

**TOWN OF SEVEN DEVILS
PUBLIC HEARING – RTP Grant
February 12, 2019
5:00pm**

The Seven Devils Town Council met for a Public Hearing for the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) Grant on Tuesday, February 12, 2019 at 5:00pm and in a Regular Meeting at Town Hall. Present were Mayor Larry Fontaine, Mayor Pro Tem Brad Lambert, Council Members Tina Bailey, David Ehmig, Kay Ehlinger, Town Attorney Rob Angle, Town Manager Debbie Powers. A quorum was met. Also present were Kelly Coffey, High Country Council of Governments (HCCOG), Eric Hiegl, Blue Ridge Conservancy, Charlie Brady, Blue Ridge Conservancy, James Tomberlin, North Carolina Wildlife Commission and Phillip Barrier, Avery County Manager. The minutes were recorded by interim Town Clerk Emma Wynn.

CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Fontaine called the meeting to order at 5:00 pm. He welcomed everyone to the Public Hearing to discuss the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) grant.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Council members and citizens recited the Pledge of Allegiance.

OPEN PUBLIC HEARING

Mayor Fontaine explained the Public Hearing is being held to discuss the Recreational Trails Program (RTP) grant opportunity; the 3rd attempt. Citizens attending who want to speak during the Public Comment session will need to sign up to speak. Comment time is limited to three (3) minutes for each citizen speaker. The Town Clerk will control the timer.

Manager Powers provided a summary on the RTP; the grant opportunity that funds trails and trail related recreational needs at the State level. Funding for the RTP is from federal gas taxes paid on non-highway fuel used in off-highway vehicles, and the program is administered at the Federal level by the Federal Highway Administration. At the State level, the Secretary of the Department of Environmental & Natural Resources has assigned the responsibility to the Divisions of Parks & Recreation and its Trails Program. The NC Trails Committee is a 7-member advisory committee who reviews all applications and makes recommendations for funding. The Secretary has final approval authority. The grant is a 75/25 match. The Pre-Application (Form A) is due on Friday, March 1, 2019. If the Pre-App is approved, the Final Application will be submitted by Friday, August 2, 2019. The NCTC will make the funding recommendations in August of this year. Awarded projects will be announced in the Fall 2019.

This project is estimated to cost \$160,000. If awarded, the grant will provide \$100,000 which is the maximum allowed. The remaining \$60,000 will be paid from Town funds and in-kind labor and donations. The Town has funds set aside in the CIP (Capital Improvement Program) for the last three (3) years at \$20,000 each year.

PUBLIC HEARING PRESENTATION – Kelly Coffey-HCCOG & Eric Hiegl-BR Conservancy Manager Powers introduced Kelly Coffey, Senior Planner at the High Country Council of Governments (HCCOG), who will speak about the content of the grant, and Eric Hiegl, Director of Land Protection & Stewardship at the Blue Ridge Conservancy, to discuss this opportunity. Charlie Brady, Executive Director of the Blue Ridge Conservancy is also in attendance.

Mr. Coffey gave an overview of the project. In 2016, Blue Ridge Conservancy purchased a large portion of Peak Mountain. The Conservancy and the Town have a mutual interest in extending the Otter Falls Park trails into the Peak Mountain property. The trail would extend from Otter Falls Park up and across the ridge of the mountain and end at the parking area by Skiview Road. High Country Council of Governments and Blue Ridge Conservancy worked with the town in 2017 & 2018 with pre-applications to the RTP to fund construction of the trail. The pre-application was approved in both years; however, the final application was not approved. Good feedback was received on improving the application for the next submission.

Mr. Hiegl explained that the Blue Ridge Conservancy is a private, non-profit land trust; one (1) of twenty-three (23) in the state that partners with local communities and landowners to protect land with agricultural, cultural, ecological, recreational and scenic significance. As stated, in 2016 a 265 acre tract was purchased on Peak Mountain. An additional 40 acres were acquired in Avery County. This gives the trail 1 ¼ miles of ridgeline. The Avery County portion borders Berry Road; it does not go to Hwy 105. The Town's interest aligned with the Conservancy mission to get people out to enjoy this property. It is the first time property has been appropriated for trails/hiking. Usually, once property is acquired it is transferred to a long-term management entity. Blue Ridge Conservancy and the Town are partnering to maintain the trails. There will be a lot of volunteer possibilities. Most details have been worked out for the trail. It will be a 2 ½ mile long trail that will switch back up from Otter Falls and meander on the ridge. A section of the trail will be flat with a gentle slope at the top for a shorter hike from the upper parking area that provides a great view of Grandfather Mountain. Professional trail builders will be hired to construct the trail.

