

BRC updates Watauga commissioners on Northern Peaks State Trail progress

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Three Top Mountain and the Northern Peaks State Trail project
Photo by Leila Jackson

BOONE — Jordan Sellers, Northern Peaks State Trail coordinator of the Blue Ridge Conservancy, updated the Watauga County Commissioners on the progress of the Northern Peaks State Trail on Tuesday, Dec. 19. The Northern Peaks State Trail is a proposed 40-mile hiking trail currently being planned and developed by the Blue Ridge Conservancy and will connect Boone with West Jefferson.

The BRC claims the trail will be the “premier hiking trail of northwest North Carolina” and will traverse across the Amphibolite Mountains, which includes Howard Knob, Snake Mountain, Elk Knob, Three Top Mountain, The Peak, Three Top Mountain, Paddy Mountain and West Jefferson. Sellers said the final route is yet to be determined, but the trail will only go through land managed or owned by willing and cooperative landowners, including state parks, state game lands, public properties, and private trail easements, among others.

“We’re basically trying to create public access for folks,” Sellers said. “There’s a lot of land out there that doesn’t have great access to it, including parts of Elk Nob, Three Top Mountain Game Land and Rivers Street Park in downtown Boone. We’re trying to deliver some trails to get more people outside and bring a positive impact to the community.” The portion of the trail that has seen the most progress is the Paddy Mountain section in West Jefferson. All 153 acres, which overlook downtown West Jefferson, are protected. BRC has received approximately \$850,000 for the portion of trail work from various grants and local and state funding.

Sellers said about a mile of trail has already been completed and is expected to be finished in early 2024. The BRC will then break ground on park infrastructure around the same period. The next portion of the trail that has seen recent progress is in Elk Knob State Park. In 2022, Elk Knob State Park received \$3.4 million for a new four to five-mile loop trail, renovations to existing backcountry trails, renovations to the existing summit trail, and construction of a south side trailhead, parking lot, vehicular bridge, restrooms, pavilion, and south side approach trail.

Sellers said some renovations, in addition to the biological survey on the north side, have been completed. Next steps include permitting and eventually breaking ground on the north side loop trail in spring 2024. Work on the south side is expected to begin in 2025. Three Top Mountain Game Land has seen the next most progress. A biological survey has been completed at the site, and the BRC has signed a contract with a trail builder. The trail is expected to be completed in 2025 or 2026.

The BRC is also planning a trail at Rivers Street Park, where the Town of Boone owns about 13 acres. The site would also be the southernmost point of the NPST and mark the start of the trail. The BRC is pursuing grant funding for the project and has received support from the town for trail construction. “We’re proposing to take a deer track trail, renovate it and have it be the southern terminus of the Northern Peaks State Trail. The trail will start in Boone and give the public more access to the park,” Sellers said.

Sellers and the BRC held a public input session for the Rivers Street Park trail at the Watauga County Public Library on Monday, Dec. 18. Based on community feedback, the organization received overwhelming positive support for the project. In other news, the BRC was awarded two grants to purchase approximately 48 acres on the north side of The Peak for protection. Current acquisition is focused between Elk Knob and The Peak, which will result in nearly half of the NPST corridor.

Moving forward, Sellers said the organization has placed a priority on funding two feasibility studies for two crucial connections: West Jefferson to Jefferson and downtown Boone to Howard Knob. “When Watauga County, Ashe County, Boone, West Jefferson, Jefferson and all the state parks and everyone trusted Blue Ridge Conservancy to take this on — we can be pretty effective — we have actually brought in over the past two years \$7 million just related to the Northern Peaks State Trail, \$3.4 million of that is directly in Watauga County,” Sellers said.