



Greenways and Economic Development

A Needed Public-Private Partnership for a Time of Massive Recovery from Helene

A Second Connect Buncombe White Paper

Introduction

We of Asheville and Buncombe County now find that our community is in the grip of two major new challenges which affect us all. The first has been called global warming or climate change throughout the past several decades but is now culminating as a climate crisis that has caused stultifying and destabilizing changes in our ability to plan for economic disruptions caused by weather patterns across the planet.

The second, closely related to economic development, is recovery from Tropical Storm Helene. It appears that the cost of recovery in Buncombe County will be at least a billion dollars spread out over a decade. Economic development to overcome this obstacle of recovery is needed in our county.

Both greenways and economic development, especially when planned in conjunction with one another, possess invaluable strengths and benefits. Environmental benefits in the case of greenways and financial benefits in economic development.

Greenways along waterways, in the manner of the Dutch, hold the promise of mitigating climate events by slowing the velocity of devastating waters and thereby saving lives and property.

As always, economic development holds vital promise by bringing the private sector with its valuable tools and skills into play in order to create sustainable development as part of the fundamental economics of human life.

In addition, at this time there is no way to predict what federal funding will amount to or when it will arrive. A new and more comprehensive approach is needed, one that can be a platform for building public-private partnerships. Connect Buncombe offers this white paper to address this challenge.

Purpose

The purpose of this white paper, the second of Connect Buncombe, is to advocate and explore a progressive working relationship between creating greenways and successful economic development. We believe that a partnership between these major elements is needed at this time due to our massive recovery program necessitated by Tropical Storm Helene and its huge funding

requirements as well as a worsening climate crisis. It is clear that the City of Asheville and the towns and areas of the remainder of Buncombe County need to fund and build more greenways and do so in a timely way within a responsible land use planning context. Simultaneously, our community needs major economic development efforts to afford and implement our recovery from Helene and further enhance our development heritage in the 21st Century.

This 2026 *Greenways and Economic Development* white paper follows from our September 2025 paper entitled *Making Strong Connections for a Resilient Future: How Greenways Can Help Mitigate the Devastation of Climate Change*. The premise of the 2025 paper was that greenways, as sizable zones of buffered waterfront edges, could and would act to slow the velocity of flooding caused by climate change disasters.

We are adding economic development to our recommendations because the path forward requires raising billions of dollars in public and private funding. That funding is not simple to assemble: it depends on coordinating banking institutions, the development industry, grants and loans, and federal, state, and local government sources.

The mission of Connect Buncombe, as a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, is to advocate and help implement greenways, related and joined green spaces, trails, multi-use paths, and conservation areas as well as supporting transit, bicycle and pedestrian improvements. We also seek to support compatible and supporting land use and economic development projects which tie in well with greenways.

Definitions

Greenways are defined as carefully sited, designed and maintained linear green spaces along our waterways, both rivers and streams, which are natural in form and welcome the public to enjoy their use.

It is a major goal for greenway planning to tie existing and new greenways into an interconnected greenway network for all of Buncombe County.

Economic development is defined by the International Development Council as the long-term process of investing in infrastructure, workforce development and innovation to improve a community's economic well-being and quality of life, creating and retaining jobs, supporting livable incomes, expanding tax bases, and building local development capacity so that a region can adapt to economic change and support residents and businesses.

Two important goals are to achieve resilience and flexibility in the relationship between greenways and economic development and to build on the economic benefits of greenways through coalitions and sustainable mixed-use projects carefully carried out over many years.

Magnificence

Asheville and Buncombe County present a magnificent environment in which to build greenways and achieve high-quality development among its beautiful mountains and valleys. We enjoy

nature's splendor. Our region possesses a highly developed public and private outdoor recreation industry. Our people, known for their creativity, are skilled in these values. We also have arts and tourism as large scale economic activities as parts of our way of life. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are part of our nature.

