

Greenway opens Highlands’ nature to citizens and visitors

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At an area on Highlands’ Greenway Trail that Mayor Don Mullin described as “the most beautiful spot in Highlands,” a new bridge crosses Mill Creek, allowing hikers to follow the wooded path from the Recreation Center to Mirror Lake. The Mayor presided over the dedication of the Mill Creek Bridge in ceremonies Tuesday, October 6. Designed by Lamar Nix, town engineer, and built by Town of Highlands employees, the bridge provides connectivity to a trail that will contribute to the pleasure of Highlands’ citizens and visitors for generations to come.

Mullin expressed the town’s gratitude to Hillrie Quinn and all the volunteers for their tireless efforts over the past year in developing that portion of the trail that includes the bridge. “Their devotion to this endeavor was truly a labor of love,” he said.

Quinn directed the efforts that involved nearly 50 citizens who put in more than 800 volunteer hours. He thanked the Town of Highlands for its “outstanding support of the Greenway effort, especially construction of this magnificent bridge.” Quinn noted that “Town employees also hauled gravel, built a culvert bridge on Big Bear Pen Mountain and performed many other tasks needed to allow our volunteer effort to succeed.”



Mayor Don Mullin, town officials and volunteers cut the grape vine across Mill Creek Bridge, “the most beautiful spot in Highlands,” to officially open the new Greenway.

Greenway Origins in London



Highlands engineer Lamar Nix, left, and Hillrie Quinn at the dedication. Quinn helped organize more than 50 citizens who put in over 800 volunteer hours on the project.

Quinn says the idea of greenways in towns and cities started in London. “When the business community realized that if London kept growing and the farms near the central city market kept being pushed further from town, the farmers would not be able to make the trip and get their food to the market. They approached the King and had him declare that a belt around London would be reserved for farms and hunting preserves. Today this belt is known as the ‘String of Pearls,’ a series of parks surrounding the inner city of London.”

In this country Fredrick Law Olmsted developed Central Park in New York City with a series of parks and boulevards all the way out to Coney Island, according to Quinn. Olmsted was also the landscape architect responsible for the grounds surrounding Asheville’s famous Biltmore House. Greenways are becoming popular in this country, with North Carolina being a leader in the establishment of such a concept. Highlands joins Franklin and more than 25 other towns and cities in the state to develop such projects.

The Highlands 2005 land use plan included the Greenway. An earlier greenway effort connected Sunset Rock with Mirror Lake. In 2005 several people volunteered to expand that initial effort, and the Town Board accepted their offer to create a greenway system in Highlands. The group developed a master plan and a strategic plan to implement it. In August of last year, the group began trail construction trips in the Highlands Recreation Park area. Their efforts were rewarded with today’s dedication ceremony.

Trails and Features of the Greenway

Currently, the Highlands Plateau Greenway consists of a number of sections, allowing hikers to pick and choose the things that interest them most. These include:

- **Kelsey Trail.** At the turn of the 20th century, prior to logging and development of the Highlands Plateau, the Kelsey trail connected the Town of Highlands to Whiteside Mountain through five miles of primeval, old-growth hemlock-hardwood forest.

The entrance to the Kelsey Trail takes you into a transitioning old-growth hemlock forest. The canopy is mainly composed of Canada hemlock, tulip poplar, birch, red maple, red oak and Fraser magnolia. Species commonly associated with hemlock coves such as rhododendron, dog hobble and mountain laurel dominate the understory.

The current distance of the Kelsey Trail is 0.5 miles, with a hike classification of easy to moderate.

- **Rhododendron Trail.** The Coker Rhododendron Trail begins at the Highlands Biological Station on Lower Lake Road, near the junction with the Upper Lake Trail. The trail leads through a lovely old-growth hemlock hardwood forest, nestled in a rhododendron cove. The distance is 0.2 miles with a moderate walk. The trail ends at a stream crossing, and hikers should return to the Lower Lake Road entrance.

- **Sunset Rock.** This is a public park and one of the first properties to be conserved by the Highlands- Cashiers Land Trust. The trail, originally a carriage trail and now a gravel road, begins across from the Highlands Nature Center at the Biological Station on Horse Cove Road. The rock outcrop at the summit gives the best panoramic view of Highlands, especially at sunset. A trail to the left leads from Sunset Rock to Sunrise Rock, a lookout spot over Horse Cove.

The distance is 0.6 miles and comprises an easy walk. While there is a road, driving is strongly discouraged.

- **Botanical Garden.** Located at the Highlands Biological Station, the Botanical Garden serves as a living museum of labeled native plant species. More than 500 species of plants can be found in montane forest, bog and wetland communities within the 12-plus acre garden.

Take the Lower Lake and Upper Lake Trails around Lindenwood Lake to connect with the Rhododendron Trail. There are a number of gardens: Butterfly Garden, Rock Outcrop Garden, Azalea Garden, Cherokee Garden and Plants of William Bartram. You can stroll down the Foreman Loop, Woodland Loop, Falls Trail and Fern Trail. All trails are easy to moderate walks, ranging from 0.1 to 0.2 miles.

- **Mill Creek Trail.** This trail follows Mill Creek from the Highlands Recreation Park on 4th Street to Mirror Lake. The trail will connect to the Nature and Sculpture Trails of the new Bascom Center campus. You can walk the trail from the Rec Park down to the Mill Creek Bridge (dedicated Oct. 6) and enjoy a beautiful open view of the water. The trail continues across the creek and joins with Oak Lane, which leads down through a charming neighborhood to Mirror Lake.

The wetlands surrounding Mirror Lake offer a beautiful view and an opportunity for bird sightings. Hikers can look for waders like the great blue heron, the resident mallard duck or the migratory hooded merganser.

Hikers will note the transitioning canopy as the trails winds further from the stream and down to the wetlands and Mirror Lake. As the canopy shifts from hemlocks to hardwoods, diversity in the understory increases to include flame azalea, witch hazel, wildflowers and ferns among the dominant rhododendron, dog hobble and mountain laurel.

This moderate walk measures 1.1 miles.

Quinn says, “In the future we will complete a trail on Big Bear Pen Mountain, rehabilitate the Kelsey Trail from 5th Street to Sherwood Forest and connect the trails into a real system of loops that will be about five miles long and include easy, moderate and difficult sections to offer appropriate choices to everyone, citizen and visitor.”

Long range Quinn hopes to connect the Highlands Plateau Greenway to the Bartram Trail, a goal of the Franklin Greenway as well. When both of these happen, then the Highlands and Franklin Greenways will be connected as well.



The Highlands Greenway was a collaborative effort and is commemorated to The Highlands Plateau Greenway volunteers, The Mountain Garden Club and the Town of Highlands.

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