

# **The Firefly Trail in Oglethorpe**

## **An FAQ for Citizens and Property Owners**

### *Table of Contents*

*This page lists the fourteen Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) addressed on subsequent pages. Read on and share with your neighbors and friends. Together we can make the Firefly Trail a reality!*

#### **1. THE ROUTE?**

What will the route of the proposed Firefly Trail be?

#### **2. WHO DECIDES?**

Who holds ultimate decision making responsibility on the trail route and other important issues?

#### **3. WHAT WILL THE FINISHED TRAIL LOOK LIKE?**

What can we expect in terms of surface materials, width, and trail amenities?

#### **4. PROPERTY OWNERS AND RIGHT OF WAY FOR THE TRAIL?**

How will the easements and property rights for the trail be acquired to create the necessary right of way? And by whom?

#### **5. PRIVACY AND SECURITY?**

If the trail passes close by individual homes how will the privacy and security of those of the affected families be assured?

#### **6. WHAT ABOUT CONDEMNATION & EMINENT DOMAIN?**

Will condemnation based on the right of eminent domain be used to secure trail right of way?

#### **7. TRAIL COST? How much will the trail cost to build – and who will pay for it?**

#### **8. WHO WILL USE IT?**

Who will use the proposed trail and how will that impact our community?

#### **9. TRAIL BENEFITS FOR OGLETHORPE COUNTY?**

Based on the experience elsewhere what benefits can citizens of Oglethorpe County expect from the completed Firefly Trail?

#### **10. TRAIL CONSTRUCTION TIMETABLE?**

What is the timetable for construction of the trail?

#### **11. TRAIL MAINTENANCE?**

Who will maintain the trail once it is built? What will that cost?

#### **12. FTI LOCAL ACTION COMMITTEES (LACs)?**

What are the Firefly Trail LACs and what do they do?

#### **13. WHAT CAN I DO?**

What is the best way for citizens of Oglethorpe County to help make the Firefly Trail a reality?

#### **14. MORE INFORMATION?**

Where can I get more information on Rail-trails generally and on the Firefly in particular.

Last edited by TK July 28, 2021.

## 1. THE ROUTE?

What will the route of the proposed Firefly Trail be?

The right of way of the abandoned CSX - Georgia Railroad between Union Point and Athens is the starting route for the trail, but that is subject to change based on development, topography, etc. While such changes are possible in many cases it must be kept in mind that it isn't practical or affordable to switch the route back and forth to satisfy every property owner. For one thing any route change that increases the length of the trail also increases construction costs.

## 2. WHO DECIDES?

Who holds ultimate decision making responsibility on the trail route and other important issues?

Ultimate decision-making power with respect to the trail route and other key issues rests with the Oglethorpe County and Greene County governments and the governments of Crawford, Maxeys, Woodville, and Union Point – the four incorporated cities through which the trail will likely pass. Typically in such circumstances local governments pull together an advisory committee of interested and impacted citizens and/or hold public briefing/comment sessions to assist them with making such decisions. But whatever advisory committees or public meetings may be created, the final decisions will rest with the county commissioners and mayors and city councils of the relevant local governments.

## 3. WHAT WILL THE FINISHED TRAIL LOOK LIKE?

What can we expect in terms of surface materials, width, and trail amenities?

The width and surface materials of the trail are to be determined and almost certainly will vary based on local conditions and the expected amount of use in different areas. **WIDTH:** In general rail-trails range from eight to fifteen feet in width. At eight feet trails are just wide enough to comfortably accommodate two bikes in one direction and a single rider in the other. But, in areas likely to be busier, a twelve to fifteen width enables two bikes in each direction safely to pass by one another. **SURFACE:** Trail surface materials will also likely vary from section to section based on local conditions including the likely amount of use. Listed in order of initial cost (lowest to highest) the probable surface materials range from crushed stone aggregate (gravel) to asphalt to reinforced concrete.

