Palmetto Trail advocates seek ways to connect the pieces



Jim Majors, Upstate trails coordinator for the Palmetto Conservation Foundation, said maintenance is one of the challenges to completing the Palmetto Trail. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

The missing links

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The entrance to the Palmetto Trail's northernmost passage is understated. A narrow footpath next to Old U.S. 25 high above the Greenville Water System watershed leads from the two-lane mountain road into the woods.

A short trek along the roadside from a nearby gravel parking area to the trailhead is marked by tiny green and white square signs bearing the name and insignia of the Palmetto Trail, but if you weren't looking for it, you'd never notice the trail.

And yet here it is, on a dirt path that enters the lush forest next to a sign that marks the border between South Carolina and North Carolina. This passage is nine miles long and leads through the watershed — a remarkable accomplishment in its own right considering the water system's protectiveness about the land that generates drinking water for much of Greenville.

This passage serves as a microcosm for what the Palmetto Trail has become and what it could be.

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First designed in 1994 by the Palmetto Conservation Foundation (PCF) as the organization's signature project, it was to become one of 16 cross-state trails in the country.

It would stretch from the mountains to the sea, march through cities, historic towns and a military base and wind through marshes and along old railroad trusses.

It was supposed to take a decade to build. The state, under Gov. Carroll Campbell, helped fund its construction.

Then administrations changed, a recession hit, funding dried up, focus turned elsewhere.

Nearly two decades later, the trail is incomplete, and yet there's renewed interest by the PCF and business partners to finish the trail as it was designed to be.

A boost from Boeing to fund a master plan has added resolve and a new unofficial PCF motto: "Finish the Trail."

The obstacles to finish it are numerous. The low-hanging fruit — the easy passages to build — have already been built. The challenge is to connect those passages to bring continuity.

Originally projected as a 425-mile trail, it may stretch to nearly 500 miles, said Natalie Britt, executive director of PCF. About 350 miles has been completed, she said.

The majority of the incomplete sections are in the Upstate, partly due to the mountainous geography and smaller parcels of land, Britt said.

How to connect the trail through these sections — some through privately owned land — is the test that PCF must pass if the Palmetto Trail is ever to truly cross the state.

The trail's origins

The idea to build the Palmetto Trail was born around a conference room table at PCF in the mid-90s. The group wanted to adopt a statewide project that would encourage use of the cultural and natural amenities the group promotes, Britt said.

They started to work in the Lowcountry and partnered with the U.S. Forest Service and Santee Cooper to build the first sections using seed money allocated by the state in 1995.

The Lowcountry is where they have found the most success. The trail starts with the seven-mile Awendaw Passage along boardwalks in the Buck Hall National Recreation Area. It winds its way north 162 miles all the way to Waree, where the gaps in the trail contiguity begin, Britt said.

In all, 24 passages have been finished, and more are in planning stages, she said.

"It connects some of the most important public lands that we have," Britt said. "No initiative in the state tells the story of South Carolina better than the Palmetto Trail."

In the Lowcountry, users can see cypress trees and Spanish moss while they walk along riverside boardwalks.

In the Midlands, on the Peak to Prosperity passage, volunteers rebuilt decking and an abandoned railroad bridge in a three-quarter-mile span across the Broad River.

And in the Upstate, on the Saluda Mountains Passage, builders found the remains of an old homestead and used its foundation to construct a rock-lined staircase.

Next challenges

There's a passage of the trail near the South Carolina School for the Deaf and Blind and Croft State Park in Spartanburg County where you can almost see where the trail should connect. But it doesn't. Yet.

Sometime this fall, a Spartanburg company will take a day to help clear and build the connector, said Jim Majors, who works part-time as the Upstate trails coordinator for PCF.

It's one of the challenges of building an ambitious trail with the limited staff of a nonprofit. They count on monitors to walk passages to alert them to maintenance issues. Then they turn to volunteers to construct sections or keep the trail maintained.

Maintenance has been a challenge since the trail's state funding was cut, Britt said.

"In 2007, we were cut 100 percent by the Sanford administration," Britt said. "We currently do not receive any state funding. So when we lost that funding we really had to regroup."

They have since turned to corporations to help. When Boeing came to Charleston, PCF invited them to take a walk on the Awendaw section of the trail, and a corporate sponsorship was born.

Boeing donated $100,000 earlier this year for PCF to complete a new master plan to figure out the best routes to complete the trail.

