

## High fives for the Huckleberry

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Soon, a vision from 1989 will be a reality in Blacksburg and Christiansburg.

Construction has begun on two expected expansions which will begin the final phase of lengthening the Huckleberry Trail to more than 10 miles. When finished, the trail will connect from the middle of Christiansburg to the Jefferson National Forest.

“We’re looking at achieving the manifest destiny of the Huckleberry Trail,” said Bill Ellenbogen, the president of the Friends of the Huckleberry Group and one of the trail’s biggest advocates since the late 1980s.

One expansion, where construction is beginning on a pedestrian bridge over Route 114, will take the trail from its current end behind the New River Valley Mall, Walmart, the Spradlin Farm shopping center and the Christiansburg Recreation Center to Christiansburg High School.

And the second expansion, where the first phase of construction is almost complete, will connect the trail across U.S. 460 by the summer and eventually connect the trailhead at the Blacksburg Library all the way to the Jefferson National Forest, passing by the Hethwood neighborhood, the new Blacksburg High School and Heritage Park on Glade Road along the way.

Ellenbogen has been working on achieving this vision for the trail since he first became involved with helping to develop a vision for the trail in 1989, while he was serving on the Blacksburg Chamber of Commerce.

Now the trail is closer to completion than ever before.

Ellenbogen said the 2010 bequest of \$1 million from the late Renva Weeks Knowles have been matched by other organizations including VDOT.

“So now her money is going toward other trails,” he said, after VDOT matched the funds and took the pedestrian bridge, which Ellenbogen said would be named after Knowles, on as its own project.

The bridge should be completed in 2014, Ellenbogen said. It’s being constructed at the same time that VDOT is finishing the widening Virginia 114 (Peppers Ferry Road).

Kevin Conner, a project manager and landscape architect with Gay and Neel, Inc., is one of the engineers who has been working on the expansion on and off for the past five years. The company helped to design the first section of expansion behind the New River Valley Mall and is again designing the rest of the expansions from the mall to the Christiansburg rec center.

Conner said the bridge’s ultimate design stemmed from working in collaboration with VDOT’s road-widening plans. The bridge will be in a thrust arch design and will be 112 feet long with a 14-foot-wide walking space, and will stand about 18 feet off the ground, he said.



Ronnie Carter of DCI/Shires Construction digs a post hole for a gate on a new section of Huckleberry Trail.  
Matt Gentry | The Roanoke Times

Conner said the bridge, expected to be finished late this year or in early 2014, will be all black and its design inspired by a wrought iron fence. He said he knows there will be some type of monument to or recognition of Knowles, but the plans for that aren't yet final.

Conner said figuring out a way to get the trail over 114 was the biggest obstacle to the project.

Conner said right now, VDOT is doing surface and foundation work on the bridge area as part of the widening.

"It'll be a couple months before you'll see stuff popping out of the ground, but they are working on it," he said.

Ellenbogen emphasized the connections the expansion would eventually make between different pockets of people.

"It will be nice to connect the high school, the rec center, the new park and the existing Huckleberry," he said.

In addition to the VDOT portion of the Christiansburg expansion, a portion of the trail behind Walmart is also currently under construction.

And there's the construction currently happening in Blacksburg, too.

The trail is being connected across U.S. 460 West through a tunnel to Plantation Road, Ellenbogen said.

The three-quarter mile portion, called the Hokie Bikeway, currently being constructed is being funded by a transportation enhancement grant obtained by Virginia Tech, town engineer Adele Schirmer said.

It was originally scheduled to be completed around the end of May, but has been pushed back because of severe weather during the construction time. But, both Ellenbogen and Schirmer said, the section ought to be finished by this summer.

The Hokie Bikeway will connect the current Huckleberry Trail to the trails near the Hethwood and Foxridge neighborhoods. Those trails will connect in the future to the new Blacksburg High School on Prices Fork Road.

And Ellenbogen said there's still more trails on Prices Fork road to be built. The vision is for the Hethwood trails to connect Prices Fork Road to Glade Road to Heritage Park. And Ellenbogen said he hopes to see Heritage Park connected to Gateway Park on Meadowbrook Road, which provides access to the Jefferson National Forest and its expansive network of trails that include the Pandapas Pond area.

Dean Crane, Blacksburg's director of parks, said after the Hokie Bikeway is finished, "we basically have 3,500 feet left to connect that to Heritage Park."

Crane said those last 3,500 feet will connect the Hokie Bikeway with bits and pieces of trail that are already in place along some sections of the route. Crane's currently working on securing \$250,000 of federal grant funding to fund the asphalt and a boardwalk-style crossing over some of the wetland area along the route.

Ellenbogen said those connections depended on building permits. Parts of the planned route cuts through private property and property owned by Virginia Tech.

Crane said that the majority of the private property owners have verbally agreed to the idea of the trail going through their land, but the town is waiting for engineers to plot the exact route so landowners can sign off.

Schirmer, Ellenbogen and others emphasized that the project has been a major collaborative effort between both towns, Virginia Tech and private landowners.

Ellenbogen said he hopes that by 2015, the entire project will be complete and will be longer than 10 miles upon completion.

It'll be the realization of a project he has championed since 1989, when Friends of the Huckleberry, with Ellenbogen as president, began lobbying for an expansion to the then-one-mile-long trail. He said the connection of Christiansburg to the Jefferson National Forest was always a long-term goal of the group.

Ellenbogen estimated the project would have cost "easily in excess of \$3 million" between 1989 and its eventual completion.

Crane said that although more than 20 years seems like a long time, "the cool thing is to think that realistically, that's a pretty short time," he said. "In the scheme of the age of the town, 23 to 25 years is a small time to get such a great project completed."

Ellenbogen emphasized the idea of using the trail to connect communities.

"We tried to identify nodes of population. And we will have lots of people at one end and lots at the other," he said. "What's occurring is the new expansion is connecting larger nodes of population and points of interest."

Crane agreed.

"It connects population zones," he said. "And while you could call it the Huckleberry Greenway, you can also call it a linear park."

Crane said he believes being located near the trail could be a positive addition for area housing communities and businesses. "What I see is it's another nice amenity of being nice to move here, nice for business," he said. Crane said he hopes communities like Hethwood let their residents know about being nearby the trail while marketing their homes.

Ellenbogen also believes the completed Huckleberry will become a tourist destination. He said the trail could rival other popular bike trails like the Creeper Trail and the New River Trail.

"People will go to ride a 10 to 20-mile ride, but not six," he said. "Maybe they'll come and spend a weekend riding the trail."

Crane said people – in Montgomery County or out – can sponsor a bench along the trail or donate to Friends of the Huckleberry to support its mission of extending the trail.

Crane said he, along with many others, are looking forward to the trail's eventual completion.

"It connects everything from downtown Blacksburg to Christiansburg to our largest park to the National Forest," Crane said. "That's pretty spectacular."

**By [Liana Bayne](#)**

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No comments yet.