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# County **QUARTERLY**

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## SETTING SIGHTS HIGH

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# Setting Sights High

## Burke County's Journey to Jumpstart Fonta Flora State Trail

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**Brisk wind swept across our faces as we ventured out on the Fonta Flora State Trail, beginning at the County Park Trailhead off Fish Hatchery Road in Morganton.** It rained the day before, so the ground was soft and marked with critter paw prints. Guided by Burke County's finest, we made our way around a section of Lake James.

The breeze turned to gusts and lake waters showed white caps, a site to behold at 30 feet above the banks of the lake. As we continued to make our way along the trail, I came to understand the vision Burke County leaders have for a state treasure that will serve generations of North Carolina's residents, and the determination these county leaders have to make it happen.

Long-time Burke County residents know what an asset they have in Lake James. It is a striking lake created by flooding the Fonta Flora community

more than a century ago. Mother Nature has done her work and thick vegetation now surrounds the lake, and thriving wildlife is all around. More than 15 years ago Burke County commissioners and other county leaders began talking about how to develop this asset into a place that would draw people to the area.

"We really had to look way down the road to see what we could build upon," said Burke County Commissioner Johnnie Carswell, "and that's the reason some of these decisions were made."

And look way down the road they did. It's a story of ups and downs, twists and turns, tenacity and collaboration. Fonta Flora State Trail is still a work in progress and well on its way to being one of the great accomplishments in North Carolina's history. The Fonta Flora Trail aims to connect Western North Carolina from Morganton to Asheville with a 70-80-mile foot and bike trail.

### Starting with Seeds

In 2002, Burke County began to develop a strategic plan, which included building greenways and trails in the community. County leaders thought Lake James could be a good place to start. It was a seed of an idea that quickly met opposition. Land developer Crescent Resources and utility company Duke Energy surfaced issues with developing around the lake. Many area residents were not keen on the idea either, and around 2004, a group formed to protect Lake James. They filed a lawsuit in an effort to legally and finally put the prospect to rest. Parties involved in the conversation ultimately came to terms outside of the courtroom.

Around the same time, Duke Energy had to complete a comprehensive relicensing agreement (CRA) to continue its use of Linville Dam. As part of the CRA, Duke was obligated to undertake certain recreational projects, including building five miles of loop trail and a six-mile trail that would be part of the Overmountain Victory National Historic

Trail. A group called Lake James Trails subsequently formed in 2005 to prepare a master plan for these trail projects, but after a year of meetings and work, the group dissolved and no master was ever created.

Time passed and life went on... until Scott Carpenter arrived on the scene in 2013. Hired as Burke County Deputy County Manager and Community Development Director, Carpenter quickly got to work researching the status of the trail project. He found that the county was owed money from Duke Energy when the CRA was approved. It was great news and cause for jumpstarting the project. A 23-member committee representing varying interests was created shortly thereafter to resume work on a master plan. The committee met monthly over lunch and worked diligently to chart a course for creating miles of trails that would surround Lake James. With consistent attendance over the course of months, the committee collaborated and the plan took shape.

The committee saw the need to start small, just to get the ball rolling. They asked

Fonta Flora State Trail bridges are handcrafted, utilizing a unique design that invites trail visitors to stop and stay for a while. Pictured left to right, Shane Prisby, Community Development Operations Manager; Johnnie Carswell, Burke County Commissioner; Scott Carpenter, Burke County Deputy County Manager and Community Development Director.



for an initial investment from the Burke County Board of Commissioners. “When Scott first came to me, I said, ‘Have you lost your ever-loving mind?’” recalled Burke County Commissioner Johnnie Carswell. Carswell was reluctant because he knew people considered the lake sacred. The commissioners thoughtfully considered the request, and decided to support the project. That initial seed money enabled the project to get off the ground and grow into a truly grand venture.

### Creating Something Great

With a bit of money in hand to jumpstart the project, the first order of business was to acquire land. Deeds to 120 acres of land

would be needed to proceed with work, and securing those deeds proved to be a challenge, to put it mildly. But Carpenter would not be deterred and pressed on, pursuing every avenue to make it happen. Crescent Resources and Duke Energy also came through, contributing 123 and 143 acres, respectively, to the effort.

It was also clear that the restrictions on what could be built at the lake would present more challenges. “I can remember the arguments about everything from paint on the boat dock to the structure of the boat docks. The county has adopted strict standards for what is acceptable, and in many cases, we had to work to modernize buildings and it’s been beneficial,” shared



Burke County Commissioner Wayne Abele. The challenge would give way to opportunity though, as Carpenter began thinking bigger about the scope of the project.

Carol Tingley, Deputy Director for North Carolina State Parks, scheduled a meeting to discuss a number of items with Carpenter and he seized the chance to explore some possibilities he was considering. He wondered whether Burke County’s project could be designated a state trail, similar to the Mountains to Sea Trail, which Carpenter was walking at the time. The answer he heard got his wheels turning even more. It was possible, but the trail would need to be longer and the General Assembly would have to pass legislation supporting it. Never one to be bothered by hurdles, Carpenter got to work designing plans to extend the trail to Morganton and talking with Senator Warren Daniel and Representative Hugh Blackwell about proposing state legislation to get the project approved.