Required Elements

- Coordinated planning that integrates greenways, trails, and adjacent protected green space (for both active and passive recreation, conservation, and transit, pedestrian, and bicycle improvements) with economic development and mixed-use goals, grounded in existing ordinances, government policies, master plans, and feasibility studies.
- Alignment with Climate Resilience Hubs and other public and private service and institutional uses (including churches, community centers, shopping facilities, hospitals, fire stations, and schools) so greenway planning strengthens the region's response to climate change.
- Incorporation of cultural and historic preservation themes and place-based assets, such as the Buncombe Turnpike, Taylor's Wave Whitewater Park on the French Broad River in Woodfin, revitalizing districts like Swannanoa, and regional trail systems such as the Hellbender and Fonta Flora State Trail.
- Use of FEMA's hazard property buyout program to convert severely damaged, non-viable properties into open, green, and outdoor recreational spaces held in long-term public ownership.
- Intimate connections between greenways and other green and public spaces, trails, multi-modal transportation improvements, and accessible businesses of all sizes.
- A blended public-private approach that creates a fertile environment for compatible housing and community development alongside greenway investment.
- Capacity to host active recreational events such as jogging groups, 5K races, and marathons that draw participation and economic activity to greenway corridors.
- Strong volunteerism, sustained by nonprofit partners, as a driver of implementation and stewardship.
- A clear emphasis on badly needed affordable housing as both a community need and an economic development strategy.

Regarding affordable housing, we should be committed to achieving a high degree of publicly supported affordable housing for all income groups, an economic development activity in its own right, in order to realize a safe and sustainable Asheville and Buncombe County. Our community excels in creating partnerships and is now pioneering in the use of formal public-private partnerships as exemplified by the Ferry Road mixed-use and greenways project which has been

assisted by the North Carolina Development Finance Institute at Raleigh's School of Government. This project will be explored slightly more as a case study later in this paper.

Interrelated Attributes of Greenways and Economic Development:

- Greenways that draw families to Asheville double as a marketable amenity. That amenity fuels the destination branding and marketing that set the region apart in a competitive tourism and relocation market.
- Greenway access supports a healthier, more active population. That population is part of the human economy that underpins long-term business sustainability and workforce productivity.
- Congenial, welcoming greenway paths generate goodwill and word-of-mouth among the people who use them. This organic form of branding becomes a marketing asset for the businesses nearby.
- Public funding, approvals, and construction unfold as a planned, organized process, and nonprofit and neighborhood partners back that process every step of the way. Together they form a capital formation pipeline that complements and invites private investment.
- Greenway corridors enhance the quality of the neighborhoods they run through. That enhancement directly drives up property values, income growth, and household wealth.
- Multi-modal infrastructure serves people on foot, on a run, or on a bike, getting them where they need to go. In doing so, it becomes the connective tissue between workers, customers, and businesses, supporting economic growth and opportunity.
- Green space, forest preservation, and conservation areas give the region an identity all its own. That distinct market identity strengthens branding, competitive positioning, and capital investment. The scenic natural environment of the county provides the resource base that sustainable business creation and expansion depend on.
- When a greenway links directly to a commercial corridor, foot traffic becomes revenue. That revenue supports job creation and an expansion orientation for the businesses along the way.
- Waterway edges depend on well-managed riparian buffers, and the horticultural and faunal systems that surround them add their own richness to the landscape. Stewarding both is not separate from economic development; it is a precondition for the essential human economy that development ultimately serves.
- Festivals, marathons, and other public events find a natural staging ground along greenway corridors. Hosting them generates recurring economic activity, from ticket and vendor sales to tourism spending and tax revenue, all of which flows back as direct support for the public sector.

Inclusion & Care to Not Cause Displacement

We embrace the diversity of all of our people and our cities, towns, neighborhoods and county. We advocate for inclusive public spaces which are for all, which respect neighborhood, community and private property rights, and which bring greenways to life, where they are desired, in ways that achieve equitable outcomes for all. We are committed to open-mindedness and objectivity toward all evidence.

It should be remembered that, as an all-volunteer non-profit entity, Connect Buncombe does not directly build greenways. It advocates for them and makes recommendations to that effect. As such it can advocate that a given greenway either be built or not be built for stated reasons.

In cases near underserved neighborhoods, where there may be fear of displacement, thoughtful, intentional engagement with community members is crucial to hear concerns and co-create solutions.

Recovery

Recovery from Tropical Storm Helene is a massive undertaking. The community's spirited and cooperative response has been remarkable. The City's creation of four Recovery Development Boards and the County's swift creation of a metropolitan Recovery Plan have provided essential support. In our mountainous region, Tropical Storm Helene devastated communities, including waterbody infrastructure and the greenways that follow those waterways. We must build the resilience needed to mitigate severe floods, landslides, forest fires, and other climate hazards.

