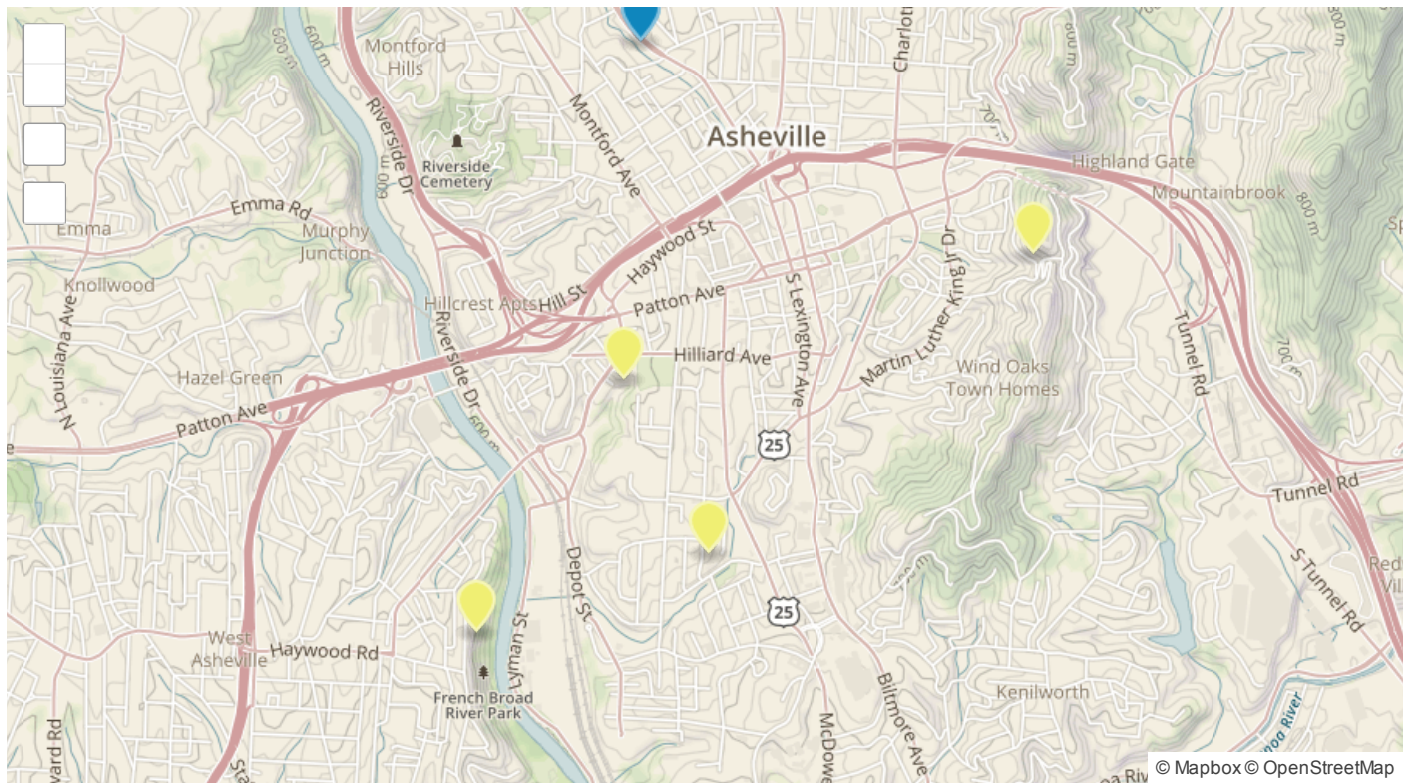


# \$17M greenway building boom planned for Asheville



**Joel Burgess**, [jburgess@citizen-times.com](mailto:jburgess@citizen-times.com) 6:26 a.m. EST December 21, 2015



(Photo: William Woody / [woody@citizen-times.com](mailto:woody@citizen-times.com))

ASHEVILLE - On an unseasonably warm December Tuesday, one of the most popular places in the city was an 8-foot-wide path.

A sunbather lay next to French Broad River, stripped down to shorts in the 65-degree heat. On paved paths around him, people jogged by, whizzed past on bikes or strolled with dogs.

There's no doubt, people love greenways. The "linear parks," as they are sometimes called, rank as a top priority in resident surveys and in public comments.

