A New Life for an Old Railroad Corridor in Durham, North Carolina

Built in the 1890s as a rail spur to downtown tobacco buildings, the Durham Belt Line extends along the city’s western edge. Abandoned since the 1980s, this 2-mile, 18-acre historic railway corridor now has the potential to become a vital part of the city’s greenspace network.

City leaders first proposed converting the railway to a recreational trail in 2001 to link the South Ellerbe Creek Trail with the American Tobacco Trail and connect the Duke Park and Old North Durham residential neighborhoods to the vibrant downtown area. Over the years, the project has gained widespread support from elected officials, civic groups, neighborhood associations and downtown business leaders.

The city of Durham worked for many years to acquire the rail corridor from its owner, Norfolk Southern, but a deal seemed difficult to reach. As the Belt Line hung in the balance, The Conservation Fund stepped in to help with negotiations and purchased the property in 2017, becoming the interim owner while the city secured the necessary funding. This effort was largely funded by a U.S. Department of Transportation-Federal Highway Administration grant in partnership with the state of North Carolina. The property recently was transferred to the city, marking a pivotal victory for the Belt Line.

The city now aims to engage the communities around the Belt Line in the planning and design process to better understand their needs and address concerns about gentrification, displacement and inequity. This community-led process ensures the Durham Belt Line will benefit all of Durham.

See our interview with the mayor of Durham, Page 2.
How will the Durham Belt Line inspire a Greener City? Ask Mayor Steve Schewel

Q. How do you see the Durham Belt Line adding to the quality of life in the city?

A. We have to make sure that we are providing people with places—trails and parks—where they can play, where they can exercise, where they can enjoy themselves, and everybody has access. The Durham Belt Line project, right in the heart of the city, is going to accomplish that. People who work downtown will be able to take a walk on this trail during lunch. In terms of the quality of life for people living and working downtown, I think it’s going to be a tremendous asset.

Q. The city struggled for about 20 years to make the purchase of the unused rail corridor. In your opinion, what was the turning point that helped move this project forward?

A. One major turning point was when Bill Holman, the Conservation Fund’s North Carolina State Director, and David Proper, the Fund’s Urban Program Director, got involved. They brought with them important experience and trusted relationships—especially with the railroad—and knew the steps that we needed to take to get to “yes.” They went through a whole new round of approvals, and David brought his negotiating skills to the table.

Q. What do you see as some of the challenges the Belt Line project faces moving forward?

A. All of the physical work to create a great trail and the design work is one challenge. It’s a big task to engineer and design this type of trail, build it, and then to create wonderful greenspaces around it. An equally big challenge is to have the trail serve people in Durham equitably. We need to make sure that every neighborhood is well served by the Belt Line.

I believe preserving land in an urban area where it’s scarce is an amazing gift.

Steve Schewel
Mayor of Durham, North Carolina

The Conservation Leadership Network Celebrates 20 Years of Conservation and Economic Development

For many people, it may be hard to remember a time when building connections was more difficult than logging on to social media. But 20 years ago, there wasn’t a space to discuss innovative conservation strategies outside of annual conferences and academia, and The Conservation Fund recognized this as an opportunity.

In 1998, The Conservation Fund established the Conservation Leadership Network (CLN). Its goal: to create a national network that connects people and organizations in order to build new approaches for conservation and serve as a catalyst for new approaches to conservation and collaboration.

CLN shows that diverse perspectives are essential for greater environmental and economic success.

VIBRANT COMMUNITIES

CLN knows that diverse perspectives are essential for greater environmental and economic success and is committed to continuing its innovative approach to conservation for the next 20 years and beyond.

FLORIDA

Two hundred years ago, longleaf pine forests—among the most diverse ecosystems on the planet—stretched across 90 million acres from Virginia to Texas. But these forests were significantly overharvested throughout the 19th century, with the sturdy lumber used nationwide in the construction of homes, bridges, buildings, railroads, homes and ships. Today, only 4.7 million acres of longleaf forests remain. The Conservation Fund has partnered with Resource Management Service and the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service to protect the largest single longleaf restoration effort on private lands to date. The partners recently placed a perpetual conservation easement on the 71,779 acres in Florida’s Gulf Coastal Plain, protecting it from development, requiring longleaf pine restoration, and allowing the land to remain a sustainable working forest supporting the local economy.

