

Links open onto greenway future

BY JOE MILLER
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RALEIGH

I looked up the hill and watched as six deer grazed in a pasture, taking in the late afternoon sun. One happened to look up, and for a minute or so, we engaged in stare-down (as usual, the deer won). As I turned to continue up the trail, a flash of burnt orange caught my eye. I turned in time to see a red fox dart through

take it outside

a clearing in the bottomland forest not 20 yards away. A couple of seconds, and it was gone.

All this after marveling at the massive sweetgums, tulip poplars and oaks that dominated the creek bottom, a curious stand of mostly short-leaf pines on a ridge and an unusual grove of dogwoods in between. Unusual because dogwoods are understory trees, loners in need of all the elbow room they can get to soak up whatever sunlight penetrates the canopy.

A great little oasis I'd stumbled upon here. The odd thing: The whole time, I was within earshot of one of the busiest stretches of rush-hour highway in the Triangle.

Bridge to the future

On Monday, workers will start laying the concrete decking for the new pedestrian bridge spanning the Beltline just east of Wade Avenue. That will take a couple of weeks. Then they'll finish putting up protective fencing along the walkway and wrap up a few more minor details. By month's end, the bridge should be ready to link the Rocky Branch greenway on the east side of the Beltline with the Reedy Creek trail on the west. When that happens, the most impressive — and expensive — stretch of greenway in the Triangle will open.

For the most part, the Triangle's roughly 100 miles of greenway slither unnoticed through flood plains, exposing themselves only briefly at the occasional road crossing. The 660-foot-long pedestrian bridge, however, has picked a prominent spot: over the Beltline near the Wade Avenue interchange where thousands of motorists pass daily.

Impressive as the bridge itself is, what it symbolizes is even more so: a greenway system that's starting to evolve into a transportation network. By this time next year, says Tom Norman, director of the N.C. Department of Transportation's Office of Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety, you should be able to take the greenway from the N.C. State campus to Umstead State Park, a distance of nearly 6 miles.

"Ultimately," says Norman, "you'll be able to walk or ride a bike to a lot of destinations on the west side of Raleigh, to Umstead, to the Museum, to the RBC Center."

A preview

When the bridge opens — the official ribbon cutting is scheduled for April 4 — you'll be able walk, bike or run from the corner of Hillsborough and Faircloth streets, along the perimeter of Meredith College, pass under Wade Avenue, go over the Beltline, then meander through a wooded portion of the N.C. Museum of Art's 164 acres up to Blue Ridge Road, a total distance of 2.3 miles.

Here's a quick preview of what this stretch, completed at a cost of \$3.8 million, is like:



Part of the Thomas Sayre sculpture 'Gyre' greets greenway walkers on the grounds of the N.C. Museum of Art.

STAFF PHOTO BY SHER STONEMAN

Start at Hillsborough and Faircloth — well, you probably won't start there. This trailhead is at the intersection of two busy streets with no nearby parking or easy access. The trail — a 10-foot-wide swath of blacktop with 2-foot-wide shoulders of runner-friendly crushed gravel — then follows Meredith's southern and western perimeters, shielded from traffic on Hillsborough and the Beltline by fence and hedges while offering views of Meredith's grounds.

The trail ducks under Wade Avenue through a funky underpass you probably didn't know existed, then climbs to the pedestrian bridge. So far, the trip along the Rocky Branch



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Greenway has been pretty flat.

That changes on the west side of the bridge. The connecting Reedy Creek Greenway makes a steep drop down to House Creek, then climbs just as steeply out.

The deer-and-fox scene described at the beginning of this column? That was from the wooden bridge spanning House Creek, a stone's throw (provided Tom Brady is throwing) from the Beltline.

Joseph Covington, the Museum of Art's director of education, has spent a lot of time on this land over the past year. Decades ago, he says it was farmland, much like the land less than 3 miles to the northwest at Umstead State Park.

In addition to the trees, wild blueberries and wild ginger abound on the Museum's land. It's home to a growing population of eastern bluebirds, and the N.C. Wildflower Society has identified a healthy community of purple-petaled liatris, a late summer wildflower.

Far-reaching appeal

Impressive as the soon-to-open greenway is, it's bigger potential will be realized next year.

Currently, the Reedy Creek stretch ends at Blue Ridge Road. But Norman says a planned extension along Reedy Creek Road to Umstead has been fast-tracked, thanks in part to a housing development going up where Trenton Road Ts into Reedy Creek.

"The developer wanted to accelerate that portion of the paving," says Norman, and is pitching in financially to make it happen.

From the museum, the greenway will extend north along the south side of Reedy Creek Road to Edwards Mill Road. There, it will go through a tunnel built when Edwards Mill was extended to Wade Avenue in 1999. The greenway will cross to the north side of Reedy Creek and parallel the road up to Umstead.

As Norman notes, you can then take a crushed-gravel bike and bridle trail through Umstead, which hooks up on the west side of the park with Cary's Black Creek Greenway. Cary's greenway will eventually hook into the American Tobacco Trail, a 23-mile rails-to-trails project that will run from western Wake County north to downtown Durham. It's more than half done.

On the opposite end of the new greenway, at Hillsborough and Gorman, the Rocky Branch Greenway continues south along Gorman, then becomes bona fide greenway again along Faucette Drive into the N.C. State campus. With a couple of brief interruptions, Rocky Branch continues east, along Western Boulevard, to the south side of

downtown. And, Norman adds, plans are in the works to make Hillsborough Street more pedestrian and biker friendly from Gorman to Pullen Road.

With these stretches of greenway starting to link up, Norman sees the system becoming more than a neighborhood amenity.

"I think it's going to be a wonderful asset for this area," Norman says. "I think people will drive from some distance away to use it." ■

Trail info

Some quick facts on the stretch of greenway, including the pedestrian bridge, expected to open soon:

Length: 2.3 miles.

Surface: Blacktop, with 2-foot-wide crushed gravel shoulders on either side, ideal for runners.

Official opening: A ribbon cutting is planned for April 4 (though the trail and bridge could open before then).

Second official opening: The N.C. Museum of Art is planning a grand opening April 16, beginning with a community parade across the bridge at 11 a.m. Shut-ties between parking lots at Meredith and the Museum of Art will run between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m.

Sight on this greenway you won't see on other greenways:

Clyde Jones critters lurking in the woods. Other artwork along the way includes Tomas Sayre's "Gyre," a trio of 24-foot-high circular orange arcs, and Vollis Simpson's 35-foot-high wind machine. And more is on the way, promises museum spokeswoman Rebecca Moore.

Learn more: Inside the museum, you can check out backpacks containing binoculars, guides, sketch pads and other materials to help understand what you're seeing along the trail. They're free.

More info: N.C. Museum of art, 839-6262, www.ncartmuseum.org; N.C. Department of Transportation's Office of Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety, www.ncdot.org/transit/bicycle, click on "projects," then "project high-lights," then "off-road projects," then look for "Wake County." ■

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