Collaboration

Public-private partnerships, with their active mix of private entrepreneurial spirit and public interest, are a key to successful recovery from Helene. Active collaboration must be established with local, regional and national bodies. At the local level this should include active community groups within Resilience Hubs, the City of Asheville Housing and Economic Development Department, the Buncombe County Office of Strategic Partnerships, MountainTrue, Mountain Housing Opportunities, the Sierra Club, the Asheville Legacy Neighborhoods Coalition, RiverLink, the Asheville and Buncombe County Economic Development Coalition at the Asheville Chamber of Commerce, Explore Asheville/Buncombe County Tourism Development Authority, Mountain BizWorks, AB Tech, the French Broad Metropolitan Planning Organization, the Black Business Alliance of the Asheville Chamber of Commerce, and more.

Statewide and regional groups such as the Land of Sky Regional Council, the Carolina Thread Trail and Catawba Lands Conservancy, the Fonta Flora State Trail, the G-5 Trail Collective in Old Fort, the Hellbender Regional Trail and the Great Trails Statewide Coalition have also been examined. Successful international efforts, like those of progressive Holland, the world's leader in water management, have been examined regarding the relationship between greenways on linear corridors and sustainable new development.

Change

Physical, cultural, and socio-economic changes are major forces in our time, and they affect greenways and economic development alike. Both must adapt to them. Our era is experiencing socio-economic changes, both positive and negative, by national, international, and local standards. On the one hand, we are seeing growing networks of greenways and trails, along with multi-modal bicycle and pedestrian provisions, sponsored by multiple partnerships. Mixed-use economic development is occurring in large and small communities alike.

High mortgage rates and housing prices have damaged the housing market. The cost of U.S. health care has become the highest in the world, and two-thirds of Americans are worried about their ability to pay for it. Greater attention is being paid to the construction of affordable housing. In a time of runaway prices, many are seeking less expensive forms of outdoor recreation. We are also witnessing shifting family dynamics, with declining numbers of young people expected to reach college age, a trend sometimes referred to as an approaching "enrollment cliff." There is also a child care crisis arising in which the lack of government support is causing existing child care centers to close with major impacts on lower-income families.

Current national policies are averse to many positive local needs at this time. Artificial intelligence, a new phenomenon, is threatening the job market by requiring fewer jobs. The onset of destructive climate change is creating a harsh planetary challenge requiring stringent resilient methods for mitigation. It is essential that we endeavor to track changes which impact both the creation, management and use of greenways and economic development.

We must also re-grow our property tax base after the ruin of so much property value as a result of Helene. The property tax is the major revenue source for our local governments because North Carolina is a Dillon's Rule state in which it is difficult to identify alternative revenue resources. We will need to attempt to achieve a faster momentum of development for several years.

Case Examples

Two prominent and on-going greenway projects in our region reflect the values of this white paper. The first is the very successful and rapidly advancing Ecusta Rail-to-Trail project in neighboring Henderson and Transylvania Counties. The second is the very promising Ferry Road Community project on the French Broad River, which directly combines greenway, trail and open space making with comprehensive mixed use economic development including housing, commercial and office uses.

The Ecusta Rail-to-Trail project is extraordinary because of its intense community engagement and its combination of short-term, mid-term, and long-range planning. As its planning study and economic impact summary makes clear, it is "A comprehensive plan for converting an inactive rail corridor into a 20-mile shared use trail to promote recreation, transportation, economic growth and community revitalization." Its construction is estimated to create 180 new jobs and \$17 million in expenditures.

The Ferry Road Project in Asheville and Buncombe County is equally impressive. At the outset of the project, Buncombe County engaged the services of the University of North Carolina School of Government Development Finance Initiative for guidance. The mixture of planned economic development elements and the method of developer selection were studied and carried out in impressive detail. The County has begun implementation by focusing on the housing component.