MICHIGAN

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill was the largest marine oil spill in U.S. history. In the nine years since the spill, The Conservation Fund has teamed with federal, state, local and private partners to expand the permanent protection of critical ecosystems along the Gulf Coast. In Mississippi, we utilized funding from the Mississippi Trustee Implementation Group’s Resource Damage Assessment to conserve more than 1,500 acres of essential coastal wildlife habitat at Grand Bay National Wildlife Refuge, Grand Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve and Grand Bay Savanna Coastal Preserve. Protecting these lands improves management and public access, while securing habitat for threatened and endangered species.

HELPING RANCHERS PROTECT A WAY OF LIFE AND KEY HABITAT IN MONTANA

When you think about Montana, majestic mountains, extraordinary wildlife and working ranches might come to mind. Cattle ranching has been part of the state’s rural economy for generations. It’s a unique way of life that Matt and Stacy Crabb know about firsthand. They were long time ranch managers when they got the opportunity of a lifetime—the chance to buy an 8,586-acre ranch along the Rocky Mountain Front. While many people dream about purchasing and running their own ranch, it can be a very difficult and expensive process.

Helping Ranchers Protect a Way of Life and Key Habitat in Montana

From subdivisions to recreation development, growth is fragmenting Montana’s vast landscape, affecting both habitat and the ranching community. As the west grows, this type of development is driving up land costs, and that makes it complicated for folks like Matt and Stacy to purchase their own ranches. But The Conservation Fund shared the family’s vision to keep the land working, intact and pristine for future generations. With support from the Land and Water Conservation Fund and the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, we helped place a conservation easement on the property and transferred the easement to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who will manage the easement in perpetuity.

This was a viable solution for the Crabb’s because, paired with a bank loan, it lowered their purchase cost and enabled them to own and operate the ranch while permanently protecting it from development.

The Crabb Ranch is now a family business that Matt and Stacy will build and share with their two children. Ranches like this are important to the economic viability of local communities, play a critical role in protecting open space and provide important habitat for grizzly bears, trumpeter swans, long-billed curlews and more. This story is a win-win for the Crabb family and for conservation.

ECONOMIC VITALITY

CLN knows that diversifying economies—determining how to create solutions for economic development, affordable housing, natural resource stewardship, public land access, local food development and other issues—can be a very difficult and expensive process.

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LAND, WATER AND WILDLIFE

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Leaving a Legacy through Planned Giving

Consider the values you hold dear ... ensuring your children and grandchildren have special outdoor places to play, helping protect the wild havens that so many species call home, or making sure all Americans have access to nature.

Each year, you make a thoughtful choice about your charitable giving. You research options, consider your giving capacity and choose an organization with a mission you believe in—one that is also committed to using your donation wisely. That's why you choose The Conservation Fund.

That same level of thoughtful consideration should also go toward researching your planned giving options. A planned gift to The Conservation Fund is a flexible and creative way to give charitably while meeting your personal, family or financial goals. And it doesn't have to be difficult. Creating a legacy gift is an especially meaningful way to help us continue to build parks, conserve open space, protect wildlife habitat and more. Your planned gift, regardless of size, leaves a legacy. It ensures generations of Americans will benefit from your support.

No matter your financial circumstance or charitable goals, there are planned giving options available to meet your needs. The most practical way to make a legacy gift is through your estate plan, by means of a will, living trust or beneficiary designation. You could consider a charitable gift annuity; donating gifts of stock or property; or designating a portion of your retirement plan, life insurance policy, bank or brokerage account.

It might sound daunting, but thoughtful planned giving is actually an easy way to make a lasting investment in the special places you love. Planned gifts are the result of a passion for our work and an intention to leave a legacy of nature for future generations. We welcome the opportunity for a one-on-one conversation with you to discuss the options that best suit your needs.

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