The prospects for the legislation looked grim at first, but late in the legislative session, the bill passed with the backing of nearby many counties and municipalities including Buncombe, Burke and McDowell Counties, as well as Asheville, Black Mountain, Glen Alpine, Marion and Morganton. The local governments in the area passed resolutions of support, and with that vote of confidence, a new goal was born – connect Morganton to Asheville by way of the Fonta Flora State Trail.

Tom Kenney, Land Protection Director for Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina, Inc., is a founding member of the 23-person project committee and remains actively engaged on the project. Foothills Conservancy has been an important partner in the project, recently purchasing 90 acres of land in McDowell County for expansion of the Fonta Flora State Trail. Kenney aptly summarized the key that has unlocked so much potential for the region, “Thanks to the leadership of Burke County, this is something that will benefit the region in western North Carolina... because of the vision the county had, embracing the idea. This is more than Burke County.” That’s right, and Burke County is at the helm creating something great that is expected to pay dividends to the state’s residents in more ways than one.



*“It’s just another good example of opening your eyes to the future, and never say you can’t... we just gave it the best shot we could.”*



### Visioning a Lasting Asset

The original goal of creating a loop trail around Lake James is well underway. Crews continue to forge sections of the trail and build infrastructure to support it – bridges, roadways and parking lots. But that’s just the beginning of what is envisioned. Carpenter is motivated when he talks about other elements he sees incorporating into the trail and recognizes county leadership is critical to its success, “Support by the commissioners has been important. I’ve been investing in this project for five years, and all the commissioners and County Manager Bryan Steen have been there all the way. Believe me, it’s not been an easy task, but they’ve been very supportive.”

Part of the bigger picture of this project is collaboration with local brewers, Todd Boera and Mark and David Bennett, who founded Fonta Flora Brewery four years ago. They approached the county about growing crops that would serve as ingredients in beer they planned to brew. They wanted to locate this expanded part of their operation at Whippoorwill Farm, a historic dairy farm in Burke County. However, the county was dry and zoning laws would not permit establishing such an operation at the farm. Again with the support of county leadership, Carpenter looked at ways to make it happen, recognizing the operation could serve as an attraction along the state trail.

Carpenter worked with state legislators to



propose a bill that would allow the brewery to utilize the same agricultural exemption wineries use. It passed and Fonta Flora is scheduled to host a soft launch of its Whippoorwill Tasting Room in June. The site will also serve as a trailhead along the state trail. “It’s just another good example of opening your eyes to the future, and never say you can’t... we just gave it the best shot we could,” shared Commissioner Carswell.

Carpenter thinks about how Burke County’s experience taking on this larger than life project could help other rural counties throughout the state. He encourages, “Find what your strong assets are. Be willing to invest in them. Be willing to trust the people who will work hard to help implement them. Our commissioners are a great example of supporting a project. They’re the best I’ve ever worked with, and on a project this hard and challenging, it’s been incredible. Don’t give up, don’t accept ‘no.’ It takes a ton of collaboration.”

### Moving Forward

In 2017, Burke County hired Shane Prisby as its Community Development Operations Manager, a boon for Prisby’s family as his wife grew up in Morganton. Prisby relocated from Vermont back to his wife’s home town to take the job. Teamed up with Carpenter, Prisby is focused on finding pathways to advancing work on the trail. “Every day is different, we’re digging a ditch one day and negotiating land purchases another,” he says. Prisby’s role in securing grants and discussing land acquisition and easement options with landowners is critical to the project progressing. In fact, there are 64 residents who own land around the lake and it is Prisby’s job to help them understand their options and determine what will work for all involved.

This summer, Burke County will hire a

United States Youth Conservation Corps crew to assist with trail development. They face a challenge as the terrain is mountainous and the goal is to create trails that are accessible by most hikers and wide enough to accommodate all-terrain vehicles, in the event rescue is required. Involving youth is an important element of this project, as county leadership sees it as an opportunity to get young people and families outside to enjoy the natural beauty the area has to offer.

“Our slogan now in Burke County is, ‘All about advancing,’” Commissioner Carswell shares with a smile, as Carpenter adds, “We’re never stuck, we’re always moving in some direction to move this project forward.” Moving forward means many things, including county and municipal collaboration to determine how the trail will take shape as it meanders west to Buncombe County.

“Even though this [Fonta Flora State Trail] is going to be an economic driver, it’s protecting the lake and I think that’s the most important thing we can give our children and their children. It is something they’ll have forever,” Commissioner Abele reflects. Burke County has seen population decline for decades and are now seeing that decline level off. Everyone is hopeful the Fonta Flora State Trail is the key to a thriving future for the region.

Commissioner Carswell captures the effort well, “We have shown that with a bit of vision and the commissioners sticking together and providing a little bit of seed money, we can realize in the end that we’ll have a product that will never go away and we’ll have something for generations to come. It is an entire community effort to make this trail on the ground and extend to the west. I can’t say enough about how many hours Scott and others have labored over this. It’s a good, collaborative effort.” ■



**Fonta Flora State Trail**  
**How to Get There**

Ten miles of the Fonta Flora State Trail is accessible through the Fonta Flora County Park trailhead, located at 126 NC-126, Morganton, NC 28655. After taking Interstate 40 exit 100 toward Glen Alpine, it’s about a 10 ½ mile drive to the trailhead.

The entrance is clearly marked with a stunning tree sculpture noting in burnt orange letters, “Fonta Flora County Park.” There is ample parking and a map of the area to get your bearings.