Long-Term Goals and Implementation

Over time, long-term goals require the following:

- Preparation of an economic input-output study for our community, encompassing both city and county.
- Construction of greenways for and in collaboration with underserved communities that want them, including Nasty Branch, Smith Mill Creek, and Shiloh.
- Development of public-private partnership greenways, such as the Ferry Road project.
- Completion of RADTIP and related French Broad River corridor greenways.
- Development of Swannanoa River corridor greenways as part of the Fonta Flora State Trail, extending from Morganton to Asheville.
- Development of Hominy Creek corridor greenways, including the Friends of Hominy Creek Greenway and the long-planned Enka Heritage Trail.
- Completion of the Weaverville Reems Creek Greenway and its connectors.
- Development of the Woodfin Greenway and Blueway, along with the Weaverville-Woodfin connection.

Conclusion

The implementation of this white paper toward these ends requires coordinated planning at a variety of scales, extensive and continuing community engagement throughout the county and city, fundraising from a variety of sources, dedicated sources of revenue for building and maintenance, and the challenging assembly of land, easements, and rights-of-way across multiple property owners and jurisdictions. Current work by Buncombe County, municipalities, and allied non-profit support organizations to implement plans for greenways in Enka-Candler, Woodfin, Weaverville, Asheville, Swannanoa, and Black Mountain are important examples that are underway.

These efforts demonstrate that the vision outlined in this white paper is not aspirational but achievable, grounded in projects already underway and partnerships already proven. As Buncombe County and Asheville continue to recover from Helene, greenways offer a rare opportunity to do more than restore what was lost. They allow us to reinvest in a way that strengthens our natural environment, our neighborhoods, and our economy together. The work ahead is significant, but so is the return: a more connected and resilient environment, economy, and community.

“I believe that greenways, trails and open space, carefully fitted to cities, towns, countrysides, historic waterways and beautiful mountain valleys, fulfill many human needs whether for transportation, health, social equity, environmental betterment, economic development or recreation and fun. Connect Buncombe has always been a spirited partner.”

*– Lucy Crown, AICP, Formerly City of Asheville Greenway Planner and
Buncombe County Park & Greenway Planner*

A Greenways and Economic Development Bibliography

We have discovered books and articles about greenways and economic development and find them relevant to Connect Buncombe and this White Paper.

- Alta, *Ecusta Rail Trail Planning Study & Economic Impact Analysis*, 2012
- Appalachian Community Capital, *Opportunity Appalachia 2020-2025 Impact Report*, 2025
- Arendt, Randall, *Rural by Design, Planning for Town and Country*, Second Edition, American Planning Association Planners Press, Chicago and Washington DC, c. 2015
- Asheville Department of Parks & Recreation, *RECREATE ASHEVILLE – Shaping Our City’s Parks, Asheville’s Comprehensive Parks & Recreation Plan*, August 27, 2024
- Asheville Department of Planning and Urban Design, *Living Asheville – A Comprehensive Plan for Our Future*, Adopted June 2018
- Asheville Department of Transportation, *Close the Gap, A Greenway, ADA Transition and Pedestrian Plan*, Adopted September 2022
- Asheville and Buncombe County Economic Development Coalition, *AVL 5 X 5 2030 – A Strategic Plan for Economic Recovery*, Asheville Chamber of Commerce
- Asheville and Buncombe County Economic Development Coalition, RiverBird Research, Venture Asheville and Asheville Chamber of Commerce, *AVL 5X5 – Interim Metrics and Economic Impact Analysis (FY 2020-2025)*, 2025
- Asheville and Buncombe County Economic Development Coalition, *2024-2025 (FY) Annual Report – The Comeback Begins*, 2025
- Blair, John P., *Local Economic Development: Analysis and Practice*, SAGE Publications, March 29, 1995
- Buncombe County Planning and Development Department, *Our Voices, Our Vision – Buncombe County 2043 Comprehensive Plan*, May 16, 2023
- Buncombe County Greenway Commission, *Chapter 9: The Economics of Greenways & Trails, Draft Greenways & Trails Plan for Public Review*, August 2012

