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EYE ON:

Georgia's Firefly Trail

By Laura Stark

In the late 1800s, when Georgia Railroad trains rumbled through the rural darkness between Athens and Union Point, embers from the wood-burning engines would flicker in the night sky. Farmers began calling the line "Firefly." Today, locals are hoping to spark interest in a 39-mile multi-use trail along that old rail corridor.

Mike Hall, president of Firefly Trail, Inc., says the group is busy planning the trail's first section in Athens. "We want to get something on the ground so people can start seeing the benefits of it and see it as a catalyst for getting the rest of the trail done. We hope it will bring a lot of momentum."

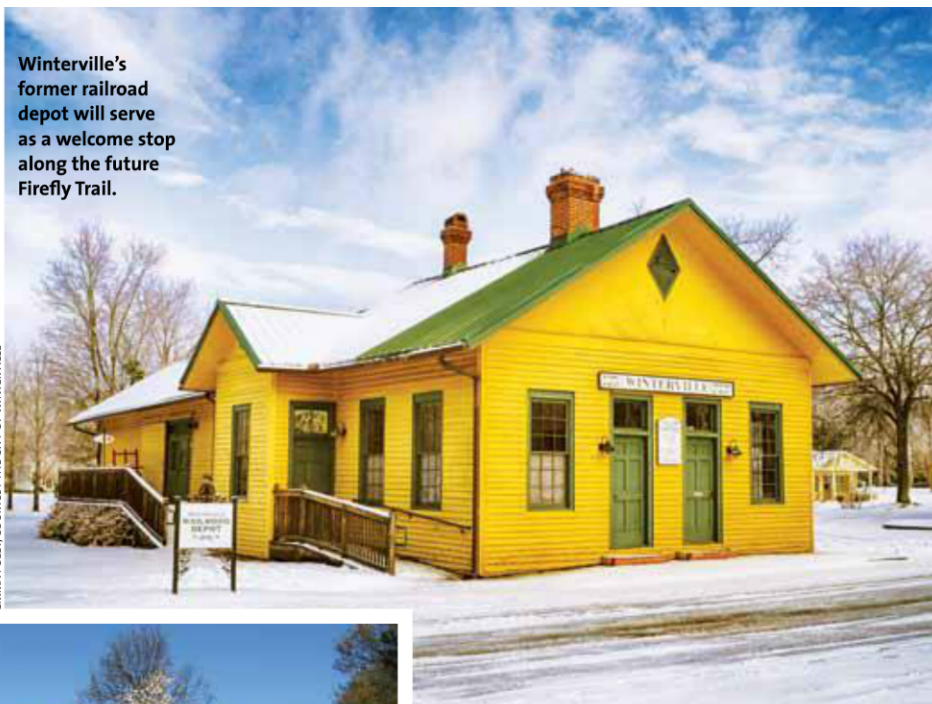
Athens, a thriving college town that is home to the University of Georgia, will be the northern gateway to the trail. Construction of the Firefly Trail here is anticipated to begin in January 2016 and be completed by year's end.

"Currently, we're focusing our efforts on the northernmost eight-tenths of a mile, from East Broad Street near downtown to Old Winterville Road," says Nancy Denson, Athens-Clarke County mayor. "This is the most expensive and difficult portion of the entire trail, but it will be incredibly scenic. Almost immediately, trail users will cross the North Oconee River and Wilkerson Street on a bridge about 40 feet high and some 600 feet long. The trail will then enter Dudley Park, where trail users can connect with the North Oconee River Greenway trail and also see the historic Trail Creek trestle, which R.E.M. made famous on the back cover of its 'Murmur' album."

From Athens, the trail will head east to Winterville and then south through

Winterville's former railroad depot will serve as a welcome stop along the future Firefly Trail.

EMMA FOLEY, COURTESY THE CITY OF WINTERVILLE



COURTESY FIREFLY TRAIL, INC.

Trail under construction: Firefly Trail

Location: Athens to Union Point, Georgia

Used railroad corridor: Athens Branch of the Georgia Railroad

Length: 39 miles

Surface: Athens-Clarke County will pave the northern end of the trail with concrete; the rural sections of the trail in Oglethorpe and Greene counties will most likely be gravel.

a handful of small towns—many of which began in the railroad heyday—to end at Union Point. The rail-trail will roll through open fields, pastures and forested areas, where deer, opossums, armadillos, coyotes and a variety of birds might be spotted.

"I think the Firefly Trail will be a really good shot in the arm for Winterville," says Emily Pennington Eisenman, Winterville's mayor. "It will bring recreational opportunities, economic development and tourism. It's really exciting."

In the quiet countryside, the past still lingers. In Winterville, the trail will pass through a concentration of historical buildings, including a former train depot that has been renovated and painted a welcoming yellow, and is now used as a community center, and the Carter-Coile Country Doctor's Museum, which provides a rare glimpse into a rural medical practice from the late 1800s. But the trail also will offer something new to the area: a safe place for residents to walk and bike.

"I live in a small town of 220 residents that lies almost in the middle of the old rail corridor," says John Stephens, former Maxeys mayor and past president of Firefly Trail, Inc. "We have streets, but no sidewalks. Presently, if one of our young mothers takes her children out walking, it's in the street. The trail would be a safer alternative."

Although much more needs to be done to complete the trail's entire 39-mile length, Denson says the effort to build the Firefly Trail enjoys strong community support.

"I know almost every trail ever built has had to deal with opposition, but I have heard very little opposition to this trail in Athens-Clarke County," she says. "I think most people are looking forward to the trail and its promise to breathe energy and investment into our community."

For more information, visit fireflytrail.com.