

**REPORT OF THE CUMBERLAND TRAILS CONFERENCE'S HAMILTON COUNTY WORKING GROUP
TO CTC'S BOARD AND ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS**

Prepared by Linda Hixon, Acting Chair/Vice Chair, Cumberland Trails Conference's
Hamilton County Working Group
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The following is an update to the Cumberland Trails Conference's board for its January 22, 2022 meeting on the efforts of its Hamilton County Working Group (occurring since the in-person update on our work that I provided to the board at its October 16, 2021 meeting) to facilitate:

- the completion of the incomplete sections of the Great Eastern Trail's Connector Trail that is located in Hamilton County and serves as Tennessee's portion of the needed linkage between the Cumberland Trail and the Georgia Pinhoti Trail components of the Great Eastern Trail (GET) and
- the completion of the incomplete sections of the Cumberland Trail (CT) in Hamilton County.

In addition to continuing our efforts to complete sectional maps for the GET's Connector Trail so that the extensive field work and trail routing studies undertaken by our CTC volunteers can be adequately documented and made available to those project partners who have or will have responsibility for the Trail's design and development, we are also providing helpful background information on the project as well as on the GET and the CT, specific trail routing suggestions and accompaniment on site visits, and encouragement to the City of Chattanooga and to Hamilton County, primarily through our contacts with the leadership of their parks and recreation departments, and to Tennessee State Parks leadership. We are also providing preliminary project coordination services: identifying the appropriate partners and the contributions that they are able and willing to make, establishing communication channels, and fostering a comfortable working relationship among the partners with the goal of establishing a solid partnership effort that is capable of carrying out the project with a decreasing need for assistance from us. In addition to providing regular updates to CTC's board, we are also providing updates to the board of the Great Eastern Trail Association (GETA).

Jameson Miller and I met with Hamilton County Mayor Jim Coppinger and his chief of staff in December 2021 to update them on progress made and the future work needed to complete the GET's Connector Trail, and we plan to schedule a meeting with Chattanooga Mayor Tim Kelly to thank him for the initiative that has already been shown by the Department of Parks & Outdoors and encourage further efforts. We are pleased with the level of interest that has been shown by the City and by County Mayor Coppinger and his chief of staff and hope that the State will take steps to build on that interest to advance completion of said Connector Trail in cooperation with our local governments. A short section of the Connector Trail will be in the City of Soddy-Daisy and we plan to schedule a meeting with Mayor Rick Nunley and the City Manager to update them and discuss future steps. The current rise in CoVid-19 cases has discouraged us a bit from seeking in-person meetings right now, but we hope the case numbers will decline soon and the return of more normal circumstances will allow for such meetings.

Development for residential and other purposes is proceeding apace in Hamilton County as more and more people move here from other parts of the country and tracts of undeveloped land are constantly being sought by developers. Land on Walden's Ridge is under pressure from this development surge. There have been sales and there are rumors of more sales of large tracts on Walden's Ridge that are located within the North Chickamauga Creek watershed. One recent sale of such land on Walden's Ridge that received newspaper coverage is a 500+ acre tract located on the opposite side of North Chickamauga Creek from the CT that sold for \$5,000,000. Large hemlock trees are present along the tract's frontage on the creek. To my knowledge, development plans have not yet been made public. We are trying to stay aware of sales of significant tracts in order to identify any positive and negative effects on the CT/GET and possible opportunities for the CT/GET.

At the base of Walden's Ridge in the north end of the County, Hamilton County government closed in December 2021 on the purchase of the 2,100 acre McDonald Farm with plans to create a new industrial park and some mixed development there while preserving some of the land as open space for recreational use. The farm borders a tract owned by the Chattanooga Audubon Society and also the Cumberland Trail State Park. Locating a trailhead for the CT on the farm that would be accessible from Highway 27 has been mentioned as a possibility. The County hopes to begin providing recreational activities at the farm by this Spring. The efforts of the County's limited Parks & Recreation staff have been focused on planning for the farm in recent months, but we expect that they will soon be able to re-engage with vigor in the GET's Connector Trail project. The Trail is recognized in the Hamilton County Parks and Recreation master plan as being an important connector between the two main spines of the County's greenway system: the Riverwalk and the CT, so attention is assured and in the meantime, we'll continue to maintain communication and engage in planning with County Mayor Coppinger and his office.