The quality and durability of crushed stone trail surfaces has improved dramatically in recent decades, and is the most common surface on rail trails nationwide. The biggest advantage of crushed stone surfaces is the fact that the initial cost can be as little as 1/10 of that of a high-end surface like reinforced concrete. In addition crushed stone creates a more “forgiving” surface for walkers and runners than the harder surfaces. The newer versions crushed stone are plenty firm for cycling for all but road bikes with extremely skinny tires. Obviously crushed stone trails require a good deal more routine maintenance than asphalt or reinforced concrete. But much of that routine maintenance can be done by trail volunteers and at least some of it funded by donations from trail users. On the other hand, while initially considerably more expensive than gravel, asphalt and reinforced concrete require considerably less routine maintenance, and, in the case of well-engineered reinforced concrete, require almost no maintenance at all, at least to the trail surface itself. The final decisions on which trail surfaces to use in which areas will rest, as do all major decisions, with the relevant local governments.

Trailside **AMENITIES**, like benches, restrooms, and picnic areas and signage will vary to some extent from community to community, based on the decisions of local governments and especially on the enthusiasm, energy and generosity of local volunteers and donors.

#### 4. PROPERTY OWNERS AND RIGHT OF WAY FOR THE TRAIL

How will the easements and property rights for the trail be acquired to create the necessary right of way? And by whom?

In general property owners will be approached individually by the relevant city or county governments, or by a representative of the Firefly Trail Inc. acting on their behalf. In some cases the claims of adjacent property owners in relation to the right of way abandoned by the CSX railroad in the mid-1980s are not clear or well-defined. Where uncertainties exist they will have to be sorted out one parcel and one owner or holder at a time in negotiation with the relevant local government or its representatives.

#### 5. PRIVACY AND SECURITY

If the trail passes close by individual homes how will the privacy and security of those of the affected families be assured?

In cases where the trail passes close enough to a family home to cause concern, the relevant local governments will typically negotiate with individual property owners to minimize the negative impact. Sometimes this means constructing, or planting, a visual barrier between the home and the trail. Sometimes, as mentioned above, it is also possible to move the trail a few yards off the old railroad right of way to further reduce the feared negative impact. Property owners' wishes will be accommodated in these cases as far as is feasible and affordable.

It is important to stress that across the nation (and beyond!) property owners adjacent to rail-trails, though they may begin by opposing rail trails, often end up being among the trail's biggest boosters. They find they enjoy their proximity to such a major public amenity. After-work-runs right out the back door or after-dinner-walks on the trail become regular family rituals. Trail neighbors love having a convenient and safe place to go for walks and bike rides with kids and grandkids!

In terms of safety and security, fears of increased crime along or near rail-trails are almost invariably overblown. A study of over 350 rail-trails nationwide (<https://www.americantrails.org/resources/rail-trails-and-safe-communities-1>) confirms this point. Almost without exception crime rates on or near rail trails are either no different or are measurably lower than in the surrounding areas. This is hardly surprising. People out for a run or bike ride are not into burglary! Safety is in fact one of the major positives of rail trails. Well used trails mean there are plenty of eyes around, so wrong-doing is kept to a minimum.

Finally, all the above neglects what is by far the most important point regarding rail-trails and public safety, namely that trail users do not have to compete with fast-moving cars and trucks!

#### 6. WHAT ABOUT CONDEMNATION & EMINENT DOMAIN?

Will condemnation based on the right of eminent domain be used to secure trail right of way?

First, let's clear up a common misunderstanding: The Firefly Trail, Inc. has no authority and cannot be granted the authority to condemn property for trail right-of-way. Rather it is local governments, that is, local elected officials, who have the power to use condemnation procedures (with court specified compensation) to secure property rights for public infrastructure like roads or trails. But, given the hostility to the process, elected officials do so only as a last resort and very rarely. This reluctance is true not only in Oglethorpe County. As of July 2021 almost the entire route of the Firefly Trail in Athens Clarke County has been secured. The only instance in which condemnation has been used in the entire process – with many dozens of parcels involved –

was a case in which the title to the property in question was unclear and condemnation provided a route to clarifying that muddled situation for all parties involved.

## **7. TRAIL COST?**

How much will the trail cost to build – and who will pay for it?

