

22 miles by 2022

Nonprofit FOLAR makes waves with localities for completing the Appomattox River Trail in three years

By Sean Jones

Staff Writer

PETERSBURG – The Friends of the Lower Appomattox River (FOLAR) group has been making waves across the Tri-Cities recently, as it edges closer to completion of its 22-mile trail system along the state scenic river. FOLAR has snapped up agreements with nearly every locality in the area while also securing millions of dollars in grant funding across its projects.

The nonprofit started in 2000 as an advocacy and educational organization to promote the awareness for the river.

The completed trail has potential to be help with physical health, increase travel opportunities, improve air quality, reduce road congestion, increase tourism and preserve natural habitats on the river.

FOLAR released a master plan for the Appomattox River Trail in 2017. The trail starts at City Point Park in Hopewell and ends at Lake Chesdin on the Chesterfield-Dinwiddie county line, moving through Prince George, Colonial Heights and Petersburg along the way.

Since that plan was established, major projects have been completed or set into motion along the Appomattox River.

Hopewell finished construction and opened its Downtown Riverwalk in April while Colonial Heights has just approved the use of grant funding to complete the last two phases for its 2.5 miles of riverside trail. More bike lanes in Hopewell and continued construction in Colonial Heights mean that both of those cities could be completed by 2022.

"We're starting by focusing on population centers because a that's really the biggest bang for our buck," said Heather Barrar, regional trails program director for FOLAR. "That's why you see us focusing on Petersburg. That's the middle of the trail."

FOLAR is turning to Petersburg, where a major planned gateway project at Patton Park could be the spark that ignites the rest of the trail in the area.

The University Boulevard gateway project would use around \$2 million in grant funding from the Virginia Department of Transportation and the Cameron Foundation to build a new connection between Ettrick and Petersburg. It would come with about a quarter-mile of trail through Patton Park that would kickstart Petersburg's portion of the Appomattox River Trail.

FOLAR is already well under way with a design for beautification and development of Patton Park which includes that quarter-mile portion.

"The stuff that we're designing in Petersburg, we want to see action on the ground," Barrar said. "We don't want that to sit on the shelf for too long."

The trail crisscrosses over the Appomattox from beginning to end, but the heart of the trail in Colonial Heights and Petersburg is planned to have paths on both sides of the river.

Four localities issued resolutions of support; Petersburg took it one step further with a Memorandum of Understanding.

More than a show of support, that MOU outlines distinct duties and responsibilities each group has for the river trail.

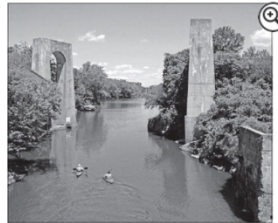
"Resolutions are important to an organization like us as we go after funding. Everyone in the region, we recognize that the localities support the trail," Barrar said. "But when you start looking for funding statewide, nationwide, to have these resolutions really help that case. You can say to a funder we have these resolutions of support from all these jurisdictions."

Barrar said the Petersburg gateway at Patton Park has great potential to be a tie-in to an even larger trail project, the Ashland Petersburg Trail. Though only in a preliminary study phase, that trail would connect Petersburg to a transregional trail going north through Richmond, ending



This aerial photo shows the area of Patton Park in Petersburg, which will be the heart of the 22-mile Appomattox River Trail network being championed by the nonprofit group Friends of the Lower Appomattox River. The group hopes to have the entire stretch from Hopewell to Lake Chesdin complete by 2022.

[CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]



in the town of Ashland.

FOLAR is now connected to other trail systems in the area with infrared trail counters. FOLAR's counters are the same brand used by Chesterfield and the James River Parks System.

"We bought the same kind so the systems would talk amongst each other," Barrar said. "You can compare numbers on a monthly basis."

FOLAR volunteers also sit on the trails twice a year to get information that the counters can't pick up. They can only distinguish the number of pedestrians with no descriptive information on the trail user.

"We count men and women. We count bicycle, pedestrian." Barrar said. "They saw someone using a walking stick in Colonial Heights, it's possible that was someone who is blind. You wouldn't be able to tell that from a trail counter."

Barrar said the trail counters are telling FOLAR that the Colonial Heights section of the trail is typically the most active. It is also the most well-kept piece of the trail with flat, paved trail, scenic views and total ADA compliance.

"I went to a conference where they talked about how people with PTSD don't like being in enclosed spaces. So, for them, trail design is important to keep it wide and open. We're seeing that with the numbers. People are in spaces that feel wide open, flat and easy. Like that the Riverwalk is super busy," Barrar said. "Those are aspects of trail building that you don't necessarily think about."

For now, FOLAR says it is hoping to get to seven contiguous miles of trail.

"We've heard from our friends at the Capital Trail that 7 miles is that magic number," Barrar said. "Once you get 7 contiguous, people will put a bike on a car, come and get a good 14-mile bike ride."

When completed, each locality will own and maintain every inch of trail within its respective jurisdiction. Those trails will all be unified with Appomattox River Trail branding of informational signs for continuity. Sean Jones can be reached at sjones@progress-index.com

Patton Park in Petersburg is at the heart of the 22-mile long Appomattox River Trail network championed by the nonprofit group Friends of the Lower Appomattox River.

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