But considering the popularity of the paths, efforts to build them have been anemic. Since efforts began in the 1980s, around \$4 million has been spent to build 4.6 miles of greenways, most lacking connections to each other.

Now an estimated \$17 million infusion of federal and local tax money — and years of planning by greenway advocates — is set to change that.

Over the next three-and-a-half years, Asheville has plans to build more greenways than the city has in last three decades, according to figures compiled by the city. The new 7.4 miles represents a 162 percent increase in mileage and, if carried out, will give greenway users an unbroken connection from Beaucatcher Mountain to the Asheville Botanical Gardens and the French Broad River.

"I am so excited at what is happening," said Mary Weber, a North Asheville landscape architect and the chairwoman of the volunteer city board overseeing greenways. Weber calls the planned burst of construction a "tipping point" for the greenway system. "It's taken so long to get to this point, but now so much is happening."

## What's taken so long?

One thing Weber has often heard about the system is disappointment.

"I talk to a lot of people who have moved here who express their dismay at how behind we are compared to other cities."

They point to places such as nearby Greenville, South Carolina. That city of 62,252 has 14.5 miles of paved and unpaved paths. Of that, 4.5 miles is part of a much larger system, the 20-mile Swamp Rabbit Trail that continues outside Greenville on an old railroad bed.

In Concord, a city 150 miles east of Asheville with a population of 85,560, there are 7.5 miles of greenways. Those include 2 miles of sidewalks that serve as the system's urban links and have special markings, said Mark Kincaid, that city's deputy director of parks and recreation.

Constraints to greenway construction in Asheville, a city of 87,882, include steep hills, narrow roads and high property costs.

There has also been pushback from some fearing loss of private property and increased crime, Weber said. The chairwoman of the Asheville greenways subcommittee said she thinks those attitudes have been strongest in unincorporated parts of Buncombe County and that may be a reason there are no county greenways.

Kincaid said when Concord first began building greenways in 2003 support from elected officials was "tepid." But that changed after they were finished and residents flocked to them.

"Our mayor, Scott Padgett, famously said greenways are now the only thing that no one yells at him about," the Concord deputy parks director said.

In Buncombe, Weber said she thinks the concerns are waning as people see property values increase near city greenways and no correlation with burglaries or other problems.

## What's happening now?

Planning for greenways has gone on for decades with the latest version of the city's master plan calling for a 15-mile system.

To date, less than a third of that mileage has been constructed. There are four greenways, the longest being the French Broad River Greenway stretching almost 3 miles from a popular dog park to the county's Hominy Creek River Park. The smallest is the 0.4-mile piece of the Swannanoa River Greenway near Walmart.

There are also some unpaved paths that the city doesn't count as part of its system. That includes the 0.7-mile Hominy Creek Trail and a mulched path in Carrier Park.

The long-term planning was important for grants and other funding, advocates say. But the sea change happened after the city switched greenways from the Parks and Recreation Department to the Transportation Department in 2012.

"The City Council felt greenways should be part of the multimodal transportation system," said Greenways Coordinator Lucy Crown, the municipal staff member in charge of the paths.

After the department change, Asheville was able to channel more than \$3 million in U.S. Transportation Department grant money to construction. The Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery grant will help expand the French Broad River Greenway as well as build paths in the Southside neighborhood and off Clingman Avenue.

The other big change came after political pressure over the use of hotel tax money.

The appointed body made up mostly of hoteliers, the Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority, awarded the city \$3 million in hotel tax grant money for greenways this fall. City Council members have been pushing for control of some of the hotel tax, a move the authority has resisted though changes were made easing the way for funding of city projects.

Other funding includes \$281,000 from the U.S. Department of Commerce and \$96,000 in federal money awarded by French Broad River Metropolitan Planning Organization. City taxpayers will contribute about \$9 million. That amount as well as the total of \$17 million is an estimate, and officials say it is likely to change over the next three-and-a-half years. While advocates support the multiyear plan it is not set in stone and will require annual funding approval by the City Council.

Some portions of the new greenways will be done by June 30. All are slated to be finished by the summer of 2019.

In relative terms, the new 7.4 miles will be "huge" said Travis Morehead, operations director of the Carolina Thread Trail, a nonprofit group working to link 15 counties in North Carolina and South Carolina by greenways.

