

New trail provides gateway to forest

By Mike Gangloff

mike.gangloff@roanoke.com
381-1674

BLACKSBURG — Hiking down Brush Mountain on Sunday in short-sleeve weather that felt more like June than November, Blacksburg businessman and trails enthusiast Bill Ellenbogen made a pitch for how to spread the word about the town's new link to the Jefferson National Forest.

"Tell them the Gateway Park has weather like this all the time," he said.

Even without such sunny slogans, the new trail between Blacksburg's Heritage Community Park and the national forest's Pandapas Pond is already drawing visitors.

As Ellenbogen and three other trail boosters made an inaugural trek intended to draw attention to the volunteer-built path, they found horseback riders and mountain bikers already in evidence.

"Thank you," Blacksburg resident Thach Winslow, who was out on horseback with his family, told Ellenbogen, who has championed trail expansions around Blacksburg for more than a decade, and town parks and landscape superintendent Susan Garrison.

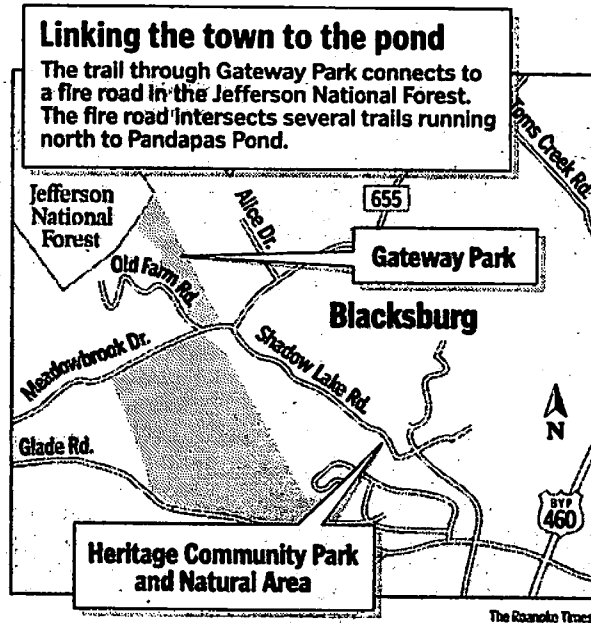
With the last orange and yellow leaves rattling in the treetops and long views out across Blacksburg or toward Gap and Salt Pond mountains in Giles County, the mystery on Sunday was how such a trail could only have come into being this fall.

"This is why we all live in Blacksburg," Ellenbogen said, climbing atop some rocks to get a better look at the scenery.

The 2½-mile link — which rises about 800 feet above downtown Blacksburg — follows a long-used unofficial route that crossed private land. In 2001, the Friends of the Huckleberry, a group formed to help create the popular Huckleberry Trail between Blacksburg and Christiansburg, bought the 20-acre Gateway property for \$260,000 and brokered an arrangement for the town to contribute \$100,000 to the purchase. Ellenbogen, a real estate developer, owner of Bogen's restaurant

Linking the town to the pond

The trail through Gateway Park connects to a fire road in the Jefferson National Forest. The fire road intersects several trails running north to Pandapas Pond.



and one of the founders of the Friends, co-signed the loan that paid for the land. After the Friends recoup their money by renting out a house on the property, the entire parcel will be transferred to the town.

Ellenbogen credited the town, the U.S. Forest Service, the Friends of the Huckleberry and the Friends of Pandapas with making a public trail a reality.

The Gateway Trail, as it is being called, creates a sanctioned access to the more than 30 miles of trails in the national forest around Pandapas Pond. Ellenbogen recalled that in his undergraduate days at Virginia Tech in the 1970s, Pandapas Pond was mostly a skinny-dipping destination for college students. It's much more heavily used now, attracting crowds of family picnickers, dog-walkers and others.

Outdoor recreation will become increasingly important to the town, Ellenbogen predicted.

"It's obvious things are going to get more developed in our community," Ellenbogen said. "And I think it's projects like this and the Huckleberry, hopefully, that will enable us to preserve some of our heritage."