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68-mile trail could draw tourists to area Rail-to-trail corridor would start in Riceboro

A proposed, 68-mile recreational trail could be the path to a happy, healthy and economically strong Liberty County. The Georgia Coast Rail-Trail, an estimated \$49 million project, would bring some of Georgia's old railroad rights-of-way together into one continuous, state-of-the-art trek for hikers and cyclists. As planned it would start in Liberty County near Riceboro and would be completed in 2015.

Visionaries for the venture said the path will stretch across four counties along the Georgia coast, stretching from Riceboro down to Kingsland in Camden County.

Fred Fryer is chairman of the Coastal Georgia Rails to Trails, the board that is trying to acquire the rights-of-way and several of the fixtures along the route's path.

He said the path will link the communities together, as well as offer a breath-taking and sensory-heightening experience for locals and tourists.

"The trail will be unique in the country because of the wetlands," he said. "Nowhere else in the nation can you enjoy a 68-mile trail through tidal marshes and creeks in an undeveloped coastal environment."

Upon completion, Fryer estimated the 10-foot-wide, concrete trail could attract up to 4 million people a year. He believes that would provide a tremendously boost to area economies, such as Liberty County's.

"People will come from all over the U.S. to use this trail, and they will bring money," he said. "They will stay at hotels and motels, buy gas and grab a bite to eat. It will be a win-win situation for everybody."





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Riceboro Mayor William Austin is already preparing his community for the impact.

The city has applied for a grant to assist with the enhancement and presentation of the trail in his city.

"I am excited about the trail. I think it is a perfect opportunity to re-vitalize our downtown area," Austin said.

"By increasing the flow of people through our central district and local residency, it will truly improve the quality of life for everybody."

While money may come rushing in once the trail is built, Fryer admits funding to begin the project is not "doable right this second."

"With the current economic state, finding the money for the project is just part of our challenge," he said, "but we're looking at getting funding from a number of sources; public, private, federal and state funds."

Last week, state legislators indicated to Fryer that state-funding might be available to the board as early as 2011.

To maximize its earning potential, the board has teamed up with the likes of Ed McBrayer, executive director of the Atlanta's PATH Foundation.

In the past 15 years, PATH has developed more than 100 miles of trails throughout North Georgia and has become a nationally recognized model for trail-building success.

McBrayer said that while the slow economy is making it tough, he has faith that by forming a private-public funding partnership the board can "talk people into helping [them] build something magnificent across the coast."

"I would not be committing time and effort if I did not think it was something that was going to happen."

Now, he said, the board is focusing on the big picture.

"In the interim, I think that if we can get the right-of-way secured ... we can get the project shovel-ready," he said.