A rail-trail can cost anywhere from \$50,000 to \$1 million per mile depending on three main factors, the expense to secure the right away, the cost of site preparation, and the type of trail surface used. Even at lower levels, when multiplied by the mile count of a long trail, those numbers can add up quickly. For instance, the stretch of trail between Maxeys and Winterville will be about 15 miles in length. If the total cost per mile is kept to a reasonable \$200,000 per mile, the total for 15 miles is still an impressive \$3,000,000. The amounts of money involved usually mean public funding is unavoidable. Hence the vital role of local governments as repeatedly mentioned in these FAQs.

But what sources of funding are available to those local governments?

First, there are substantial grants available from the state and federal governments to help. Two prime examples are the federal government's Transportation Alternative Program (TAP) – which is helping to fund the model miles currently under construction in Union Point and Maxeys; or the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Program (GOSP) from which the trail – with Green County as the lead applicant - has already received a \$2.1 Million grant to fund the trail in Green County and add to it in Maxeys. Funds are also available from nonprofit foundations such as the Riverview Foundation which has already made several generous grants to the Firefly Trail Inc. ; or the Doppelt Family Trail Development Fund administered by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), the advocacy and lobbying group in Washington, D.C. One of the key roles the Firefly Trail Inc. can play is to identify promising grant opportunities for local city and county governments and advise and assist them with their applications for such funding.

Another possibility, used with great success in Athens-Clarke County, is to include trail construction along with others transportation needs in a Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) . In this case too the Firefly Trail organization and its Local Action Committees (LACs) can play a crucial role by helping to build strong and vocal public support for the trail so that the result of SPLOST referendum is an emphatic YES vote, as it has been in Athens-Clarke County.

## **8. WHO WILL USE IT?**

Who will use the proposed trail and how will that impact our community?

There is ample evidence that rail trails attract visitors and are often an economic boon to the communities they pass through. A study by Georgia Tech researcher Dr. Shatakshree Dhongde projects\* that the economic impact along the 39 mile Firefly Trail corridor could be as much as \$14.7 million annually once the full 39-mile trail is completed. But, the evidence is also clear that the vast majority of trail users are likely to be local residents. The trail will become a major public amenity as local groups, pairs, and individuals converge upon it to walk and talk, run, and ride in a traffic-free, healthy outdoor environment. Across the country – including in the case of the Firefly Trail – medical professionals and their employers are major donors to local rail trails; they are confident believers in the wellness benefits of such trails. Over and over the wellness statistics show that wellness improves and the incidence of obesity and diabetes drops dramatically for regular trail users.

\* A link to download Dr. Dongde's study is at <https://www.fireflytrail.com/resources.html>.

## 9. TRAIL BENEFITS FOR OGLETHORPE COUNTIES?

Based on the experience elsewhere what benefits can citizens of Oglethorpe County expect from the completed Firefly Trail?

In addition to the likely economic and wellness impact of the trail mentioned in the previous answer – see Q&A #8 above – other likely impacts include improvements in public safety, in lifestyle satisfaction, and increased property values and greater community cohesion and pride. Public safety will be enhanced by getting walkers runners and cyclists off the public streets they currently must share with cars. Having a safe convenient outdoor place to exercise and socialize will mean more Oglethorpe County citizens build those activities into their daily and weekly routines, thus moving them to a healthier, more satisfying lifestyle.

Meanwhile, a UGA researcher on the topic of the impact of recreational trails has concluded that the single most consistent measurable impact of trails like the Firefly is a significant increase in residents' pride in their own community. The trail quickly becomes a place to show off to visiting friends and relatives. Who knows,... some of those relatives and friends might decide that a home in Oglethorpe County near the Firefly Trail would be a good place to move to – perhaps to retire to. A healthier, more satisfying lifestyle, as well as increased community pride, are plainly significant elements in contributors to increased property values.

## 10. TRAIL CONSTRUCTION TIMETABLE?

What is the timetable for construction of the trail?