- Carolina Thread Trail and Catawba Lands Conservancy, *Trail Benefits – Evaluating the Economic, Physical Health, and Environmental Impacts of Completing Six Key Segments of the Carolina Thread Trail*, December 2022
- Chancellor, Charles, Ph.D., Brookover, Bob, Ph.D., & Clemson University Regional Economic Analysis Laboratory, *Estimated Economic Impact of the Saluda Grade Trail*, October 13, 2023
- Congress for a New Urbanism, *A Necessary Response: The Climate Action Handbook*, Andelani Press, 2026
- Dykeman, Wilma, *The French Broad*, Wakestone Books, Newport, Tennessee, 1955
- Econsult Corporation, SW+A & Alta Greenways, *Ecusta Rail Trail Planning Study & Economic Impact Analysis*, March 2012
- Fernleaf, *Understand Risk, Build Resilience- Climate Resilience Decision and Adaptation Report*, Unknown Date
- French Broad River Metropolitan Transportation Organization, *Elevate 2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan*, FBMPO, September 2025
- Flink, Charles A., *The Greenway Imperative – Connecting Communities and Landscapes for a Sustainable Future*, University of Florida Press, Gainesville, FL, c. 2020
- Frost, Julian, *The Scientific Method: From Hypothesis to Discovery*, February 2, 2026
- Gill, Joshua K., *The Virginia Creeper Trail: An Analysis of Net Economic Benefits and Economic Impacts of Trips, A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Science*, Athens, Georgia 2004
- Hendersonville, City of, *H Parks & Greenspace Appendix 1, City of Hendersonville Greenway Plan*, 2024
- Institution for Transportation Research and Education, ITRE, State of North Carolina and Alta Planning and Design, *Evaluating the Economic Impact of Shared Use Paths in North Carolina, Technical Memorandum: Brevard Greenway Year One*, Prepared for the North Carolina Department of Transportation, Division of Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation, August 2016
- Little, Charles E., *Greenways for America*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, c. 1990
- Mathur, Anuradha and Dilip Da Cunha, *Design in the Terrain of Water*, Applied Research + Design Publishing with University of Pennsylvania School of Design, 2014
- Metz, Tracy and Maartje van den Heuvel, *Sweet & Salt – Water and the Dutch*, NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, 2012
- Mountain Bizworks, *Opportunity Appalachia in WNC, Opportunity Appalachia 2020-2025 Impact Report – Appalachian Community Capital*, September 30, 2021

- Murphy, David, Mourek, Daniel, *Central European Greenways – Designing International Corridors of Sustainable Development*, Environmental Partnership for Sustainable Development
- New York Parks & Conservation Association, *Greenways & Trails Bringing Economic Benefits to New York*, The Business Council of New York State
- North Carolina Department of Transportation with Support from the NC Division of Parks and Recreation and other State Agency Partners, *The Great Trails State – A Guide for Exploring the Trails of North Carolina*
- North Carolina, *Evaluating the Economic Contribution of Shared Use Paths in North Carolina*, Final Report, 2015-2017
- Nutter Associates, Stephen D. Reiling, Ph.D., Resource Economist, University of Maine, Orono , Maine and The Oswego County Department of Planning and Community Development, *Oswego County Snowmobile Trail Feasibility Study*, August 1999
- Nutter Associates, Community Planners & Development Feasibility Associates, *FORT DRUM REGIONAL ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY – Analysis of Economic Impacts of Fort Drum, NY on the Regional Economy of Jefferson, St. Lawrence and Lewis Counties*, June 1999
- Nutter Associates for the Wayne Economic Development Corporation, Wayne County, New York *Economic Development Corporation Strategic Economic Development Plan*, Wayne County, New York September 1996
- Olshansky, Robert B., and Johnson, Laurie A., Clear As Mud – Planning for the Rebuilding of New Orleans, A Planners Press Book, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, London & New York, 2010
- Pinna, F. and Saiu, V., *Greenways as Integrated Systems: A Proposal for Planning and Design Guidelines Based on Case Studies Evaluations*, Sustainability 2021
- Searns, Robert M., *Beyond Greenways – The Next Step for City Trails and Walking Routes*, Island Press, Washington, DC, c. 2023
- Urban Land Institute Advisory Services Program, *Asheville: A Legacy in Progress*, August 1, 2025
- Yiyong Chen, Wiyong Gu, Tao Liu, Lei Yuan, and Mali Zeng, *Increasing the Use of Urban Greenways in Developing Countries: A Case Study on Wutong Greenway in Shenzhen, China*, International Journal Of Environmental Research and Public Health, 23 May 2017

For further information & comments, contact:

David G. Nutter, AICP,
Chairman, Connect Buncombe Advocacy & Partnerships Committee
Asheville, North Carolina
Cell: 828-279-1820
Email: dnutter@aol.com