhead proposed there could include a gateway monument and plaza, mini rail museum, information center, outdoor climbing wall and educational garden.

Pickens also hopes to partner with a developer to build retail or a restaurant, Hendricks said.

Easley has an added challenge: The trail will end outside of the city's shopping and restaurant district for safety reasons. If not, it would run parallel to the Norfolk Southern Railroad that's still in use, Simons said.

"In Easley, everything's still around the curve," Sanders said.

To bridge the gap, Alta Planning has proposed an Easley trailhead that would have an outdoor center with a picnic area, trailhead store and information center with signs to point toward downtown Easley.

Easley would have an outdoor recreation center, a couple of outdoor classrooms, trailhead parking and signs directing users toward Main Street.

Trail users will have options to trek the final mile into Easley's center, either by proposed bike lanes along Fleetwood Drive to North A Street or along quiet neighborhood streets.

"We've got to get them downtown," Simons said. "Everyone's on the same page on that. It's just how to do it."

Swamp Rabbit ties

Easley and Pickens already have the shops and restaurants that could benefit from trail traffic and that sets them ahead of where Travelers Rest was when the trail first arrived in that city, Sanders said.

Simons sees cyclists stop for ice cream and coffee along the Swamp Rabbit and believes Easley could get those same trail users at its delis and coffee or ice cream shops.

"We want them to do that here," he said.

Hendricks said Pickens needs to create the full-day experience for trail users so when they arrive in the city, they don't just turn around and ride away.

After seeing the Swamp Rabbit case study, she's confident the Doodle Trail will bring traffic. She said she's already talked to someone who wants to open a bike shop in Pickens.

"The most challenging part for us, and for most small towns ... is getting people back to your downtown and filling those businesses and building a sense of community back on Main Street," she said.

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