The trail will be/ is being built in sections with the timeline different for each section, based mainly on the degree of public and local government support. The process is most advanced in Athens-Clarke County – a.k.a. the Northern Segment. Funding in ACC is largely secured thanks to strong public support for recent SPLOST and TSPLOST votes. Acquisition of right-of-way is nearly complete. Although only about 2 miles of the trail is completed as of early March 2020, activity is set to accelerate. The Firefly should be finished from Athens to the Oglethorpe County line in Winterville within three to four years. In January of 2021 Greene County with partners Union Point, Woodville, and Maxeys were awarded a \$2.1 Million grant from the Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Program to complete the trail in Greene County and add to the Model Mile already constructed in Maxeys. As of July 2021, the construction process is least advanced in the central trail segment between Maxeys and Winterville. But Local Action Committees (LACs) are now established in North and South Oglethorpe; things are starting to move! (For more on the LAC's see Q&A #11 below).

## 11. TRAIL MAINTENANCE?

Who will maintain the trail once it is built? What will that cost?

The local governments that build the trail and hold the property rights to the right of way will have the ultimate responsibility for maintaining it, though some of that responsibility will likely be delegated to community volunteers – as happens with many rail-trails nationwide.

The cost of keeping the trail in good shape for users will vary based on how well the site is prepared during construction and what trail surface is used. Reinforced concrete is the most expensive surface, but if well engineered requires very little maintenance apart from mowing the shoulders occasionally and removing leaves and branches after storms. Asphalt is cheaper to install than concrete but over time will need cracks and holes repaired. Crushed stone aggregate – gravel – is easily the cheapest to build but requires the most maintenance. But the routine maintenance required for gravel creates an excellent opportunity for local volunteer involvement. This is one way we expect our Local Action Committees (LACs) to remain involved after the trail is built. Whatever surface is used – or combinations of surfaces – volunteer involvement can greatly reduce the cost of maintenance. It is common for instance for different civic organizations to “adopt” a section of the trail and assume responsibility for removal of leaves in the autumn, and fallen branches after storms. Indeed

members of such organizations often find walking and clearing the trail and enjoyable and satisfying group activity.

## 12. FTI LOCAL ACTION COMMITTEES (LACs):

What are the Firefly Trail's LACs and what do they do?

To mobilize and coordinate the efforts of local trail supporters, the Firefly Trail Board of Directors has initiated LACs in communities along the trail. As of March 2020 five LACs have been established: Union Point and Greene County, Maxeys and South Oglethorpe, Crawford and North Oglethorpe, Winterville-Clarke, and East Athens-Clarke. The LACs are supported by Firefly's Trail Development Coordinator, John Kissane. The roles played by the LACs vary slightly in each community and shift significantly once funding to build the trail is in hand, as is currently the case in Athens-Clarke County.

Even when an LAC is extremely engaged and active, it must be borne in mind that the ultimate decision-making authority for trail matters remains with the local government (city or county) that built the trail and holds the related property rights. As noted in Q&A #11 above, governments will sometimes delegate specific maintenance and other responsibilities to LACs, civic groups, businesses, or families.

## 13. WHAT CAN I DO?

What is the best way for citizens of Oglethorpe County to help make the Firefly Trail a reality?

The answer to this question is simple. Join the nearest Firefly Local Action Committee. Becoming part of this group of like-minded friends and neighbors gives everyone the benefit of strength in numbers and provides a direct link for each community to the coordinated efforts to build and support the trail along its entire 39-mile length. Here is contact information for key members of the two LACs in Oglethorpe County. These individuals would be happy to answer your questions and if you desire to add you to the LAC's group email list (*For security reason we have used "AT" in place of the @ sign in the email addresses below. Substitute the latter if you want to use the address.*):

- Maxeys and South Oglethorpe LAC: Edward Toledano - fetoledanoATgmail.com
- Crawford and North Oglethorpe: John Kissane - jakissaneATgmail.com

## 14. MORE INFORMATION?

For additional information on rail trails nationwide, see the website of the [Rails-to-Trails Conservancy \(RTC\)](#), our national advocacy group and resource organization in Washington, D.C. Finally for more information on the Firefly Trail

- see our website at [www.fireflytrail.com](http://www.fireflytrail.com), or
- [SUBSCRIBE](#) to our newsletter, or
- [CHECK OUT](#) and "friend" our Facebook page.

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