There was a question regarding Blue Ridge Conservancy's long term commitment for the land. Manager Powers stated that there is a 25-year easement and it can be renewed. Mayor Fontaine explained that details of the trail are described in the second part of the application. The trail builder will use GPS to flag the trail; the trail will not be a loop; you can hike from Otter Falls and end at the parking area above Skiview. Plans are to have 15

parking spaces with 5 of them designated as handicap parking. There are no restrooms planned at this time. It is possible the trail will connect to other trails in the future.

Concern was expressed regarding the increase in traffic for residents in the Skiview area. Mayor Fontaine stated that the PBSO has been mapping traffic showing electronic counts for a year which will give us a basis to compare to the traffic once the trail is completed. Most traffic is currently generated from people visiting the Hawksnest tubing and ziplining than from hiking. It is estimated that 20% of the properties in Seven Devils is rental property which also increases traffic.

Another concern was the amount of overflow parking on the road due to the popularity of the Otter Falls Trail. Member Ehmig stated that additional parking has been added at the Otter Falls trail. Tickets are issued and towing will be utilized on Town roads; however, Skyland Road is a state road and the Town is not able to ticket cars parked there.

Manager Powers distributed letters of support for the council members and residents to sign.

Mayor Fontaine stated that all concerns will be considered, and the Town will endeavor to make it the least impactful for our residents as possible. If unforeseen issues arise, the project can be stopped.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Anne Fontaine, 127 W. Rocky Top Trail, resident and Chairman for the Seven Devils TDA and Parks & Recreation Commission. She stated that in addition to the project for the Peak Mountain Trail meeting the criteria for the RTP Grant, it also aligns perfectly with the Town's Recreation Master Plan which was updated two (2) years ago. On a recent survey of recreational needs completed last summer, the number one (1) item requested was hiking trails in the area. The trail will offer many recreational opportunities to our residents and our visitors. It encourages people to get out in the fresh air, gives a sense of community, creates greater community connections, and promotes a healthy relationship with the Blue Ridge Conservancy. Studies have shown that property located next to or adjacent to trails offering amenities to potential buyers may increase property values by 4-6%. Having a parking area at the end of Skiview will provide senior citizens and handicapped individuals access to an area where they can enjoy beautiful views of Grandfather Mountain. The trail is important to our town from a recreational, economic & health standpoint. It will be a compliment to the existing Otter Falls Trail. It is a great opportunity.

David Hooper, 167 Snowcloud Drive, is in favor of the RTP Grant. He complimented the Town for the preserving the beauty of the area. The trails will encourage more young people to buy property in Seven Devils.

Amy Renfranz, 289 Hawks Lake Drive, who is the Director of Education and Natural Resource Management for Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation. She has lived in Seven Devils for over a year. One of the reasons for buying property in Seven Devils was availability to the Otter Falls Trail. Having natural areas and parks adds to the quality of the Town. As part of the non-profit land management who oversees trails, she would like to offer her knowledge and she is happy to help with the trail maintenance. She is in favor of the RTP Grant.

Mayor Fontaine thanked everyone for the comments, questions & concerns. He encouraged everyone to sign the letters of support. Manager Powers stated that letters of support are on Seven Devils website and copies are available at the Town Clerk's desk.

Another Public Hearing for the PARTF Grant will be held on February 14th at 11:00 am.

CLOSE PUBLIC HEARING

Mayor Pro Tem Lambert made a motion to close the Public Hearing. Member Bailey seconded the motion. The members agreed unanimously.

ADJOURN

The Public Hearing adjourned at 5:40pm.



Larry Fontaine, Mayor



Debbie Powers, Town Manager