

## League of Women Voters of Henderson County Ecusta Trail Endorsement December 8, 2015

The League of Women Voters of Henderson County has a long history of supporting projects which benefit the environmental, economic, health, and social goals of our community. Quality of life is increased when these goals are met, for people native to our region, for all those who have made it their home, and for those who visit us.

A few years ago, a small group of local people saw the potential for a resource in our area and DuPont State Recreational Forest is the result. More than 443,000 people visited the Forest in 2014, meeting all of the goals of preserving a near pristine environment, providing economic boon through visitor traffic, and enhancing social and health needs through recreational activity.

Our community is on the threshold of another opportunity. The Ecusta Trail proposes to use the abandoned railroad line between Hendersonville and Brevard for a walking and bicycle path. This rail has not been used for 13 years. Rail to Trail lines have become popular destinations all over the country, some in urban areas, some rural. Ecusta Trail would provide a beautiful, outdoor recreational experience right in our backyard. Walkers and bikers, both locals and visitors, could take on the challenge of the whole 19 mile trail, or they could commute to work, walk a section, or meet for a picnic. The community as a whole would benefit as we preserve scenic areas, mountain views, bogs, and French Broad River frontage. It does not infringe on agricultural land, and the right of way is almost entirely owned by the railroad. Eventually connecting it to the Greenways already established by the City of Hendersonville and Henderson County, and to those in Brevard and Transylvania County, would increase its value, as would a path to DuPont Forest from Penrose.

When the Etowah and Horse Shoe communities drafted their Community Plan Project in 2009 they proposed considering the establishment of "A greenway between Hendersonville and Brevard on the existing Norfolk-Southern railroad line." Six years ago these communities were already thinking about the economic, environmental, and health benefits of such a trail.

League members recently visited the Swamp Rabbit Trail in Greenville County, South Carolina, which runs from Travelers Rest through Falls Park in downtown Greenville, to Cleveland Park. We were impressed by the positive effects on the economy, the environment and health which this Trail has provided to their community. The Greenville Health System is a primary sponsor of the Trail, including construction, maintenance and advertising. Swamp Rabbit figures show that they had over 500,000 users of the trail last year, with specific tourism revenue of nearly \$7M. Travelers Rest, which for many years past was a ghost town of vacant and decaying buildings, is revitalized with restaurants, outfitters, shops, even a brewery. Historic venues are revived. Parks have been built. Music and art events are held along the trail, and both commercial and residential real estate values have increased. Three new hotels are being built in downtown Greenville, partly in response to higher occupancy rates since the trail was completed in 2010. Joyce McCarrell, co-owner of the Café at Williams Hardware in Travelers Rest, commented to us, "When community leaders are looking for industry to knock on the door, they don't seem to realize that it's here, industry is knocking. It's the tourism industry!"

The League wishes to add its voice to the long list of supporters who agree that Henderson and Transylvania counties will benefit, as will our future generations, when we build the Ecusta Trail.