"The longest stretch we've funded at one time is 3.5 miles," Morehead said. "And that is a natural surface trail."

The key to drawing people to a greenway is having at least five contiguous miles, he said. The new Asheville links aim to do that by enabling people to walk from their neighborhoods to the north, south, east or west of downtown to the French Broad River, up the side of Beaucatcher Mountain or to the Asheville Botanical Gardens, said Crown. Some sidewalks will be outfitted greenway connectors through neighborhoods and downtown.

"With all of the 'River to Ridge' greenways constructed, we will have around 10 miles of connected greenways for our citizens to enjoy," Crown said.

Those benefits come at a high cost. The federal grants will not allow the city to do in-house work for parts of the projects, requiring that higher-priced contractors be used. Some of the portions will go through steep and winding terrain and over streams and gullies. With planning, engineering and construction, a typical greenway costs about \$1 million a mile, experts say. Asheville's newest links will cost more than twice that.

Andrew Thomas, a computer programmer who moved to East Asheville from Waynesville six months ago, was jogging on the French Broad River Greenway last week with friend Maria Ruiz of South Carolina.

Thomas said he supported an expanded system. While he likes trails in the national forest, greenways can be more convenient and allow people to recreate and exercise without "getting in their cars and heading out."

As for the cost, Thomas said he didn't have a good understanding of the overall municipal budget.

"But it's certainly a long-term investment."

Lea Shepard, who lives outside Asheville near Spivey Mountain, was walking her dog Lobo on the French Broad Greenway last week. Shepard said she comes with Lobo about three times a week but she unfortunately has to stick to the few wide portions of the system.

"He doesn't like other dogs," she said.

But an expanded system where she can walk from Hominy Creek River Park to the New Belgium brewery may motivate her and Lobo to make a change, she said.

"I won't be able to use it now, but I'll try to get him trained up so we could do it."

### **Completed greenways**

#### French Broad River Greenway

2.83 miles

French Broad River Park/Dog Park in the northeast to Hominy Creek River Park in the south

Last section finished: 2010

Cost: \$1.3 million

#### Glenn's Creek Greenway

0.9 miles

Weaver Park in the northeast to Broadway and W.T. Weaver Boulevard intersection in west

Last section finished: 2002

Cost: \$470,000

#### Reed Creek Greenway

0.7 miles

Broadway across from W.T. Weaver Boulevard south to Magnolia Avenue

Last section finished: 2014

Cost: \$1.4 million (plus grants and donations for 0.28-mile section)

Swannanoa River Greenway

0.4 miles

Just east of Interstate 240 along Swannanoa River crossing Bleachery Boulevard in the east

Last section finished: 2006

Cost: amount unavailable; paid for by private developer

**Coming greenways** (Note: Costs are estimates and likely to change)

French Broad River Greenway - West

1.65 miles

French Broad River Park/Dog Park in the south to parking lot north of New Belgium brewery

Completion: June 2019 (northern 0.45 section by June 2016)

Cost: \$5.4 million (U.S. Department of Transportation, U.S. Department of Commerce, Buncombe County hotel tax, city)

French Broad River Greenway - East

2.2 miles

North from Amboy Road and Lyman Street intersection along French Broad River to 0.3 miles north of Interstate 240

Completion: June 2018

Cost: \$2.5 million (U.S. Department of Transportation, hotel tax, city)

Beaucatcher Greenway

1.25 miles

Memorial Stadium parking lot in south through Beaucatcher Overlook Park north to Helen's Bridge Park

Completion: June 2019

Cost: \$3.8 million (Buncombe County hotel tax, city)

Town Branch Greenway

0.72 miles

Depot Street west behind Grant Center, north across Choctaw Street to Phifer Street

Completion: June 2018

Cost: \$2.5 million (U.S. Department of Transportation, hotel tax, city)

Clingman Forest Greenway

0.45 miles

Clingman Avenue to the north and east with connections at Hilliard Avenue and Merritt and Charles streets

Completion: June 2018

Cost: \$2.8 million (U.S. Department of Transportation, hotel tax, city)

Greenway connectors

1.09 miles

Sidewalks, road crossings and other areas linking different greenways

Cost: \$120,000 Costs are for planning. Construction costs are unknown. (Federal grant through Metropolitan Transportation Organization, city)

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