The foundation hired Alta Planning to formulate a master plan with strategies to complete gaps in the trail, a long-term maintenance plan, and a new marketing and branding strategy, Britt said.

A familiar name in Greenville after it developed the city's bikeways plan, Alta held community meetings earlier this year across the state and now is finalizing its plan, which should be ready by early next year, said John Cock, principal with Alta Planning.

Part of that plan includes rerouting some existing sections of the trail and altering proposed routes to allow the trail to be finished sooner, Cock said.

Complete the puzzle

The air is cool on a late-summer morning as Majors parks his truck on the side of the road near the Saluda Mountains Passage. He's here to pick up equipment he loaned to a summer camp so the campers could do trail maintenance.

While he's at it, he'll install a sign at the passage entrance and take a hike a ways up the trail to move some brush that's fallen across the trail.

Earlier in the week, Majors hiked at Jocassee Gorges as "reconnaissance" for another section of the trail that would connect US 178 in Pickens County to Oconee State Park.

This proposed section would go through property owned or managed by the state Department of Natural Resources, the state parks service, the U.S. Forest Service, a private landowner, a private foundation and Duke Energy. He has to get them all to agree to a route.

"DNR is working with the Palmetto Trail to work out a route in the Jocassee Gorges that creates a wonderful hiking experience and meets the objectives of both organizations," said DNR spokesman Greg Lucas.

How the Palmetto Trail fits into a landscape where the 105-mile long Foothills Trail already has been established for nearly 40 years is another issue.

Heyward Douglass, executive director of the Foothills Trail Conference, said they've had some discussions about sharing a trail or linking to each other's trails, but "we're not overly anxious to give up or re-brand our trail."

"We've been a standalone trail that everybody has been familiar with for 40 years," Douglass said.

The Jocassee section is a sizable and crucial link to the Upstate portion of the trail. Britt said this section would add diversity to the Upstate's trail offerings and has potential to give hikers a great experience with unique views.

Britt said they hope to get permission to cross Jocassee Dam, but negotiations are ongoing.

In other places, the foundation is taking an easier route now — which means keeping the trail on back roads rather than off road — to close gaps with the hope to one day move the trail completely off the roadways, Majors said.

By the end of September, a new section called the Peach-country Passage will wind its way through peach orchards and farms on country roads from Landrum to Inman, Majors said.

The section can be hiked, but will be designated as more of a road-bike path, he said.

Awareness of the trail differs, even in places where it will travel. Landrum's city administrator said she didn't know much about it, while Inman has created its own trail commission in an effort to bring trails to the small city.

Inman is building its own paved trails within the city and is setting itself up as a trailhead for the Palmetto Trail to encourage users to visit the city in an effort to build business, said Richard Lane, president of the Inman Trail Commission.

In other sections, like the Glenn Springs Passage south of the Croft Passage in Spartanburg County, Majors has encountered a different type of challenge.

"My challenge down there is the landowners tend to want to timber their property," Majors said.

And because the trail runs through forested private land, he has to re-route the passage when a landowner decides to timber near the trail.

If you build it...

No statewide tourism impact studies have been done on the trail, said Marion Edmunds, spokesman with the state Parks, Recreation and Tourism office.

Britt tells of numerous calls from out-of-state visitors who want to long-hike or camp along sections of the trail.

"I planned a trip a couple of months ago for 14 guys from Canada who were coming to the Midlands for a conference and were extending their stay specifically to explore the Palmetto Trail," she said.

Nearly 3,000 people a month hike the most popular passages near the coast, she said. In one week, 200 hiked the Blue Wall Passage along the Blue Ridge Escarpment in northern Greenville County, according to an automated trail counter set up earlier this summer, Majors said.

But most don't realize the trail is part of a mountains-to-sea passage, Britt said.

Britt hopes the entire trail will be finished in five to 10 years.

"I really think we're starting to identify how to close those gaps," she said.



lajors replaces a sign on the Saluda Mountains Passage of the Palmetto Trail. Majors has often hiked the trail looking for places where ons can be connected. KEN OSBURN/STAFF



luda Mountains Passage of the Palmetto Trail winds its way through woods on the Greenville Water watershed. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

Majors, 70 years old, hiked a ways on the Saluda Mountains Passage and talked about when he first hiked through the section, just walking in the woods with no trail, and planned how to cut through giant fallen trees and around the steepest hill to create a walkable trail.

Will it ever be finished?

"I'm encouraged," he said. "I am more encouraged than I was."