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## Mendota Trail sees long-awaited completion

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1 of 6



Many members of the Mendota Trail Conservancy Board gathered for a ceremonial grand opening of the trail after many (Tanner Cook/six rivers media

BENHAMS, Va. — Seeing a dream realized is always a fulfilling sensation.

One can only imagine what the feelings were on Friday when members of the Mendota Trail Conservancy, volunteers, engineers and numerous others saw the completion of a project that had been decades in the making.

The 12.5-mile rail trail from Bristol to the community of Mendota in rural Washington County was officially connected with the ribbon cutting and much celebration by the dozens in attendance.

“This is a very special day for the Mendota Trail,” trail spokesperson and avid volunteer Ellen Mueller said. “Over the last six years, we’ve had several ceremonies to celebrate milestones in the development of the trail. In October of 2017, we opened the first mile of the trail. Today, we celebrate the opening of a fully connected, 12.5-mile Mendota Trail from Bristol to Mendota.

“We dreamed big, worked hard and now we have a beautiful trail for bikers and hikers to enjoy. We’d like to thank everyone for their continued support.”

## **A LONG TIME COMING**

Beginning in the 1980s, the government began an initiative to save land as part of the Rails-to-Trails movement that converted old railroad beds into fitness trails.

The property that eventually became the trail was transferred to the city of Bristol from a scenic rail excursion company in 2000.

After many years of trying to get the project off the ground, the property was again transferred from the city to Mountain Heritage Inc. and Frank Kilgore revived the trail’s development in 2016.

“Seven years ago, everybody said it couldn’t be done,” Kilgore said. “This beautiful trail is a testament to people never giving up in order to achieve a great thing. We have a great group of volunteers, public and private donors and legislators coming together to literally enhance forgotten communities, increase the value of adjacent properties, encourage exercise and good health and promote Southwest Virginia as a good place to live and improve.”

Seven years later, what many thought would never happen in the beginning finally came to fruition.

With help from local legislations, the Mendota Trail secured over \$900,000 in funding from the state for the restoration of numerous trestles, clearing of what was once thick overgrowth along the trail and much more.

“This project has been the perfect example of a public and private partnership,” said Tyler Lester, legislative director of the Office of Virginia Senator Todd Pillion. “Along with the state funding, they leveraged it with support from the private sector and community support. That really has made all of this possible.”

## **WHAT IT MEANS**

Though it had already been done within the board meeting on Aug. 31, the ownership transfer of the Mendota Trail was done ceremoniously Friday.

President of the Mendota Trail Conservancy Dr. Jim Lapis presented Washington County chairman of the Board of Supervisors Saul Hernandez with a golden railroad spike made of foam, harkening back to the days of the completion of the transcontinental railroad in the 19th century.

With the transfer, Washington County assumes ownership of the trail, a first for the county since the famous Creeper Trail is owned by the towns of Abingdon and Damascus. The trail also has a designation of a county park.

What many hope is that the trail will bring business and ecotourism — tourism directed toward exotic, often threatened, natural environments, intended to support conservation efforts and observe wildlife — to the often forgotten parts of an otherwise beautiful part of Washington County.

“No matter where you are in Southwest Virginia, once you get past Roanoke and the New River valley, take a look around and you’ll see a really beautiful place that we’re very fortunate to live in,” Delegate Israel O’Quinn said. “It’s been heartwarming to see all the support for this trail from both the public and private sector. Our delegation didn’t need a whole lot of arm-twisting to realize that this project would be transformational.

“I personally have a lot of optimism about our region and it’s an optimism that everything is moving in the right direction. ... In Southwest Virginia, we don’t have to manufacture fake experiences. We’ve got the real thing and this is an outdoor Mecca that we’re lucky to call home.”

Some of the more attractive spots on the trail include a few miles in the Wolf Run gorge and along the North Fork of the Holston River getting closer to the end.

“This project is a testament to improving the health and wellness of the community” said John Jeter, CEO of the Bristol Regional Medical Center and Johnston Memorial Hospital. “At Ballad, we firmly believe that good health extends beyond the walls of our hospitals and clinics. Where we work and where we play have a profound impact on our well-being as a community.”

Ballad Health was the lead corporate sponsor of the Mendota Trail.

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