Tim Laramore, executive director of the North Chickamauga Creek Conservancy (NCCC) and a member of our Hamilton County Working Group, has recently advised that, using a formula developed with the assistance of the Land Trust for Tennessee, NCCC has evaluated the conservation values of tracts of land along the creek and has sent letters to about 150 landowners to ascertain their interest in conserving their properties. Tim mentioned that NCCC is considering and likely will request in the near future Tennessee Scenic River designation for North Chickamauga Creek. (Statutes governing the State's Scenic River program are Tennessee Code 11-13-101 - 11-13-118 and can be viewed online by Googling "Tennessee Code Free Public Access" and going to a Lexis website.) Tim also indicated that NCCC is continuing with its efforts to insure that restoration of the tract on Dayton Pike, where stone harvesting operations have been underway for some years, that borders a portion of the North Chickamauga Creek Gorge State Natural Area will be done in a manner that fully complies with legal requirements when its permit for such operations ends December 15, 2022.

Regarding the proposed creation of a multi-use pedestrian pathway on the C. B. Robinson Bridge over the Tennessee River, a project that has long been sought by local bicyclists and

walkers and is needed for GET hikers to cross the river and if southbound , continue on the Riverwalk toward Lookout Mountain and if northbound, continue along the north bank of the river to the North Chickamauga Creek Greenway Trail and then, along the creek to Walden's Ridge, there have been some encouraging steps taken by the City of Chattanooga's Department of Transportation (CDOT). CDOT has requested during the recent RTP call for projects that the priority of the project be moved up from the illustrative list to the first Tier of the plan 2026-2030 and CDOT is working with TDOT on a temporary measure that could provide the needed access in the interim. If permitted, the temporary measure would reconfigure the C. B. Robinson ramps and northbound lanes to provide a multi-use trail and CDOT would proceed to determine a source and funds for about 1.4 miles of barrier to separate the trail users from vehicular traffic. CDOT's long term goal is to have dedicated access on and off the Bridge and it is anticipated that funding for that would be available in 2026.

The City of Chattanooga's Department of Parks and Outdoors is developing plans for a "lighter/quicker version of a non-accessible hiking trail" that would perhaps have a compacted gravel surface for the GET/Greenway segment located between the north end of the C. B. Robinson Bridge and Hixson High School and submitting a budget request for that for the City's FY 2023 budget. Blythe Bailey, the Department's Director of Design and Connectivity, says, "This effort on my part will not be pushing for the finished paved greenway at this time, but instead an intermediate trail system that accomplishes [the goal of completing the GET through Chattanooga] but is not an accessible transportation corridor which would be our ideal long-term goal for the greenway."

Construction of a new conference center at Greenway Farm which is along the route of the GET/Greenway appears to be nearing completion.

There is precedent for a long-distance trail to have a fork in its route – the GET, for example, has one or more forks - and the idea has been floated of having the CT have a fork at its southern end whereby one fork of the CT continues south along Walden's Ridge to Signal Point (and Shackleford Ridge Park which now, through the efforts of the Tennessee River Gorge Trust, has the needed easement for development of a trail connection with Signal Point) and the Prentice Cooper State Forest segment of the Cumberland Trail and one fork of the CT follows the GET's route from the North Chickamauga Creek Gorge State Natural Area, along the North Chickamauga Creek Greenway, the Riverwalk, the Guild Trail and NPS trails to the Tennessee-Georgia line on Lookout Mountain. The idea has generated a good bit of excitement locally and would certainly be helpful in encouraging the City of Chattanooga and I expect Hamilton County also to move forward with efforts to complete the GET's Connector Trail here. (If the Georgia Pinhoti Trail would perhaps have an interest in co-aligning with the Cloudland Connector, the Chattanooga Connector and the National Park Service Trails, it would be possible for the Cumberland Trail and the Georgia Pinhoti Trail segments of the GET to seamlessly connect at the Tennessee-Georgia line and simplify matters for hikers.) When I mentioned this idea at the October 2021 CTC board meeting, time did not permit more than one board member to express an opinion but I would like to hear from the rest of the board and advisory board members. Please send me your thoughts, suggestions, etc. My email address is lkhixon@gmail.com.