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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT
ATHENS-CLARKE COUNTY, GA - USA
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Blazing Trails:
Ticket-to-Ride event raises funds and awareness for Firefly Trail

The annual Ticket to Ride event, a mass participation bicycle event to promote creation of a 39-mile rail-trail from Athens to Union Point, was attended by a record number of cyclists this year. Over 215 attendees suited up on March 21st, departing from the Jittery Joe's Roasting Company on Barber Street to show their support for the proposed pathway. The money raised by the event will fund outreach efforts to further the planning and construction of the trail.

Athens was the first community to jump on board for the construction of the Firefly Trail, including it in its 2005 SPLOST and 2011 SPLOST project lists. Plans call for the trail to follow traverse from Athens through Winterville, Arnoldsville, Crawford, Stephens, Maxeys, Woodville and concluding in Union Point. The exact route has not been finalized beyond Athens-Clarke County's borders, but the trail is gaining popularity with Oglethorpe and Greene County residents, according to Firefly Trail Inc. president Mike Hall.

Greenways and trails have significant economic impacts on a community. A similar length trail in Virginia sees revenues of 2.2 million dollars annually to the communities it serves, with 1.2 million of those dollars coming from non-local visitors. Trails like this draw in tourism and spur new businesses, from service-related ventures like bike rentals and guided tours to traditional tourism-related operations such as restaurants and lodging facilities. Trails can often serve as the economic engine for small communities. This was the case when the Pinellas Trail, a 38 mile trail running from Tarpon Springs to North St. Petersburg, Florida, was constructed through the small town of Dunedin. At the time, downtown Dunedin was struggling with vacancy rates at 65%. Within a few years of the trail's completion through town, downtown storefronts were at 100% occupancy and the trail is now touted by residents as having brought the dying town back to life.

Cyclists at the Winterville Train Depot.

Recent studies also show that trails have a considerable positive impact on the value of adjacent property. Land adjacent to an Oregon greenbelt was found to have additional value of $1200 per acre compared to land a mere 1000 feet away. A recent National Association of Homebuilders survey found that trails are the second most important community amenity for potential home buyers, ahead of public parks and outdoor pools. Many other communities have also leveraged these trails for safe commuting alternatives, which make their cities more attractive to the millennials who state that transportation options as one of their top three factors when selecting a place to live. According to Zillow.com, millennials are set to become the largest home-buying bloc by the end of this year and their preferences will dominate the residential housing market for the next few decades.

These types of trails also serve as an educational tool, teaching users about the environment and conservation of natural resources. They often tie in historic preservation efforts, using historic structures as landmarks along the route. Such is the case with the proposed Firefly Trail, which could feature historic train depots as resting places along the route, as well as passing by numerous historic homes.

Athens is fortunate to already have in-place a 3.5 mile multi-use path constructed connecting Sandy Creek Nature Center to Dudley Park and the campus of the University of Georgia. The trail is managed by ACC staff and overseen by the members of the Oconee Rivers Greenway Commission, who assist in the overall design and planning of the trail network, as well as the protection of the adjacent rivers and streams. The existing greenway network and the proposed Firefly Trail will be seamlessly connected, further increasing the transportation and recreation options for Athens' residents and visitors. EDG

Cyclists at the starting line in the Jittery Joe's Roasting Company parking lot on Barber Street in Athens.